

The Exploding Lake

A Doc Savage Adventure
#163

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Dent]
[Harold A. Davis]
1946

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DOC

Doc Savage—born Clark Savage, Jr.—was raised from the cradle for his task in life—his job of flitting about the globe righting wrongs, helping the oppressed, smashing the guilty. He is a physician and surgeon—and a mighty good one, the tops in his line. He has the best and most modern equipment at his command, for he has limitless wealth. His main headquarters are in New York, but he has his Fortress of Solitude at a place unknown to anyone, where he goes at periodic intervals to increase his knowledge and concentrate. He's foiled countless crooks, and changed many of them into honest, useful citizens. The world would be a great place if there were more Doc Savages. But there's only one.

Other books by Kenneth Robeson

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #1 (including *The All-White Elf*, *The Angry Canary*, *The Running Skeletons*, *The Swooning Lady*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #2 (including *The Mindless Monsters*, *The Rustling Death*, *King Joe Cay*, *The Thing That Pursued*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #3 (including *Measures for a Coffin*, *The Three Devils*, *The Spook of Grandpa Eben*, *Strange Fish*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #4 (including *Mystery Island*, *Men of Fear*, *Rock Sinister*, *The Pure Evil*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #5 (including *No Light to Die By*, *The Monkey Suit*, *Let's Kill Ames*, *Once Over Lightly*, *I Died Yesterday*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #6 (including *The Awful Dynasty*, *The Magic Forest*, *Fire and Ice*, *The Disappearing Lady*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #7 (including *The Men Vanished*, *Five Fathoms Dead*, *The Terrible Stork*, *Danger Lies East*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #8 (including *The Mental Monster*, *The Pink Lady*, *Weird Valley*, *Trouble on Parade*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #9 (including *The Invisible-Box Murders*, *Birds of Death*, *The Wee Ones*, *Terror Takes 7*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #10 (including *The Devil's Black Rock*, *Waves of Death*, *The Too-Wise Owl*, *Terror and the Lonely Widow*)

DOC SAVAGE OMNIBUS #11 (including *See-Pah-Poo*, *Colors for Murder*, *Three Times a Corpse*, *Death Is a Round Black Spot*, *The Devil Is Jones*)

THE
EXPLODING LAKE

A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

PRINTING HISTORY

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THE EXPLODING LAKE

I

From the Negros River southward to Beagle Channel, distance measures somewhere near a thousand miles, and the cross-span measured from Carmen de Patagones to Point de Corral is somewhat less, about six hundred miles. Transplanted on to the United States, the dismal area would cover a triangle roughly with its three corners at New York City, Chicago and Key West, Florida.

Of a part of this godforsaken region the Encyclopedia Britannica has this to say: “From Lake Buenos Aires southward, the Andes are known in detail only on their eastern border. Two great fields of inland ice fill all the central part of the cordillera from about 46° south latitude to 51° south latitude. From these ice-fields great glaciers flow down to the lake region on the eastern border of the cordillera and to the fjords of the western border. At the time of writing this article these ice-fields have never been crossed, although the southernmost field has recently been penetrated to some distance by expeditions working in from Lake Argentino and Lake Viedma. . . .”

Juan Russel, while he was no expedition—he was one man, two mules—could perhaps have added to the description, and certainly his words would have made it less forbidding. Juan had a romantic heart, an inheritance from his Spanish mother; he also had a practical streak, drawn from his father, a man from Kansas who had been a particularly good mining engineer. From his Castilian mother, Juan Russel drew a love of beauty and the arts. His father had sent him to Rolla School of Mines, which was in Missouri, not too far from Kansas, so Juan was a good metallurgist.

Juan Russel looked a little like a bum, it should be said here; but he had quite a wide name in his profession in South America.

Where Juan got his idea of humor was a question, but it was probably from American comic strips. His humor was of an obvious sort. He had, for instance, christened his pack mules Andy and Uncle Bim. Andy, who was perverse and unpredictable, carried the tools and what equipment that could not be broken easily. Uncle Bim was used for the provisions, the necessities. You could depend on Uncle Bim as much as it was safe to depend on a Patagonian mule. And Andy would follow Uncle Bim.

Uncle Bim—the mule was not all angel—suddenly balked. With feet planted and head down, he stopped at the crest of a hill.

“Get going, you blank-blank so-and-so,” Juan urged. He did not have much confidence in the profanity. He jabbed a thumb in Uncle Bim’s ribs, and that didn’t get results either.

Beneath them a couple of thousand feet, then outflung for miles, lay an irregular plateau, its surface dotted with a series of small lakes. The view was imposing. Juan Russel paused to gaze at it, for he liked this country—he liked the view down there, although it was far less imposing than what he had seen recently. He had been skirting the edges of an almost inaccessible and little-known glacier, and it was lovely country. The practical side of him had made wondering note of huge waterfalls, with their promise of unlimited power. He had found indications of oil formations, not exactly oil—but could be. And he had been interested in ore outcroppings. *This country*, Juan thought, *will be a hell of a place, some day.*

He walked around in front of Uncle Bim and prepared to strike a match. Uncle Bim was impressed by fire. A lighted match in front of his mule-nose—it didn't need to touch him—would cure him of a balk.

Juan made the first pass at the match with his thumbnail. The results were more impressive on Juan than the mule. First there was a blinding, an incredible, glare of light. Juan peered, half-blinded, at the match in his hand. It was unstruck. It had not caused whatever had happened.

“What the hell!” Juan gasped.

Then came the blast. Powerful, it shook the hill itself—then the sound, and the sound was enough to paralyze the eardrums for a few moments.

“Earthquake!” thought Juan. He flung himself flat, a good thing to do when there was an earthquake, he had heard.

Presently, he said stupidly, “No earthquake!” and sat up and looked around.

He saw, down below in the comparatively level pampas, a gigantic billow of dark smoke that was growing and mushrooming as it lifted into the sky. The proportions of the thing were astounding.

Uncle Bim, the mule, was regarding his owner with admiration. Apparently he thought one match had caused all this, and he was impressed.

The mule stood with docility while Juan got out his binoculars and took a look at the base of the smoke column.

As nearly as Juan could tell, there should have been a small lake at the base of the smoke plume, and it was not there.

Juan was a scientist, as all metallurgists are to an extent, and presently the fear began to touch him. He didn't like what he saw. He continued to watch the lake, or rather the stupefying absence of a lake. Unquestionably, where water had been, there was a blackened depression, and the surrounding area was bare of vegetation and trees which should have been there.

The item that contributed as much to crawling horror as anything was the absolute lack of human life in the vicinity. A volcanic eruption? Not at all. There was no crater, no fuming, and after all it wasn't volcanic territory. An explosion? Yes, an explosion, but of an eerie sort.

"Atom bomb!" Juan thought. "Oh, hell! It can't be. There would be observers around. And it would have come from an airplane." He rolled on his back and scanned the sky for a plane, and found none, although the binoculars were good.

He shivered. Presently he arose and started descending the slope, which was in places cliff-like. Both Andy and Uncle Bim were unusually uncomplaining, as they moved toward the scene of whatever had happened.

Four days later Juan Russel led his mules into Piensa de Blanca, a small village which was on the outskirts of nowhere, even in Patagonia.

"*El telefono?*" said the first native he accosted. "It is miles to nearest, many miles. Say, stranger, you are in a bad shape, no?"

"A telephone," Juan mumbled. "I gotta get to a telephone." He said this in English, then translated it into Spanish when he saw the native's open mouth. "*Yo querer telefono!*"

"Friend, it is trip tough to nearest telephone," said the native. "What you need . . . rest. Eh?"

Juan Russel, it was obvious, needed rest. But he needed something else much more, and that was peace of mind. The old Juan, the guy who was a good romantic Spaniard and a hard-headed American businessman, and a practical humorist, too, was gone. He was no more. He was terribly lost.

"Got to reach telephone," Juan mumbled, and set the gaunt mules in motion.

He collapsed, though, at the end of the street, and they brought him back to the local hotel. There was a bar in connection, and they took him in there to put some soup inside him. But first they put in a shot of hard liquor.

Juan did not intend to talk about what he had seen. But, as soon as the liquor was in him and working, there was a battle between his inherited instinctive taciturnity—from his father—and his naturally garrulous mother's Latin temperament. He was stewing with what he had seen anyway, and he could no more have kept quiet than a fish could keep from swimming.

At first, it didn't make much difference. The peons thought he was crazy. A nutty prospector had wandered into town; the same sort of thing that

happens in little desert towns in Arizona and Nevada and all the way up to the Klondike.

Furthermore, few of the peons in this isolated village had any idea what he was talking about. Juan was a scientist, and regardless of his looks—particularly, now, his condition—an erudite and learned man. He was too incoherent to use non-technical terminology, and so most of the peons merely decided he was loco and let it go at that.

Presently they got some soup into Juan, and he fell over in a stupor of exhaustion. They put him to bed, and the hotel proprietor, naturally wondering whether he was going to get paid for food and meal, looked in Juan's pockets. He learned the man was Juan Russel—and the name of Juan Russel, prospector, metallurgical research man, was known here.

Talk went through the village, as it naturally would. The talk became garbled—the things Juan had mumbled drunkenly mixed themselves up ludicrously—but eventually it reached the ears of a man who wore a blue shirt, and who was staying at the *Casa Negros*, the Black House, a rooming-house which was genteel in spite of its name.

“Juan Russel, eh?” this man said. “What did you say he saw? . . . Spontaneous disintegration. . . . The beginning of the end of the universe, you say. . . . Crazy? Oh, sure he's crazy. I wouldn't know.” He beckoned Señora Coliz, the proprietress. “*Vino blanca*,” he ordered. “By the way, I shall leave early, Señora. Very early. I will pay you now, so I need not awaken you when I leave.”

He went out presently and filled the tank of his car with gas.

He left about two o'clock in the morning, headed in the general direction of Buenos Aires.

Juan Russel, somewhat refreshed—although very tight of tongue—left in a rented automobile about eight o'clock the following morning. He left behind him in the village the impression that he was about the most terrified man who had ever visited the place.

Around noon, Juan reached his first fair-sized town. It had telephonic connection—of a poor sort—with another town, and then another town, and eventually with Buenos Aires. Juan placed a call. He got the next town, and was informed he could not talk to Buenos Aires—or to New York, which was where he wanted to talk. Line down.

“Listen,” Juan said desperately. “Listen, Operator. If the lines are repaired, get me—I mean, get hold of Doc Savage, in New York City. Tell

him it is Juan Russel calling him on a terrible, an infinitely terrible matter. Tell him to be available for my call, which I will attempt to place. I am heading on toward Buenos Aires, any place I can find a telephone line. Tell Doc Savage that.” He was extremely earnest. “*El Señor Doc Savage, Ciudad Nueva York. Estados Unidos Sí, sí.*” He made the operator repeat it. “That is correct. Doc Savage is very well known in New York. They will be able to find him by name alone.”

Juan Russel got going again in search of a telephone. He was, those who happened to notice him agreed, about the most terrified man who had ever been through that village, too.

Juan Russel had met Doc Savage once, several years ago, while attending a special meeting of metallurgists in New York City. There had been a notice on the convention bulletin board:

* * *

CLARK SAVAGE, JR., WILL SPEAK TUESDAY AT 2
PM ON “THE MOLECULAR STRUCTURE OF SEVERAL
LESSER KNOWN METALS.”

Juan had heard vaguely of Doc Savage before, but he had been surprised to find the lecture hall crowded to capacity, which was unusual, because metallurgists were not much different from all convention attenders; most of them spent their time getting tight and raising what hell could be raised. Juan had been fortunate to squeeze his way into the hall.

Doc Savage was a conservatively dressed man who did not appear particularly large physically at first, although later, when Juan got close to him, he realized the man was a giant. Savage had rather regular bronze features; his coloring—the deep bronze—was rather striking, it was true. Physically, he struck a contrast to the anemic-looking faces of the audience, most of whom has spent the night in the nightclubs.

The man spoke in a voice that seemed low, well-modulated, but a voice that carried to every corner of the lecture hall. His text was a revelation. Juan had thought he knew something about metals. He began to feel like a school kid.

Later, he met Doc Savage personally—one of those things where you shake the speaker's hand and tell him what a wow he was.

“Oh, yes, Juan Russel, the Patagonian metallurgist,” Doc Savage said. “You have done good work down there pioneering in fluorescence for prospecting, I understand.”

That was the extent of their acquaintance, but Juan's interest had been aroused in Doc Savage. After that he read everything he could find about the man, and his uncanny abilities. He found out that Doc Savage—sometimes called the Bronze Man by the newspapers—was an expert in a number of fields, and that actually his specialty was surgery.

Juan also learned that Savage had a reputation as an adventurer, that he liked excitement, and that he had a name as a sort of modern Galahad who went around getting people out of trouble which was either of a fantastic nature, or outside the abilities of the law enforcement agencies.

Doc Savage, it developed, had five assistants, all experts in their fields; their fields were electricity, chemistry, law, civil engineering and geology. These men were also adventurers at heart. This group, Juan found out, had been given credit for wiping out some vicious criminal organizations and solving a number of fantastic mysteries.

Doc Savage's specialty, Juan had gathered, was the unusual. And he had always retained his admiration for the big bronze man. Juan, being an adventurer himself in a sense, felt that Doc Savage embodied some of the things he himself would have liked to be. In the back of his mind, probably, there had been a secret wish to someday be associated with Doc Savage in a matter involving something weird and very, very important.

That evening, Juan reached the town he had called by telephone, and found the wires were still down. He visited the telephone office, and he was a wild man. He impressed on everyone from the telephone company manager down that he must, absolutely must, get hold of Doc Savage, and he repeated the request that, should the break in the wires be found and repaired, Doc Savage should be contacted at once and urged to wait at the phone for his, Juan's, call.

“Tell him”—Juan gasped—“tell him that it is a matter so important that—that—well, words cannot describe the horror of it. It involves—involves everything!”

Here, too, they thought he must be a little touched. No man in a normal stage of mind could carry that much terror.

At the *Cochina*, at eating place, Juan had a steak which he forced himself to eat. And presently, while he was still at the table, a man sat down opposite him. The stranger was fairly well dressed. He wore a blue shirt.

“Juan Russel?” he said.

“I—yes.” Continued terror was making Juan’s tongue a little thick. He had trouble with words.

The man in the blue shirt was plain, almost mouse-like; there was a tiny scar across his lower lip; his voice, like his eyes, was flat and emotionless.

“I am Monk Mayfair,” the man said.

“Monk—for God’s sake!” Juan gasped. “You—I—mother of mercy!” He suddenly seized the man’s hand. “Oh, what luck! Mother of all things—what wonderful luck!” He lapsed into Spanish in his excitement and babbled about how wonderful this was.

“I am one of Doc Savage’s assistants,” the man said, and the tiny scar flickered faintly on his lip.

“You—I recognize the name—Monk Mayfair!” Juan blurted. “That is why I am—oh, this is wonderful!”

The man who had called himself Monk Mayfair nodded. The expression in his eyes did not change. He said, “I heard you are trying to telephone Doc Savage. They—at the telephone office—are a bunch of gossips.”

“*Sí, sí!*” Juan gasped. “*Mio dios! Magnifico!*”

Juan Russel had never met Monk Mayfair, but of course he had read of him. Monk was one of Doc Savage’s five aides, the one who was a chemist. Doc Savage’s men had a reputation for working in various parts of the world—they were consultants of high skill—so it did not seem strange that Monk Mayfair should be in Patagonia.

“Maybe I can help you out,” the man in the blue shirt said.

“Yes. Yes, you can.” Juan nodded vehemently. Relief was making him weak, almost incoherent. “I have much to tell you—a—a thing that is terrible, incredible. A lake—it disappeared—a lake—I mean—”

“I heard about that,” the other said quietly.

“You heard!”

“Rumor travels fast in this country.”

“Rumor?”

“You talked—you were a little drunk, I understand—in the town where you stayed last night. News about you has preceded you.”

“Oh!”

“You wanted to keep this secret?”

“I—yes. That is—well—terror! The terror of it! I did not think—”

“Maybe,” the man in the blue shirt said, “we had better not talk here. Rather public.”

“We—yes. Yes, not here. My hotel. We will go—”

“Good enough.” The other arose.

Juan’s spirits did not rise as they moved toward the hotel, but they at least became somewhat settled. It was dark—the hour was about ten—and they had to move slowly, since the pavement was none too good. Doc Savage, Juan thought, was going to be reached. Things were going to be—well, maybe not all right. But there would now be a chance. Doc Savage, Juan believed, was possibly the only man living who stood a chance of coping with this thing.

“I think we’re being followed,” said the man in the blue shirt.

“*Dios—!*”

“In here.”

They were opposite a small alleyway. The other man drew Juan into the blacker murk of the alley. He said quietly, “We will wait here and see—” and did not trouble to finish the sentence, because his knife had by that time gone into Juan’s back near the left shoulder-blade and descending at an angle, reached his heart.

Blue-shirt used the knife half a dozen more times to make sure Juan was dead. He wiped the blade on Juan’s clothing casually, replaced the knife in its holster, and finished in the darkness until he found Juan’s billfold and took what folding money it contained. He sauntered out of the alley, went to the place where he had his car parked and before starting the motor, counted Juan’s money. It came to a little over a thousand pesos.

“A fair bonus,” he remarked.

He started the engine of his car and left town. Five miles or so out of town, he paused long enough to get a portable radio transmitter out of the car trunk, warm up the tubes, and whistle into the microphone several times. Presently he got an answering whistle in the receiver.

“Juan is dead,” he reported, and put the transmitter back in the trunk and got going.

The *Dias Escribe* was not the leading Buenos Aires newspaper, but it was not under the government's thumb as much as some of the others, and was a little sharper in going after news. Pedro Verde, the managing editor, a sour, skeptical little man, called his makeup editor to the desk and pointed at a story and demanded, "What is this piece of tripe? . . . Don't you know we don't print fairy stories?" He rapped the item with his fist and yelled, "A lake disappearing! For God's sake!" The item was headed:

* * *

STRANGE NEW MYSTERY IN PATAGONIA

A LAKE VANISHES

The text of the story related how two men had been flying their plane over Patagonia when they had heard and felt a tremendous blast, a blast that almost took their plane from the sky. Frightened, they had gone to their home airport, but had returned two days later, and had taken a picture of the scene.

The picture was reproduced, and showed a blackened area, and, nearby, a number of perfectly normal lakes.

"It is a good story—"

"It is so damned good that it is no account at all!" the managing editor yelled. "Listen, too many cockeyed stories about Patagonia have been floating around. They get on the wire services, get up north to the United States, and people up there think we are a bunch of screwballs, lovers of Nazis; and relations get worse. That sort of thing has got to stop. We've got enough trouble as it is with the kind of guys we've got in government office down here, without helping the stink along. That story is regular goofy sea-monster stuff."

"Yes, but even a sea-monster story makes good reading now and then. In the United States' papers, every once in a while, you see—"

"The hell with that."

"Yes, sir."

"Find these two aviators. I want to know whether they are dependable."

"Yes, sir."

The next day, the makeup man had to make an embarrassed report. The identity of the two men had been determined. Carlos Juarez and Rodrigo

Unos. The reporter assigned to the story had sought the men to get more details, but they could not be found; they had apparently disappeared after giving the picture and the story to a correspondent to send in.

“It’s a phony,” said the managing editor bitterly. “Print no more of it.”

The Associated Press, though, had already picked up the story and put it on their wire-photo to New York. The A. P. man didn’t particularly believe the cockeyed thing, but it made a good story.

The murder of Juan Russel got quite a play all over Argentina. The man’s family background was reviewed at length, and his scientific achievements got an extended accounting. The police, it was stated, were positive the slayer would be in custody within twenty-four hours.

Presently reporters, on the trail of details about the man’s death, unearthed the fact that he had come out of the Patagonia wild-lands in a condition that was best described as highly erratic. The man seemed to be suffering from hallucinations, and under the delusion that the world—the universe, even—was menaced by something infernal and fantastic.

They played down the fantastic and infernal menace, because it seemed to be evidence that the man was mentally unbalanced.

In justice to the reporters on the story, there was really nothing told them that would connect Juan Russel with the business of the vanished lake. Juan, drunk as he had been that night when he talked, had been either too canny—or too terrified, which was more likely—to let out the connection with the lake. Anyway, it did not get in print. But the story of Juan’s death made all the newspapers, and was cabled to New York by the press associations, where it got some play—another murder in that trouble-making country down there, Argentina.

There was obviously no political cast to the crime, though.

III

The steward of the Clipper for New York took a last deep breath of the fine Buenos Aires atmosphere, flipped his cigarette into the grass, and went into the terminal.

“I suggest you get aboard, *Señor*,” he said. “Departure is shortly.”

“Thank you,” said the man who had a small scar on his lower lip. He was of medium height, clad—he did not wear a blue shirt now—in white

linen and Panama. His mouse-like features were as expressionless as they were when he had put the knife into Juan Russel.

He had been reading the newspaper account of Juan Russel's murder. He said—to himself—cheerfully, "Ah, so they expect an arrest in twenty-four hours." He folded the newspaper, put it in his pocket. "They always do," he remarked.

"Sir?" said the steward.

"Nothing," said the man. "Nothing that will come to pass."

He showed his ticket and passport to the first officer, who said, "Paul Cort?"

"Paul Cort. That's right."

"Portuguese, I see."

"Yes, Lisbon. The visa is in order, I think."

"Yes, visaed by the U. S. Consul. Okay." The first officer nodded. Paul Cort boarded the big seaplane, found a seat, and noticed that the ship was already filled, except for one seat. Paul Cort became uneasy, thereafter.

Presently there was a commotion on the ramp. A big man, an enormously big man, had just arrived. Perspiration was streaming down his red face. He got through the formalities with the First Officer.

"Name?"

"Dartlic—Orlin Dartlic."

"Dutch, eh?"

"Netherlands. The Hague," the big man boomed. "To New York, is going."

He did not handle the English so well, and some of the passengers, overhearing, chuckled. Paul Cort did no chuckling, but he seemed considerably relieved about the one empty seat.

A few moments later, the big man—enormously fat, he was—from the Netherlands lowered himself into the vacant seat, overflowing somewhat, and holding a briefcase clutched tightly on the balloons of flesh that served him for a lap.

"I thought I be left yet," he puffed. He had a loud voice, and a boisterously amiable way of using it.

The seaplane engines began rumbling and vibrating, the ship taxied to the end of the take-off area. A launch finished making the safety-run over the take-off area to make sure there were no floating menaces, and sent a flat signal back to the seaplane. The pilot did his cockpit check, fed fuel to the

carburetors, and the seaplane moved, presently began bouncing, got on step, then lifted. It was airborne.

It was about this time that the fat Mr. Orlin Dartlic of the Netherlands saw the mouse-like Mr. Paul Cort, of Portugal, and the effect on the fat man was something to see. He turned quite white. He said something, or a number of things, in Dutch or some language similar. It was a little too inarticulate with terror to be understandable.

The big man dashed back to the door. "Off I want!" he gasped. "Off! Off! Quick."

"Hey, we're in the air," the steward said. "What's the matter?"

"I—uh—something I forget. Something that very important is!" The big man was frantic. "This ship you land quick, no?"

The steward was very sorry, but it was out of the question. No could do. Company regulations, and other things, including inconvenience to the other passengers. Very sorry.

The steward was of the opinion that it was the fat man's first flight—a plain case of air-scare. The steward talked smoothly, logically, and got the big man back in his seat, then administered a sedative, a calming drug of mild qualities. The fat man took that. He was glad to get it. He needed calming.

Paul Cort continued to be quite expressionless.

A couple of hours later, the fat man paid a visit to the men's room, and Paul Cort joined him there. The two men gave not the slightest sign of knowing each other. The big man did swallow audibly, and his huge head turned until he was staring into the impassive face of the other.

Paul Cort produced his newspaper with an offhand manner.

"Too bad about this fellow Russel, Juan Russel," Cort said. "Did you read about it?"

"I—yes, I read." The fat man swallowed again, a sound like a trout gulping a bug off the surface. "I—a friend of yours, no?"

"No, not exactly. I never met him. A promising young man, I heard, though."

"A very bad thing, murder."

"Yes," said Paul Cort. "It was the violence of it. The world, we of the world, have too much of violence in these times." Paul Cort nodded

somberly. His mouse-like features remained largely unchanged. “I feel lucky that my country has escaped. Portugal, you know.”

The big man bowed with difficulty, said nothing.

“Yes,” Cort continued. “We were lucky—we of Portugal— in a way. Of course”—he gave a slight lift of shoulders—“we did get to see a great many adventurers of the world. Lisbon was full of them. Spies from every nation, as you can imagine, and rascals. Rascals galore. Some very bad ones.” He shrugged again. “All of this, you understand, I hear from my people. Letters. From friends. You see, I am a businessman, and I was out of it. I was in Argentina, and missed the worst of it. You, too, are a businessman, I take it.”

The big man hesitated.

“Advisor of the government, I am,” he said finally. He made it sound pompous. “I am advisor on Patagonian affairs.”

“That sounds important.”

“It is.”

“My name is Cort. Paul Cort. I am glad to meet you, Mr.—”

“Dartlic—Orlin Dartlic.”

They exchanged slight bows. They did not shake hands. The small man took a seat and leaned back, eyelids closed, and there was nothing to show that he was in the least interested further.

“I believe,” he said presently, “that I read somewhere about you.” He aroused himself, turned the pages of his newspaper. “Ah, here it is,” he said.

The headline said:

U. S. SCIENTIST TO BE
CONSULTED

DARTLIC TO MEET
CLARK SAVAGE, JR.

The story did not elaborate much on the headlines, merely stating that Orlin Dartlic, official advisor on Patagonian affairs, was taking the Clipper to New York for a technical consultation with the New York scientist, Clark Savage, Jr.

“That you, eh?” said Cort.

“Is me,” the fat man said. He said this calmly enough, but in a moment he went into the bathroom and could be heard being sick.

Cort's mouse-like face was blank, and presently he arose and left the men's lounge, resuming his seat.

* * *

Susan Lane boarded the plane at Rio de Janeiro. Susan—you knew her two minutes, and began calling her Susie—made up the third of the oddly assorted trio of Cort, Dartlic and Susie Lane.

“Look at the blonde bombshell!” somebody said.

“Yeah. For crying out loud! What's that she's got?”

The object of amazement was a cub ocelot. Susie was, rather obviously, smuggling the animal aboard, and not making much of a pretense of keeping it under her coat.

“Nothing doing!” said the Second Officer firmly. “No animals.”

“What animal?” said Susie. “I don't see any animal.” The ocelot wasn't as big as a tiger under her coat, but it was as conspicuous as one.

The Brazilian officials claimed they didn't see any animal either. They had obviously been paid by Susie not to see one, and they thought it was very funny. They assured the Second Officer there was no animal. There was quite a row, which the Second Officer lost, and Susie tripped aboard with the cub.

“I shot its mama, who was really a bloodthirsty cat,” she explained.

The other passengers stirred uneasily. Tension spread around the vicinity of the cub ocelot, which looked capable of doing about as much damage as a wildcat in case it took a notion.

“I'm a big game huntress,” Susie told her seat-mate, a gentleman who peddled bulldozers for an Ohio concern. He was dubious. He highly favored Susie as a seat-mate, but the matter of the animal, which he took to be some kind of a spotted wildcat, was another matter.

“Will the thing scratch?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yes,” said Susie brightly. “But it's so sweet, don't you think?”

“Ummmmmm,” said the drummer. “Are you really a big game huntress? I mean—do you go into jungles and such?”

“Oh, definitely.”

In the course of the next couple of hours, Susan Lane definitely established herself as a silly bit of fluff whose papa, Ben Holland Lane, had made more money than he knew what to do with in the oil business, and was spoiling an already flibber-jibbit daughter by letting her traipse around over

the world, hunt lions in Africa, counts in London, ocelots in Brazil and wolves in New York. The drummer of bulldozers made what he thought was some headway.

In Trinidad, there was a stop of about half an hour for refueling and maintenance check of the engines and plane, and the passengers stretched their legs.

Paul Cort sent a cablegram to someone named Gaines at the Plaza Central hotel in New York. It read: MEET CLIPPER. I WILL POINT OUT MAN DISCUSSED IN TELEPHONE CONVERSATION. HAVE PLENTY OF MEN TO DO JOB. CORT.

The fat Netherlander, Orlin Dartlic, sent a cablegram to Doc Savage, New York. It said: ARRIVING CLIPPER. IMPERATIVE MEET YOU DISCUSS AMAZING MATTER IN PATAGONIA. IMPORTANCE CANNOT BE UNDERRATED. He signed it with a flourish with full name and title: ORLIN DARTLIC, ADVISER TO THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT ON PATAGONIAN AFFAIRS.

Susan Lane's cablegram was to Washington, to an individual designated as BUCKLEY, Suite 244, Clagle Hotel, Washington, D. C. It read. MOUSE, RAT AND CAT. SUSIE IS SO INNOCENT. BIG DOINGS ALL RIGHT. AND HOW ARE YOU, YOU BUM. SUSIE.

The cablegram despatching in all three cases was done with care that none of the other three principles involved noticed that a message was being sent.

There was one other incident in Trinidad. The cub ocelot clawed the wolf ideas out of the drummer. It happened in the lunchroom, and the cub emitted a small, high-pitched sound, bounded from the table, landed on the drummer's leg, and ruined his suit, his leg skin, and his amorous ideas about Susie.

"Too bad," said Susie. It really didn't seem to bother her.

At La Guardia Airport, fat Orlin Dartlic was one of the first through the customs ritual. The bellhop started with the fat man's bag to the regular airlines bus, but Dartlic stopped him. "No, a taxi I want," the fat man said.

Susan Lane was through next, and there was an argument about the animal. It seemed there were quarantine regulations about animals, and the

La Guardia customs men were not as easily persuaded as the Brazilian ones had been.

“Papa! Papa, darling!” Susie squealed suddenly.

A large horny-fisted embarrassed looking man had approached. He wrapped Susie in his arms, got and gave some fatherly kisses and hugging, then told the customs men, “We’ll see about this! Where’s the telephone? I’ll call whoever has got to be called about this cat. If Susie wants that thing—God knows why she’d want it—she’s gonna have it.” He stalked off, and presumably found a telephone.

Fat Orlin Dartlic got his cab. He had kept an eye on Paul Cort, and he perspired profusely when he discovered there was a car waiting for Cort, a low roadster that looked fast. Cort and the man at the wheel shook hands.

The fat man’s features were a study of terror. He reached in his pocket, brought out a bill, and pushed it toward his cab driver.

“I think we are going to be followed yet,” the fat man said. “You can prevent that, no?”

The driver thought so. He asked, “What’s the idea, bub? I ain’t looking for no trouble.”

“A matter of another man’s wife, and a private detective following me,” lied the fat man. “I want to lose the fellow.” He calmly added another greenback to the first. “You will assist, yes?”

The cab driver looked at the second bill and gasped. “Okay,” he said. The cab leaped forward. The driver, who was a fat man himself, knew his New York; he could drive, and, once clear of the bridge, he left the parkway, took narrow streets, doubled, twisted. The roadster carrying Paul Cort hung behind them for a time. Then, expertly, the cabbie trapped the other machine in changing lights and a snarl of traffic.

“That did it,” he reported.

The fat man sighed in relief. “Good.”

“Ain’t none of them can stick on my tail when I take a notion,” the cab driver boasted.

The fat man gave him a street address. “Take me there,” he said.

The building, in the midtown section, was one of the most impressive in the city, and, at this hour of the day, somewhat crowded in the lobby area. The fat man was careful. He looked everywhere before he got out of the cab,

looked everywhere in the lobby, and ambled to the directory listing occupants of the skyscraper.

Doc Savage's offices were listed on the eighty-sixth floor.

"Eighty-six," the fat man told an elevator operator.

"Sorry, sir, no stop at eighty-six," the operator advised him.

"But I—"

"You wish to see Doc Savage?"

"I—Yes."

"You will have to get a pass from the seventh floor, Room 710," the elevator attendant advised.

"Well—on seven let me out, yes." The fat man was confused and upset. "Why—I do not understand this," he complained.

"Merely a formality to keep cranks away from the eighty-sixth floor," he was told.

"Oh."

In the seventh-floor corridor, Dartlic looked around dubiously; for several moments he stood eyeing the corridor, but it seemed deserted. Carefully, moving quietly despite his size, he edged along, looking for 710.

There was, suddenly, a whispering of feet on the tile floor behind him. He whirled, discovered three men almost upon him, men with knives. His shriek was a small mewling sound of terror, but there was no terror paralysis in the way he moved. Slow as he looked, and despite the suddenness of the attack, he fought with precision and skill. The briefcase he carried whirled, caught a man across the face; the case was evidently heavy, for the man went down. He promptly kicked a second man in the stomach, which seemed an impossible feat for his short legs. In the meantime, he had found an abnormally loud voice and was bellowing with hair-raising volume.

"Help!" he bawled. "Help! Murderers! Help! Come and help—"

Down the corridor—it was room 710—a door flew open. A slender, dapper looking man came out, yelled, "Here! What's going on?"

The fight broke up then. The fat man, still howling, broke free and ran toward the slender man, and the three assailants took the other direction, toward a stairway door.

"Get in 710!" yelled the slender man. He went in pursuit of the assailants. All four disappeared down the stairway.

Presently, from below somewhere, there were shots, about six of them, two together at first, then four somewhat spaced. After that, there was silence in the building, as far as violence was concerned.

IV

Seven-ten seemed to the fat man to be like any other office, although there was no name on the door, only a number, and there was no one in the reception room. He sank, puffing, sweating, trembling until his globes of fat seemed to twitch, in a chair. He fanned himself with both hands, and waited. He looked, in spite of the narrowness of his escape, somewhat restored by the excitement. As if he had at last reached a goal, over considerable obstacles.

Presently, about five minutes later, the slender, dapper man who had broken up the fight returned to the office. He strode past Orlin Dartlic without saying anything, seized a telephone, and got the police. It developed, from what he was telling the police, that the three assailants had escaped, after taking some shots at him.

He was, it seemed, Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, an associate of Doc Savage.

He was asked about the man who had been the object of the assault.

"I'll try to find him for you," he said, and looked thoughtfully over the telephone at Dartlic.

Orlin Dartlic bowed his fat head in appreciation. "A kindness, yes. Thank you," he said when the other finished telephoning.

"You want the police to know about you?"

"I—better it would be—first I should see Doc Savage, yes."

"I'm Ham Brooks," the slender man said. "I work with Doc."

"Yes, I gathered—"

"What happened?"

"I—they attacked me—my life I think they want."

"That was the general idea I got, too," Ham said. "What's behind it? Who are you? Were you headed for this office?"

"Yes. To me the elevator man say come here. To the eighty-sixth floor he would not take me."

Ham nodded. "We get a lot of cranks," he explained. "This place is a sort of reception center. Matter of fact, it's a detective agency, a private outfit, which is kept on retainer to see that Doc isn't bothered too much."

"I am Orlin Dartlic," wheezed the fat man. "I come to see Doc Savage."

The other nodded. "Okay. I suppose this sort of thing puts you through automatically."

Orlin Dartlic was impressed by Doc Savage. He said he was, too. He said: "Impressed, I am. All my expectations fulfilled."

Ham Brooks explained, "Doc, this gentleman appeared downstairs and three men attempted, or appeared to be attempting—it darned well looked like the real thing—to do something to him, probably murder him. The attack occurred in the seventh-floor corridor, and the fellows ran. I dashed out without a gun on me, and they got away, after taking a few shots at me. I notified the police of their descriptions." He nodded at the fat man. "I did not say Mr. Dartlic was here."

"Dartlic, Patagonian advisor to the Argentine government," Dartlic said.

Doc Savage was—the fat man was standing close enough to realize this—a bronze man of remarkable size and muscular development, and also an individual in whom size and sinew did not seem nearly as impressive as other qualities. The man's eyes, an unusual shade of flake gold, were striking. His voice was striking; so was his manner, choice of words, and his way of approaching matters.

Dartlic gazed about him. They stood in a laboratory, surrounded by a profusion of scientific equipment, and Dartlic said, "Ah, the very latest you have. The most new, the best."

"You are a scientist?" Doc Savage asked. He was measuring the fat man thoughtfully.

"Scientist? Ah, no—yes, in the most modest of ways. A dabbler, a hobby, at my home sometimes." He sighed, producing quite an upheaval in his voluminous body, and indicated Ham Brooks. "I might be dead were it not for Mr. Brooks, yet," Dartlic said. "Those men, they try to kill me. Assuredly, yes."

"Know them?"

The fat man hesitated. "I—ah—know them exactly, no." He looked about, selected a chair and collapsed into it. "My story—you hear it, no?"

"Yes."

Dartlic sat hunched in the chair, big fists tight about the briefcase. There was a considerable grease of perspiration on his forehead. "A moment," he said. "I organize my words, yes. I am a man badly scared."

Ham Brooks sauntered over and, without being very obtrusive about it, flipped a switch that got a wire recording gadget in operation. The device had quite a sensitive pickup, and would record whatever was said in the laboratory. Doc frequently used it to record the second-to-second behavior of scientific experiments which he made, in that way managing to get, he

insisted, clues that might have otherwise escaped him in solving a difficult piece of research.

The fat man mopped his forehead, settled himself, cleared his throat, said, "I begin."

Orlin Dartlic spoke roundly, beginning in a bombastic fashion, as if he was a politician getting ready to do a lot of talking without saying anything he could be pinned down on.

"These are times such as the world, in the time of man, has not seen before, yet," he said. "Forces of the mind most strange, and forces of terror worse yet, are abroad. There has been murder, mass murder, murder of people one by one. In such times like, a man who is thinking, he gets to feel maybe a climax it comes, that the world faces extinction." He held up both hands. "It is terrified, I am. You must forgive me. I around the bush, go."

Ham Brooks had perched on the edge of an instrument table. Around the bush go was right, he reflected. He was tempted to suggest that they in a straight line go, but restrained himself. Ham had an air of dignity to uphold, a rather phony air which he felt went with his position as one of the most important alumni the Harvard Law School had ever turned out, an attorney with an international reputation.

Doc Savage said nothing. He was normally a man of not many words; it was not unusual for him, in a questioning session, to keep in the background and say almost nothing but merely observe and listen, weigh and consider.

The fat man sighed again. He opened his briefcase, explored in it, grunting from the effort of bending his head to look inside. He withdrew an envelope.

"You photography know," he said. "This negative . . ." He extended it.

Doc Savage took the envelope, removed a photographic negative from it, held it to the light, turned it to catch light reflections to see whether there had been retouching done to it.

"Is not a fake, no?" Dartlic said.

"Apparently not."

"Is not!"

Ham Brooks leaned forward, said, "Let me point out something now, Dartlic. We are naturally suspicious by nature, and we have formed a little habit of taking nothing for granted. You don't mind, do you?"

"I—mind?"

"I'll give you an illustration of what I mean," Ham said, indicating the negative. "I know, for example, that it is quite possible to take a picture, make a print, retouch the print—an expert artist can put almost anything into the print—and then re-photograph the print, and have a negative which seems quite genuine. It is a genuine negative—but of a picture that is a phony, not of the real thing." Ham held up a hand as the fat man opened his mouth. "Mind you, I'm just explaining some questions we may ask in advance. I don't want you to get insulted."

"Is genuine."

"All right. You say it is genuine. Now what?"

Dartlic produced a photographic print from the briefcase.

"Is print from negative," he said. "More about it you can tell from this, yes."

The picture was a duplicate of that which had been produced in *Dias Escribe*, the Buenos Aires newspaper. It showed the lake that Juan Russel had seen, much as Juan had seen it, although there was no plume of smoke.

"Ham," Doc said.

"Yes."

"Will you bring the two clippings from the Globe from File 4, Section 2, subdivision 970?"

Doc Savage said nothing while Ham was out of the room. He did examine the print again, using a magnifying glass on it, and he carried the negative to an enlarger, put it in the slide, switched on the projection lamp and adjusted the focus to its sharpest point.

Ham came in with the clippings, one concerning the story of two aviators flying over Patagonia who had seen a vanished lake, and the other a clipping concerning the murder of Juan Russel, Patagonian metallurgist. At Doc's nod, Ham showed them to Dartlic.

"Is same." Dartlic nodded vehemently. "Is picture from that negative."

Doc said, "Look at the other clipping."

The fat man lifted his eyes. "Juan Russel . . . Why do you connect his death . . ."

"Is there a connection?"

The fat man bowed his head. "The truth I tell. . . . We do not know. . . . We fear—yes."

Doc Savage indicated the vastly enlarged picture which the negative was projecting on the white easel surface.

“You have reason to believe this is an actual photograph of the phenomena?”

“Yes.”

“Who took it?”

“The newspaper story—two aviators, as it say. Two aviators, yes. Their names, Carlos Juarez and Rodrigo Unos. They disappear.”

“Disappear?”

“Yes.”

“Foul play?”

“We do not know,” Dartlic said gloomily. “They are not to be found, is all. We look. We not find.”

Ham demanded, “Who do you mean by *we*?”

“My department. I am Advisor of Patagonian Affairs. I have government department. They look, the people who work for me.”

Ham frowned. “Do you think there is anything mysterious about these two fliers who took the picture?”

The fat man considered this, rubbing his several chins. “Who is to know?” he said finally.

Doc bent over the projected negative again. He said, bluntly, “If you are building up to an atom bomb scare, you can turn off the steam. Whatever did this, it was not an atom bomb.”

“No atom bomb,” the fat man agreed. He spread his hands and appealed to Doc. “You will not be humorous with me, no? The truth tell.” His voice climbed a little, and there was terror in it, fear in his eyes. “Could be worse, no? Could be more horrible?”

Doc switched off the enlarger.

“It could be,” he said, and he was quite sober.

The fat man said he had some background he now wanted to give them. Patagonia was a big country, he said, and it was almost a third of all Argentina, much larger than the state of Texas.

“A fabulous place, yes,” he said. “There are ice-fields. There are glaciers, and there are huge virgin forests. We have huge waterfalls that could provide immense power, and mountains and pampas, gold in the rivers, oil under the ground, many metals.”

He sounded, Ham reflected, like a representative of the Chamber of Commerce. Ham was wondering just what had sobered Doc Savage; he could see that Doc was impressed and disturbed.

“And men who are very bad,” Dartlic added.

“Eh?” Ham frowned.

“I am now explaining why interested my government department is,” Dartlic explained.

“Oh.”

“First, more background,” the fat man said. “There is in Patagonia long coastlines, with many bays and harbors, some explored and some not. In fact, little of Patagonia as a whole has been really explored so far. The ice-fields there have never been crossed. Power is there. Metals there. And unlimited space to hide out. You see. No?”

Ham asked drily, “Where do the men who are very bad come in?”

“Power,” said Dartlic. “You understand what I mean—power? Not the electric kind—the kind that comes from men dominating other men.”

Ham frowned. “Oh, you figure politically?”

“Politically. Is right.” Dartlic nodded vehemently.

“Be a little more specific.”

Dartlic shrugged. “You do not need a picture drawn. There is trouble for long time between Argentina and United States. Ill feelings. Many misunderstandings on both sides. Lies told. Deliberate efforts to cause troubles.”

Ham was skeptical. He knew the Argentine political picture, and he thought most of it was justified. Perhaps not all. He wasn’t sure. Nobody could be sure.

“There are bad men in Argentina,” the fat man said.

“I’m glad you admitted that,” Ham told him. “It saves us arguing the point.”

Dartlic looked gratified. “I am glad you understand. These men came, we do not know quite how, but perhaps by submarine, many of them. We are not sure. There were many mysterious submarine stories after the Nazis fell—they may have had basis in truth. Natives, too, came with rumors. We tried to find these men. We could not.”

“Everybody knows,” Ham said, “that Argentina is being accused of keeping the Nazi ideology alive. . . . Now, what is the connection with the vanished lake and Juan Russel?”

“We do not know—definitely.”

“Eh?”

“We suspect—strongly.”

“Suspect what?”

The fat man paused, seeming for the moment like a ham actor about to deliver a punch-line in a bad melodrama. Ham, watching the grave expression on Doc Savage’s features, got the feeling that the bronze man considered the thing very serious.

“Hans Boehl—of him you know?” the fat man asked abruptly.

The name meant nothing to Ham Brooks, but he saw Doc Savage’s eyes widen, saw a muscle flicker at the corner of the bronze man’s mouth, which was about as much astonishment as Doc would show, Ham felt, if the end of the world was unexpectedly announced.

Doc Savage said, “Hans Randolfe Boehl, *Academy Deutchlander Obscience*, established about midway in the war in Munich?”

“The same.” Dartlic nodded.

“Look here, Dartlic,” Doc said sharply. “Hans Boehl was in charge of Axis atomic research. What are you doing, getting back on the atomic bomb theme?” Doc tapped the photographic print. “This is not the work of an atomic bomb.”

“No atomic bomb, no,” Dartlic said. “The whole world fears atomic bomb, yes? This is not that.” He eyed Doc Savage intently. “I think you know what it could be, no?”

“It could be a fake.” Doc turned the print grimly in his hands. “God help us—let us hope it is.”

“Of a fake, we cannot take a chance.”

“No . . .”

“Get back to Hans Boehl, I will,” the fat man said. “It is known some of the best scientists in Germany got away before the Reich fell. That is no secret. One of the men who got away was Hans Boehl.”

“If he wasn’t killed by the Russians.”

“They have not admitted so.”

“Or captured by them.”

“He is in Patagonia, we think,” said Dartlic flatly.

Doc Savage—the bronze man’s vehemence surprised Ham—said, “Dartlic, that is important information. Can you back it up?”

The fat man spread his hands in the gesture that he seemed to use habitually. “Prove? By producing Hans Boehl—no. By showing you men who claim to have seen him in Patagonia—yes. There were three men. Two are criminals in prison, and these men tried to buy relief from persecution by saying they could take us to Hans Boehl. They could not. When Argentine agents went to get Boehl, he was not there. The third man—murdered. Quite promptly after he talked, he was murdered.”

Ham looked at Doc, asked, “If this Hans Boehl is just a scientist—”

“The man is more than that,” Doc said quickly. “He is a genius at organization, and is generally credited with being one of the masterminds behind the whole Nazi set-up. He is not—as far as we definitely know—dangerous as a scientist. As an organizer, and a purveyor of Nazi ideology, he is vicious.”

“But,” Ham said, “I don’t see the point in connecting Boehl with this lake business.”

The fat man grunted painfully. He levelled an arm at the print. “If that lake—if that is what I suspect—and I am sure Mr. Savage suspects—it is a horrendous thing which Boehl could use, possibly.”

“I still don’t—”

“My mission here,” Dartlic said dramatically, “is to ask Mr. Savage, to plead with Mr. Savage, to come to Patagonia and make an investigation and do—do whatever he thinks should be done.”

“You want Doc to come to Patagonia?” Ham said.

“Is correct.”

There was silence in the room, and it was broken presently by the ringing of the telephone. Ham picked up the instrument, said, “Yes . . . He’s rather busy. . . . Well, all right.” He extended the instrument toward Doc, explaining, “Some guy. He says he wants to speak to you about Dartlic, here.”

The fat man bolted upright. “About me!”

Doc took the instrument. He said, “Speaking,” and listened for a while. His face was quite expressionless, except for a slight downward warp of the mouth corners. He said, “Thank you, my friend. I hope we have the satisfaction of a meeting.” He hung up.

Dartlic blurted, “About me? What is said? Who was it?”

“Let’s see if you recognize the voice,” Doc said. “Play it back, Ham.”

Ham worked with the recorder that was attached to the telephone, got the wire backed up, switched on to reproduce, and flicked the switch.

They listened to Paul Cort's flat voice assuring Doc Savage that if he went to Patagonia, he would meet an abrupt end, and not a pleasant one, either. Cort was clipped, calm, expressionless.

Fat Orlin Dartlic had turned white. "I know that voice!" he yelled. "Is man on plane. Is man named Paul Cort." The fat man buried his face in his hands, wailed, "I should have made the plane turn back in Buenos Aires."

"Turn back?" Ham was suspicious.

Dartlic nodded. "This Paul Cort is man we suspect. Is Portuguese. Him we have investigated, but we find nothing against him. Only rumors. He board the plane with me in Buenos Aires, and I am terrified and ask the pilot to turn back, but there is argument, and I do not press. I think I am but very nervous. Here in New York, today, I think he follow me. I am almost sure he try to follow me."

"Paul Cort set those three guys on you downstairs, the ones who tried to kill you?"

"Perhaps. It is likely."

Doc Savage went over and played the telephone recording back, listening intently, turning the volume up until the voice bellowed out of the speaker, studying the voice tones and quality characteristics. He switched off the gadget.

Ham said, "That's kind of corny—calling us up and threatening us."

Doc said nothing.

The fat man, puzzled, asked, "Corny—what is the word meaning?"

"A dumb old trick that has been pulled before," Ham explained. "Effective the first couple of dozen times it was used, but now worn out."

The fat man's shudder was gigantic. "It was effective on me, this corny," he said. "I am scared stiff."

V

Colonel John Renwick waited, suitcase at his feet, in front of the shabby hotel on Twenty-eighth Street where he lived. He was a big man who looked awkwardly uncomfortable because of the embarrassing size of his fists, and a rather sour look which was his perpetual expression. The bitter expression

was deceptive with Renny, for it was apt to be its sourest when Renny's spirits were fairly high.

Presently Ham Brooks pulled up in a cab, and knocked open the door with a palm. "Climb in. Sorry I was a little late," Ham said.

Renny got into the cab, examined Ham's well-dressed figure gloomily, and settled himself. Ham had a reputation for clothes, and he did his best to live up to it; just now he was wearing what the well-dressed gentleman in the tropics should wear. The air wasn't exactly tropical in New York. In fact, it was cold.

"What about tickets?" Renny asked.

"That's all arranged. Five on the Clipper to Buenos Aires."

"Five?"

"Doc, Monk, Dartlic, you and I."

"Dartlic the fat, frightened guy you told me about over the telephone?"

Ham nodded. "And don't underrate his fright. He's got it bad."

The cab was in motion. It took a left turn up Fifth, caught a green light at the next corner, turned right and moved across town toward the less crowded speedway that would lead them to the big bridge and eventually to La Guardia field.

"How come," Renny asked, "Doc isn't flying down there in one of our ships?"

"Bait."

"Huh?"

"This Dartlic claims he was trailed from Argentina. And there isn't much doubt about three guys trying to put knives into him. I saw part of that myself."

"They might have been putting on an act," Renny said suspiciously.

"Act?"

"Possible, isn't it?"

Ham frowned. "You know something I don't?"

"Nope."

Ham considered the point. "Anyway, the shooting they did at me wasn't an act. The bullets were real and they did some good aiming."

"Never teched you, eh?"

"It's not funny."

Renny examined Ham thoughtfully, said, "You look like a guy who found a snake in his oatmeal."

Ham hesitated. “I guess I do at that. It’s the way Doc seems to be looking at this thing. He’s upset. I don’t know that I’ve seen him quite as disturbed before.”

Renny whistled. “Holy cow. Upset, eh? He upsets about as easy as Gibraltar.”

“I know it.”

“Give me the story,” Renny suggested. He listened to Ham’s description of Orlin Dartlic’s violent arrival in the uptown building—Ham glorified that part somewhat, made it plain that he was somewhat of a hero—and carried the recital through Dartlic’s account of the vanished lake, the death of a metallurgist named Juan Russel, the remote vastness of Patagonia, the rumors of international rogues centering on the place, and particularly one rogue named Hans Boehl.

“So Doc decided to go down and see what was cooking,” Ham finished.

“Holy cow! You saved fat boy’s life, didn’t you?” Renny said.

“Go ahead, laugh.”

“I did. Silently.”

“You’re acquiring some of Monk’s stinking qualities,” Ham said.

“Uh-huh. I’ve heard of Hans Boehl.”

“You have!”

“He’s a bad boy.”

“So I gathered.”

“Now,” said Renny, “you can tell me what about this vanished lake it was that stood Doc’s hair on end.”

“Doc hasn’t said.”

“The hell he hasn’t.”

Ham nodded soberly. “You know how Doc gets close-mouthed when he runs into something so fantastic and grisly he doesn’t quite believe a normal world could produce such a thing? Well, that’s the way this has affected him. He acts as if it would scare the pants off us if he spread the information. That fat Dartlic acts the same way.”

Monk Mayfair, the chemist, was a short, wide and extremely homely man whose nickname was aptly applied. He was rated as one of the great industrial chemists of the day, but there was nothing about his appearance to betray the fact, and his behavior hit a consistent tone that was somewhat less than dignified.

“Where’s Monk?” Ham asked, after they had met Doc Savage and Orlin Dartlic at La Guardia, and introductions had been accomplished.

“The last I saw of him, he had a blonde cornered,” Doc explained.

“Running right in form, eh?” Ham said. “Will you excuse me a minute. I’d better find the big dope and sort of protect him.”

Renny snorted when Ham was out of earshot. “Protect Monk—that’s very good,” he said. “What he meant was that he plans to ruin Monk with the blonde as quickly as possible.”

Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair were very close friends, and if the occasion demanded—if it demanded very hard—either one of them would probably have risked his life for the other. However, they had not exchanged a civil sentence, as far as anyone could testify, since their first meeting. They seemed to enjoy each other’s company enormously, and either one would spend infinite time and pains and effort—energy that would have earned good money if more sensibly directed—to perpetrate a dirty trick or an embarrassing practical gag on the other.

“Whoeeee!” Ham had discovered Monk—more particularly, he had discovered the blonde. He hurried forward. “Well, well, if it isn’t old love-bug himself!” he hailed Monk.

“A viper in our midst,” Monk said unpleasantly. “Look, will you run along and peddle it somewhere else?”

Ham ignored this, beamed at the blonde, said, “Miss, I trust you don’t fully understand the mistake you have made. I feel it my duty—”

“Beat it, shyster!” Monk urged frantically. “This is a private—this is a young lady who has a six-foot-three, three-hundred-pound brother who hates lawyers. You better scam before he comes back—”

“Why,” said the blonde, “I haven’t any brother.”

“That’s too bad.” Ham was sympathetic. “With this Monk Mayfair missing link around, any girl needs a big brother. By the way, my name is Brooks—Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks.”

“Susan Lane.” The blonde extended her hand. “Susie, for short.”

Ham said, “I want to warn you, Susie, about this hairy oaf you’ve been talking to. He has a wife and thirteen children, most of whom are mentally deficient.”

“That’s a damned lie!” Monk yelled.

“It makes a good beginning, anyway,” Ham said.

Fat Orlin Dartlic got quite a wallop out of seeing Susie again; the wallop landing in his stomach. His jaw dropped, composure fell completely from

his bulbous face for a moment. He croaked, “That—woman—” And pointed.

Doc Savage gave Susan Lane an appraisal. His immediate thought, unspoken, was that she wasn’t going to be a stabilizing influence on Monk and Ham, who were somewhat unpredictable at all times.

“On the plane she was!” Dartlic blurted.

“What plane?”

“The one I come from Buenos Aires on.”

“She came up from Buenos Aires with you, eh?”

“Yes—no. No! She got aboard at Rio.”

“In Brazil?”

“Yes.”

“Rio de Janeiro,” Doc suggested, “is quite a distance from Buenos Aires. It could be a coincidence. It often happens, two people riding the same plane to some destination, then taking the same plane back.”

The fat man shuddered violently. “With Hans Boehl in the picture, nothing is coincidence, maybe.”

Despite Orlin Dartlic’s discouraging attitude at the start of the Buenos Aires flight, things took a pleasant course. Even, eventually, Dartlic himself seemed to be enjoying Susie’s company. Susie had a certain rattlebrained effervescence that was amusing and, after a time, one began to suspect it was something she was born with, just as she had been born with the blonde hair, and that, underneath, there was quite a bit of hard-headed sense.

“I’m going hunting again,” Susie explained. “The Andes, this time. I guess I’m really going exploring, though.”

“Exploring for what?” the fat man asked.

“Why, what do you explore for? Things, I guess. Maybe a lost race of giants. Don’t they have giants in Patagonia? I’ve heard they do.”

Dartlic chuckled. “About Patagonia, almost anything you hear, yes. . . . By the way, what became of the ocelot cub?”

“Daniel?”

“Uh—Daniel?”

“The ocelot. I named him Daniel. You know, like Daniel in the lion’s den, only he was a lion, if you want to call an ocelot a lion, which isn’t exactly correct, but anyway I didn’t think he would want to be called a lion, so I called him Daniel.”

“You disposed of the animal?”

“I sent him to Papa’s zoo in Tulsa. Papa has a zoo at our place in Tulsa, and I keep my animals there.”

Ham nudged Monk and whispered. “There! See where you’re going to wind up. She has a zoo.”

“That isn’t all she’s got,” Monk said cheerfully.

Doc Savage devoted considerable thought to Susie during the southward trip, without reaching much of a conclusion as to whether she was rattlebrained or had keen intelligence. He distrusted his opinions about women anyway.

Doc did draw from Susie’s presence a certain amount of mental relief—he didn’t like to do too much thinking about the grisly possibilities that could lie in the future of this matter they were launched upon. Thinking could, since they now had very little to work on, and were not yet on the scene, only take one course, that of painful contemplating of the magnitude and horror that might develop. Such thinking, which would do nothing but bring on more fear—a paralyzing state of terror was quite possible—was useless. Thought was best diverted, and Susie was a good diverter. He even, to the alarm of Monk and Ham, and the astonishment of Renny Renwick, went through the motions of playing up to Susie somewhat.

“Holy cow!” Renny muttered, observing this unheard-of phenomenon. He told Monk, “What the hell! She’s not Doc’s type.”

“I wish you’d point that out to him,” Monk said. “That kinda competition I can’t take.”

“So I noticed,” Renny said drily. “Ham is kinda heading you off, too, isn’t he?”

“That Ham,” Monk said ominously, “had better have his sulfa kit handy, because I’m gonna work him over. I wonder how he thinks up all those lies he is telling her about me.” He went back to his seat shaking his head.

The Clipper was slowed by head winds; it was night of the third day out of New York before the lights of Buenos Aires came into view far ahead, like sprinkled jewels, powder-fine, on a carpet of black velvet.

Doc Savage called Renny back into the men’s lounge. Orlin Dartlic was already there, but he took little part in the conference except to jerk his head repeatedly in agreement.

“Renny, you’re going to work directly with me,” Doc explained. “Your engineering work has given you the kind of a scientific background that will

be handy if this thing turns out to be what I—and Mr. Dartlic—believe it could be.”

Doc, Renny and Dartlic would go to a hotel, the *Casa Helado*, on *Unos de Martes* Avenue, number eighty-nine.

“That will be our headquarters for the time—probably no more than a day—that it takes us to get organized for a trip to look at this vanished lake,” Doc explained.

Renny nodded. “What about Monk and Ham?”

“They have the hotel address,” Doc said. “They are going to follow the girl.”

“That’s not much of a change for them,” Renny said. “Follow the girl, eh? So you don’t trust her little exploring story?”

“Just not taking chances, is all. Mr. Dartlic feels nothing should be regarded as a coincidence when Hans Boehl is, or remotely might be, in the picture.”

Renny nodded gloomily.

“Hans Boehl,” he agreed, “takes the coincidence out of anything.”

VI

Monk and Ham, having accepted the job of keeping tab on Susan Lane without any strenuous objections, proceeded to latch on to the young lady, to dog her footsteps. While a very obvious method, this was quite logical, because it was probably a normal thing to see young men panting around Susie. Susie herself seemed to accept it as a matter of course, but, shortly after alighting from the plane—while they were still in the customs rigamarole—another young man entered the scene.

“Susan!” exclaimed this young man with dignity. “Susan, this is wonderful!”

“Bernard Perling!” screamed Susie.

Monk muttered, “Who’s this guy?”

They were not long revising two or three first impressions about Perling. First, he was older than he had at first seemed—between thirty-five and forty, probably. He was a rather small man, hardly taller than Susan Lane, of dark complexion with a wisp of a black moustache.

“Right out of a movie,” Ham muttered.

Susie and Bernard Perling were squealing and shaking hands and exchanging hugs, Susie doing most of the squealing and Perling, in a dignified fashion, taking care of the hugging.

Susie performed introductions.

“Perlie,” she told Monk and Ham, “is an old pal. I cabled him I was coming down here and going exploring. Perlie, like a nice boy, is going to help me get started.”

“Friends of yours,” Mr. Perling asked, looking vaguely at Monk and Ham.

“Oh, lovely boys,” Susie explained. “They’re down here on a—on a—” She looked blankly at Monk and Ham, said, “I don’t believe I know why you are down here, do I?”

“Vacation trip,” Monk explained blandly.

“They work for Doc Savage,” Susie told Perling. “Mr. Savage is a very important man in New York. He’s a kind of detective, isn’t he?”

Monk said that if he had ever heard Doc Savage called a detective before, he couldn’t recall it, and that he didn’t think the term quite fit. He said that he and Ham would like to see the town after they got located in a nice hotel, and wouldn’t it be great if they and Miss Susan Lane put up at the same hotel.

“Oh, but Susan is staying at my estate,” said the somewhat foppish Mr. Perling. “However,” he conceded, “I will be glad to have my car drop you at a hotel, since you are Miss Lane’s friends.”

Mr. Perling had an impressive limousine complete with uniformed chauffeur. The chauffeur put everyone’s luggage in the back, held the door open for them, and they got going.

It developed that the limousine was first going to take Mr. Perling and Susie to the Perling estate, then continue on to a hotel with Monk and Ham, a procedure they were not against, since they were curious about Perling. He was, they found during the ride, evidently quite wealthy, owning considerable property of a commercial nature, and a good bit of real estate—city buildings and ranches.

If the estate was any indication of Perling’s financial standing, he was as rich as Croesus. The estate made Monk and Ham stare in breathless astonishment; the sweep of landscaped drives, the castle-like grandeur of the buildings, was more like a big California resort hotel than a home.

Monk and Ham were discouraged when the car continued onward, Perling and Susie having been left at the estate.

“You see that place?” Monk muttered.

“It would take a tour to see it,” Ham said.

“Big.”

“Bad taste. Worse than Hollywood.”

“Yeah,” Monk grumbled. “That guy is liable to be stiff competition. You see the way he rolls his eyes at her?”

Their driver, an erect dignified Argentinian, had been driving with stiff-necked composure, but now he snapped his head forward, yelled out of the window. “*Dios!*” he bawled. “*El automovil—*”

He didn’t complete whatever comments he had to make, because the other car, which had pulled up alongside and was crowding them off the road, suddenly whipped in ahead. A tree seemed to leap at them; the crash that followed was violent, and the front of the car changed its shape considerably.

Monk yelled, “By God! Who are those guys . . . ?”

Out of the other machine men were piling, more men than it appeared possible to jam into the car. They converged on the wrecked limousine from both sides. Monk and Ham barely had time to get the door open—it was somewhat jammed by the crash—and out into the road before the fighting started. There were no guns. The lack of firearms encouraged Ham to say, “It looks like this is a shellacking somebody has fixed up for us.”

Monk said, “Okay, let’s see what we can do about it.”

The street—road, really, for the spot was isolated—filled with tumult. The limousine driver, nose flattened and leaking crimson, got out, looked at the battle, and decided to leave there. He took half a dozen steps, there was a shot, and he went down. One of the attackers had calmly stepped out of the battle, aimed and fired; the man went to the fallen chauffeur, shot him again, this time in the temple. The killer then came back to the fight, said, in Spanish, “Give to them a thorough beating. It will soften them up.”

Occasionally Monk or Ham would partially emerge from the mêlée in a sort of volcanic upheaval; now and then a yelling figure would fly out of the huddle at a tangent. Mostly there were blow sounds, curses, scufflings, grunts, the sounds that men make when badly hurt. It subsided, finally, with Monk and Ham beaten into insensibility.

The man who had shot the chauffeur gave an order, and a commendation.

“Load them in the car and let’s go,” he said. “You did a good job on them.”

Monk revived in complete darkness and his first impression, a horrified one, was that he was blind. That idea frightened him into trying to sit up, and he gasped in agony; he felt as if he’d been put through a meat grinder, and that somebody was leading an elephant back and forth over what remained.

He realized, presently, that his body was actually rolling back and forth, and hitting metal braces on either side. Occasionally, for variety, his feet would hit the floor a solid bump, then he’d tumble again, and the elephant would take another trip over him. The elephant, he finally made out, was just plain pain, nothing else.

“Ham!” he croaked.

He got silence. Horrified, he settled down to the grim business of getting enough consciousness organized to do something constructive. There was, on the back of his head, a lump like a misplaced egg, and it had brothers elsewhere; even his teeth hurt as if they were being drilled upon.

He was tied, he found. But not tied very securely, for the knots were easy to untangle, and he tried to get to his feet. The floor rocked and rolled—it actually did; this was no phenomena perpetrated by his head. He stood up with difficulty, hanging on to anything he could reach, which seemed to be exclusively iron plates making up a wall or bulkhead. Standing made him quite ill, and his head flew off somewhere and was gone for quite a while before, with angry effort, he seemed to take it back and restore it to his shoulders.

“Boat,” he decided.

When he was able to hear sounds, he decided the boat was driven by a diesel engine. . . . Let’s see, what had happened? The last thing he could recall was hearing somebody say something about softening them up. Them? Oh, yes, Ham—

“Ham!” he yelled.

He felt around over the floor for Ham, but it was a rusty steel cubicle he was in, and Ham was not there. If there was a porthole, he couldn’t find it, and the same went for ventilation. He decided there wasn’t any ventilation; the place didn’t smell as if there was. It smelled, he concluded, as if raw hides had been hauled in it frequently.

Monk had absolutely no intention of going to sleep at this point, which was what he did. His body simply gave up; it had taken a hard beating. He slid down on the floor and slept, if it could be called that.

The door had opened. Very briefly, letting in a bone-colored chink of light; then the door had closed, but someone had been tossed, or had stepped, inside.

Monk listened. He was awake, could hear, see; he didn't feel much better than he had earlier, but he wanted to fight somebody, which was a sign of improvement. Feet were slipping slowly and cautiously over the metal plates, and seemed to be approaching him. His face split in a painful grimace—his captors must have decided to do away with him; the killer was coming toward him, in the belief that Monk was helpless.

His leg muscles gathered, his ears strained to catch the whispering shuffle of feet, and he leaped; he launched his short, solid body, desperately; his long arms whipped out. He misjudged somewhat, but made contact with the foe, and came down on the steel plates of the floor with a thud, tangled with someone. He got a fist in the midriff. A hand took his throat; he gasped for breath, kicked, and did some damage, because he got a gasp of pain and a “Damn you!”

“Ugh-uh—ugh!” Monk croaked past the fingers around his throat.

The other released him.

“I'll be damned!” said Ham's voice.

“Ham!”

“Monk!”

Monk said, “I thought it was somebody gonna cut my throat?”

“In the dark?” Ham sneered. “If they had sent a man in here to kill you, he would have had a light. What were you trying to do, beat me up just for the pleasure of it?”

Monk said this wasn't so. “If you felt as lousy as I do, you'd know better.”

“You were damned active there for a minute.”

“I don't think I got any arms and legs left,” Monk complained. “Where have you been?”

“I have been their personal guest on deck,” Ham explained.

“Having it soft, eh?”

“Not exactly. I think they broke my nose. Maybe not, but it feels like it.”

“Huh?”

“They want to know what we’re doing in Argentina.”

“And you told them that?”

“The truth—we’re on a vacation.”

“A hell of a vacation!” Monk growled. He realized that Ham must suspect there was a microphone hidden somewhere, or some other eavesdropping device. So he added a buildup to Ham’s statement, untrue, that they were on a vacation. He said, “Ain’t this a fine note! We come to a place to really take a vacation, and a bunch of guys think we’re up to something. Now I ask you, don’t that beat all hell! What are we on? A boat?”

Ham said it was a boat. “About seventy feet long, some kind of a coastwise cargo boat.”

“Where are we?”

“How do I know? It’s getting kinda cold outside, though.”

“Cold? Up north, eh?”

“Down south, you dope. It gets colder down here as you go south.”

“Oh.”

“We’re following the coastline, as nearly as I can tell,” Ham said.

“Know our hosts?”

“They’re all strangers to me,” Ham said.

It must have been nearly an hour later when they heard the first of what was to be a series of agonized shrieks. The sounds came from close at hand. Instinctively, both Monk and Ham came to their feet; they had heard men in pain before, but hardly anything that contained more suffering than these cries.

Ham whispered that it sounded right next door. “Let’s see if we can find some sort of an opening in the wall—those sounds seem a little clear to be coming through a bulkhead.”

They began going over the bulkhead, and presently Ham grunted softly. “An opening,” he whispered. “It’s got a few planks over it from the other side.” Ham continued working with the opening, using his fingers, shoving and asking, once, “Got a belt buckle?”

Presently he opened up a narrow slit of light. They jammed their eyes to the opening.

The adjoining compartment seemed somewhat larger than their own, and it was lighted. Spread-eagled against a bulkhead was a small man, almost nude, leaking blood from the nostrils, and from several minor wounds, evidently whip-made.

Ham breathed, "Good God!" The man was suspended by his thumbs.

Two men stood before the hanging man. They were saying nothing, but both had whips—hideous whips made of two-foot lengths of wire hawser, with the ends unlaid. From time to time, one or the other would use his whip, striking vulnerable spots.

The complete silence of the two whip-wielders was hair-raising. Ham's features became—he could tell from the way they felt—chalky in the darkness. He could hear rage straining at Monk's breathing, hear Monk's efforts to keep it controlled.

"I guess," one of the whip-wielders said suddenly, "that will do."

"Take him down?" asked the other.

"Let him hang, unless"—the man stepped close to the hanging man, jabbed the jagged end of the wire hawser into his midriff—"the great man here wishes to change his mind."

The dangling man said nothing. His mouth gaped, his eyes were slitted, and the crimson from his nostrils had traveled in irregular yarns the length of his body, almost to the toes of his right foot.

"Want to cooperate?" the whip-wielder demanded.

The victim maintained his silence.

"We'll let him digest that, and come back later with another serving of it," the man said. He jerked his head, and both whip-handlers left the compartment.

Monk and Ham withdrew from the crack.

Monk said, "I think I know who that fellow is."

"So do I," Ham agreed.

"He answers the description of the fellow that fat man, Orlin Dartlic, said trailed him to New York on the Clipper. Ain't that who he looks like to you?"

"Yes. Mouse-like face, scar on the lip—you can see the scar—and a kind of a dead-pan look about him."

"Paul Cort," Monk said. "Wasn't that his name?"

"Paul Cort was the name the fat man gave him," Ham agreed.

VII

They worked with the planks which covered the opening. "It would be too much to expect to be able to get through here," Ham said. "But there's a chance—say! Say! I believe we're going to get them loose."

The opening—it was actually a full-length but narrow door—was blocked the full length by hardwood planking, fitting into the opening so that it presented, on the side where Monk and Ham were imprisoned, a fairly smooth surface that accounted, Monk decided, for his not locating it earlier.

The boat continued to travel rapidly over a choppy sea. The motion was violent, and the ventilation not good; they heard, very infrequently, sounds from the deck, but they were the meaningless sort of noises that were normal to a boat.

They got through the bulkhead finally.

"I'll hold him up," Monk said. "You get his thumbs loose."

The victim groaned faintly, but gave no other sign of life, and Ham decided, "He's fainted." They got him down, spread him out on the floor—then there was nothing to do but wait. They did examine the man's battered features, and concluded there were no bones broken and that, as a whole, he was not near death, granting that his heart was in satisfactory condition.

They spent some of the time inspecting their steel prison. The door, they found, was fastened on the outside. It was of steel. The porthole—there was only one—was not large enough to admit either Monk or Ham to the outside.

"Land," Monk said, peering through the porthole.

The coast was rocky, quite forbidding, a desolate area of cliffs and sharply climbing hills, of surf beating itself to foam on reefs.

"I didn't know there was country like that close to Buenos Aires," Monk remarked.

"What makes you think it has to be close to Buenos Aires?"

"Eh?"

"How long do you think we've been on this hooker?"

"Why, five or six hours, maybe," Monk ventured.

"Four day."

"What?" Monk gasped. "Four—boy, I must have been laid out. Four days—listen, I wasn't unconscious that long."

"They gave us something to knock us out, some kind of pills."

“Oh. Four days! Whew! We could be anywhere!” Monk shook his head, gasped, felt of the knot on his scalp. “Four days. We been on this boat all that time, you know that?”

“I don’t know.”

The man grinned at them, entirely without humor, a grimace that twisted his battered features, and the tiny scar, half-hidden by caked blood, flickered on his lower lip.

“I am Paul Cort,” he said. “I hope—in some way—I can return this favor.”

Monk grunted. The idea of the fellow being able to return a favor seemed a bit far-fetched.

Ham sank beside the man. “How do you feel?”

Paul Cort grimaced again. “About, I imagine, as I look.”

“You don’t look so hot.”

The man lifted his head slightly, glanced around; he said, “Lean close,” and when Ham did so, whispered, “Microphone? They can overhear?”

Ham shook his head. “We don’t know. We looked for a mike, but didn’t find any. But let’s not be too sure. They’ve got new mikes—you can attach them to a wall, and they’ll pick up what is said on the other side.”

“Ahhhhhh.” Cort closed his eyes. “I shall tell you what I can without telling anything they do not already know.”

“That might be a good idea, Cort.”

Paul Cort eyed them sharply. “You know my name? How is that?”

Ham glanced at Monk; they exchanged nods of agreement that it would be okay to explain about the name. Ham said, “A man named Orlin Dartlic came to Doc Savage in New York—”

“That I know. I trailed him. So! He told you my name. Of course.”

“You trailed him, eh?”

“Yes,” Cort said. “I lost him after he left the airport, though. I heard later there was an attack on him at Doc Savage’s place. The attack was not my doing.”

“But you heard about it?”

“From sources, yes.” Cort scowled, shrugged his shoulders painfully. “Let us not be kittenish. I was told by”—he lifted his eyes toward the deck—“these scuts on this boat. They are part of the gang.”

“What gang?”

Cort hesitated, then spoke deliberately. “You’re going to have to take my word for a lot of this, and there will be questions you will want to ask. Don’t ask them. I won’t answer. And the questions themselves might be valuable to our friends and hosts, who probably have a microphone planted and are listening.”

Monk and Ham nodded. In their current frame of mind, any information was better than none.

“The European war, as you probably know by now, became the focus of activity of just about all the big-time crooks in business,” Cort explained. “One of the top crooks, and a scientist on top of that, was a man named Boehl—Hans Boehl. Probably the greatest authority on infernal organizations in the world. Hans Boehl was one of the gang who got out of Europe, and, without giving details, I can say that I am assigned to finding Boehl, learning what he is up to if I can’t find him, and seeing that he is—shall we say, placed in good hands. Preferably the hands of the devil.”

Ham said, “One of the details you’re omitting, I take it, is just who you are?”

“Not necessarily.”

“You’re a secret agent?”

“Yes. For the Argentine government.”

“Oh.”

Paul Cort continued, “The trail of Hans Boehl led to Patagonia. There it stopped. Patagonia is a big place, and I had little to work on until that lake vanished. Then I did.”

Monk grunted. “Lake vanished?” he said. “Now we’re getting somewhere. I want to know—”

“No!”

“Eh?”

“Not here,” said Cort. “Not anything about the lake—not here.”

Presently Cort said, “Here is why I went to New York. I knew Doc Savage’s help was going to be asked, so I trailed along—if Orlin Dartlic got the job done, fine and okay. If he did not, I was going to try my hand at enlisting Doc Savage’s interest.” He paused, his voice took on a grinding note of emphasis, and he said, “I am sure Savage can find where Boehl is hiding, and completely thwart the horror which can, through Boehl, grow out of this thing.”

Monk thought of the telephoned warning Doc had received, in Cort's voice, not to come to the Argentine, and particularly Patagonia. He began, "About that telephone—"

"The phoned threat in New York?" Paul Cort twisted his lips thinly, distorting the scar. "I made it, yes. I told you I was anxious to have Savage to come to Patagonia. I figured a threat was an excellent argument in favor of his entering the case. Did I figure rightly?"

Monk shrugged. "I guess so. But Dartlic had already sold a bill of goods."

"Yes?" Cort frowned. "I hardly gave the fat man credit for so much brains."

"Dartlic, you mean?"

"A fat coward and a fool."

"Works for the Argentine government, doesn't he?"

Paul Cort nodded. "He is a Netherlands secret agent on the trail of Hans Boehl."

"Netherlands? Dutch?"

Cort nodded. "There is not a country in Europe but that would put a noose around Boehl's neck, and pay dearly for the privilege."

"Portugal, too?"

Paul Cort smiled wryly. "You have heard I use a Portuguese passport, I see. Think nothing of it. It is a phony."

Ham listened for a while for some sign of the return of the men who had been beating Cort. He asked, "What do they want out of you?"

"The whereabouts of Boehl."

"Oh—hey, wait a minute! Aren't they Boehl's gang?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. There are other secret agents after Boehl—Russian, English, American." He peered intently at Monk, asked, "I presume you knew that."

"We didn't know anything," Monk said.

Ham asked, "How'd you get here?"

"Unfortunately," admitted Paul Cort, "I was somewhat of a dope and made a couple of unforgivable traps. In short, two bogus police officers arrested me and I believed them for just a minute too long. The two officers, who are of course not officers, were the fellows who were in here a while ago, beating me."

"They were wise to you, eh?" Monk said.

“My mistake,” Cort said bitterly, “was one quite a few men have made—I misjudged a blonde.”

Monk stiffened. “Eh?”

“Susan Lane,” Cort said.

Ham jumped. “For God’s sake. Is Susie—”

“The rattlebrained Susie,” Paul Cort said, “is Hans Boehl’s tool.”

Monk was chagrined. He glanced at Ham, and got some satisfaction out of the lawyer’s stunned look. “Suckers,” Monk said sourly.

“Listen, you fell first—”

“I said suckers—plural—didn’t I?” Monk asked bitterly.

They were silent, their thoughts involved with the perfidy of the female sex, and particularly with their own susceptibility. They were, as Monk saw it, a couple of colossal saps, and probably deserved whatever was going to happen to them, which he suspected was going to be plenty. He looked at Paul Cort’s physical condition, took another stock of his own bruises, and shuddered.

Ham was scowling.

“You know a man named Perling?” he asked Cort.

“Bernard Perling?”

“Yes.”

“I know of him. Who doesn’t? More money than—let us say—sense.”

“He’s a friend of Susie’s.”

Cort nodded. “And would like to be more—would like to marry her.”

“Then Perling and Susie are working together for Boehl?”

“No.”

“Eh?”

“Perling is as harmless as he seems. He is merely a rich sap, and sometimes a heel.”

“Oh.”

Monk shook his head. He was depressed by his own gullibility, and by their position, which didn’t appeal to him. He wandered over to the porthole and stood peering out.

There was, rather close at hand, a line of cliffs and reefs on which waves broke. He realized, surprised, that the shore was quite close and that, astonishingly, the cliffs were not as high as he had thought, and the reefs not as vicious; the waves, in proportion, were not as violent as he had supposed.

They were short and chopping, which gave the boat its violent motion, but there was not the long rolling swells usually encountered at sea.

Spray had leaked in around the edge of the porthole slightly and, suddenly suspicious, Monk touched a finger to the dampness, brought the finger to his lips, and tasted.

“The hell!”

“What’s the matter?” Ham demanded.

“Not salty!” Monk said. “You know something? We’re not on the ocean. We’re on a lake.”

Paul Cort looked startled.

“That’s important,” he said hoarsely. “Very important.”

VIII

Susan Lane could sob very effectively. She put a pitiful wounded-bird manner into it that was disturbing, and it quite effectively blocked Doc Savage’s questions, his more pointed ones, and even interfered with his reasoning. This was the third time she had burst into tears when he had talked to her, and it was getting his goat. She wailed, “To think that I was the fault for something awful happening to that nice Monk and that nice Ham!” It didn’t sound silly the way she did it. It was heart-rending, or at least heart-disturbing.

Bernard Perling patted her shoulder affectionately. “Now, now, it couldn’t have been your fault, my dear,” he said. “Besides, Mr. Savage, I am sure, will eventually find his friends.”

“What makes you sure?” asked fat Orlin Dartlic.

“Mr. Savage’s reputation,” said Perling promptly. “He is quite famous as a man who deals with trouble, you know.”

Doc Savage carried his disgust and his concern out in a patio, stood frowning down at the multitude of Buenos Aires lights spread out below him. Four days, he reflected bitterly, and there had been no headway made. Four days and not the slightest trace of Monk or Ham. There was a slight sound beside him, and he saw that Orlin Dartlic had joined him.

“What do you think?” Doc asked.

“Poof! Words. How is one to know about words,” the fat man said gloomily.

“They could have led Monk and Ham into a trap.”

Dartlic shrugged. “Who is to make us sure of it? The chauffeur? No. Perling’s chauffeur is dead, killed by the road.”

“Perling seems harmless.”

“A hand-grenade looks harmless, no? Almost like a baseball, yes? Blooie! It is to handle with care.”

“Four days!” Doc said violently. “Four days, and we get nowhere, do nothing.” He looked at the fat man, added, “And part of that is your fault.”

“But I—”

“Never mind,” Doc said, more quietly. “I’m sure you have been doing what you could, the best way you could.” He resumed watching, without particularly seeing, the spectacular vista that was Buenos Aires by night.

I am, he thought, on edge, and that isn’t good. The delay was getting under his skin, that, and the complete absence of any information about Monk or Ham. Dartlic had, in all fairness, done all he could. The man’s department, the Department of Patagonian Affairs, had cooperated fully—and even the Argentine government heads themselves, while somewhat suspicious in view of the sour note relations were hitting with the United States, had been helpful, or at least had put no hindrances in Doc’s way. That was more of a concession than he had expected.

No trace had been found of the two aviators who had taken the picture of the lake; they had simply disappeared, whether by foul play or not, no one knew. The same went for the murderer of Juan Russel; he had not been found.

Juan Russel . . . There was, Doc reflected, no direct evidence in his hands to connect the death of Russel with the lake business. Was he, he wondered, overlooking an angle there? Not overlooking it, exactly—he had Renny Renwick working on the Russel matter—but giving it less attention than it deserved? Renny, who spoke Spanish fairly well, had left that morning by plane for the Patagonian village where Juan Russel had been murdered. That, Doc reflected, was one thing Orlin Dartlic didn’t know—not that he didn’t trust Dartlic. He was, so far, neutral about Dartlic. His disposition was simply to trust no one.

Doc threw his weight against Dartlic suddenly. The fat man staggered, lost his balance; they went down together behind a stone patio bench.

Dartlic gasped, “What the—”

“Easy,” Doc said. “Over there. A man. Sulking.”

The fat man peered intently, could distinguish nothing, and said so. "Nobody I see," he muttered. He sounded frightened.

"The fellow ducked behind a bush," Doc said. "I got only a glimpse of him. Stay down."

Dartlic muttered, "Perhaps a guard that silly ass Perling, he is hire. For Susie, he is concerned. She is upset about this."

"Stay down," Doc said.

Moving softly, the bronze man crawled toward the figure he had seen, making as much use of shadows as possible. He heard, presently, a sound that was slight, the scuff of leather on a rock. Doc took a chance, went forward in a silent run, and had a mishap; he stepped on a rock that clattered.

Instantly the skulker was off; the fellow swung in his track, head down, and melted into darkness at the end of the patio. There followed, for about fifty yards, a headlong race, but a poorly matched one, for Doc gained rapidly. He came up behind the man, swung his fist in a short arc and struck the other below and ahead of the ear. The man went down.

Doc crouched and listened for a while. He heard no sounds to indicate the man had a companion, and, reassured, he threw the victim over his shoulder and trudged back to the patio, then into the house, where there was more light.

"Dartlic," he called.

The fat man came.

Doc indicated the unconscious skulker. "Ever seen him before?"

Dartlic shook his head. "Was he . . . ?"

"Prowling, yes." Doc searched the fellow, but found no weapons. He said, "Unarmed. That's not what I expected. Will you get Susie and Perling?"

Susan Lane and Bernard Perling, when the fat man brought them, professed never to have seen the prowler before.

The man was short, as dark as a peon, but without the roughness of a lower class Argentinian. His clothing, Doc noted, was fairly expensive; even in unconsciousness, the man's face had a certain strength, although his mouth was rather small, his lips thin.

"He'll wake up presently," Doc said.

The man regained consciousness warily, Doc suspecting that the man kept his eyes closed after he was awake, a possible feat, although a rather difficult one. At any rate, the man's voice was quite clear when he spoke.

Dartlic yelled at him, "The idea of prowling around here, what was it?"

The man looked at Doc. "Señor Savage?" he asked in fair English.

"Yes."

"I am glad. It is you I was wish to speak with."

Doc Savage showed what could have passed for mild surprise, although actually he was startled and wary. "You were prowling around here because you wanted to talk to me?"

"Sí."

"Why not just walk right in?"

"Yes! Why?" Dartlic yelled.

For a moment, the prowler's dark eyes showed fear of the fat man. "Because, my friend Juan Russel was murdered. I do not wish to be murdered myself." His voice harshened. "Is not that a reason good enough? Not wishing to be killed."

"What do you know about Juan Russel?"

"He is my friend."

Orlin Dartlic's big fists clenched, and he leaned over the man menacingly, bawled, "What do you know about the vanishing lake, fellow?"

The man sneered. He didn't like Dartlic. "Your soft fists do not scare me, Señor," he said. "I speak because I wish—and because of Juan, who is send my son, Belos, to mining college when I am not afford to do so. Juan Russel," he added proudly, "is seventh cousin to me. Is of my blood, and very dear friend!"

"Take it easy," Doc told Dartlic. "Let's hear what he has to say."

"I am Pedro Diego," the skulker said.

"All right, Pedro," Doc said patiently. "Let's have what you've got to say."

Pedro Diego hesitated, compressed his lips, said, "In—what you say it—private."

"You mean you want to talk to us alone?"

"Not us. You." The man's arm levelled at Dartlic. "Not him."

The fat man said he would be damned. He said it in Netherlands Dutch, in English, and in Spanish, and seemed quite upset.

Doc Savage took the man into another room, closed the door, and listened patiently as the fellow said, “I was Juan Russel’s friend, and I do not know why he was killed, and I did not know until I read in newspaper of it, and then I go to where Joan Russel die, and I find out nothing.”

“Oh, you’ve been investigating Juan Russel’s murder?”

“Sí.”

“Why?”

“He is my friend, my blood relative, my benefactor,” the man said. He had a way of running his words together and mixing them with a little Spanish when he came to a meaning the words for which eluded him in English. “I find nothing in murder scene,” he continued. “I backtrack Juan, and I begin to find out some things. Don’t ask me what is the meaning; I can’t tell you because I know from nothing, but this I know: it is terrible. It is real. It is deadly. Who is, what is, I do not know, nor where is I do know sure.”

“Wait a minute,” Doc said. “Let’s try that last sentence again, only in Spanish this time. The English you are getting upside down.”

In Spanish, the man said, “I know where Juan Russel found the thing that he was murdered for finding.”

Doc was intent now. “What is it?”

“That I do not know.”

“But you know where?”

“Sí.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Let me explain,” Pedro Diego said. “Juan Russel used two pack burros, named Andy and Uncle Bim, and he thought a great deal of them. He was very attached to them, and often said that if anything ever happened to him, he would like me to have them because I would take the best of care of them. You understand, *Señor*, that I wanted also something to remember Juan by. And I knew he would like for me to see that his burros were well taken care of. So—his burros were not with him when he was murdered. He was murdered in a village, to which he had come by automobile.”

“I see.”

“I backtracked Juan Russel, Señor Savage. And I found out that Juan Russel, before he was killed, was a man in the greatest of terror, a man maddened by fear. Of what would Juan be so afraid? I do not know. Not of anything of danger to himself, of that I am sure. Juan Russel was a fearless

man. But he was in infinite terror before he died. I talk to people who saw him, who heard him, and his condition of terror was pitiable.”

“How far did you backtrack Juan?”

“Until I found the two burros, Andy and Uncle Bim.”

“No farther.”

“No.”

“Then how,” Doc demanded, “do you know where Juan Russel encountered—whatever he encountered?”

“Very simple. Juan Russel always kept a map of his travels in little-known Patagonian territory. He kept it day by day—absolutely, every night, and often during the day, he would draw in the notebook and make notes there.”

“You mean you found this map on the burros?”

“Yes. Not map, really—a diary, *Señor*. A scientific record.”

“Of what Russel saw?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

Pedro Diego gripped Doc’s arm dramatically. “The record, *Señor*, she end suddenly. All of a sudden, no more entries. . . . Is that not meaningful?”

“You think that the record led up until about the time Juan Russel saw whatever he saw—and after that he was too upset to keep it up to date?”

“*Sí*. Is that not reasonable?”

“Very reasonable. Where is this record?”

The man said, “It is at the *Casa Helado*. The hotel.”

“That is where I am staying,” Doc said, surprised.

“*Sí, Señor*. That I know. I go there seeking you, and they tell me you are here. That you are in Buenos Aires—I learn that from the newspapers.”

By midnight, Doc Savage had managed to obtain, from the files of a mining concern, the *Minerales Internacionale*, several reports in the handwriting of Juan Russel. Russel had done considerable work for the company in the past, and, through Orlin Dartlic, access to their files was readily gained.

Doc finished his examination of the handwriting of reports and the notebook Pedro Diego had given him. The latter—obviously both reports and notebook were in the same handwriting—was copious with scientific

detail, and the sketches, while abbreviated, were expertly made and, probably, accurate.

“Genuine,” Doc said.

“A clue we got, yes,” Orlin Dartlic said happily. “That fellow Pedro Diego, I am not liking not a little bit. I think I lock him in jailhouse, yes.”

“That might be a good idea,” Doc said.

The fat man looked surprised.

Doc went into the other room, where Pedro Diego was waiting and explained about jail. Doc made it sound quite reasonable, even a wise move. He said, “We have every reason to believe there are tremendous things involved, great dangers, and that your life may be menaced because of this aid you have given us. For your protection, I would suggest that you submit to arrest as a witness. In jail, you will be safe.”

Pedro was not too happy about that. “If you recommend—”

“I recommend highly,” Doc said.

Renny telephoned at twelve twenty-seven. He said, “Doc, I’m down here on the fringe of creation. If you ever saw a wild country, this is it, and I’m not really into it yet. This is the village where Juan Russel was murdered.”

“Learn anything?”

“Enough to be interesting,” Renny explained. “Juan Russel was scared stiff when he came into this town. He tried to telephone you in New York—”

“Telephone me?” Doc interrupted. “We received no telephone calls from him. Are you sure—”

“I’m getting to that. The wires were cut. They were cut in a dozen places that day—which means somebody knew what Juan Russel was up to, and got ahead of him and put the telephone lines on the fritz. They did that, it would appear, so Russel could not get in touch with you until they had time to kill him. Russel was very upset about not being able to reach you. He raised hell with the telephone people here, and then, after he was killed, and the lines were repaired, they got scared and kept it quiet.”

“Got scared?”

“A guy came around and threatened them, as a matter of fact.”

“Anyone we know?”

“The one who threatened them? Uh-huh. Answers the description of Paul Cort.”

“Paul Cort tried to keep us from finding out Juan Russel was trying to reach us, eh?”

“Looks as if.”

“You stick right there,” Doc said. “I’m coming down.”

IX

The darkness lasted for a long time. They were, in effect, flying into a country that was in its way like the Arctic, a land in which days and nights became distorted in length. This season—winter in New York, summer here in Patagonia—was the season of longest days, but that did not keep the night from seeming long. Doc did not like the country below; there were no landing fields, almost, that were established airports, and not much of the country, he suspected, offered emergency fields. The sun came up finally, and seemed to mount rapidly to about the position it would probably hold most of the day—a phenomena which was not a fact, but due to the presence of mountains to the south which, as they flew toward them, sank quickly, giving the illusion of a swift-rising sun.

“Is big country, don’t I tell you?” Dartlic said.

Doc made no comment. The fat man was right, though. The territory over which they were flying was as impressive as any he had seen. There were, at intervals, miles of pampas with here and there herds of cattle or sheep—the latter becoming more scarce. They flew over forest lands of vast sweep, and later, as they continued south, there were lakes and, far to the right, the bluish evidence of ice-fields and mountains lost in the haze of distance. A rugged, desolate country, a country where rivers roared through gorges, tumbled over gigantic waterfalls.

“Is vast,” said Dartlic happily.

“I think we’re about there,” Doc said. He decreased throttle settings, adjusted the tabs for a glide angle, and fell to watching the earth. Below was a road, the sole sign of civilization, and, as he got lower, he could distinguish a telephone line, probably the one that had been cut, as Renny explained, when Juan Russel endeavored to place his call.

The village came into view presently, appearing rather unexpectedly as a cluster of rooftops not far ahead.

Dartlic pointed. “Is lake. Can use.”

Doc thought they could. Their plane—it belonged to Dartlic’s Department of Patagonian Affairs—was an amphibian, a fairly new one; the

lake about three miles from the village, seemed large enough to serve for a landing area. Doc made a circle, mentally measuring the clear area, noting wind direction from the breaking of the small waves on the lake. A fair breeze, evidently; his navigation checks had indicated about forty miles of wind aloft, but there was probably less, not more than twenty, on the surface. He dragged the lake to make sure there were no floating obstructions, then brought the ship in and set it down.

Dartlic pointed excitedly. "Somebody is!"

"Renwick," Doc agreed.

"Holy cow, no news of Monk or Ham yet," Renny said bitterly. "I wish I knew what happened to those two. It's beginning to get me down."

Doc nodded soberly. He surmised that Renny's spirits were also down because he had unearthed no more information of value. He said, "You haven't learned more?"

Renny shook his head. "Not a thing. Somebody fixed the telephone wires so Juan Russel couldn't call out. The same somebody tried to throw a scare into the telephone people, and succeeded partially."

Fat Orlin Dartlic scowled. "Is Paul Cort, no?"

"Is Paul Cort's description, anyway," Renny said. "Small guy, mouse-like, scar on his lip."

Doc Savage said, "Some information fell in our laps last night." He told Renny about Pedro Diego, friend of Juan Russel, and the scientific notebook which Juan Russel had of his wanderings.

Renny frowned. "Yeah? You know, I been asking questions in this town all day, and I got descriptions of everybody, the police included—there were some special police down from the province capitol, and two from Buenos Aires itself—who have been asking questions about Juan Russel. This is a village, you know. Strangers are scarce. It was easy to find out who had been interested in Juan Russel."

"You make a point, no?" Dartlic demanded.

"Yeah, I make a point. Nobody named Pedro Diego has been through here on the Russel case."

"Whoosh!" said Dartlic.

"You sure?" Doc asked Renny.

"What's Pedro Diego look like?" Renny asked, and then, having heard Pedro's description, he shook his head vehemently. "No such guy. He wasn't

through here—like he said he was.”

Dartlic chuckled. “Ah! It’s good we put Pedro Diego the jailhouse in, no!”

Renny completed his examination of the Russel notebook, turned back to some of the surveys, and compared them with charts. He did some head scratching. “I think we can find that vanished lake from the air,” he said. “That is, granting it’s what Juan Russel saw.”

Doc nodded. “We’ll take a crack at it right away.”

Dartlic started. “Today?”

“Yes.”

“But gasoline. The fuel gauge I am noticing is not a third left.”

Doc Savage turned to Renny, asked, “Was the shipment of aviation gasoline here?”

Renny nodded. “Uh-huh. I had half a dozen guys and two mule carts haul it out here.”

“Gasoline!” Dartlic yelled. “Where you get—shipment you say? How am I confused? What do you do don’t you—I mean, gasoline come from where?”

“Doc had it sent down here.”

“Where from?”

“Buenos Aires.”

“When?”

“Shipped four days ago, right after we got to Buenos Aires.”

The fat man flipped his hands excitedly. “I am surprise like damned,” he yelled. “You know somethings I don’t know, no?”

Doc said drily, “Let’s load the gas.”

The fat man was puzzled about the gasoline shipment, and during the loading—they had to pack the five-gallon tins about a hundred yards across soft marshy ground—he collared Renny and demanded explanations. “How come this?”

“The gasoline?” Renny shrugged. “Oh, Doc figured we would use this as a base in hunting for the vanished lake, I guess.”

“But how he know—the lake—is in this direction he don’t know and how could he?”

Renny was somewhat amused by the fat man's method of mixing up the English language when he was excited.

"Doc figured Juan Russel in it from the beginning, I guess," he said.

"The hell he does! Why am I not told, no?"

"Look, take a deep breath and relax," Renny suggested. "Somebody should have told you about Doc. He goes along apparently getting the worst end of the deal and completely confused, it would appear, and all of a sudden you discover he hasn't been going down—he has been going up. In other words, don't be too surprised to find out he already knows what is what and who done it."

"I'm a son of my gun," the fat man said.

The refueling was about completed when Doc Savage said, "There seems to be a plane coming." Kenny's head shot up, his ears strained, and presently he nodded. The fat man, Dartlic, said, "Safe I play!" and struck out running. Renny and Doc watched him, and the fat man took shelter among boulders and underbrush.

"He's a queer duck," Renny said. "The way he slaughters the English language—"

Doc said, "He may not have a bad idea. We had better take shelter ourselves until we make sure about this plane."

The plane, a large cabin job—amphibian—came out of the north swiftly, dropped over the village, made a circle, continued to the lake, circled that, then went into an approach. Presently it was skimming the surface, spray flying. It turned in to the shore not far from where Doc's plane was beached, and the pilot eased up on the sand cautiously with the hull keel. Then the pilot opened the nose hatch, and stood up for a look around.

"Perling!" Renny gasped.

Bernard Perling looked all about, then yelled, "Mr. Savage!"

Doc said, "Keep down, and let's see what he is up to."

Perling repeated his shout, then swore mildly in Spanish. He disappeared back inside the plane, then, and presently there was an uproar, the effect being somewhat as if Perling was trying to drag a scratching, spitting wildcat out of the ship. But it was Susan Lane, blonde, angry, saying plenty and using her long fingernails whenever she could.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled.

Doc said, "We might as well look into this."

When Susan Lane caught sight of the three men, she screeched, "Take this gorilla off me! Take him off!"

Perling grinned at them, his small moustache slanting upward on each lip like a pair of surprised eyebrows.

"Susie dear," he said, "isn't the little angel I thought she was."

Susie stopped fighting. She eyed Doc Savage uneasily, tried to straighten her dress and untangle her hair. "This idiot doesn't know what he is doing," she said, indicating Perling. "He's a fool."

Perling looked pleased. He bowed slightly, said, "My dear, the reputation of idiot has been a cross to bear. I think, from now on, though, that I shall carry it more lightly."

"What happened?" Doc asked.

"The lovely Susie," Perling said, "was keeping track of where you went. She had some fellow—he got away—who was bringing her reports on you."

"Is that true?" Doc asked Susie.

"I don't care what you're thinking," she snapped. "And I don't think I'm going to dignify his accusations"—she tried to kick Perling's shin here, unexpectedly, but failed—"with an answer."

Fat Orlin Dartlic cleared his throat loudly. "The tutz she follow me to New York and back again, maybe," he said.

Susie gave him a dark look. "I wouldn't follow you from here"—she made a sixteenth-space with thumb and forefinger—"to there."

Bernard Perling was straightening his coat, and feeling dubiously of several scratches on his face. "Oh, by the way, I wish to extend hospitality," he said.

"Hospitality?"

"I have, south and west of here, a hunting estate," Perling said. "A small place of mine that I've used occasionally when I wanted solitude. There is a small landing field, and a hangar. You are welcome to use it."

"How far?" Doc asked.

"About two hundred miles," Perling said. "You will accept, yes?"

Doc Savage drew Renny and Dartlic aside and announced that he thought it would be a good idea to accept Perling's invitation. Renny said, "If you vote for that, it's okay with me." But fat Dartlic was less agreeable, explaining, "You will overlook me a good scare, no? This Perling and this

Susie, it is very funny they follow us, yes? I am not a man who likes to put on his boots with snakes in them already. I vote for look at that lake.”

“I think we can find the lake, and stop at Perling’s place before dark,” Doc said. “The plane will hold Perling and the girl.”

Dartlic said, “Perling’s place is not from that lake so damned far, maybe?”

“Suspiciously close,” Doc said.

“Maybe we get in trouble that place. Is possible?”

“Is possible, all right.”

“I no like.”

“Put it this way, why don’t we?” Doc suggested. “We take Perling and the girl along, and have a look at the vanished lake, then a look at Perling’s hunting lodge, as he calls it, and if it seems all right, we’ll land and investigate.”

“Is agreeable,” Dartlic said.

X

The lake lay on a tableland at the foot of a considerable escarpment of cliffs and low mountains, the valleys of which were laced with glaciers. There was actually a series of lakes, connected by small streams, forming necklaces that led to a much larger lake a few miles to the left. This larger lake lay at the foot of the mountains, and was obviously a picturesque, as well as a remarkably remote spot.

Doc said to Dartlic, “You can fly, can you not?”

The fat man nodded.

“Take over,” Doc said. “Renny and I will want a close look at that place.”

“Can you detect radio-activity from this height?” the fat man asked anxiously. “We would not want—we do not know . . .” He swallowed in fright.

“It would depend on how strong it was,” Doc said.

Perling and Susan Lane were riding in the two rear seats in the cabin, the girl with her wrists tied to the seat arms. She told Doc bitterly, “So now we’re going to see the master work, eh?”

Doc seemed slightly amused. “That would be a change, wouldn’t it?”

“Eh? Change?”

“Almost everyone has been working on me, so far, don’t you think?” he asked.

She blinked at him. She was surprised.

“Maybe you’re not as over-rated as I was beginning to think,” she said.

“No?”

“As long as you know they’ve been playing you for a sucker, I guess that might take you out of the sucker bracket,” she said.

Doc carried some of the instruments he had brought—nothing extraordinary; the instruments were ones he had borrowed in Buenos Aires, from a radiological research laboratory—back to the seat immediately back of the pilot-copilot seat.

He told Renny, “Susie is a character.”

“She’s something,” Renny agreed.

“My stock is going up with her.”

“I hope that’s a help,” Renny said. “You want me to use that radio-activity detector? I think I know how to handle the gimmick.”

“There’s nothing unusually complicated about it,” Doc said. “It’s one they use to locate lost radium around hospitals. You put on the headset, and adjust the selector dial until you get a click—about two every second—then turn the volume knob up until it is satisfactory.”

“How much of an increase in frequency of clicks should I get excited about?”

“Anything out of the way. There’s bound to be some variation and some interference, but report anything unusual.”

“Okay.”

At Doc’s instructions, Dartlic brought the plane across the lake area in level flight at steadily descending altitudes, beginning at three thousand feet, dropping five hundred the next two trips, then, below a thousand feet, descending two hundred feet lower each time.

Doc took some photographs on each trip down to the five hundred foot level, and after that, took no more until they were very low, about fifty feet.

There was evidence of a violently burned area around the lake, the charred trunks of scrawny trees, and blackened roots.

The lake area itself was about two thirds full of water again.

There was a small dam, obviously hand-made and not yet completed, across the stream at the lower end, forming the lake.

“Holy cow!” Renny said. “That lake is shallow—not over a foot deep, it doesn’t look like. . . . And that damn—I think they’re still working on it!”

Doc started to speak, but excited howling from fat Dartlic interrupted them.

“Bullets is!” Dartlic bawled. “In wing is holes! Bullets, no!” He banked the plane frantically.

Renny spotted the perforations in the outer wing panel which had aroused the fat man, and agreed, “Bullets is, all right. Somebody hidden in the brush down there was taking shots at us.”

Doc Savage searched the ground below as the plane swung in a wide circle, but he could distinguish no trace of the marksman.

Renny said, “But how’d they get there? There’s no trail, except right around the lake, and leading over to the next lake. There was kind of a road there.”

“Boats,” Doc said.

“Huh?”

“From the other lake, you’ll notice, a fairly deep stream seems to connect with another lake, and then the larger body of water.”

“Oh.”

“They could transport whatever they needed by boat from the larger lake, and would have to pack it less than a quarter of a mile across land to get to the lake—if you would call it a lake—that vanished.”

Renny rubbed his jaw with a big hand. “This is kind of a corny set-up, isn’t it?”

“You get any action out of the radio-activity detector?”

“Not a peep.”

“What does that mean to you?”

“It blows any atom ideas sky-high.”

“I’m glad of that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Renny was silent a while. Doc went forward, told Dartlic to see if he could locate Bernard Perling’s lodge, and sent Perling forward to guide the fat man in the hunt.

When Doc came back, Renny said, “The photograph—the negative too—was faked up, a little, wasn’t it? The negative showed signs of radio-activity, stuff that would affect a photographic film if it was strong enough.”

“So that has been on your mind, eh?”

Renny nodded. “Yeah, I figured what they wanted us to figure, I guess. That lake, from the negative, sure looked like it had gone up because somebody—or nature itself—had started atomic disintegration of water. It scared me plenty. If somebody was doing it—and all this talk about Hans Boehl didn’t ease my mind—it was bad. If, through some freak process of nature, the lake had disintegrated, that wasn’t good either. The whole dangd world would go up in a minute, if something like that happened—the oceans, everything. I even got to thinking of how much water there is in the human body, eighty percent or whatever it is—I was going to look that up, but got scared out—and it was something! Boy! Holy cow!”

“The lake business was probably staged,” Doc said.

“Uh-huh. What’d they use, you figure?”

“High-test gasoline, conceivably. That lake is very shallow. It looked to me like the bottom had been smoothed off and levelled ahead of time. Probably three or four inches of gasoline, maybe less—probably less, too, considering the difficulty of getting it in here—was used. A spark at the right time, and up it went. From a distance, it would be remarkably effective. Literally a great explosion. The stuff would evaporate, the whole vicinity would be saturated with explosive vapor, and it would be, in effect, a great explosion.”

“The right time was when Juan Russel happened to pass?”

“Yes.”

“But how did they know he was going to pass?”

“Juan Russel was a prospector, and the line of hills yonder is a logical route for him to follow. Juan had, no doubt, mentioned where he was going to prospect, the general route he would follow. And if Russel had not come along, someone else would have, no doubt. They were merely fortunate enough to use Russel.”

“Or unfortunate,” Renny said.

“Yes,” Doc agreed. “I think that they would not have needed to murder any other man but Russel.”

“Because Russel knew you?”

Doc nodded. “Russel was killed because he started trying to get in touch with me.”

“A hell of a coincidence, Russel knowing you.”

“He may have been chosen for that reason.”

Renny said, “I guess you figure this the way I do—the whole thing a bait to get you down here.”

“Yes—a bait to get us down here,” Doc said.

Dartlic yelled, “The lodge is!” He was pointing. Doc went forward, and looked down at the rugged, desolate country beneath. To the right, a river roared through a huge gorge, tumbled over a waterfall, made its way presently to the lake. Ahead and a bit to the left was some kind of a habitation, a fairly large log lodge near the upthrust of a cliff, and, in front of the lodge, a cleared area of a landing strip. Bernard Perling explained, “There it is. The air currents are sometimes tricky, but I think you can land. If you feel it is safe. That—that lake is only about thirty miles away.”

Doc asked, “How long since you have been down here?”

“Here! Months. Yes, about seven months since I have visited the place.”

“You keep men here?”

“Men? One man. A caretaker.”

“We’ll land,” Doc said.

Perling nodded uneasily. “I would not—I wish to state—in view of the mysterious things that are happening in this vicinity, that I do not guarantee safety.”

“Land,” Doc said.

The bronze man went back and took the seat beside Renny, lowered his voice, said grimly, “I told Dartlic we’re going to land. I’ll take over the controls myself. But before we land—I think you should have a vote in this.”

“Vote on what?”

“Landing here. I think we’re deliberately doing what has been planned for us to do. That means a trap. In brief, the situation is this: we can play safe and maybe never solve this thing and never find Monk and Ham. Or we can walk into their trap and depend on fighting our way out.”

Renny’s long face was startled. “You make it sound damned rough.”

“It is.

“You figure Monk and Ham are alive?”

Doc nodded. “And near here. I think—and this is a deduction, like most of what I have been saying recently—I think that Monk and Ham were seized to be used as a club over us—to make us do something.”

“That’s old-fashioned melodrama.”

Doc agreed that it was. “It’s also a system the Nazis used quite a lot, and, remember, Hans Boehl had a big finger in the Nazi methods.”

“The touch of Hans Boehl, eh?”

“How do you vote?”

“I don’t see we’ve got much choice,” Renny said gloomily. “I vote we land, do what we can.”

Doc handled the landing. There was, it developed, ample strip, but the wind currents gave them a hustling around on the last leg of the approach, and the landing was somewhat rough. They all breathed easier when they were down, and taxiing toward a large log building, rather elaborately made, which Perling indicated was the hangar.

Immediately, a man appeared. He was tall, a bearded youth in rough khaki.

“Rico!” Bernard Perling said. He was relieved. “Rico is my caretaker.” He leaned out of the plane door to yell, “Rico, have any strangers been about here recently?”

The tall youth wet his lips. It appeared that he was more accustomed to silence than to conversation.

“No one in weeks,” he said in Spanish.

“Ah, that’s better,” Perling sighed.

The lodge was around a small bend in a canyon just off the mesa, and Perling led the way. “At least, we will have a comfortable night here,” he declared.

The place was surprisingly well furnished considering its remoteness, and, as Renny found when he immediately explored, had twelve rooms, although it had not seemed quite that large from the air. There were electric lights, a radio receiver in each of three rooms, and in the study was a cheerful fireplace, bookcases, and rather expensive rugs, for a lodge, were on the floor. “Rico is a good caretaker,” Perling said proudly.

They returned to the plane, and with Rico’s help, got the ship rolled into the hangar. Renny asked, “What about the girl?”

“She is very angry,” Perling said. “I do not think she is going to talk.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know anything,” Dartlic suggested.

“Could be.”

“I think she dies, yes,” the fat man said.

Back in the lodge, Renny tried his hand with Susie. He was remembering that the last time Monk and Ham had been seen, they were

trailing Susie, and he wasn't very cordial. He said, "If you've got an explanation, you'd better make it. And it better be good."

Susie glared at Renny defiantly. She had a robe wrapped around her and was standing close to the fireplace. The air had turned colder, for evening was approaching, and the high mountains around the lake, the proximity of the glaciers, the latitude they were in, all contributed to an icy night climate.

"I know what you're thinking," Susie snapped. "So just go ahead thinking it. I don't know what happened to Monk and Ham, and I didn't lead them into any trap." She gave them all an unfriendly look. "I was shanghaied down here, and I don't like that, either. I think you are a pack of idiots for landing here, and if you had any respect for a lady, you'd get the blazes away from here now."

Perling said mildly, "Rico has seen no one about for weeks."

"Rico!" she said violently. "Why should anybody believe Rico?"

Perling shook his head. "These American women," he said wonderingly. "I will never understand them."

"Susie isn't quite typical," Renny said.

Rico got together an excellent dinner of two kinds of game, wild honey, wine, good coffee. Dartlic ate enormously, although he professed to be worried about the whole thing and mystified, he added, because they were still grasping at mirages. He was full of conversation, all of it mixed up thoroughly in the English language, which Rico didn't seem to understand.

They were all tired, or professed to be, and retired early. Susie was locked in a bedroom which, because it had a window that could be nailed shut, they figured was a fairly substantial prison.

Alone in their bedroom, Renny asked Doc, "You still figure we're in the trap?"

"Yes."

"When will they spring it?"

"I have no idea."

Renny shivered. "I hope it's tonight. This sliding around and not really getting my teeth into anything is going to tie me in a knot before long."

There were two shots first. Just two reports, obviously inside the lodge, followed by silence for a moment. Then Orlin Dartlic yelled. His voice rose in a great bawling outcry.

“This is it,” Doc told Renny. “Take it easy.”

Renny swore, low and bitterly.

The sound of running feet came from the rear of the lodge. Rico burst into the room; blood was streaming from his mouth; a gun crashed behind him, and Rico went down solidly. He was dead.

Renny’s “For God’s sake!” was hoarse. He added, “I can’t stand by and take—” He didn’t finish, but seized the revolver Rico had been carrying, jumped to the door, fired twice, and snapped the hammer down three times on empty cartridges. The gun was empty, and he yelled, “The guy got away, goddamit!”

Doc said, rather bitterly, “It’s a good thing. In case you don’t know it, they might be perfectly willing to kill you.”

There was another volley of running feet, and Dartlic’s voice howling, “Is us! Is us! No shoot!” He piled into the room, with Perling and Susan Lane on his heels. “Is attacked!” he bellowed.

Renny said, “Get down, you big lummo!” Doc Savage gripped Susan Lane, piled her unceremoniously behind a sofa where at least she wouldn’t be a visible target. “Lights out,” he told Renny. He asked, “Dartlic, how many of them are there?”

“I do not know, yes,” the fat man said.

Susan Lane screamed shrilly. She had just comprehended, apparently, that Rico was dead on the floor. Perling said, “Please, Susie, you must hang on to yourself.” He went over to her and tried to comfort her; presently he was howling himself. She had bitten one of his fingers almost off, he yelled, which was somewhat of an exaggeration.

Presently glass crashed out of the window, and something hard bounced across the floor, let go with a mush explosion.

Doc said, “Tear gas. This finishes it up. We haven’t a chance. Don’t do anything to get killed.”

Susie said bitterly, “The great Doc Savage—a streak up his back a yard wide.”

For no good reason he could lay a finger on, the remark enraged Doc Savage. He said nothing—he was trying to think of an answer, at the same time realizing that it was an unusual time to want to get into an argument—when Bernard Perling yelled, “Damned if I am going to give up!”

Perling, making sick enraged noises, thrust blindly for the door, pushed out into another room. He made it, judging from the sound, out of the lodge, and a strange voice said, “Perling! We don’t need him.”

A rifle cracked, just once; the sound was followed by a faint moan.

“He is dead,” another voice said.

“Shoot him again to be sure.”

Susan Lane moaned after the second shot. “I—I misjudged him,” she wailed. “I thought he—he was—” She didn’t seem able to finish.

The men who came into the room were roughly dressed, four in number, and they wore gas masks. They entered cautiously, first turning on the lights. They had rifles. They were fairly young, and moved with the practiced caution and sureness of men who were accustomed to violence. One of them, evidently a straw boss, went over and knocked the rest of the glass out of the window.

“Search them,” he said. “Then keep them here until the gas clears and they can see.”

Later, the prisoners were bound; a man who knew how to do it lashed their arms firmly behind them. Renny’s muscles tensed during the process—sometimes you could get a little slack that way, and slip the bonds later—but a pistol butt smashed down on his head, effectively discouraging his foresight.

From the sounds, it was evident that the raiding party was removing evidence of its activity. Rico’s body was dragged from the room; they could hear a man demanding if anyone had seen a piece of rope around, and something that would serve as a weight while Rico’s body was consigned to the lake. Dartlic swore hoarsely; he had been mumbling and, occasionally, spitting a swear-word or two, almost continually.

Finally, when the gas was out of their eyes—not immediately; the interval must have been all of thirty minutes—they were ordered to their feet and outside.

They passed Bernard Perling’s body.

“Is he—” Susie stopped. “Is he—”

Perling lay on his back, mouth widely open, a thin red smear having extruded itself from a bluish spot on his forehead and partially filled one eye, then spilled along the side of his face.

A man gave the girl a shove. He said, "He's dead and with nothing to worry about. Which is more than you can say for yourself."

Hours later, they were still moving, and Renny was bewildered; but greater than his bewilderment was his uneasiness, his apprehension lest they might have made a mistake in giving up. They were well-guarded, and outnumbered. Their hands ached from the tightness of the ropes; lines were also fastened about their waists now, holding them together. Susie, who was directly behind Renny, would fall occasionally, and the tightening of the rope would jar him.

They were not, it was clear, following a trail, but they were skirting the lake; it was a continual up and down, a stumbling up hills, a skidding and sliding down the other side. It had been, while it was still dark, rough business, but not as bad now that it was daylight. Once Renny tried to talk; he was ordered to shut up; disobeyed—and was gagged. The gag interfered with his breathing and was tremendously uncomfortable. He managed, a bit later, to retaliate; he chose a particularly bad spot to have his feet fly out from under him, and slide over the edge of a low cliff, striking apparently by accident one of the guards as he did so. The rope saved Renny, but the guard went on over; they could hear the fellow squawking with pain down below. Two men climbed down to him, and brought him up again. The man's arm was broken. Renny felt considerable satisfaction.

"Blindfold them," the captor in charge ordered suddenly.

The blindfolds were ready at hand, it developed, thick dark cloth which was tied on over layers of adhesive tape which was plastered over their eyes.

"What is the idea of this?" Doc demanded. "In this kind of going, we can hardly see—"

"Shut up!"

"Is good, yes!" gasped Dartlic. "Is sign they not going to kill us."

Doc heard a blow—he was already blindfolded—and, in a few minutes, painful gasping by Dartlic.

They walked, then, interminably; they fell time without number, they were pushed and shoved. Renny had cause, blindfolded as he was, to regret his trick on the guard; the thing preyed on his mind; he expected to be shoved over a cliff himself any minute, until finally it became a nightmare. They began to hear the dull rumble of a waterfall, and this came nearer, but slowly, and then it faded somewhat; but had not been left entirely behind when they reached their destination.

Wooden steps came underfoot, then planking; the first steps had been only three in number. They walked, Renny judged, about twenty feet on a wooden floor, and pepper was suddenly tossed into his nostrils, causing him to go into paroxysms of sneezing, in the course of which he was led down more steps—about twenty risers down—and then along a passage that was fairly narrow, for he could feel the stone sides with his shoulders. Stone was underfoot now.

A voice came. It was loud, incredibly loud. It smashed against their eardrums.

“Untie Savage’s hands, you fools!” the voice bellowed. “If you have damaged his hands, damn you!”

A loudspeaker, Renny thought. Some kind of public address system—that was the source of the voice.

“Consign them,” the loudspeaker thundered, “to the prepared places.”

They heard Dartlic complain, “What the hell is this, yes? It is crazy like something a kid never thought of.” For this, judging from the sounds, he was hit, or kicked, in the stomach.

Presently they were led farther, this time through what was evidently a door, and, Renny judged from the banging of doors, the sliding of bars, they were being separated and locked in cells of some sort. He was shoved forward himself, and felt a knife sawing at the ropes that held his arms; as soon as one rope parted, the knife was taken away.

“You can do the rest of it yourself,” a voice said. And a door slammed, a very heavy door, judging from the noise.

Renny, without delay, began working at the ropes on his arms. He knew, shortly, that someone else was in the place with him, and he said, “Who is it?”

Doc Savage’s voice said, “I’ll get those ropes off you. Take it easy, Renny.” A moment later, the ropes were removed. Renny, endeavoring to lift his arms, gasped in agony. “Whew! Holy cow!” he blurted. “They damned near ruined my arms. The circulation is gone out of them.”

“It will come back. I’ll take the tape off your eyes. It’s going to hurt.”

It did hurt, and Renny’s eyes watered until he could see nothing for a while. . . . His first impression of their surrounding was not good. “A cave,” he muttered.

The cavern, not particularly large and with nothing outstanding about it except that it was a cave, was apparently of natural formation, the work of

some underground stream a long time ago. Caves like it, Renny reflected, could be found in almost any part of the world.

Their prison arrangement was still more ordinary. It consisted of fences about eight feet high, made of heavy rough-sawn planking—timbers actually—dividing a section of the cave into twelve-foot squares; twelve feet in each dimension. There was no roof, other than the cave roof, which was some thirty feet overhead at this point.

A voice called loudly, “Doc!”

“Monk!” Renny yelled. “Where the blazes are you?”

Monk Mayfair’s voice angrily informed them that he was penned up. “I can’t tell where you are with relation to where I am, on account of the blasted echoes in here,” he said. “I’m to the right, though, I think. You see that gray-colored patch on the ceiling? I’m just about under that.”

Renny, searching for the lighter patch on the ceiling, shouted, “Where is Ham? Is he . . . ?”

Ham himself answered that. “I’m in the same fix with the rest of you.”

Monk yelled, “Watch out for the top of these pens. There’s a wire runs around the top of them, and it’s charged with electricity. You don’t get a good ground hanging to the wall, but it’s enough to knock the pants off you anyway. You couldn’t climb out of here if you wanted to.”

Doc asked, “What happened to you two?”

Monk and Ham tried to talk at once, but Monk finally gave the story; his rather thin and squawking voice seemed to have less trouble with the acoustics of the cave. He told about the waylaying of Bernard Perling’s car in Buenos Aires, their beating, their awakening—four days later, they had been told—on a boat traveling on the lake. “We thought we were at sea,” Monk explained. “Only we weren’t. They get to this place—from what I hear it’s the most isolated part of the lake region—by boat from a landing field about twenty miles away where they’re in the habit of bringing their stuff in by plane.”

Ham said, “Tell him about Paul Cort.”

Monk gave a realistic description of their finding Paul Cort on the boat with them, being beaten, of their getting through the bulkhead to Cort, and their conversation with him.

“You know what that guy done?” Monk demanded.

“Eh?”

“Sucked us in, that’s what he did,” Monk said angrily. “The guy was a phony. He said that he was an Argentinian agent. He was no more an Argentinian agent than I am. He was working for Hans Boehl.”

“Hans Boehl is behind this?”

“Sure.”

“Have you seen him?”

“Nah. I gather they expect him here today.”

Doc asked, “What was the idea of their taking such elaborate pains to foist Cort on to you as a friend?”

“They wanted to pump us about how much you knew.”

“Oh.”

“They didn’t have any luck,” Monk said. “Not that it seems important now.”

“No, it doesn’t seem too important now.”

“You know what this is all about?” Monk demanded.

“Do you?”

“They got a job they’re gonna try to make you do,” Monk said. “Some kind of a scientific job.”

XII

Doc Savage was taken out of the pen late in the afternoon. He was sleeping, and someone kicked him in the ribs; it was a man with a rifle, and the fellow backed away warily, said, in Spanish, “You come with me, alone.”

Renny, alarmed, looked at Doc. The only light, which came from a single naked electric bulb strung high overhead, was not very effective in the cell, but it did accentuate the lines of anxiety on Renny’s long face.

“I imagine this is just a preliminary propositioning,” Doc said. “Take it easy.”

He was removed from the pen, the door was fastened again. He discovered that two other guards had gotten Susan Lane out of another pen. She appeared bewildered, terrified.

“Obey orders, Susie,” Doc said quietly.

“But they—”

“We’ll play along with them.”

“Oh, no—”

“For the time being.”

They were escorted to the right, then around a corner, and Doc decided they were not going toward the cave entrance, but deeper into the thing. They came, presently, to a narrow area which was planked up solidly except for a door, through which they were escorted.

Now the loudspeaker voice hailed them thunderously.

“Guards?” it said.

“Yes, they are inside,” one of the escorts said.

“Hold them there a moment,” the voice said. The loudspeaker outfit was obviously of the conventional intercommunicator type, the speakers serving as pickup microphones as well as speakers. “Mr. Savage,” the voice said.

“Yes?”

“Good. I am Hans Boehl. I prefer not to let you get a look at me for obvious reasons. Therefore I am taking this method of addressing you.”

“I see.”

“You know,” the voice demanded, “who Miss Susan Lane is?”

“Yes,” Doc said.

“If your information is that she is an operative for the State Department of the United States of America, that data is correct,” Hans Boehl’s voice said. “You needn’t admit it. I toss in the information for what it is worth.”

Doc made no comment.

“You have,” the voice said, “been brought here, at considerable expense and more elaborate scheming than perhaps was necessary, to do some specialized work.”

“You think I’ll do it?” Doc asked.

“I don’t think you are a fool.”

Doc said nothing.

“You will now be taken into the laboratory,” the voice said. “You will touch nothing, or the guards will shoot Miss Lane. They will not shoot you unless it is necessary, but they will at once shoot Miss Lane. You understand that?”

“I hear you.”

The laboratory—it lay beyond another locked door, and was brilliantly lighted—was equipped with German apparatus almost entirely, Doc saw. It

was, for its purpose, excellent equipment. He saw power generators and converters, saw bins of ore and metals that were used in experimentation; mounted prominently, lead-shielded, was a compact and fairly powerful cyclotron.

He gave the cyclotron particular attention—it was, he knew, one of the products of Nazi scientific skill and had been built originally, he surmised, for the atom-bomb research in the Reich. There were, he saw, water shields to stop wildly thrown neutrons, indicating that no better system of control had been worked out. There was an innovation, a movable arrangement so that the thing could be pushed forward or backward, firing either at an extremely large target, or a very small one.

“What do you think of it, Herr Savage?” Boehl’s voice bawled out of the speakers.

“Mediocre,” Doc said bluntly.

The other snorted. “An insult,” he said. “That is a very good cyclotron, and you know it. But we will not go into a discussion about Nazi shortcomings. You are, I understand, a direct man. Is that right?”

“Get to the point,” Doc suggested.

“Fine. The point is this: the nature of an element is determined by the number of protons in the nucleus. Bombarding by neutrons, through use of a cyclotron, has proved that the number of protons in an element can be changed. In other words, you can change molecular structure through addition or subtraction of protons. This happens under cyclotron bombardment.”

Doc said drily, “Almost any reader of the newspapers in the United States could come up with that kind of information.”

Hans Boehl agreed. “Perhaps true. I do not know. But in my experiments with atomic explosion, I find as you have found, no doubt, that the chief problem is the slowing down of the speed of neutron bombardment, so that atomic disintegration would be accomplished, rather than having the neutrons speed harmlessly past. Is that not so?”

“If you expect any elementary instruction out of me,” Doc said, “my frame of mind will have to be somewhat different from what it now is. What are you driving at?”

The other said unpleasantly, “I am no child at this business.”

“Matter of opinion.”

“Would you like to know what you’re going to do? You’re going to complete my experiments aimed at changing a baser metal into gold.”

“Gold? Make gold out of what?”

“Lead.”

“It can’t be done,” Doc said.

“It can!” The man became excited. “Do not tell me black is white! I have seen it done—once, in Munich, it was done, but by accident. It happened in the course of experiments, and the man who did it could not repeat.” The man cursed roundly in German, added, “You do this, you understand, or your friends will be killed. And do not tell me you will not under such compulsion, because I have seen it worked on men fully as well-equipped with ideals as yourself. Guards, take them back. You will have time to think about it.”

Renny had come to the conclusion that the outlook was tough, and Monk and Ham agreed with him. They listened to Doc’s explanation about the gold—what talking they did had to be shouted across the partitions—without too much surprise. Ham Brooks went philosophical to the extent of remarking, “That’s about the sort of thing one would expect an escaped Nazi to devote his attention to. Turning cheaper metals to gold has been the dream of avarice down through the centuries. The point is, can it be done?”

Doc said, “Boehl claims it can—claims it happened once during the course of the Nazi atomic research.”

“He lying?”

“He might be.”

Renny added the practical thought that, “On the other hand, some Nazi scientist might have slipped a piece of gold into the contraption to make them think he was a very valuable guy who had discovered something special.”

“Anyway,” Doc said, “it is in my lap.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“You mean, going to try,” Doc said. “I don’t know.”

Fat Dartlic wailed, “If not you try we maybe die too quick, no? You think of that?”

“How much time have you to think it over?” Ham called.

“He neglected to say.”

Dartlic demanded, “If this you do, how long it take?”

“Months, weeks, years—no telling,” Doc said.

“Is no good,” the fat man complained. “I have not a liking—” He went silent, because two guards had entered that section of the cave, and one of them said, in German, “The fat man is wanted.” Dartlic at once emitted a howl, “Me? What am I want to do nothing for?” He shouted some more, still in English, still mixed up, while they were opening his pen door, hauling him out and taking him away. His protestations receded, could no longer be heard.

“What you suppose they want with him?” Renny asked. “That guy, for my memory, is about as useless as they come.”

XIII

Orlin Dartlic muttered to one of the guards, “Are we out of hearing, no?” When the guard grunted, “*Ja*,” Dartlic stopped his howling. He went willingly with the escort, and arrived eventually in the part of the cave adjacent to the laboratory where Doc had been taken; he did not enter the laboratory, however, but was stopped in the intermediate room.

The loudspeaker, its volume considerably reduced, addressed him. It was Boehl’s voice, and the man said, “Nice work, Dartlic.”

“Is nice nothing,” the fat man complained. “Is a hell of a complicated mess, yes.”

“You’re doing all right.”

“I should hope so, maybe.”

Boehl’s voice on the loudspeaker sounded friendly, and continued the compliments. “You are to be highly commended. Your whole part in the operation, the trip to New York, the summoning of Doc Savage, your pretended aid in Buenos Aires, all was very well carried out. I have good reports on you.”

“Is a job,” the fat man said. “Anyway, I try.”

“There is just one thing.”

The fat man showed some alarm. “Always a fly in the soup,” he grumbled.

“Why did Savage come here?”

“Eh? After all that planning and conniving you ask—”

“Doc Savage is not a fool,” Hans Boehl’s voice said. “The man has a frightening reputation for coming up with the unexpected at the least expected times.”

“Is smart, yes,” said Dartlic. “But not a genius, no. A man who works very hard at thinking and mind work, yes. But a dangerous man—it could be.”

“I wish you would learn to speak the English language,” the other said. “Or stick to German.”

“Ach, nobody like the German language right now.”

Boehl swore bitterly. “Get back to the point—why did Doc Savage come here?” he said.

“He was enticed here.”

“You really think so?”

“If not, I was a sucker made of,” Dartlic said. “What are you worried about?”

The voice from the loudspeaker said, “I want you to try to find out whether Doc Savage came in here because he has a plan of action. He doesn’t seem as worried as I expected.”

“He is plenty worried, you ask me,” said Dartlic.

“Well, see what you can get out of him.”

“You begin to scare me, yes,” the fat man said uneasily. “What you think could happen to us?”

“Savage could have something up his sleeve—”

“He was searched, wasn’t he?”

“Don’t overdo that silly ass manner,” Boehl’s voice growled out of the intercommunicator. “It may be that arrangements have been made with Argentine troops to follow down here and clean us out, or even with U. S. agents, the FBI or—”

“Is fat chance of U. S. kissing with Argentine government,” said Dartlic.

“See if Doc Savage let himself be caught in this trap,” the other said sharply.

“Will do.”

“And see if you can find out, if he did, what scheme he has up his sleeve.”

“Sure.”

“That’s all.”

Orlin Dartlic said hastily, “Wait a minute—is he out of lead going to be about to make gold?”

“He will before we’re done with him.”

“He says,” Dartlic explained, “that it cannot be done.”

The voice became angry. "It was done in Munich."

"Savage had an idea about that. He said someone might have pretended to find how to make the gold to give himself a little more importance."

"If the Munich scientist did so," the other snapped, "it was a very poor idea. . . . The man was placed in a concentration camp, where he died, for not being able to repeat his feat."

"Well, I just told you that for what it is worth."

"Is isn't worth anything."

"All right. By the way, if I am going to have to stay in that pen a while, I would like to have a good raincoat or preferably a rubber blanket."

"What do you want with a rubber blanket?"

"The roof leaks. There is a drippage over my pen."

"Guard, get him a rubber blanket," the voice said.

XIV

Fat Orlin Dartlic was returned to his pen, which was the one adjacent to that occupied to Renny and Doc Savage, and the rubber blanket was given him. It was a heavy waterproof affair, and, while the guard was still at the pen door, Dartlic glanced with satisfaction at the wet spot on the floor made by drippage from the cave roof. He made no comment on the rubber sheeting, however. Presently he heard Renny's voice, demanding, "What did they want with you?"

"The voice of head himself, I meet," Dartlic explained.

"Boehl?"

"Yep."

"You meet him in person?"

"By voice. He talks through loudspeaker, yes. Does not want us to see his face, I guess."

"That's the way he handled Doc, too," Renny said. "What did he try to get out of you?"

"Wanted to know what we figured on doing," the fat man explained.

"You told him?"

"I tell him go jump in corner of cave," Dartlic said. "I don't think he like that. I wonder if I make a mistake? He say something about what value am I

to anybody around here, that I probably eat more than I am worth. His talk I don't like not much."

"I wouldn't like it either," Renny said.

Renny was depressed. He asked Doc Savage to describe the voice over the loudspeaker system, and Doc did so, imitating the voice himself with fair accuracy, instead of trying to describe it with words.

"Probably disguised," Renny said. "You know something? I been thinking, and I got a suspicion."

"Yes?"

"A suspicion that Paul Cort is this Hans Boehl we hear about," Renny said. "What do you think of that?"

It was later, probably late in the afternoon—time was a little difficult to keep track of, since their watches had been taken—when Doc Savage started an agitation to have the ceiling light dimmed, or extinguished. His request, made first to a guard, was laughed at. There was only the one light centered in the cave, probably a 300-watt bulb, judging from its size.

"If we just had something to throw at it," Doc said.

A moment later, a rock came sailing over the pen wall. It was followed presently by a second stone; both the rocks were about the size of baseballs.

"Holy cow!" Renny gasped.

"Sh-h-h-h," Doc admonished.

"But what—"

"Easy does it," Doc said. He moved over to the pen partition, found the nearest thing to a crack that he could locate, asking, "Any reason for delay?"

"None at all," Dartlic whispered back. "In fact, he's beginning to get suspicious. It has occurred to him that he caught you awfully easy."

"Want to wait until you're out?"

"Good idea. I'll find an excuse to be taken out in a few minutes."

Renny Renwick said several things under his breath, collared Doc and demanded, "What goes on? What the hell?"

"The fat man," Doc said, "is our ace in the hole."

"Eh?"

"He's working for Boehl—Boehl thinks."

"He—I don't get it!"

“He’s working for the Argentine government—the Argentine government thinks.”

“Then who the—”

From the other side of the partition, the fat man’s side, a bundle suddenly came flying over. Doc caught it silently. It was the rubber blanket, and some stuff inside it. He spread it on the floor, unfolded the blanket and—Renny gasped—there were half a dozen small gas grenades, two explosive grenades, enclosed in the blanket. What startled Renny was the fact that the grenades were a type which Doc Savage had developed, and, Renny knew, must have originally been supplied by Doc himself.

“Who the hell’s Dartlic?” Renny gasped.

“Actually, an agent for the Netherlands government,” Doc said. “He has been in Argentina several years—what they call a sleeper. An agent planted far ahead of time.”

“But—”

Doc indicated the grenades. “He brought this in for me. Working for Boehl, he knew he wouldn’t be searched.”

“For Boehl, eh?”

Doc nodded. “Yes—but he has never seen Boehl. You see, he has been approached by Boehl’s agents, and they have paid him through the agents, but he has never seen Boehl. It is Boehl he is after.”

Renny grunted. “At least, I can see why you were willing to get caught.”

Presently fat Orlin Dartlic did some yelling on the other side of the stockage, howling that he had a bellyache, and the guards opened the door and took him away.

Doc whispered, “Give him a few minutes, Renny. He can do us a lot of good.”

“You going to try the break now?”

“Yes.” Doc was contemplating the one light in the ceiling. “You think you could hit that with one of those rocks?”

Renny didn’t think he could. “As scared as I am,” he confessed, “I’d be lucky to hit the ground with my hat, if I had a hat.”

Doc said, “We might as well start it.”

“You mean—whoeee!” Renny passed a hand over his head as if to ascertain whether his hair was standing on end, asked, “Without any more preparation than this—what about Monk and Ham? Will they—how we going to—”

Doc said, “The rubber blanket will get us over the electrified wires. Maybe we can then open the doors to their pens. As for notifying them—I don’t imagine, once this thing starts, anybody will need notifying.” He indicated the rubber blanket. “Fold it, and get close to the wall, so you can throw it over the wire in the dark.”

Renny did so. He wondered if Doc could hit the light bulb with a rock, one out of two tries. The possibilities, in his opinion, were thin, and he found his hands shaking. He got the rubber pad folded, wondering if it was synthetic and whether it would protect them from the charged wire, and whether the wire was barbed, which might complicate matters. . . .

The light went out. The first rock had gotten to it. There was a second’s silence; then a huge bell began clamoring somewhere. The darkness was intense; startled shouts came from two guards; at either end of the large cavern room, they seemed to be located.

Doc said, “Over. Try to open the other pens.”

Renny leaped, hooked his hands over wire and rubber blanket, swung himself up, went over the top, and dropped down on the other side. He could hear the sound of running feet. There had been no shots as yet.

Doc landed beside him. “Get the pens open. That’s up to you,” Doc said. “Here, wait. Take these.” He gave Renny three gas grenades, added, “Give Monk and Ham one each—they’re the regular anaesthetic gas we use. Just hold your breath long enough, and they take effect on the other guy, then become harmless. But hold your breath at least a minute. Remember that. Or the stuff will get you, too.”

The first shot came; a tongue of flame that sprang briefly; a blast of noise that was amazing in the confines of the cave. Doc moved toward the flashes, aware from the sounds that there was movement in other parts of the cave; guards pushing forward, no doubt, as yet unaware why the alarm had sounded.

Doc tried to think of a voice to imitate, thought of Paul Cort’s, decided against it because he had only heard it once, on the wire-transcription in New York. He decided to use Orlin Dartlic’s voice, as nearly as he could manage.

“Is going on, what?” he demanded.

“What the hell?” the guard said in German. “I thought you—”

Doc hit him from the side, coming in with hands out.

The man had a gun, a rifle, and it blasted deafeningly when surprise reflex tightened the man’s hand on the trigger. Doc bent the weapon upward, swung his right fist for the fellow’s midriff, missed completely the first time

in the blackness, connected with the second blow, and doubled the man over. He hit the man twice more, both blows well placed.

He used Dartlic's squawking voice again, loudly.

"Is all right, guards!" he yelled. "No shoot! No shoot! Is part of plan."

He hoped that would not confuse Renny; he could hear the big-fisted engineer moving; presently there was whispering, and Monk's hoarse voice said, "By golly, you don't say!" Monk sounded pleased.

A shot came from the other end of the room. It was followed, almost instantly, by a scuffle, blow noises, and a grunt that was distinctly Monk's. A body fell heavily. Not Monk, obviously, for Monk complained, "Oh my God, I think I broke a thumb. He dodged and I hit the wall."

Ham asked, "You get him?"

"Yeah, but there's still one at the other end—"

"This one is out of commission temporarily," Doc said. "You fellows go toward the outside. Just circulate among them, and do what you can do."

Susan Lane demanded shrilly, "You're not going to leave me locked up in here, are you?"

"Let her out, Renny," Doc said.

"Okay. I just thought she might get hurt."

"She might have a chance to escape, too. . . . Susie, if you should get outside and we don't, get United States agents in here. Don't trust the Argentine authorities too far."

They were, Doc realized, killing too much time. He reached down and slugged the guard again, making sure the fellow would remain out for a while.

Deeper in the cave somewhere, there was a series of shots. The fat man, Doc thought. He might need help badly. He pushed ahead, finding the going difficult because of the darkness; stumbling ahead, he was ripped by a number of thoughts, none of them pleasant. He had no idea how many men they were up against; a dozen at the very least. Orlin Dartlic had thought there were about a dozen of them, but there could be more; Dartlic's information had been scant. Even if, by a stretch of luck, they got out of the cave, there was still the desolate country to contend with; the nearest civilization was undoubtedly days distant on foot; a chase through that kind of country, with themselves as the pursued, was nothing to look forward to.

He came, abruptly, against a door, and fumbled for a lock, a fastener of some kind—presently to realize with horror that there was none. The door

was secured from the other side; if there was a fastener on this side, it was secreted too well for him to find in a hurry.

He yelled—partly to preserve the life of anyone who might be on the other side, Dartlic if he was there, and also to inform Monk and Ham and Renny what the uproar would be—in a loud voice: “We’re going to blast the door down.” He then retreated a few yards, let go with one of the explosive grenades, and flattened out, hoping he was behind something, and hoping the grenade wouldn’t hit something in the darkness and bounce back too near him.

The force of the explosion was fabulous; he had the impression that he was actually shoved several feet across the cave floor, although that must have been partly illusion. Following the blast, there was light; the partition was down, and there was a lighted passage beyond it.

He could hear the loudspeaker bellowing now, Hans Boehl’s voice, a little less consciously disguised than before, howling, “What is it? What has happened?” The man was repeating the demands in German, Spanish and English, and each language, even in excitement, was spoken fluently.

“Dartlic!” Doc shouted.

“Is help!” the fat man howled somewhere ahead. He added, “Is help, please! The army is raid the place. A hundred men!”

The last alarmed Doc immeasurably; then he realized the fat man was confusing Boehl, wherever the fellow was, with the stuff about an army. It was, under the urgency of the situation, fast thinking on the fat man’s part.

Dartlic was fighting Paul Cort. The fat man must have killed two guards; there were two dead men underfoot, at least, and Dartlic had his hands full with Cort. Cort was whipping him. They were down suddenly, Cort broke clear, got his feet under him, came up. His thin lips were grim, the scar stood out as a pale line on his lip. He got a gun out—Doc fired; the report of the rifle hurt his head, deafened him. Cort released his revolver, walked backward wildly a few feet. Doc had tried for a shoulder shot, not particularly because he wanted to spare the man’s life, but a blasted shoulder was the quickest means of forcing the gun out of Cort’s hand.

Cort regained his balance, and instantly made for the dropped gun with his left hand. But Dartlic was up now, and he struck Cort down. He kicked Cort, after the man fell, repeatedly, kicking him in body, neck, head, making guttural sounds of rage as he did so.

Doc said, “Save some of that for the rest of them,” and went on.

For a few moments, no one was in sight; there were no shots; the cave whispered and grumbled with the sound of men moving cautiously, or violently; the loudspeaker had gone dead. The silence, except for frantic preparation, was a dramatic buildup for the break-loose which came suddenly.

It was, this time, shots and yells from the direction Monk and the others had taken. Doc heard Renny bawl out, “Breaking eggs! Breaking eggs!”

“What is he—is crazy! Eggs! Eggs! Is nuts,” Dartlic gasped. “What is he ___”

Doc was looking for one of the loudspeakers; he found it on the wall, leaped, caught it, and tore it loose, snapping the wires. Hoping that would keep his voice from being picked up by Boehl, he told the fat man, “Renny is using gas. It’s an anaesthetic that only lasts about forty seconds—if you can hold your breath somewhat longer than that, it usually doesn’t affect you.”

“Oh.” The fat man sounded sheepish.

Doc listened. He said, “I don’t believe there is anyone else back here. Surely the noise would have brought them out by now.” He swung about. “Let’s join Renny and the others, and see what we can do about fighting our way out of here.”

The fat man gave Paul Cort a last violent kick before he followed Doc.

The cavern was by no means enormous, because, once they had passed back through the large chamber where the prison pens were, they came within fifty feet to a smaller area, closed off by a door which now stood open, where there was light from several electric bulbs.

Monk Mayfair was wandering around the room, a large rock in one hand, and, as he came to an unconscious man, he rapped the rock against the victim’s head. He said, “None of these guys had better have thin skulls.”

“How many here?” Doc demanded.

“Nine,” Renny said. “They were pushovers for the gas. They were all gathered outside the door, laying for us.” He picked up a submachine gun. “Holy cow, look at the tommy guns. They all had them.”

“Nine,” Doc said. “Two in the room where they had us penned, the two Dartlic got, and Paul Cort—that makes fourteen. Let’s see if we can get out.”

Backed now by Monk and the others armed with submachine guns, he followed a wider passage, came to a spot where the cave apparently had

been walled up solidly with stone, and an overhead opening made. This was reached by steps. He ascended, turned right in a narrow passage, went up more steps, and came to a door. It was open.

He glanced meaningfully at Dartlic; the fat man understood, and called loudly through the door, "Is all right. Was a break, yes."

There was no answer.

They stepped through the door into an elaborately furnished room. There was a fireplace to the left, a long rustic table, wide windows, beyond them an afternoon view of lake and mountains and glaciers—all quite familiar.

"Hell!" Monk said explosively. "This is Bernard Perling's cabin!"

XV

They found Bernard Perling in a rear room. They heard his wailing first, terrified pleas for help, demands to know what had happened. Perling was tied after a fashion and there was adhesive tape hanging to one of his cheeks. A gag, he explained, which he had been able to remove; he had loosened most of his bindings also, he pointed out.

"We thought you were dead," Monk told him. "We saw you outside this morning, and you sure looked dead."

"I was knocked unconscious when I stepped out of the cabin, or ran out," Perling explained. "I—I don't know what—what they did then. I—why did they—didn't they kill me?"

Doc said, "Dartlic, you and Monk and Ham stay in here with Miss Lane. Renny and I will look around for Boehl."

"I think—Boehl—a thin man ran through here—escaped," Perling said jerkily.

"Wait in here," Doc said.

Doc Savage and Renny worked through the lodge cautiously, found no one, and—after Doc had made a close examination of the bedrooms, coming out of one of them carrying a bundle of clothing—returned to the large central room where the others waited.

Doc deposited his bundle of clothing on a table.

"Everyone straight on this?" he asked.

Monk and Ham weren't. They said so. Ham pointed at Dartlic and demanded, "Who is he, anyway? I had him pegged through most of this as the ramrod of the thing."

The fat man looked insulted. “Boehl? Me? Is worst insult I ever give!”

“Dartlic,” Doc told Monk and Ham, “is a Netherlands intelligence agent, assigned, like many other agents, to the job of finding Hans Boehl. Dartlic was planted in Argentina before the European war began, and it was evident that Argentina wasn’t going to cooperate with the Allies, and might actually give assistance to the Axis, which turned out to be partly the case. As soon as hints began to crop up that Hans Boehl was in Argentina, Dartlic got the job of finding him. Dartlic, in the meantime, had managed to rise to a fairly responsible job with the Argentine government—consultant on Patagonian affairs, with his own department.”

“Is right,” the fat man agreed. He looked pleased with himself.

Doc said, “You might review the thing for them, Dartlic.”

Dartlic nodded agreeably. “Is best you listen close, for the English I slaughter,” he said.

The fat man had managed to become a paid operative of Boehl, he explained, but he had never been able to meet Boehl. All his dealing had been through lesser agents, and he had learned that Paul Cort was one of Boehl’s close lieutenants—if not Boehl himself. He had suspected Cort was Boehl, frequently, but had not dared move, not being sure.

The business of making gold out of other metals had been a surprise to him, but he could see now that it was logical—Hans Boehl, fugitive from the Reich, would need funds to operate, do whatever he planned to do in the future. So what would be better than to make gold out of lead—and, since Boehl was unable to do the job himself, trick Doc Savage into coming to the Patagonian hinterlands where Doc could be seized and made to do the job.

“Rest you already know,” Dartlic said. “The phony business about lake, timed for poor Juan Russel to see, and the summoning of Doc Savage to investigate. Vanished lake was best bait, because the whole world is upset about the atomic bomb business. Doc Savage would come down here quick if he thought wrong kind of man had found out how to make atomic bomb. Is right, yes?”

“Is all right, except Boehl got away,” Renny said gloomily. “How the devil are we going to find him in this wilderness?”

Doc indicated the clothing he had tossed on the table. “That suit might help.”

“Eh?”

“Take a look.” Doc spread the garments out, and they proved to be a man’s suit, the one Bernard Perling had been wearing when the phony shooting was staged.

“It is my suit,” Perling said. “Why do you—how is it important?”

“It just seems funny,” said Doc, “that you would be allowed to change clothes when you were a prisoner.”

Perling began losing color. “I—I insisted that they allow me—”

“For God’s sake!” Ham said softly. He was staring at Bernard Perling with horror.

Doc swung to Dartlic. “Dartlic,” he said, “what did Paul Cort tell you in order to have you spare his life?”

The fat man blinked. “Why, no—” He swallowed, blinked again, took the hint, and said, “You want I should say so now?”

“Yes. Tell Perling.”

The fat man made it dramatic—he leveled an arm at Perling, and threw his shoulders forward as much as they would travel in their covering of fat.

“You—Bernard Perling—are Hans Boehl!” he bellowed.

Perling—or Boehl—then moved a little faster than any of them expected. Evidently he had had escape in the back of his mind, and had laid plans, because his actions—the backward leap, the swift overturning of a chair, the jerking around of a sofa to block pursuit momentarily, was done with lightning speed.

Renny alone stood a chance of heading him off. Renny, lunging, might have reached the man, pinned him against the door, or by a flying tackle, possibly have brought him down. Dartlic tripped Renny.

Hans Boehl ran, once he was through the lodge door, with head-back, arm-pumping effort. He was, he knew, in excellent physical condition; good body trim had always been a fetish with him, even in his youth, before the time of the Nazis, who had put physical training on a god-like plane. He was not even particularly scared; danger, the taking of desperate chances, had been a part of his life for a long time, and he had developed a hardness toward it. There was a perverted ecstasy in danger, for him; his mind had never seemed more clear, more facile.

There was, seven miles to the south, a plane in a hangar, and a man there, a man who was merely a pilot, a hireling. Once Boehl reached the plane, escape would be simple, and he would go somewhere, probably another part of Patagonia—they wouldn’t expect that, the fools—and begin again. Already he had snatches of plans for the future. He hardly heard the two shots behind him. Everything seemed crystal clear. He felt free; free and agile, strong, superior to all things; he was Hans Boehl, and he had been a

great man in Nazi Germany; as great as Hitler, and he could remember, so clearly now, that he had been superior to Hitler. He was running lightly, very lightly; he had no weight at all; he was on the sand of the lake beach now, and it was hard dark sand. He could feel the sand; it was between his teeth, hard and gritting, with no taste at all, no taste at all.

“Is dead as anything,” Orlin Dartlic said presently. “Is run fifty yards after I shoot him through brain. What do you know about that, no?”

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 Exploding Lake* by Lester Dent and Harold A. Davis (as Kenneth Robeson)]