

THE YELLOW CLOUD

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

- Chapter I. THE IMPOSSIBLE YELLOW THING
- Chapter II. PROOF OF IMPOSSIBLE
- Chapter III. STRANGE LADYBIRD
- Chapter IV. MEN AFTER FILM
- Chapter V. TELEVISION MIX-UP
- Chapter VI. BIG EARS
- Chapter VII. GIRL TRAIL
- Chapter VIII. SCHOOLHOUSE LESSON
- Chapter IX. MONK, THE BEAUTIFUL
- Chapter X. PAT GUESSES WRONG
- Chapter XI. NOT SOUTH AMERICA
- Chapter XII. BACKWARD FLYING
- Chapter XIII. CRAZY HOUSE
- Chapter XIV. MADHOUSE RAID
- Chapter XV. PIT TRAP
- Chapter XVI. THE MONKHOUSE

Chapter I. THE IMPOSSIBLE YELLOW THING

IT was too bad that nobody actually saw what happened to the new army X-ship on its test flight. It happened that there were clouds that night, and anyway, the impossible thing occurred twenty thousand feet in the air.

So all the information they got was what the pilot told them over the radio. And, of course, no one could hardly believe that. It was too incredible.

However, there was no denying plane and pilot vanished.

Also, there were the photographs, which the pilot took and dropped—the picture that actually showed the thing that had grabbed the plane, incredible as it was.

The army wasn't fooling that night.

There had been a congressional investigation, and it had resulted in the boot being taken to certain high staff officers until, as one old-timer put it, the seats of their pants rang like bells.

The investigation had brought out the simple and undeniable fact that the army—the United States army—was about as well prepared as a man with a musket. The army, the soldiers of the Stars and Stripes, might make an impressive sight when stood in a row—if nobody noticed that they stood in about the same equipment as in 1918. Every European soldier had a submachine gun, even the, Chinese had sub-gun companies, but the American doughboy, the boy in khaki—what did he have?

He had a rifle—1918 style. His commanding general also possibly had a polo pony, listed in the records as a cavalry mount.

It had peeled hides, had that congressional investigation. It had wanted to know why there were only half a dozen or so antiaircraft guns available to protect New York City, although there were plenty of soldiers riding around on horses, the way King Arthur rode around in the fifth century. England had multi-barreled anti-aircraft guns capable of firing several thousand shells a minute—and England had almost as many of those guns as the U.S.A. had soldiers.

America wasn't going to fight England, of course; in fact, it looked as if she was figuring on England to protect her. Or figuring on somebody. It certainly didn't appear that she was thinking much about protecting herself.

Army, you better do something, was the word.

Europe was full of men who were trying to be Napoleon. There were even some in South America. The only thing that impressed these burglars was the fact that you wore a pistol.

So the army wasn't fooling. For once, actually, it wasn't. It had even fired its publicity men, the boys who could take two crack-pot tanks produced by a nut inventor, and send out enough pictures and ballyhoo baloney that some of the U. S. A. really thought it had a mechanized army.

Army wasn't fooling, and it was testing the new X-ship, the new X-ship being a plane that was actually the kind of plane they had been saying the previous ones were. It was a supership, which could outfight and out fly by fifty per cent the best plane of any other army in the world, and this was no press-agent slop.

To test-fly the X-ship, the army had called upon the greatest engineer in the army reserve—a man who was probably also the second greatest engineer in the world.

Colonel John Renwick was this engineer—Renny Renwick, the man with the fists, and the I'm-on-my-way-to-a-funeral face.

The man who was associated with Doc Savage.

THE stage had been nicely set for a devil of a mystery; only nobody knew that as yet.

The X-ship was so good that the army really wanted to keep its performance a secret; so precautions had been taken. The test was being held from a deserted sand-dune island on the North Carolina coast, and the one bridge leading to the island was watched; while a motorboat floated

around and around the island loaded with army officers dressed like local fishermen.
It was to be a night hop.

The new X-ship was there, sitting on the hard sand beach, a creation of camouflaged metal that looked as stocky as a bulldog and as vicious as a yellow hornet.

The snouts of nine machine guns poked out of various streamlined ports, her innards were full of racks for bombs, and there was a high-powered aerial camera and a gigantic photoflash contraption, so that the plane could take a night picture of many square miles of enemy territory.

Everything was ready except Test Pilot Colonel John Renny Renwick. He hadn't shown up.

Around about stood generals and majors and lieutenants and sergeants.

No small amount of interest centered on the army's new electrical "listener" for locating airplanes flying high. Four of these stood on the sand. The gadgets were very efficient—but most every other army in the world had them as efficient.

The idea of tonight's test was: The new X-ship had a silenced motor, a special propeller, and it was hoped it could fly so silently at an altitude of twenty thousand feet that no electrical listener could spot it. This night's test would tell.

The army radiomen had their outfits set up, too. A bang-up, new two-way radiotelephone was part of the equipment of the X-ship, and they were going to test that.

The men at the electrical "listeners" gave a start

"Sir, there's a plane coming," one reported.

The plane came down with a brisk whistle of wind past wings, stuck out two whiskers of light from its wing floodlights, and came to rest on the beach. The occupants—three men—alighted.

"Colonel Renwick!" someone said.

Colonel Renny Renwick had a voice that sounded something like the roof of a mine coming down must sound to a miner.

"Holy cow!" he said. "Sorry if we're a little late. I wanted to pick up two friends of mine."

"Two friends?"

"Sure."

"To witness testing of the X-ship, you mean?"

"Yep."

The army officers looked at each other and must have said mentally, "Oh, damn, what'll we do about this?" The test of the X-ship was supposed to be very, very secret, and not for outsiders to see.

"We—ah—that is—"

"Sure, I know." Renny Renwick rumbled. "But it will be all right for these two guys to watch.

They're in the army, too. They're Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair and Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks."

"Oh!"

"Yes," Renny said. "The two are Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks."

That made it different. Very different.

"Did Monk bring his pig?" an officer asked.

That got a burst of laughter.

"And did Ham fetch his chimpanzee?" inquired a second officer.

This caused another laugh.

The army officer was referring to Habeas Corpus, a pet pig that belonged to Monk, and Chemistry, a pet chimpanzee that was Ham's property. The pig, Habeas Corpus, had ears large enough to be wings, long legs, and an inquisitive snout. The chimp, Chemistry, was a runt animal that was astounding for the reason that he bore an incredible, personal likeness to Monk. It was this likeness that had first caused Ham to collect Chemistry. Each animal had been carefully trained by his owner, and they were a continual source of trouble.

Presence of Monk and Ham was all right with the army men. Almost everybody in the service had heard of Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks—Monk, who was a famous industrial chemist, and Ham, who was also famous, or infamous, depending on the point of view, as a lawyer.

Monk and Ham were Doc Savage aids, too.

PREPARATIONS, to test-fly the X-plane proceeded, but there was no particular excitement, for as yet nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The out-of-the ordinary was still to come.

Monk and Ham got into a quarrel, of course. But that caused no surprise, for it was what everyone expected.

Monk Mayfair had a ludicrously wide mouth, a nose that did not have the same shape with which it had started life, and the kind of hair that the brush salesman rubs when he says, "Lady, this is exactly what you need to scrub that back porch." Monk was constructed along the lines of—well, no one ever had to look at Monk and wonder where he got that nickname.

Ham Brooks had been selected "The Best Dressed Man in New York" five times running. He was the Beau Brummell of the decade, a tailor's dream, and a never-ending pain in Monk's neck—if one listened only to what Monk said. Ham Brooks had a thin waist, broad shoulders, an orator's wide and rubbery mouth, a voice that made radio announcers hide their faces in envy. He always carried an innocent-looking black cane that contained a sword that he frequently had occasion to use.

Ham got out of the plane and shook his cane under Monk's nose.

"You get funny with me," he yelled, "and I'll amputate those flaps that you call ears."

Monk put his fists on his hips, put an evil look in one eye.

"There ain't nothin' funny about it!" he said. "At ten o'clock tonight, I'm going to break your left leg. At eleven, I'm going to break your right leg. Every hour thereafter, I'm going to break one of your bones, until I run out of bones."

"I didn't do it!" Ham shouted.

"You didn't?"

"No!"

"The heck you didn't!" Monk shoved his face close to Ham's, and snarled, "I can see the devil all over your face!"

"It's the first time," Ham said, "that I ever knew my face was a mirror."

One of the army officers asked Renny, "What's wrong with them now?"

Renny explained, "Somebody took a picture of Monk and sent it to a magazine labeled as an African baboon dressed in man's clothing. The magazine published the picture, claiming it didn't notice the difference. Monk figures Ham sent the picture."

"I see," said the officer.

"Monk saw, too," Renny said, "assorted red."

Renny Renwick had a long jaw and a thin mouth that was always indescribably sad when things were going well. It was doubtful if he could have put either one of his fists in a quart pail.

He got in the X-ship.

"This won't take long," he said. "Watch out for the sand, boys."

The army men got back away from the funnel of sand which the propeller slipstream scooped up, and the plane buzzed off down the beach.

Colonel Renny Renwick was wrong about it not taking long. It was going to take long, long, very long.

THE X-ship went up through the night sky with a bawl and a moan.

"She's sweet," an army man said. "A sweet job."

Monk and Ham had their noses jammed together. They separated them now, and walked over to the radio-receiving outfit, which had a loudspeaker so that those interested could gather around and hear.

"This dangerous for Renny?" Monk asked.

"He'll be all right," an army man said.

"Don't wings come off them things sometimes when they test?"

"Well, sometimes," the army man admitted.

"That's what I thought," Monk said.

He sat down by the radio. Ham sat down, also, but out of reach of Monk's long arms. Both indulged in deep silence, apparently thinking of future violent remarks to make to each other.

It was a nice night, except for the clouds. A little chilly, perhaps. The wind—there was always wind in these sand dunes—pushed fine sand around and made faint whispering sounds, and waves crawled up on the beach and burst with sighs like long, fat white hogs.

Renny's voice came from the loudspeaker.

"Altitude twelve thousand," Renny's voice said. "Getting into clouds."

"Holy pups!" an army man said. "Look at that rate of climb!"

The wind whispered, the waves sighed, and the loudspeaker went on droning. It told of thousand after thousand feet of climb, of air speed, of engine temperature, or other things.

Suddenly, the voice changed.

"Holy cow!" it exploded.

Monk and Ham jerked up straight, stared at the radio loudspeaker.

It must have been three minutes before the radio made another sound. Then:

"Listen, down there," it said. "I haven't made a dive, I haven't made any sharp turns, and I haven't put a strain on myself in any way. So I can't be delirious and seeing things."

Monk leaned over and grabbed the microphone.

"What the blazes is wrong, Renny?" he asked.

"This Monk?"

"Yes; it's Monk."

Renny's voice said,

"All right, Monk; listen to me. I'm going to tell you about this cloud. I'll describe the cloud.

It's about a quarter of a mile long, and probably half that wide. It's about two hundred feet deep, or maybe deeper in some places and less in others, because you know how clouds are shaped."

Renny's voice had somehow changed. It was full of ripping excitement. It had the frenzy of a buzz saw that had gone to work on a pine knot.

Monk said, "Say, what's the idea of tellin' me about a cloud."

"Because," Renny's voice said, "this cloud is yellow."

"Eh? It's—"

"Yellow."

"Say, big-fists," Monk said, "who you kidding?"

"The cloud," Renny said, " is as yellow as a pond frog."

Monk muttered, "I don't think your joke is so funny."

"The yellow cloud," Renny said, " is chasing me!"

THAT was about all of that. Or, at least, the end of it must have come while Monk and Ham and the army men were standing around with say-is-this-something-you're-supposed-to-laugh-at expressions on their faces.

It is not incredibly unusual for an eagle or a buzzard to chase a plane, and an owl might conceivably be up that high—twenty thousand feet—at this time of night; and the owl might have been in a disposition where it wanted to chase a plane. Another plane might conceivably have chased this plane. But a cloud? Oh, no! Out of the question. Somebody was crazy.

Renny's voice said,

" I'm gonna take a picture of the cloud."

They saw him take the picture. That is, the brief, terrifically strong photo-flash device with which the X-plane was equipped, made such a surge of light that it penetrated, even through the thick layer of clouds, sufficiently that those on the beach saw its momentary glow.

A minute passed.

Renny's voice was now more tense.

"I'm going to drop the picture film by parachute!" it said.

Monk yelled, "Hey, Renny! What—"

The voice from the sky got wild.

"The cloud is going to catch me!" Renny yelled.

That was all.

Chapter II. PROOF OF IMPOSSIBLE

IT must have been five minutes before those on the beach sand realized it was going to be all. At least, it took them that long to come to life. Then Monk reared up howling.

"Blazes!" he yelled. "Why didn't we think?"

Monk meant the plane in which they had come. He legged for the craft. The plane was larger than the X-ship, and a different type; but it could climb to twenty thousand feet.

Ham dived into the plane after Monk. Although they squabbled at all other times, they seemed to coordinate perfectly, once they had something urgent to do. Up went the plane, moaning hungrily for the stars.

An hour later, the plane bumped on the beach again, and Monk and Ham stepped out, trailed by their two strange pets, the pig and the chimp.

"Nothing."

The army men stared. "But—"

"I know," Monk said. "You ain't telling us how nuts it is. Cloud strata extends to thirteen thousand feet. Over that, it's as clear as crystal all the way to the moon. But no Renny, no plane."

"And no yellow cloud?" a captain asked.

Monk glared at him.

"Listen!" Monk snarled. "Renny isn't crazy, but just the same there ain't yellow clouds—and if they were yellow, they would chase planes."

The captain said, "Come over here."

"Eh?"

"I want you to hear something," the captain explained.

The captain led Monk and Ham to one of the electrical "listeners" for locating air raiders. The device sat on a truck, resembled a magnified, old-time phonograph with ten-foot horns sticking out in every direction. The operators rode saddles and had telephone headsets strapped to their ears. The captain said to one of the operators, "You were listening to the X-ship?"

"Yes," the operator said. "That is, we listened until—"

"Until what?" the captain prompted.

"Well, there was a kind of shriek, as if something huge had rushed through the air up there," the listener-operator said. "Then there was a crash."

"What kind of a crash?"

"A crunchy one. Kind of tinny."

"Exactly what was that crash like?" the captain asked.

The operator thought for a moment.

"Like a plane would sound if it were being smashed into a lump by something big," he said.

Monk got a bluish pale.

"Was that all?" he asked.

"I should think it was enough," the operator said.

MONK and Ham went over and leaned against the wing of their plane. They did not say anything, because there did not seem to be much they could say.

The wind was mounting, pushing the big white waves up higher on the beach, and the waves were sighing like bigger hogs as they broke.

"It's impossible," Ham said.

"Sure," Monk agreed.

They walked over to the army man in command of the whole project of test-flying the X-ship.

Monk said, "Look here, sir; it is probable that gas from the motor made Renny delirious, then unconscious, in which case he probably crashed the ship. I suggest a search for the wrecked plane." "Excellent idea."

An intensive search began for wreckage of the X-ship.

Monk and Ham joined the search. They had little to say, and there was grim tightness around their mouths. For once, there was none of their perpetual squabbling.

They had been closely associated with the missing Renny Renwick for a long time. On several occasions they had saved his life, and there had been instances when he had saved theirs. In fact, they were bound together about as closely as it is possible for men to be cemented, for they were all members of one of the most unusual little groups—only six men belonged—that ever had been assembled. A group, incidentally, which had no name, except that they were known as Doc Savage and his men. The group did not need a name to be feared in the far corners of the earth.

The group had no name, but mere whispered rumor of its presence in a neighborhood brought terror to wrongdoers, men outside the law.

For Doc Savage and his little group were engaged in one of the most unusual of careers, that of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, frequently in the far ends of the world. It was not an occupation—often they did not profit financially. But money was a minor motivation, Doc Savage having a secret source of fabulous wealth somewhere in the Central American mountains.

Furthermore, each of Doc Savage's five assistants was master of a profession, and capable of making an excellent income from it.

Excitement—that was what bound them together. A love of excitement and action. That, and the thrill that continually came from association with an individual as unusual as Doc Savage, amazing man of mystery, sometimes called the "Man of Bronze."

Monk and Ham, liking Renny as they did, were terribly concerned over his fate.

"He might have got out of the plane with the parachute," Monk muttered.

"Sure," Ham said hopefully.

The sun came up and the wind went down, and the waves did not roll up on the beach as violently; and Negro fishermen rowed out through the island channels, chanting as they strained their backs over the long oars.

Now that it was light, Monk and Ham took off in their plane and looked for X-ship wreckage or a parachute.

They found the parachute, a small one, not a man-sized parachute. It was dangling from a tree, and on the end of the shrouds was a little canvas bag. It was the kind of parachute used to drop things from planes.

In the little canvas bag attached to the parachute were the photographic films that Renny's voice had mentioned while the impossible was happening the night before. It did not take long to rush the films to a dark room and develop them. But it did take a long time for Monk and Ham to get over the shock of what the photographs showed.

They had not, really, believed there was a yellow cloud.

"UH!" Monk said, rather as if he had been hit hard in the stomach with a fist. He sat down. He looked at Ham, and after a minute Ham backed away from the picture as if it might have fangs. They had been brought up in this logical-minded world which is growing more scientific each year, and which has an explanation for almost everything except what causes colds and seasickness and what makes people live. This was impossible. A yellow cloud chasing an airplane—there wasn't such a thing.

The picture showed evidence to the contrary. It appeared that Renny had rolled the plane over and pointed the airplane camera upward to get the picture.

There were stars visible behind the cloud.

There was every indication that the cloud was what Renny's voice had described—length a quarter of a mile, width half that, depth two hundred feet in places, more or less in others. They could not tell about the yellow hue, for this was not color film. But it was unusual. It was a solid cloud. It seemed to have body to it.

"Whew!" Monk said. The homely chemist got up and examined the cloud, then bit his lips as if trying to get stiffness out of them.

"The cloud," he added, "does not seem to have eyes, mouth, arms, or wings. It's just a cloud."

Ham gripped his sword cane and looked up.

"Listen," he said. "You don't believe there was a yellow cloud?"

"I don't know what to believe," Monk said.

They still did not know what to believe late that afternoon when they climbed wearily into their plane, gunned the motor, and vaulted off for the north. Both men were silent, almost stupefied. It was hard to accept that no trace had been found of Renny or the X-ship. Land ships had scanned half the State of North Carolina, and the navy had done the same with the adjacent ocean. No success at all.

Monk and Ham landed at the airport across the Potomac from Washington. They needed fuel. Monk got

back into the plane scowling.

"Look at these newspapers," he growled.

The headlines said:

DOC SAVAGE AID MISSING
IN ARMY PLANE TEST

"Let me see that!" Ham said. He snatched the paper and read. "Well, they didn't mention the yellow cloud business," he said.

"The army wants the cloud business kept quiet," Monk explained.

"It's all right with me," Ham said. "I don't want people thinking we're nuts."

The evening sun was red in the west, and filled the high-flying plane with a gory glow. The shadows of hills and houses lengthened swiftly on the ground. "We should make New York in an hour and a half," Monk said.

The plane radio—it was tuned in on an army station—began to talk, saying,
" Calling Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks; calling—"

"You got us," Monk said into the microphone.

The radio said,

" We have a report for you. Two planes were flying over Pennsylvania. One of them was attacked a by yellow cloud, seized and carried away. The second plane managed to escape."

Monk chewed a fingernail and stared at the radio as if he doubted his ears. He said, "Say that again."

The radio said it again, and added, "The pilot of the plane that escaped is at Central Airport, Philadelphia."

Monk and Ham looked at each other.

"What's the pilot's name?" Monk asked.

"Brick Palmer," the radio said.

"Thanks," Monk said.

Ham, who was flying the plane, gave the ship enough left rudder to send it toward Philadelphia. The two men were silent for a long time. They had been trying not to accept the existence of a yellow cloud, because it was fantastic; and now that they were confronted with the specter of the thing again, they were without words.

They did think, though, that they might be able to learn something of the fate of Renny by questioning this flier, Brick Palmer, who had actually seen a yellow cloud grab a plane.

"I wonder what kind of a man this Brick Palmer is?" Monk muttered.

Chapter III. STRANGE LADYBIRD

THE girl held the gun in both hands quite steadily. She had come into the airport waiting room with the weapon concealed in her flying helmet, which she was carrying in her hands, and now she had the gun pointed at Monk and Ham.

Monk and Ham stared at her in gap-mouthed astonishment.

Out on the tarmac somewhere a transport plane was rumbling its big motor, and in a hangar mechanics were banging hammers against machinery. The airport was far enough outside Philadelphia so that there was no rumble of the city.

Monk started to put his hands up.

"Keep them down," the girl ordered grimly.

She was a small girl, somewhat a spriggins of a girl. From the quick way she moved, she seemed about fifteen years old; but she was a little older than that—twentyish, maybe.

The sky winds had browned her. Nature had put red in her lips and mahogany-colored fire in her eyes. She was pretty. Striking enough that Monk, who was a connoisseur of feminine pulchritude, would have opened his mouth and batted both his small eyes—even if she had not been letting him look into the muzzle of a gun.

"Listen," Monk said. "We only want to see a party named Brick Palmer."

"Yes," Ham said. "We came—"

"Shut up!" the girl advised.

She stood small and tense. She had dropped her flying helmet—it was of the same brown leather as her zippered jacket.

"Walk out of that side door," she ordered. "Act natural."

They stepped out of the side door upon the gravel of the airport parking lot. It was almost dark, and the big beacon had been turned on and was swinging at monotonous intervals. Colored border lights made a far-flung path.

"Get in your ambulance," the girl said.

Ham stared at her. "Ambulance?"

"We came in a plane," Monk explained.

The girl did not believe that. She had picked up her helmet and covered her gun again. She lifted the helmet slightly, showed the weapon muzzle.

"I don't fool people!" she said grimly.

"Do you tell people who you are?" Ham asked.

"You know that. You asked for me."

"You're not Brick Palmer!" Ham exploded.

"Abricketta Palmer. Yes."

Ham said, "Oh!" and looked at Monk, who said, "Blazes!" They were astonished and puzzled.

"Go get in your ambulance," the girl said. "You're taking me away from here—but not the way you hoped."

"We haven't got any ambulance, I tell you," Monk said.

The girl looked at them tensely, wondering what to do.

"We'll walk then," she said. "Get going."

They walked down the main road and turned into a side lane at the girl's command. They passed a house, and a dog came out of the yard and followed them, barking violently, but went back. It was not very dark. There was much traffic on the road they had left, but none on this lane.

They came to a spot which was lonesome.

"I better search you here," the girl said.

She went through their pockets while they held their arms high. She made a little mound of their belongings on the road, and then struck a match for a light. She examined the cards, looked at the names on envelopes. She straightened, looking foolish.

"I made a mistake," she said.

THE girl did not point her gun at them any longer. She rolled it in her helmet, uncomfortably.

She explained, "When I told my story back at the airport, they thought I was crazy. I heard them say something about sending for somebody to take me to a psychopathic ward for a medical examination. A psychopathic ward is an insane asylum, isn't it?"

"Something like that," Monk said.

"I thought you were two attendants who had come to get me," the girl added. "I was determined not to go. When you came, they just said there were two men to see me and shoved me in that room, so I—well—"

Monk and Ham stood and squinted in the growing darkness, neither knowing what to say.

"We thought you were a man," Monk muttered finally.

The girl picked up the things she had taken from their pockets and began handing them back.

"You are associated with Doc Savage?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I have heard of him," she said. "Quite famous, isn't he?"

Monk asked, "What about the yellow cloud?"

The girl shuddered. "We were flying at about ten thousand feet. Chester's plane was about a mile ahead of mine—"

"Who's Chester?" Ham asked.

"Chester Palmer, my brother," the girl explained. "He was about a mile ahead. We were flying over a cloud ceiling. This cloud just seemed to jump up, yellow and grim, from the ordinary clouds below and envelop my brother's plane. It was like—hard to describe—as if a puff of yellow smoke had been blown up."

Ham asked, "Did this happen in the daytime?"

"Yes."

"Then what occurred?"

The girl stuffed her flying helmet in one pocket of her laced whipcord breeches and shoved the gun into another pocket. She took out a handkerchief and began to choke it.

"I got close to the yellow thing—cloud—" she explained. "It jumped at me. That is, one whole section of the cloud just kind of spurted at me. I banked plane, barely got away. It chased me for at least fifteen miles and almost overtook me. I never saw my brother or his plane again."

"How fast did you fly," Ham asked, "when it was chasing you?"

"About two hundred and fifty miles an hour."

"And this yellow cloud kept up with you?"

"Yes."

"What was it?" Monk asked.

The girl took a long time to get an answer. "I don't know," she said.

The night had been still, but now several small frogs—or they might have been crickets—set up an orchestration in the ditch water along the edge of the lane. The dog that had pursued them came snuffling down the road, barked three times, then turned and ran back again.

"Now you know," the girl said, "why I thought you were two men who had come to take me to an insane asylum."

"Was this an army plane your brother was flying?" Monk asked suddenly.

"Oh, no. Just an ordinary three-place, open-cockpit commercial job."

Monk said, "Come over here, Ham."

The two men moved down the lane a short distance and the girl remained behind until she was out of earshot.

"It's so utterly screwy," Monk muttered.

"You're telling me!" Ham said. "But what do we do?"

Monk had something on his mind—he was thinking back. During the last two or three adventures in which Doc Savage had been involved, Monk and Ham had been unfortunate. They had fallen for feminine wiles. Three times in a row, a pretty girl associated with the enemy had made fools out of them. Doc Savage had not said much about it, but they suspected he had thought a great deal.

"You thinking about what I am?" Monk asked.

"I am thinking," Ham said, "that we had better look into this girl's story."

"That's the idea," Monk agreed. "This time, we don't fall for the first pretty face that comes along."

"You think she might be trying to pull a phony on us?"

"I don't know. Nothing about this thing so far is even believable, much less making sense."

They went back to the girl.

"I hope," Monk told her, "that you don't mind being investigated."

MONK and Ham never did quite figure out how that next thing managed to happen to them so unexpectedly. They were taken by complete surprise. Maybe it was because the girl was so pretty that they couldn't keep their minds on anything else.

They were walking into the airport waiting room, and the girl was saying, "I hope that Doc Savage will interest himself in finding out what happened to my brother."

"You want Doc Savage to try to find your brother?" Monk asked.

"Oh, I do, I do!"

"I think Doc will help," Ham said.

"Oh, wonderful!" Brick Palmer exclaimed.

Her throat seemed full of relief.

"You see," Ham said, "a man named Renny was the first—"

He never did finish.

The previous Fourth of July, Monk had lighted a nickel firecracker and threw it, and the cracker hit a tree limb and bounced back and hit Monk on top of the head, exploding just as it struck. Ham had thought it very unpleasant.

Monk's head, now, felt the way it had when the firecracker exploded. He fell to the floor.

Part of the airport waiting-room floor, Monk noticed for the first time, had been freshly painted deep-red. It had been blocked off by stretching a twine string to which was clipped pieces of newspaper. Monk had broken the string when he fell, and it and the newspaper fragments had fallen in the fresh, deep-red paint, also.

Vaguely, he became aware of yelling.

"Help me, stupid!" Ham was howling.

Monk got his thinking reconnected. He'd been banged on the head. By a man—a very long and active man who had skin that was the color of a good English boot.

There were three other men, all active, but not the same color. They were lighter, one having a reddish face. They were closing in on Ham.

Ham had unsheathed his sword cane, danced into a corner. He stood poised in the fencing stance they had taught him at Harvard. He liked to perform with that sword cane, did Ham. He lunged, sent out the blade. A man yelped, dodged back. The man's elbow began leaking red.

"Only nicked me!" the man snarled triumphantly.

"

You think!" Ham gritted.

The tip of the sword cane was coated with a sticky chemical, and even a scratch from it would soon render a victim unconscious.

MONK got up and roared. He always roared when he fought. His ordinary voice was a childlike squeak, but his fighting voice was something that might have come out of the big horn on the front of the Queen Mary's forward funnel.

"Hell-gun 'em!" yelled the boot-colored man.

They must have been keeping their guns out of action because of the noise. But with Monk roaring, there could hardly be more noise.

The boot-colored man drew a thin-nosed pistol. He aimed at Ham. He shot Ham three times in the stomach. Ham sat down backward.

Monk hit the boot-colored man. Monk brought his fist from far back, and the man sailed across and thumped the wall, bounced like a rubber ball and fell.

The other men swung around with their guns.

Monk hated to mix any caution at all with his fights. But he could, when he had to. He took a precaution now.

Out of one pocket Monk snatched an egg-sized blob of metal. He pressed a lever on the thing. It popped, and spouted black smoke. The smoke spread, and almost instantaneously, the room was full of drawing-ink black.

Guns were crashing. But Monk was moving, and the bullets missed him.

"Get up an' fight, Ham!" he howled.

Monk went silent, came up on tiptoes, and made for the spot where he had last seen the girl.

Abricketta Palmer wasn't there.

The boot-colored man began yelling.

"Get the girl and beat it!" he shouted, and added some profanity.

He sounded as if he had had enough fight.

Men began getting out of the airport waiting room. Monk felt around, slugged someone, and nearly got shot in the head. He became cautious, worked to the door and crept outside.

There was smoke outside now. There was yelling and confusion around the airport.

Monk crept out of the smoke, but dived back in again when the men began shooting at him. All four of the raiders were outdoors. They had the girl. Monk got back in the airport waiting room and listened to lead make holes in the walls. The waiting room was made of tiling, plastered, and the bullets breaking through sounded as if they were smashing pottery.

After a while, the shooting stopped, and an automobile left at high speed.

Monk dashed outdoors.

"Call the State troopers!" he yelled. "Have 'em get that car!"

LATER the night breeze blew the bomb smoke out of the waiting room. Monk walked in. His shoe soles made stick-stick sounds in the tacky paint.

Ham sat on the floor. He was taking off his clothes.

"Why didn't you get up and fight?" Monk asked.

Ham said thickly, "You were doing all right, weren't you?"

"They got away."

"Personally," Ham said, "I was glad to see them go."

Monk walked around and around Ham, examining him. He made tongue-clucking sympathy sounds.

"Hurt?" he asked.

"Listen," Ham snarled, "were you ever shot three times in the stomach?"

"You had on your bulletproof undershirt, didn't you?"

Ham scowled and yelled, "Bulletproof undershirt, or no shirt—were you ever shot three times in the stomach?"

Monk asked, "What are you undressing for?"

"The zipper of the infernal bulletproof shirt," Ham explained, "is stuck."

Ham eventually got out of the undershirt, and seemed hard to convince that there were no holes in his stomach. The undershirt—it had been devised by Doc Savage, and all of the bronze man's group wore them habitually—was of very light, special alloy chain-mesh fabrication, effective against anything less than a military rifle slug.

Monk said, "They tried to kill us."

"Did they?" Ham asked sarcastically.

Monk walked around the waiting room, examining the footprints in the fresh paint with considerable interest.

Ham asked, "What became of the one I nicked with my sword cane?"

"He ran off with the others."

Ham picked up his cane and examined the tip disgustedly.

"I'll have to mix a stronger batch of dope for the point of this thing," he muttered.

Monk ambled out to their plane. None of the Doc Savage crew traveled without carrying some of the equipment which they used in their strange profession. Monk came back from the plane carrying a police type of camera. He began photographing the footprints.

He selected a footprint, got down on his knees beside it, and carefully placed a ruler so that it would show, in the picture, the exact length and width of the print.

"That's your own footprint, you hairy gossoon," Ham said.

Monk's neck got red.

"All right, all right," he grumbled. "I'm still dizzy. One of them guys hit me over the head with a gun."

"Why?" Ham asked.

"He was trying to knock me senseless."

"I mean," Ham said, "what was the whole idea?"

"They couldn't have been after the girl, could they?"

Ham jerked up straight. "They didn't—"

"They took," Monk explained, "the girl."

Chapter IV. MEN AFTER FILM

THAT was Ham's first inkling that the raiders had carried away Brick Palmer.

"Did you get State troopers after them?" he asked grimly.

"Sure."

The two men said nothing more for some time, but their minds were not at rest. They had intelligence considerably above the average, although they were addicted to acting like clowns at times. Ham could not have become a famous lawyer without wits, and Monk could not have become one of the greatest chemists without gray matter. Their present period of silence meant that they were cudgeling their brains, trying to make sense out of what had happened.

"Thinking about it," Monk muttered, "just makes my head ring."

"Impossible!"

"Eh?"

"Sound can't travel through a vacuum," Ham said unkindly.

Monk scowled, evidently could get no suitable retort on his tongue, jammed his hands in his pants pockets.

"We were starting to investigate that girl when the keg of nails burst open," the homely chemist said. "Why don't we go ahead with that?"

"Good idea," Ham admitted.

After some argument with the airport management about who would pay the long-distance telephone calls, Monk and Ham began contacting distant airports. They did this almost half an hour, then got a result.

"Listen to this!" Ham said. "It's the Columbus, Ohio, airport manager. He's a tough guy."

Together, each crowding one ear against the receiver, they listened to what the Columbus airport man had to growl.

"A man named Chester Palmer, and his sister, Abricketta Palmer, landed here in two planes," said the voice from Columbus. "They took off later, saying they were going to fly across Pennsylvania."

"We want the truth," Monk said.

"Say, why should I lie to you?" the Columbus airport man asked indignantly.

Monk said, "Keep your shirt on. We just wanted to make sure the girl and her brother were flying two planes."

"Well, they were. Say, you ain't calling me a liar?" The man sounded as if he wanted to fight.

"No," Monk said. "We're just trying to solve a mystery."

"Mystery!" snapped the Columbus man. "What mystery? Tell me about it. I'm all ears."

"So is a jackass!" Monk said, and hung up. "Wise guy," he added.

Ham said, "The girl told a straight story, it looks like."

"Yeah," Monk agreed.

A State policeman arrived in a bad humor.

"We found that car," he said. "Deserted."

"The girl and the guys—"

"No telling where," the trooper said. "They abandoned the car down the road a few miles. We think they changed to another car, maybe."

Monk and Ham remained at the airport until midnight. It was a moonlight night and regular passenger planes took off or landed at intervals, and there was an entertaining argument between a large woman and the ticket clerk about an excess baggage charge. Monk and Ham sat around, worried about Renny, wondered what had happened to the girl, tried to make something logical out of the mystery. They were too depressed to carry on their usual quarrel.

They got out the photograph of the cloud and examined it. "I figure," Monk said, "that we had better get this to Doc Savage."

"What good will that picture do Doc?" Ham demanded.

"More good than it's done us, I hope," Monk said.

They walked out to their plane and got in. They had left their pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, locked in the ship.

An airport attendant came running. He said, "Hold it a minute, fellows! Another ship is using the runway."

Monk and Ham watched the other ship. It was a cabin craft, streamlined, all new design. It came roaring from the murk beyond a far hangar, turned on to the runway, gathered speed, picked up its tail and took the air. It climbed a big spiral around the field.

Neither Monk nor Ham thought anything of the incident. They did not notice that the plane followed them as they took off and flew toward New York. The other ship kept far back, and extinguished its flying lights, which was against commercial regulations.

THE brick warehouse—the structure that bore the sign "HIDALGO TRADING COMPANY" on its front—had stood on the Hudson River water front for thirty years or so. The sign bearing the name, however, was of much later date; but the building itself had been there long enough that the citizens of New York, those that passed that way, had come to accept it and never given it a second glance.

If a plane was occasionally seen moving on the river near the warehouse, that attracted no undue attention either, because seaplanes were no novelty in the metropolis.

The warehouse was Doc Savage's hangar-boathouse—the place where he kept his planes and such water craft as he and his associates had occasion to use. Few knew the purpose of the building, for the old warehouse looked innocent and unused.

Monk and Ham landed their plane on the Hudson, taxied toward the end of the wharf. Monk stood up in the cockpit with a long device that was like a flashlight, except that it had a black lens. The gadget was a projector for infra-red light—light of wave length too short for the eye to perceive. The beam struck a photoelectric cell on the end of the warehouse, and this closed a relay, and an electrical apparatus operated to open the door. Most of the warehouse end was composed of door. They taxied the plane into the warehouse. The door closed.

Down over the river drifted the other plane, the ship that had been following them. Its riding lights were still out, and the cockpit was black.

"Damn!" said a voice in the darkened cabin. "We're gonna lose their trail."
"They'll go straight to Doc Savage," another voice said. "We'll pick 'em up there."
"We gotta do more than pick them up!" said the first speaker savagely. "We can't have 'em investigating this."

The dark plane turned toward one of the Long Island airports.

Monk and Ham, inside the warehouse, tied their ship on one of the small floating slips. Monk changed the radio to a wave length habitually used by the Doc Savage group. He said into the microphone, "Hello, Doc."

The voice that answered was remarkable. Not even the tonal shortcomings of the radio loud-speaker could lessen its vibrant quality.

"Yes, Monk?" it said.

"Where are you now?"

"Laboratory."

"You know about Renny disappearing?" Monk asked.

"The newspapers have the story."

"There's a heck of a lot of it they haven't got," Monk said. "We'll be right up."

Doc Savage's New York establishment was elaborate, particularly in the matter of defenses; their enemies were many, and some of them were ingenious. To facilitate quick secret passage from the water-front hangar to the group headquarters, Doc Savage had installed the thing that Monk called the "flea run."

Ham opened a steel door of what appeared to be a large concrete block that stood on the floor. They stepped inside into a bullet-shaped car, hardly more than four times the size of a barrel. This was well padded, the necessity for the padding being plainly evident as Monk closed the switch and there was a rush of compressed air and the car began slamming through a tube like tunnel. The speed increased. Monk and Ham held onto things. The car shook, slammed, jarred and finally came to a stop with a terrific bump.

Monk got out and felt of his teeth to see how many had been loosened.

"That thing gets worse every time we use it," he complained.

They walked into Doc Savage's laboratory. At first the room seemed to cover half an acre. It wasn't that large, really—the aspect of size came from its whiteness, the vastness of the windows that banked three sides. The windows were double-strength, bulletproof glass. One had to look down from them to see even the highest roofs of Manhattan, for this establishment was on the eighty-sixth floor of one of the city's tallest skyscrapers.

The laboratory was full of apparatus—glass and metal in fantastic shapes. It was one of the most completely equipped in existence. Monk, looking over the place when it was first built, had started to dub it the "Wizard's Den," but had not because the word seemed a little too near the truth.

"Doc!" Monk called.

There was silence.

Monk made a circle of the laboratory, then passed through the library—a great paneled room containing an amazing assortment of scientific tomes—into the reception room, which held large leather chairs, a great inlaid table and a huge safe. These three rooms comprised the headquarters suite.

"He's not here!" Monk said, astonished.

"But we talked to him on the radio not five minutes ago," Ham said.

THEY sat down and scratched their heads. It was a little puzzling.

Later, there was a knock on the door.

"Must be Doc," Monk said.

"Doc knows how to open that door, doesn't he?" Ham asked.

The door was operated by a trick mechanical device—a relay which functioned on the same scientific principle that causes the leaves of an electroscope to separate when a bit of radioactive metal is brought near. Doc and his men carried slightly radioactive medallions, opened the door by merely bringing these close to a certain spot.

Ham went over and opened the door.

A smallish, rather wide man looked at him. The man had eyes that slanted slightly, high cheekbones, curly hair and a brisk expression. One of his ancestors had probably been an Oriental.

"Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks?" he asked swiftly.

"Right."

"Doc Savage," said the little brisk man, "sent me to get you."

"Yes?" Monk said. "How come?"

The other explained. "Doc Savage got a call from a man who is in trouble. He's down the street."

"Who are you?"

"One of the bystanders. Doc Savage merely asked if I would come for you." The little man made a quick gesture. "Will you please hurry? I rather got the idea it was a rush matter."

They left Habeas and Chemistry in the office, walked out into the corridor, took an elevator down to the street. The lobby, vast, full of black and chromium, was as impressive as the building. It was almost dark this time of morning. During the day, pedestrians occasionally stopped to look

upward, the building being so high that it was still a curiosity, although it had been constructed several years. There were few pedestrians at this late night hour.

"I've got a car," the small man said.

He crossed the sidewalk to his car. It was an average black machine, a sedan.

There were two men in the rear seat.

"My friends, Joe and Charlie," the man said. "Get in."

There was nothing suspicious about it, really. Not until Monk and Ham had slipped into the car seats, and saw Joe and Charlie draw guns and point the weapons at them, did they realize what it was.

"Hey!" Monk barked. "What—"

"Sh-h-h!" said the small man.

"Yes," one of the men with the gun told Monk. "We've heard how noisy you can get."

THE car's starting jump jerked Monk and Ham back against the cushions. There was not much traffic, and the machine traveled fast, northward, swinging left and taking Eleventh Avenue to avoid the theatrical district. It hit the express highway—the new boulevard system by which it was possible to leave the city at forty miles an hour without stopping.

One of the men began to chuckle.

"I just thought of something funny," he said.

"Got your mind on yourself, eh?" Monk growled.

The man said, "Doc Savage is going to be puzzled when he gets to that Brooklyn address and finds an empty lot."

Monk stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"How d'ya think we got him away from your skyscraper layout?" the man asked. "The answer is easy. We sent him a fake telephone call asking for help in a hurry. He rushed right out, left the coast clear for us to nab you."

Monk said grimly, "Thanks for the information."

The car charged through the night, now and then giving a little vault as it went over culvert or bridge. There were woods on each side of the road now.

"Where's the film?" a man asked.

"What film?" Monk said.

The car turned right suddenly. It jumped, twisted and groaned over a rutty road. It went down a hill, a hill so steep that the car all but stood on its radiator, while the driver swore and fought the brakes. There was water at the bottom of the hill.

Ham said, "The Hudson River."

"The River Styx, to you," a man said.

They got out of the car. The captors held flashlights and guns. Monk and Ham had been searched en route. They walked through knee-high grass that was wet with dew.

There was a rickety one-plank catwalk that led out over the water to an enormous gray object. They trod the plank catwalk, balancing carefully. The blurred gray monster became an old river steamboat, tied up at pilings to die of old age.

The main salon of the old boat was a musty cavern where the paint was peeling, and some of the floor had been purloined by river shanty-boaters for stove wood.

"Search 'em again," the spokesman ordered. "The big one is wearing some kind of bulletproof vest. Look under it for the film."

Monk stared at gun muzzles, stood helpless while they went over him again. They found the film. He had put it in an envelope and was carrying it under the bulletproof undershirt.

"That's all we wanted," the man said.

He put the film in his own pocket.

Monk said, "You'll let us go now, eh?"

The man showed his teeth unpleasantly.

"Go down and break some chunks of iron loose in the engine room," he ordered one of his fellows.

"We'll use them for weights, after we shoot them."

"You think anybody will hear the shots?" asked one of his men.

"Unlikely."

"Why not get the shooting over with first, then?"

"Maybe we'd better," the man said.

He lifted his gun, selected a spot between Monk's eyes.

Instead of firing, he howled, doubled over and began clubbing at his ankles with the gun.

NONE of the flashlight beams were pointed at the floor at the moment. Monk could not tell, at first, what had happened. Then he saw what had grabbed the man's ankles—

Two bronze hands, long-fingered, alive with cabled strength, had come up through an adjacent gap in the floor to seize the man.

"Doc!" Monk yelled.

The homely chemist doubled, pitched for the nearest foe. Ham did likewise. The grabbed man kept snarling, striking with the gun. Then it occurred to him to shoot. He tried to point his gun. One bronze hand closed on it, seemed to take the weapon out of the man's fingers without effort.

The man lunged, tried to get away. His feet slipped and he slammed down. The bronze hands changed to his body in an effort to hold him. When they got hold of his coat, the coat tore.

The man got up, leaving his coat behind, and ran.

"It's Doc Savage!" he yelled. "More of his gang may be with him. Get out of here!"

It had happened fast. Monk and Ham had the other two men on the floor. The gun of Ham's foe was sailing into a corner. Monk had hold of the weapon of his opponent, was twisting to get it.

The man who had escaped Doc Savage jumped into the mêlée. He kicked and slugged. Ham fell back, dazed. Monk howled in pain, scrambled away—he had the gun which he had been trying to get. But he had no chance to use it.

The three foes dashed out of the salon. They had one flashlight.

The other flashlight lay on the floor, glowing, and its luminance showed the great form of Doc Savage as he swung up through the gap in the floor. There was not much room. It took him a moment to make it.

Monk heaved up, yelled, "Maybe they'll fall off that catwalk!"

But the three men did not have trouble with the catwalk. They reached shore—they were already on shore when Monk, charging down the deck, fell through a hole. Monk howled angrily in the ship's hold. Doc and Ham raced out on the catwalk. Ham, unbalanced, had to drop and grab the plank; but Doc went on.

The three fugitives raced to their car. There was profanity as they found something wrong.

Evidently they were unable to use the machine, because they went on up the road swearing.

"Hey! Here's another car," one of them yelled a moment later. "Must be the one the bronze man came in."

A car motor burst into life, headlights blazed white and the machine went bouncing up the rutted road.

Ham found Doc Savage standing in the road looking after the careening machine.

"No chance of overtaking it," Doc said.

"Is it one of our machines?" Ham asked.

"Long Tom's car," Doc explained. "Long Tom wasn't in it, however."

Long Tom was Major Thomas J. Roberts, another of Doc Savage's group of aids. His car, old-looking, had a special motor and was capable of high speed.

"Blast it!" Ham said. "They got away."

They went back to where Monk bellowed in the abandoned steamboat hold.

"I can't get out!" Monk roared.

Ham said, "Here's a hole, you missing link."

Monk crawled out and sat on the deck and groaned.

"O-o-o!" he croaked. "I fell on my crazy bone."

"Comb your hair different and it won't show," Ham suggested.

Monk said a number of things about Ham's ancestry and added comments concerning the law profession in general. While he was doing that, Doc Savage moved away.

THERE was one peculiar aspect about Doc Savage's size. He was a giant, but so symmetrical in muscular development that his real size was apparent only when he stood near other men, or was close to an object to which his proportions might be compared.

Doc searched the boat, using a spring-generator-operated flashlight with a lens that could be adjusted to throw a pencil of light or a fan. He rejoined Monk and Ham.

"There is an alcohol stove and some blankets in one of the cabins," he said. "Apparently, the boat has been used as a hide-out from time to time." His voice was unexcited. But it had a controlled quality that suggested trained power.

Monk asked, "How in blazes did you happen to turn up, Doc?"

"It was not difficult," the bronze man explained, "to follow you in the car. They had no lookouts posted, so it was easy to get aboard and drop down through a hatch into the hold."

"But—"

"There was a chance they might say something that would show what is behind this," Doc explained.

"I didn't mean that," Monk said. "How did you happen to get the trail in the first place? Didn't they pull you over to Brooklyn with a fake telephone call?"

"The call," Doc said quietly, "was somewhat too fake. The caller said he was in Brooklyn."

"I don't see—"

"You know that new system we installed for quickly tracing telephone calls?" the bronze man reminded. "Well, the trace showed that the call came from Manhattan—a block away from our headquarters, in fact. That was suspicious. Suspicious enough to cause me to go down to the street and start looking for trouble."

Monk rubbed his bruises. "I see."

Doc Savage picked up the coat which he had stripped from one of their opponents, and from a pocket took the film.

He said, "This seems to be what they were after."

Ham said, "That's the picture which Renny took of the yellow cloud."

"I can't understand why they were so hot to get it," Monk grumbled. "Me and Ham have spent hours

looking at that picture. It don't tell us anything."

"When we get back to headquarters we can examine it," Doc said.

"We can ride back to town in their car," Monk suggested.

"If we can get it started," Ham corrected. "They couldn't. That's why they took Long Tom's machine."

They went to the car which belonged to the three men, and Monk got in, ground the starter for some time without getting results, then got out and looked under the hood.

"Hey!" the homely chemist exploded. "The spark-plug wires are disconnected." He looked at Doc Savage with sudden suspicion. "Did you do that, Doc?"

"Yes," the bronze man admitted.

"Why?"

"So they would take Long Tom's car."

Monk scratched his head. "I don't get it."

Doc Savage did not explain. That was another of the bronze man's unusual traits—he had a habit, sometimes a little aggravating, of occasionally neglecting to clarify motives for some of the things that he did.

Chapter V. TELEVISION MIX-UP

IT was still night when they returned to Doc Savage's skyscraper headquarters. Clouds had crawled across the heavens during most of the night, but now the sky was clear and held stars by the millions. Down in the street, milk wagons were beginning to rattle around.

The big white laboratory was very quiet except for the grim voices of Monk and Ham telling the story from the beginning. Monk said, "This yellow cloud thing is crazy, but it's supposed to have grabbed Renny, the army plane, and a plane flown by the girl's brother, Chester Palmer."

Ham put a period to the recital with, "We know there is something sinister back of it. That is proven by the fact that those men grabbed the girl and tried to get the picture. The girl saw that yellow cloud, and the picture shows it."

Doc Savage had made an enlarged print from the negative—the gelatin image was clear enough that he had "blown" it up to a picture about three feet square. He took this out of the big photographic drier and put it under a light.

They gathered around the picture.

"I don't see that this shows anything," Ham complained. "You can see the cloud, but it's—look at it any way you want—just a cloud."

"It looks kinda solid," Monk pointed out.

Doc Savage seemed to have no comment, although he scrutinized the enlargement at length.

The bronze man's eyes were one of the most effective things about him. They were like pools of flake gold always being stirred by small winds, and they had a hypnotic, compelling quality.

Doc Savage went to the window, stood looking out. He made a striking figure outlined against the stars in the sky. The light from the laboratory enhanced the bronze tan that tropical suns had given to his skin.

He was looking at the stars when he made his trilling sound. It was a strange sound, this trilling which Doc Savage made in moments of mental stress. It was low, with a ventriloquial quality that made it seem to come from everywhere in the room, yet from nowhere. It was strange, as exotic as the passing of an arctic wind through naked ice spires.

Monk and Ham stared sharply at the bronze man. That trilling sound—Doc made it unconsciously—always meant that he had discovered something important or had hit upon an unusual line of action.

Monk asked, "You got some idea of what it's about, Doc?"

Instead of answering, the bronze man went to the telephone. He made a call.

"Long Tom," he said into the telephone mouthpiece.

"As much of me as isn't asleep," Long Tom's voice answered drowsily.

Major Thomas J. Long Tom Roberts was the electrical wizard of their group.

"Will you come down to headquarters at once?" Doc requested.

"Why it isn't even daylight," Long Tom protested.

"We want to test your new device," Doc said.

"That's different," Long Tom exclaimed. "I'll be right down."

Monk looked puzzled as the bronze man replaced the receiver.

"Test what?" the homely chemist asked.

"How is your knowledge of television?" Doc countered.

"Nothing to brag about," Monk said. Which was probably a little modest, Monk having no small learning in the field of electrochemistry.

Ham asked, "What has television got to do with this business of yellow clouds?"

DOC SAVAGE launched into an outline of the elementary principles of television. Monk and Ham listened, unable to see just what he was getting at.

"Television is vision at a distance by electromechanical means," Doc began. "It has been accepted on an experimental scale for a number of years. Telephoto, the sending of pictures over wires, is commercially practical and has been used by news agencies for some time. Television by radio,

however, is not as advanced.

"Original radio television was accomplished by photoelectric-cell-and-mechanical-scanning disk devices. This method was impractical, largely because of the difficulty of perfectly synchronizing transmitter and receptor scanning disks.

"The next development was the cathode ray tube, which eliminated the synchronizing problem, but which had the handicap of picture size. It was nearly impossible and prohibitively expensive to get a picture more than a few inches by each dimension."

Monk interrupted, "What is this leading up to?"

"Long Tom," Doc said, "has been working for some time on the television problem, with my assistance. He has taken the most promising principles, tested them and discarded them one after another in an effort to find a new principle of television scanning. He has tried oscillating reflecting optical elements and other methods."

"All of which," Ham said, "would sure confuse a jury."

Monk said, "I still don't see what television has got to do with our yellow-cloud mystery."

"Long Tom," Doc Savage said, "has hit upon something really astounding and revolutionary in television. A discovery so unusual that he has not been able to figure out the scientific theory of why it works."

"If Long Tom can't figure it out," Ham said, "it must be pretty complicated. He knows more about what goes on inside an electron than I know about a courtroom."

Monk growled, "You mean Long Tom has built a new television gimmick, but don't know why it works."

"Exactly," Doc agreed.

"Isn't that," Ham asked, "putting the cart before the horse?"

Doc Savage shook his head slightly.

"Many inventions have been discovered by accident," he explained, "and the scientific theory worked out later."

At this point, Long Tom arrived.

Major Thomas J. Long Tom Roberts was a man who looked as if he had grown up in the kind of dark, damp place preferred by mushrooms. Undertakers often looked at Long Tom and felt like rubbing their hands in anticipation of early business. Long Tom's looks were deceptive, however.

"Any trace of Renny, yet?" he demanded anxiously.

"No," Doc admitted.

Dapper Ham said, "I hear you've invented something without knowing just what you've invented."

"You must mean that televisor," Long Tom said, and looked sheepish.

"Does it work?" Ham asked.

"Does it work?" Long Tom rolled his eyes upward, made a gesture of hugging something. "Boy, does it! The thing is a honey!"

Monk had been standing in the background, looking as if he wanted to bite his fingernails. Now he lost his patience. He windmilled his arms.

"I want to know," he yelled, "what a television jigger has got to do with the question of what happened to Renny!"

Doc Savage answered that.

"You remember that the three men fled from the old river steamboat in Long Tom's car," the bronze man reminded.

"Yeah, but what—"

"One of Long Tom's new television transmitters," Doc Savage explained, "was in the car."

MONK stopped waving his arms, looked blankly startled, then began grinning.

"You mean it's possible to tune in the televisor in the car? And maybe see where the three men are?"

"We hope."

"Then what're we waitin' on?"

Long Tom dashed into the laboratory, fished a big key out of his clothing, and unlocked a white steel cabinet, revealing a second door with a combination lock. He went to work on the combination.

"I kept this thing in my own lab at first," the electrical wizard explained. "Then it dawned on me that it was too valuable to let lay around."

He clicked the combination, opened the second cabinet door, disclosing a nest of apparatus that appeared as complicated to Monk as the inside of a sixteen-tube radio must seem to a Congo bushman.

Long Tom said, "I don't guarantee results from this."

"Why not?" Monk asked curiously.

"It behaves funny," Long Tom explained. "It isn't perfected. I tune it in sometimes and get queer lights and shapeless shadows and things."

The electrical wizard began adjusting his device. There was a folding screen of some size, apparently an ordinary beaded screen of motion-picture variety, upon which the received image was projected. Arrangements completed, Long Tom drew the curtains of the laboratory windows to shut out the morning sunlight.

"Cross your fingers," he said.

He threw switches. The mass of apparatus made two or three clickings, then began to hiss like a snake. A blob of bluish light appeared on the screen, enlarged and became square. It turned yellow, then white, then yellow again, and gray spots and streaks appeared. These changed around.

"Looks as if," Monk ventured, "you've tuned in a London fog."

Long Tom said something uncomplimentary about Monk's sense of humor. Long Tom always took his electricity seriously.

"Hey!" Ham yelled suddenly. "What's that?"

The shadows on the television screen had resolved into two sets of windows, two rows of seats, with terrified people in the seats.

"A plane cabin!" Ham exploded.

"Yeah," Monk said. "The cabin, of a big plane, at that."

Long Tom complained, "I thought you said the television transmitter was in my car."

"You can see," Monk said, "that it must have got changed to a plane."

Ham leveled an arm suddenly at the television screen.

"Something's wrong there!" he said sharply.

The occupants of the plane had leaped up to stare out of the starboard windows. There was wild anxiety in the way they did it. Anxiety, and terror, unmistakably. Four or five passengers were women, the rest men.

One of the women in the plane cabin suddenly put her hands over her eyes and collapsed, apparently in a faint. She must have screamed as well, from the way her mouth strained open.

The co-pilot and a mechanic rushed back into the cabin and began forcing the passengers back into their seats. Evidently the shift of weight as those in the cabin rushed to one set of windows had unbalanced the plane.

With great difficulty, the co-pilot and mechanic got some passengers back in their seats.

Everyone aboard the plane seemed terrified.

MONK and Ham had stopped breathing while they stared, and Long Tom had his mouth open in a what-the-devil-does-this-mean expression. Doc Savage's metallic features remained outwardly inscrutable. But all three aids were astonished.

An increased dramatic effect seemed to spring from the very silence of the tableau being enacted. It was no talking picture. It was horror, stark and silent.

"Doc!" Monk croaked.

"Yes?"

"You recognize uniforms on the co-pilot and mechanic?"

"Yes, and recognize the plane cabin as well. The plane is the new Bermuda Wind, flying regular transoceanic air service between New York, Bermuda and England." Doc Savage paused a moment for emphasis. "The plane is flying from England to New York at this time, according to the newspapers." Long Tom almost missed that. Then he yelped, gave a violent jump.

"Impossible!" he exploded. "Can't be flying from England! How would my television transmitter get aboard?"

"Sh-h-h!" Monk, admonished. "Watch what's happenin'!"

The big seagoing airliner, judging from the way the passengers were leaning in their seats, had banked sharply to the left. A moment later, it swung to the right. Then it went into a steep, twisting dive.

"That pilot shouldn't stunt a passenger plane!" Ham snapped.

"He's tryin' to escape somethin', you shyster!" Monk said.

The plane came out of its dive in a long roll that made sky and water change places—and which caused something else to appear through the plane windows.

As clearly as if someone had explained, Doc Savage and his men knew what was happening.

Monk voiced it.

"There's a yellow cloud after that plane?" the homely chemist gasped.

The others nodded wordlessly. They had barely glimpsed the nodulose, opaque mass through the plane windows, but there was no doubt about what it was.

New terror swept the plane.

It was now that the round brown man with the big ears appeared. He was short in stature, shorter than almost any other man in the plane. But what he lacked in size, he made up for in agility and determination.

The small brown man reared out of his seat. His ears stood out like flags. He socked the co-pilot on the jaw, dropping him. The mechanic surged forward threateningly, and the little man floored him, also.

It appeared that the big-eared dwarf was determined to get out of the plane.

He dashed forward, wrenched open the door of a locker, and dragged out one of the automatic-inflating life rafts carried by commercial seaplanes. He hauled this to the door, tried to force the door open, and couldn't because of the air rush. He did manage to open a window.

He stuffed the life raft out through the window. It was neither heavy nor bulky, but once it hit the water, chemicals inside would turn into gas and inflate the thing into a buoyant craft of some proportions.

The floored co-pilot got up. With some of the men passengers, he started to rush the little fellow with the big ears. The latter drew a gun, menaced them, kept them back. The small man got a parachute out of the same locker from which he had secured the life raft. He put it on, still keeping the others back with his weapon. Finally, the man climbed through the plane window, feet-first. He hung for a moment, ears seeming doubly large. Then he dropped toward the sea. The whole thing, seen through the televisor in Doc Savage's office, had been weird and soundless. And it continued so to the end—an end that was not long delayed. The plane climbed, banked, dived, in an effort to escape. Suddenly, blackness covered several cabin windows, blackness that closed in from the outside. It blanketed more windows. The plane windows began breaking. The sides of the cabin slowly crushed in. The television screen became completely dark. Monk croaked,

"The cloud got the plane!"
Chapter VI. BIG EARS

THERE was almost breathless stillness in the laboratory atop the skyscraper, and the drawn curtains made it dark. The place was air-conditioned, and treated air was coming in through the shaft vents with a steady rush. Down in the harbor a steamer horn was hooting departing salutes. Monk pointed at the television apparatus. "Are you gonna tell me what we just saw actually happen?" he asked Long Tom. Long Tom sank in a chair, took hold of his hair with both hands. "Don't talk to me!" he muttered. "But—" "I don't know what to think," Long Tom snapped. "But you built this televisor and you should know—" Long Tom jumped up and glared angrily. "Don't start riding me about this!" he roared. "Why, who's riding you?" Monk asked him blankly. Long Tom shook his fists at Monk, shook them at his television apparatus. "I don't understand it!" he howled. "How that machine managed to pick up such a thing is beyond me!" "Don't act like a fool," the homely chemist said. "No, Monk wants a monopoly on that," Ham chimed in unkindly. Doc Savage had gone to one of the telephones. There were several instruments, and each could be cut into a loud-speaker so that conversations could be heard by all in a room. Doc called the transatlantic plane company which operated the Bermuda Wind. "Do you have any news from the Bermuda Wind?" he asked. "How did you learn about that?" screamed a voice at the other end of the wire. "It just happened! Over the radio! The pilot . . . we're trying to raise him now." "What did the pilot say happened?" Doc Savage asked. "Crazy stuff! About a yellow cloud—"

A superior must have shouted to the man on the other end of the wire at that moment and he dropped the receiver, not taking time to put it on the hook. They could hear, carried by the telephone, the excitement in the air-line offices. After a moment, Doc Savage broke the circuit, and stillness came again to the vast white laboratory. Monk said, "Long Tom, that contraption of yours really works!" Long Tom still sat and held his hair. "Don't talk to me!" he muttered. Doc Savage went to the big chart case that was a part of the equipment in the library. He unrolled a large square chart of that part of the Atlantic Ocean between Bermuda and New York. He made a second telephone call, this one also to the Bermuda Wind air-line office. They had become more coherent in the airport office, and Doc got what he wanted—the position of the Bermuda Wind when disaster struck. The bronze man marked a spot on the library chart. "Hey!" Monk exploded. "That's only a hundred miles out to sea." Ham said, "We saw one man go overboard with a parachute. The little fellow with the big ears. Maybe he escaped." "We'll go out and see if we can pick him up," Doc Savage said quietly. There was instantly a rush for the tube device which Monk called the "flea run." They crowded into the capsule of a car, and Doc jerked the lever and set the mechanism in operation. The car jerked, rattled, banged, and Monk put his fingers in his ears and squalled, "I wish I'd walked!" The car came to the other end of the tube—which meant it was in the Hudson River water-front warehouse—and stopped. Doc shut off the mechanism, twisted the door handle. The door did not open. A voice outside said, "Right here is where we have an understanding!"

MONK still had his fingers in his ears. Not having heard the voice, he had missed the significance of what had happened. He extracted his fingertips from his ears.

"Well, what are we waiting on?" he complained. "Open the door and let's get out of this dragon's egg."

Doc Savage wrenched at the door, obviously, it had been fastened from the outside. He threw the controls. The car remained stationary, showing that the driving mechanism had been cut off by the person outside as soon as they arrived.

Monk's expression changed. "What-what--"

"I'm not kidding you," the voice outside said.

Monk's face altered again. "Pat!" he yelled.

"Monk, I'm not fooling you, either," the voice said.

"What do you think you're doing?" Monk yelled.

"Getting what I'm after," Pat said. "Just this once, I'm going to do it."

Pat was Pat Savage—Patricia Savage, who operated an elaborate Park Avenue beautifying establishment that charged outrageous fees. Pat's business was strictly carriage trade, and profitable. The guiding of it was also complicated enough that it should occupy the energies of the young woman; but Pat was Doc Savage's cousin, and she had the bronze man's family trait of restlessness and thirst for adventure. She had an incurable yen for excitement.

Time after time, Pat had attempted to join Doc Savage's group in the course of an adventure. Most of the time she failed. When she succeeded, it was usually through some ruse. She had joined up with them just often enough to whet her thrill appetite.

Doc Savage said, "What do you want, Pat?" He had a pretty good idea of what she wanted.

"I read in the newspapers about Renny," Pat advised. "I want in on this thing. I want to go along."

"Out of the question," Doc said.

"All right," Pat advised. "You stay in there."

Monk and Ham made disgusted noises, began fighting with the capsule door. They had no success.

Then Monk began kicking the metal angrily.

"Bang away," Pat said. "It's good exercise."

Doc Savage made a gesture of resignation.

"All right," he said.

"I get to go?" Pat demanded.

"Yes."

"You won't double-cross me?"

"No."

Pat unlocked the door.

PAT had the same flake-gold eyes as Doc Savage, and the bronze man's suntanned skin. She was tall; in an evening gown her figure made her a sensation. There was a bright vivacity about her that was contagious—a come-on-let's-have-fun air.

"Pat, that was a dirty trick," Monk said.

"Oh, sure," Pat said. "Do you remember the time you gave me a package and told me to go off to the mountains and guard it with my life? After I guarded it for a week, I looked in it and found a picture of a goat. Was that nice?"

"It got you out of danger," Monk pointed out.

"Hah!" Pat said disgustedly.

She brightened. "Where do we go now? What's up?"

They floated from the hangar a big seaplane, a four-motored ship that would stand up under an ocean landing. Doc warmed the motor, sent the craft down the river, put it "on step," and a few moments later they were volleying out to sea.

There were clouds over the land as over the sea for a few miles out, then the air became clear, visibility unlimited.

Monk had been explaining to Pat and finally he finished.

"It doesn't make sense," Pat said.

"It's about to drive me out of my mind," Monk admitted.

"Lucky!" Ham said. "Who'd want to stay in a mind like yours?"

Monk gave Ham a mean eye. "One of these days," he said, "I'm going to delete the membership of the bar association by one."

Long Tom sat back in the cabin. He alternately strained his hair with his hands and chewed his fingernails. The fact that his television device had picked up a picture where there was not supposed to be a transmitter, had plunged him into a dither from which he had not recovered.

Doc Savage flew the plane, throttles wide, toward the position where the Bermuda Wind had reported. Monk and Ham quarreled for a while, then got out binoculars and began to scan the sky.

The ship was far enough out so that there was no sea traffic. Also there was little wind. The sea was mirrored turquoise that flung away to the horizons, and the sky was a bright chromium bowl.

Doc dropped smoke bombs occasionally. By sighting back at them, he could check windage. He took frequent radio bearings, and finally he slanted the plane down at the sea.

"Look!" Ham yelled.

"Right on the nose," Monk muttered.

The pneumatic raft was striped orange and black, the two most apparent colors for aerial visibility.

There was a man-speck on it. Monk yanked open one of the windows, leaned out to use his binoculars. He made pleased grunting noises.

"Is it the fellow we saw by television?" Ham asked.

"I can see ears sticking out," Monk said, "so it must be him."

THE man on the pneumatic raft had dried out his parachute and had been trying to contrive the thing into a sail which would pull the raft along.

"He must plan to sail back to Europe," Monk muttered. "That's the way the wind is blowing."

They hastily fastened the seat straps across their stomachs, having learned that a sea might look calm from aloft, and still have as many ups and downs as a Coney Island roller coaster.

The landing was fairly gentle, however. They taxied close to the raft.

The raft's passenger grinned at them.

"You taking on any hitchhikers?" he asked.

They got him aboard. He had a leathery skin, one that apparently had been exposed to many storms, and there was a certain pop-eyed expression about his face that was puzzling. He was not a white man, nor yet was he exactly an Asiatic. His spoken English, however, was free-flowing and good enough, if a bit slangy.

"You're not hurt?" Monk demanded.

"I doubt if the experience has done me any good," the man said.

Monk, puzzled about his nationality, asked, "You a Chinaman?"

"Not unless I've been misinformed."

"Then what are you?"

"An Eskimo."

"Eskimo?"

"Sure. We eat blubber and live in ice houses, remember?"

Monk blinked, uncertain how to take the man's manner. There seemed to be a little too much levity for a fellow who had been sitting on a rubberized cloth sack full of gas, well out in the Atlantic Ocean.

Monk extended his hand.

"My name is Monk Mayfair," he said.

"My name is Noe," the man said. "Heck Noe. A typical Eskimo name, as you may notice."

He clasped Monk's hand—and Monk emitted a howl. An extremely startled howl. He gave his hand a violent jerk and got it away from the man to whom he had just given it.

A small palm-fitting, mechanical buzzer of the kind used by practical jokers fell to the plane floor.

"Hah, hah!" Heck Noe shouted. "I just had it in my pocket. Good joke, eh?"

"Ur-r-rump!" Monk said.

Doc Savage asked, "Just what happened to the Bermuda Wind, Mr. Noe?"

The Eskimo sat down in a seat and rubbed his jaw.

"You know, I'm wondering if I hadn't better lie about that," he said. "Otherwise, nobody is going to believe me. Worse still, they may want to stick me in an insane asylum."

"What happened?"

"Well, a yellow cloud overtook the plane. The pilot dodged it for a time, and while the dodging was going on, I heaved the life raft out of the window, put on a parachute, and jumped. I had me a little fighting doing that, but I was scared, and the ocean didn't look so bad compared to that thing that was chasing us. Anyway, I'd just as soon drown as be crazy, and I sure thought I was crazy at the time. After I jumped, I looked up and saw the yellow cloud wrap around the plane. I never saw the plane again. The cloud went off to the west."

The man stopped, leaned back, and appeared to stiffen himself for a barrage of skepticism. After he had looked at them for a time, his jaw began to sag.

"What!" he gasped. "You believe me!"

Long Tom asked, "Was there a television transmitter in the back of that plane cabin?"

"A what?"

"A television transmitter."

"What would it look like?"

"It was in a metal case about the size of a steamer trunk."

"The only thing in the back of the cabin," said the Eskimo, "was a darned pretty stewardess."

DOC SAVAGE took the pneumatic raft and the parachute aboard, noting that each was marked with the insignia of the ocean air line which operated the Bermuda Wind. He taxied around for a time, then lifted the ship off the waves and flew a few yards above the surface, examining the sea closely for signs of Bermuda Wind wreckage. Ham and Pat took binoculars and assisted in the hunt.

Monk and the rescued man, Heck Noe, sat farther back in the cabin. The Eskimo leaned over.

"Who's the big bronze guy?" he asked.

"Why, Doc Savage," Monk said. "Don't you recognize him?"

"Never heard of him."

"Well, you should have."

"I can see that," Heck Noe said thoughtfully.

The plane continued its slow circling, Doc Savage watching from the cockpit, and Ham moving back and forth to peer from different windows.

Ham was very dapper—it would have been remarkable if he wasn't—in the latest thing in sport flying clothes. During the flight, he had produced a complete outfit from some hiding place aboard the plane, and had changed in the rear washroom.

Heck Noe pointed at Ham.

"Who's that?" the Eskimo wanted to know. "One of the Four Hundred?"

"One of the ciphers," Monk explained.

With a sudden surge of its motor, the plane climbed. Doc Savage had evidently dismissed the chances of finding any trace of the Bermuda Wind. He turned the plane back toward New York, then let Pat take over the controls. Pat liked flying, and she was good at it.

Doc Savage came back, sank his big frame in the seat across from Monk and Heck Noe. They could talk freely; the plane cabin was sound-proof.

"Do you have any idea," Doc Savage asked, "why the disaster overtook the Bermuda Wind.

Heck Noe shook his head. "Since you have paid me the compliment of believing my story about the crazy thing that happened to the plane," he said, "I'll make a sensible answer. That plane seemed like a very unusual type of ship to me. Its speed particularly. I happen to be an explorer of sorts, and I know maps. I checked the course of that plane. I think we flew almost four hundred miles an hour at times. Or is that speed impossible?"

"Four hundred miles an hour," Doc said, "is very good. You say you are an explorer?"

"Explorer, yes. Modern type, you know. I do mineralogical research—look for mines—in the arctic."

This seemed to satisfy Doc Savage, who went back to the pilot's compartment. The plane flew low, and its speed must have made it sound like a passing cannon ball to such surface craft as were on their course.

They met, and passed, three ocean airline planes en route out to sea to investigate the disappearance of the Bermuda Wind. Monk decided to remind Doc that they had missed breakfast.

Monk got up, took a step—and piled down in the aisle, all but braining himself.

He turned around and discovered that someone had surreptitiously tied his shoelaces to the seat.

Monk scowled, glared at Heck Noe. Heck tittered.

Monk untied himself and got up and stamped to the pilot's compartment.

"That guy," Monk said disgustedly, "is a noodle-head."

Chapter VII. GIRL TRAIL

HECK NOE, the Eskimo mineralogical explorer, was an interested observer while Doc Savage set the big plane down on the Hudson River and taxied to the warehouse, and opened the big doors with the infrared device, finally mooring the plane in a slip.

The Eskimo stared in amazement at the other equipment in the warehouse—two or three speedboats, Diesel yacht, an old sailing vessel which Doc Savage was keeping because it had a hull of remarkably perfect design, and even a submarine equipped for under-the-ice polar exploration.

"Gosh!" Heck Noe said.

They did not take the "flea run" back to the skyscraper. They rode a taxicab, and it was crowded with the six of them—Pat, Monk, Ham, Heck Noe, Long Tom and Doc Savage.

Heck Noe gaped at the reception room the same way he had ogled the riverfront warehouse.

"I don't get this," he said. "What are you guys, anyway? What's your racket, with a layout like this?"

Ham said, "Sit down and I'll explain."

While Ham was making Heck Noe's mouth open wider and wider by describing the strange career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers which was followed by Doc Savage and his five assistants—"Six assistants!" Pat interjected at this point. "Don't forget me! I'm an assistant this time."—Doc Savage went into the library with Monk and seated himself before the telephone.

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, went to a corner and hunkered with his chin in cupped palms.

"There wasn't any television transmitter on that plane!" he was heard to mumble. "How could we pick up a picture of what happened?"

Monk said, "Long Tom is sure doing some mental bullfighting."

Doc Savage again telephoned the air line which operated the Bermuda Wind. He got a high official on the wire. "I understand," the bronze man said, "that the Bermuda Wind was able to log a speed of almost four hundred miles an hour."

"I . . . well . . . now—"

"That seems fast for a commercial plane," Doc said. "Can you clarify the point?"

The man at the other end did some hemming and hawing and never did respond with direct information. Instead, he said, "You had better call Admiral Jelks of the navy department in Washington."

Admiral Jelks was a naval officer whose existence was almost unknown to the American public that

read newspapers. However, he was not unimportant. The men in the service knew that he had the most modern set of brains in the navy. Admiral Jelks was personally well acquainted with Doc Savage, and he greeted the bronze man with the enthusiasm of an old friend over the telephone. The telephone conversation was brief. Doc made his wants known.

"If it was anybody but you," Admiral Jelks told Doc Savage, "I wouldn't know a thing. But for you—the truth."

"And what is the truth?"

"The Bermuda Wind was our new navy super bomber." Admiral Jelks explained. "To avoid too much public attention and give the new ship a hard flying test, we had turned it over to the commercial air line operating to England."

Doc said, "Like the X-ship, the Bermuda Wind was a new military craft?"

"That's it."

Doc Savage hung up, turned, and watched Monk push out his lips and make blowing sounds.

"This yellow cloud," Monk said, "seems to have an appetite for new military planes." Then the homely chemist sat up suddenly and shook his head. "No, wait! There was a plane flown by the Palmer girl's brother. That was an ordinary commercial crate, the way I understand."

Heck Noe came into the library. He looked like a man who was bursting with an idea.

"Look here, this fellow Ham Brooks has just told me the kind of an outfit you fellows are," he said excitedly. "The way I get it, trouble is your business. Right now, you're out to solve the mystery of what happened to the Bermuda Wind. That right?"

"Right," Doc admitted.

Heck Noe put his hands in his pockets, teetered back on his heels until it seemed he would fall over. He wore a determined look. "In that plane," he said, "was a brief case of mine. It contained the only copies of mineralogy surveys that it took me two years to make. With them gone, I'm out two years of work. I want them back. How about letting me help you on this mystery?"

Pat said, "Oh, Doc never lets anyone help him."

"There will be no objections," Doc told Heck Noe, "to your aiding us."

"I'm wrong again," Pat said.

Long Tom sprang up suddenly from his corner. He had pulled his stringy, colorless hair out from his head until it looked like lion mane.

"I'm gonna try that television again!" he yelled.

LONG TOM unlocked the laboratory cabinets again and contemplated his television apparatus with much the same emotion that a Dominique hen must feel upon discovering that she has hatched out a nest full of turkeys.

"What do you figure you'll tune in this time?" Monk asked.

"Don't start getting funny!" Long Tom snarled. He tinkered with the switches, made microscopic adjustments of dial settings, then stood back and stuck out his jaw at the television receiver as it began to make its snakelike hissing.

On the screen, the lights appeared and shifted as they had on the previous occasion, and slowly the screen image took on definition, shape—a picture appeared.

Long Tom let out a howl. "Yeo-o-ow!" he yelled. "This time, I got it!"

What the device had gotten appeared to be a schoolroom, minus pupils. At least there were desks, school variety, and a blackboard encircling the room.

The case containing the television transmitter seemed to be setting on one of the desks. There were several men in the room. They had drawn the curtains and it was murky, so the identity of the men was discernible only when they wandered close to the transmitter.

"There's that guy with the riding-boot hide!" Monk ejaculated. "The one who raided us at the airport."

"I think I see the girl!" Ham exploded. "There in the corner."

The lawyer crowded close to the television screen, batted his eyes owlshly and made disgusted mutterings.

Long Tom said, "Get farther away from the screen and you can see clearer. It's like the movies."

The schoolroom, they could see now, was shabby, apparently disused. Scabs of paper were loose.

Over the blackboard, prominently displayed, was a politician's yellowed campaign poster.

The campaign poster had a picture of a fat man who resembled models usually employed by cartoonists to illustrate a politician. Printing on it said:

VOTE FOR HONEST TOM HELLER

COUNTY REPRESENTATIVE

At this point, one of the men in the schoolroom must have sauntered over and perched on the desk in front of the television transmitter, because the screen went dark.

"Blazes!" Monk exclaimed. "How we gonna find out where that schoolhouse is?"

"We might try elimination," Doc suggested.

Swiftly, the bronze man explained what he wanted them to do, and they got on telephones. First, the schoolhouse was abandoned, and they could tell it was in a rural district. A number of rural schoolhouses had gone into disuse with the recent establishment of consolidated schools and use of busses to haul pupils. This must be such a school.

"Get a list of abandoned schools," Doc directed.

As the telephoning continued, it became evident that the list of abandoned schools was going to total at least a hundred.

"Fine lot of help this will be," Monk grumbled. "We ain't got time to search a hundred schoolhouses scattered to hell'n'gone."

Doc Savage next telephoned State democratic leaders, asking, "Can you tell me anything about a candidate for county representative called Honest Tom Heller?"

At last Doc got hold of a politician who laughed and said, "Oh, that's the guy they sent to the State penitentiary last year."

"What county was he from?"

"Long Green County."

"Thank you," Doc said.

Long Green County, their list showed, had only three discontinued schoolhouses, and two of these had been sold and razed.

"So there's only one Long Green County abandoned schoolhouse standing," Doc pointed out.

"That does make it simpler," Monk admitted.

THEY all rode in one car, in a long machine of subdued black color, one that did not look quite like the rolling fortress that it was—the body of armored plate, the glass bulletproof, the tires full of sponge rubber instead of air, and the whole machine rendered gas-tight, and equipped inside with oxygen apparatus. Underneath the car there were concealed gas chambers containing vapors to produce unconsciousness or make a smoke screen.

Pat drove. Monk rode beside her, and Heck Noe crowded in the front seat with them. Doc Savage, Ham and Long Tom occupied the rear, Ham poring over a road map. It was afternoon now, but still too early for the home-from-work traffic. They went north on Manhattan Island, turned left across George Washington Bridge. The abandoned schoolhouse was in Pennsylvania.

They had covered about fifty miles when Pat screeched. Her yell was short, but had the explosive violence of a firecracker.

She came up out of her seat and her intentions seemed to be to climb on top of Monk's head and burst out through the top of the car, if possible. The car angled off the road, stood on its nose in a ditch. Fortunately, it was going slowly up hill at the time.

"A mouse!" Pat screamed.

They piled out of the machine. Monk got down on the floor, searched, and came up with the mouse—a mechanical tin thing that was covered with an artificial fuzz. It still buzzed. When Monk hung it on his coat, it climbed.

"It climbs right up anything it comes to," Heck Noe said, "including a feminine ankle."

Pat screeched, "Did you stick that thing on me?"

Heck Noe grinned. "Well, it seemed like a good joke."

Monk got between Pat and Heck Noe and probably saved the Eskimo from losing some hair.

"You better curb your idea of practical jokes," Monk growled, "or you're gonna get unpopular."

They put their shoulders to the car in an effort to get it out of the ditch. The engine moaned, the wheels spun, and the vehicle remained rutted. There was a woods on the left and Monk wandered into that and came back with sharp sticks with which they proceeded to dig.

Much digging, grunting, and motor-gunning got the car back on the road.

"Where's the practical joker?" Ham demanded, astonished.

There was no sign of Heck Noe.

"He was here a moment ago," Monk said.

They looked around for the Eskimo. They shouted. But no results.

"Must have fled to escape Pat's wrath," Monk ventured.

"Probably the smart thing for him to do," Pat said ominously.

Long Tom—he was still indulging in glum silences due to the erratic behavior of his televisor—came to life and demanded, "Are we gonna stick around and hunt that crazy Eskimo—or go after the girl, Brick Palmer?"

"We'll go on," Doc said.

They got in the car, straightened the machine out and rolled on up the hill, disappearing over the top. The motor of the car was large, but did not make much sound, and shortly there was nothing but the woodland stillness at the spot where the car had gone into the ditch.

In freeing the machine the men had stirred up some dust, but this settled or was blown away by the slight wind.

HECK NOE came out of the woods. His manner was cautious and he listened, looked carefully in both directions.

The Eskimo did not seem interested in the direction in which Doc Savage's car had gone, but in the other direction.

After a moment, he gave a pleased grunt and took up a position in the center of the road.

A car appeared, traveling fast, obviously following Doc Savage's machine. The driver saw Heck Noe, but did not slacken speed. Heck Noe waved his arms. "Wait," he called. The car would have run him down. Heck Noe leaped wildly, escaped.

"I'm working with you!" he yelled.

The men in the car—two of them—heard the words. The machine scudded on up the hill. Then brakes squealed; it stopped, and eventually it came back down. Heck Noe put a foot on the running board as it halted.

The two car occupants stared at him. They were young men who looked old and experienced. They held guns on their laps, not ostensibly displayed, but ready.

"You said what?" one demanded.

"Don't you know me by sight?" Heck Noe countered.

"Should we?"

"Oh, hell! You must be two of the new boys." Heck Noe leaned forward confidently. "We better get acquainted. At times, you will be taking orders from me."

"We don't know you," one of the men said. "We don't know what you are talking about."

Heck Noe grinned at them. "Listen," he said. "Doc Savage is on his way to that schoolhouse. If we work it right, we have a perfect set-up to get rid of him. But muff it—and you will be muffing it if you don't listen to me—and we're in a mess."

The two men looked at each other, undecided. They were suspicious, but the suspicion slowly went away. "All right," one said. "What do we do?"

"What's the layout around this schoolhouse?"

"It's abandoned."

"I know that."

"And it sits in the middle of a tobacco field. It's been two or three years since they used the schoolhouse, and the farmer plowed the field up and planted tobacco."

Heck Noe asked, "Have you got machine guns? Can you plant them inside and cover that tobacco field? Then when Doc Savage tries to crawl close, cut loose."

"We could if we got word to them at the schoolhouse."

"Go ahead. Get doing it."

"What about you?"

"Watch me fix an alibi for myself."

The Eskimo got in the damp roadside ditch, lay down, proceeded to dirty his face and hands and soil his clothing. He dug his fingers into the earth and got dirt under the nails. He took off coat, vest, shirt, tore them in strips, then tied the strips into a rope.

"You call that an alibi?" one of the men demanded.

"Sure," Heck Noe said. "I fell in a well. Went looking in the woods for something to help pry the car out of the ditch, and fell in an abandoned well. Had me a time getting out."

The two men seemed satisfied. They drove away.

Heck Noe struck out down the road afoot.

"The bear cage," he said, "has got the door open."

Chapter VIII. SCHOOLHOUSE LESSON

THE schoolhouse was as uninviting as a dead, white leghorn hen lying in the tobacco field.

American youth has never been noted for its veneration of the schoolhouse—not, at least, until later in life—and this building had suffered as a result, younger vandals having pried bricks from the chimney, pounded holes in the weatherboarding, and doubtless been prevented from breaking every window only by the presence of nailed-up boards.

Around about was hill country, with woodland close to the tobacco field on three sides. The road ran through one of these woods.

Doc Savage turned his car off into the woods, followed a lane through thick brush, and stopped.

He got out, and was followed by Monk, Ham, Long Tom and Pat.

They wore serious expressions, as if they had something new on their minds, even Long Tom for the moment appearing to have stepped out of his puzzled sulk over the misbehavior of his television pet. They went back to the road and stood there.

Before long, a car approached. The newly arrived machine stopped some distance away, and Heck Noe got out. The car was apparently one which the Eskimo had hired, for he paid off the driver, and the machine turned around and left, after which Heck Noe started for the woods.

"Ps-s-t!" Monk hissed.

Monk, when his hissing was up to standard, could make steam escaping from a boiler seem insignificant. His skill had been developed, he claimed, by sitting alone in parks and thinking about Ham Brooks.

Heck Noe came galloping toward them.

"Great!" he exploded. "I was afraid I wouldn't find you!"

Pat said grimly, "I suppose you've got more trick mice?"

Heck Noe grinned at her. "If you had seen me fall in that well," he said, "it might make you feel better."

"What well?"

Heck Noe launched into an elaborate description, complete with gestures, of an imaginary incident during which he had sauntered into the woods searching for a timber to use as a lever in freeing the car from the ditch, and had found suitable timbers in the covering of an abandoned well.

His description of how he hit the bottom of the well, and of his climb out again, was particularly graphic. He finished with, "I was knocked senseless by the fall. Must have been out when you left, reason I didn't hear you calling, if you called."

Having finished his story, Heck Noe looked quite honest. The dirt stains on his clothing, the grime under his fingernails, made his story convincing. He added, "I found a farmer and hired him to bring me here. I was with you when you found the location of the schoolhouse, so I knew where to come."

"Kind of a rattlebrained story," Pat said.

The Eskimo threw up both arms resignedly.

"All my stories rattle, seems as if," he said. "Does this one rattle any worse than the one about a yellow cloud chasing an airplane through the sky and grabbing it?"

Long Tom joined the discussion gloomily.

"There's a lot of hard-to-swallow things about this!" he said. "How about my television receiver getting a picture from that plane, where there couldn't have been a transmitter?"

Doc Savage had been standing aside from the discussion, as he habitually did, and now he put in a pointed reminder, saying, "The situation amounts to this: Renny Renwick in an army pursuit plane, a man named Chester Palmer in an ordinary commercial plane, and a whole lot of passengers and a navy bombing plane, and a girl named Brick Palmer are all missing. All of which is very mysterious, and some of it not quite believable. But the job we are on right now is rescuing Brick Palmer. She is supposed to be in that schoolhouse."

"We are wasting a lot of time here," Monk grunted. "Come on!"

THE tobacco was like cabbage that had not headed, and the plants grew in long rows that were mathematically straight, each plant spaced so that the tips of its leaves just touched its neighbors. The sun burned down brightly and there was enough breeze to keep the tobacco leaves waving, which, as Pat remarked, was fortunate, because if they should cause a plant to shake while crawling across the field, it would be less likely to be noticed from the schoolhouse.

Doc Savage went flat on the ground and crawled out into the growing tobacco.

"Wait a minute!" Heck Noe said. "I got more story."

The bronze man did not come back immediately. He seemed interested in testing the solidity of the field earth to see if it would support a heavy automobile without too much bogging. Finally, he came back.

"Story?" he asked.

"I didn't tell you all of what happened," Heck Noe said hurriedly. "While I was walking down the road, a car approached and I decided it was trailin' you. Just on the chance it was, I yelled at 'em. I hollered, 'I'm working with you!' And sure enough, they came back."

"Who came back?" Monk asked blankly.

"Two guys in a car," Heck Noe explained. "So I made me some lie-talk. I told 'em you was going to close in on the schoolhouse—"

"You idiot!" Monk yelled.

"Listen, you homely piece of meat," the Eskimo said, "I didn't tell them anything they didn't already know. They were following you to the schoolhouse, weren't they? They would know where you were going, wouldn't they?"

"Go ahead"—Monk was scowling—"with your interesting story."

Heck Noe grinned cheerfully.

"I told 'em to come on and set a machine-gun trap," he said. "And they did. And here I am telling you about it."

"That's the part I didn't expect—you telling us," Monk said.

"Simple," Heck Noe said. "I sold them guys on the idea I'm one of the gang. So now I join 'em."

Monk's jaw fell. "So now you what?"

"I join 'em," Heck Noe said.

"But—"

"And I tip you off the best way to make the raid," continued the Eskimo. "Or maybe I capture 'em all single-handed."

Doc Savage, having listened again without comment, put in a few quiet-toned words which, without being either grim or particularly firm, nevertheless settled the question under discussion.

"Joining those in the schoolhouse would be too dangerous," he said. "You will stay with us."

Heck Noe protested, "But see here—"

"That's settled," Monk said. "But I must admit I'm kinda disappointed. We figured you was a crook, and they'd promised me the privilege of kicking your teeth in."

The Eskimo's eyes went round. "Thought I was a crook?"

"Sure."

"How come?"

"Well, you see," Monk said dryly, "we didn't actually go off and leave you back there when the car went in the ditch. We just drove over the hill. Doc got out and went back and watched you."

"Doc Savage watched me!" Heck Noe exploded.

"And listened," Monk added, "to what you had to say to them two guys when you stopped them."

THEY went back into the woods to the car. "We'll get the machine ready," the bronze man said. They went over the car, giving it a brief check. Monk, the chemist, crawled under the machine and examined the chemical tanks mounted on the chassis. Monk had built the chemical devices and it was his job to see that they functioned properly. Doc Savage jerked a lever and the radiator became shuttered with thick steel.

"Listen here," Heck Noe said, "I hope you don't think I'm a crook!"

"Why should we?" Ham asked.

Monk said, "On the other hand, there's plenty of reason why we should think you're only partly equipped with wits."

"Matter of opinion," Heck Noe said amiably enough.

The raid on the schoolhouse was sudden, violent, and so charged with excitement that it satisfied even Pat. They got in the car. Doc drove. The motor burst into life; the machine plunged out of the woods into the tobacco field. The field earth was dry and a great worm of dust jumped up and squirmed behind the machine.

The car drew near the schoolhouse, veered left, jounced over tobacco rows. Doc threw a lever, and from chemical tanks under the machine poured an immense volume of black smoke. He jerked another lever and tear gas mingled with the smoke.

"Get masks on," he directed.

Long Tom had the masks ready—skeleton-goggle-nose clip-respirator affairs. They put these on, and by that time the car had circled and drawn a black smoke ring around the schoolhouse. The ring spread, becoming a sooty pancake of smoke and gas in the middle of which stood the schoolhouse like a dilapidated marshmallow.

A suspiciously silent marshmallow.

Monk took off his gas mask. The car was gas-tight, so it was safe to do that.

"Where are those machine guns?" he demanded.

"You've got me," Heck Noe said. "I don't know."

"Well, there's something suspicious about this. They should have started shooting."

DOC SAVAGE swung out of the car. Visibility in the smoke was hardly more than a yard. He went quietly to the side of the schoolhouse, put an ear against the weatherboarding and listened.

The bronze man's ears had been trained to an animal sensitivity, as had many of his other faculties: he had managed to take, each day since childhood, a two-hour routine of exercises designed to develop his faculties. He always managed to sandwich these exercises into the day. They were responsible for some of the apparently superhuman physical feats which he managed to perform. There was no sound inside the schoolhouse, which was not as it should be.

From his clothing, the bronze man took a collapsible metal grapple to which was fastened a long silk line knotted for climbing. He backed a few paces, tossed this. The grapple did not take hold of the roof ridge that time, but on the next attempt it did.

Doc climbed to the roof. He made some noise deliberately. He was not fired upon, nor did bullets interrupt him when he began tearing shingles off the roof.

The bronze man made a hole, dropped through onto the rafters, tapped lath and plaster loose with a foot, then listened again. There was no sound. He lowered himself through the hole, let loose, landed on a desk, and the desk broke.

A thick fog of smoke and tear gas had penetrated into the schoolhouse.

Hacking gag sounds seemed to be coming from one corner.

Doc searched, and almost at once he found the cache of dynamite. The dynamite was eighty-percent stuff, and there was enough of it to have possibly thrown the walls of the schoolhouse out of the tobacco field. The detonator was a battery and coil, and the device was connected to the door and to the windows; so that any attempt to enter by these routes would have fired the explosive.

The gasping sounds kept coming from the corner. Smoke was making it darker inside. Doc Savage examined the dynamite-exploding mechanism carefully, then got it disconnected with a quick gesture, after which he went over the doors and windows in a swift search to be sure there was no second death trap. Then he went out to the car where the others were waiting like soldiers in a fort.

He gestured for them to come in.

Once inside the schoolhouse, Monk perceived the enemy was not there and was so disgusted he took off his gas mask to comment, complaining, "Blast it! I hoped we would have a fight in here. Ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to tear up the inside of a schoolhouse."

The gasping sounds came from the corner again.

Monk dashed to the corner and strained his tear-leaking eyes. "Who the thunderation is this?" he yelled.

THE shooting began then. They had expected it earlier, when they had thought the quarry was in the schoolhouse, but it came now from a distance, from the woods; and it was military machine guns, the new high-powered kind, the bullets cutting through the walls of the schoolhouse like .22-caliber slugs going through cardboard.

There was no need for Doc to yell to get down. They were all on the floor instantly.

Monk—he realized he was handicapped by the tear gas he had foolishly breathed—yelled, "I'll take care of this guy in the corner, Doc."

Doc Savage pitched out through a window, landed beside the car. The others followed. They got into the machine. Passing bullets made a procession of ugly, abbreviated whistles. Doc drove the car out of the smoke and the gas. The big machine had many qualities of a military tank, principally the bullet-resisting ones.

The machine guns were firing from the east where the trees were thick.

Ham and Long Tom dragged machine pistols out of armpit holsters. These machine pistols had been perfected by Doc Savage. Little larger than automatics, they ejected slugs faster than most military weapons, and had the additional advantage of firing "mercy" bullets that produced unconsciousness only, or explosives or even gas pellets.

Ham clipped a drum of gas slugs into his machine pistol and cranked the windshield down farther than it usually slid, thus disclosing a round porthole. He fired through this, spraying the woods in the vicinity of the machine gun.

Pat said, "I wish I had one of those things."

"I wish you weren't here," Doc told her.

"Don't I know that!" Pat ejaculated gleefully.

Heck Noe said, "Boy, have we got excitement!"

Machine-gun bullets hit the car. Their impact was deafening and the bulletproof glass in the windshield became fanned with cracks. Suddenly a bullet came through the windshield.

"Better get down," Doc said. "They are using new-type guns."

Ham fired again. Explosive slugs this time. A tree upset and clouds of dirt flew in the air as the explosive bullets detonated.

The machine-gunners ran then. They fled wildly through the woods, strangely animated figures in the shadows.

Ham and Long Tom clipped drums of mercy bullets into their pistols. The weapons moaned like big bull-fiddles.

A barbed-wire fence separated the tobacco field from the woods, and the car broke through this easily. For a hundred feet the machine lunged into the woods. It scraped a tree, glanced off another one and was suddenly wedged. The timber was too thick to allow it to pass. It stopped.

Doc Savage flung out of the car, raced for the fleeing men. There were half a dozen of the running fugitives.

All of them had good legs, and they made speed.

The farmer who owned this patch of timber knew something about forestry, and he had trained the copse carefully; so that there was no underbrush, and the tree trunks stood straight and healthy—and crowded. It was impossible to shoot through the trees with any precision. The chase progressed in pell-mell haste, the woods full of glancing, random bullets.

Birds came up out of the treetops by scores, and an owl, a large brown owl, said, "Who, who, who!" and started west.

It developed that there was another road beyond the woods and a car waiting upon it, the motor turning over.

The fugitives piled into the car. There was a short discussion of some kind, profanity. Doc Savage and his aids were too far back to hear exactly what was said.

When Doc first saw the car, a man was standing on the running board aiming a gun at Brick Palmer, who was running down the road.

DOC SAVAGE flung back, scooped the machine pistol from Ham's hand, came on around and fired—seeming to do it all in one moment. The bronze man never carried a firearm himself, not even a machine pistol, but he had practiced until he was skilled with their use.

The mercy bullets slammed into the legs of the man aiming at Brick Palmer. He squawked, doubled. Hands dragged him back into the car.

The car took off then. It was a fast machine, and used all its speed.

Long Tom sprang into the road, then jumped around angrily because he could not use explosive bullets to stop the receding car. The road was crooked, and the machine had traversed one of the curves. The explosive slugs would not reach it. Long Tom tried, broke off two trees and frightened several birds badly, but got no other results.

Heck Noe pointed at the gun. "Just what do you shoot out of that thing, anyway? Bombs?"

"Almost anything," Long Tom said. The electrical wizard looked extraordinarily cheerful. The excitement apparently had lifted him from his despondency over his television apparatus.

Brick Palmer had jumped into a ditch. She climbed out now and came back toward them. She seemed puzzled until she recognized Ham.

"Oh," she said. "You were at the Philadelphia airport! Where is your partner?"

"Monk is back there." Ham jerked a thumb in the direction of the schoolhouse. "Are you all right?"

The girl did not answer. She sank on the edge of the road, and her face became strange.

"Damn!" she said. "I think I'm going to have an attack of the after-it-happens!"

She had it—the attack consisted mostly of lip bitings and hand clenchings and an occasional big shake, and recovered sufficiently for conversation by the time they were halfway back through the woods, on their return trip to the schoolhouse.

"This is the most unearthly thing," she said.

Ham took over the questioning of the girl. Ham had gotten the questioning habit from his practice as a lawyer.

"Why did they seize you?" he asked.

"To get me away from you," the girl replied. "They did not want you to question me. And the reason was that they seemed to be afraid I could tell you more than they wanted you to know about that fantastic yellow cloud apparition that seized my brother's plane."

"And what can you tell us?"

"Nothing of value," the girl said. "I think they realized that after they seized me."

Ham complained, "You mean that this mess is still up in the air?"

"Down in the mud, more like it," the girl said. "Black mud. I can't make heads or tails of it."

"Did you hear anything about your brother?" Ham asked.

"Not a thing."

"Or about Renny Renwick?"

"Who is he?"

"Renny," Ham explained patiently, "is one of our associates who was, as far as we know, flying the first plane that was seized by the cloud."

"Oh." The girl passed her hand over her forehead. "I guess I haven't much of an idea of what has happened."

Heck Noe had been looking at the girl, pulling one of his overly large ears in a thoughtful way while he did so.

"You saw that yellow cloud?" he asked.

"Yes," Brick Palmer said, and shuddered.

"I saw it, too," Heck Noe muttered. "Wasn't it a hell of a thing?"

THE schoolhouse was empty. The interior was gloomy except for the spots where sunlight slanted in through the hole that Doc Savage had made in the roof, and through the windows which they had smashed when they left the place in haste. Also, there were a few pencil-thin sunbeams poking in through holes which machine-gun bullets had made.

Ham's face turned stark.

"Where's Monk?" he exploded.

The others looked blank, realizing they had left Monk here at the schoolhouse to guard the individual who had been making the hacking and gasping sounds in the corner.

Long Tom had rushed into the schoolhouse concerned only about finding whether his television transmitter was there.

It was there. He stood beside it. But his interest in the apparatus had changed to concern about what might have become of Monk. He fumbled absentmindedly with the television.

"This is the only one of my new theory television transmitters in existence," he muttered. "If it was here—in this schoolhouse—how did we pick up the scene on the trans-ocean plane, Bermuda Wind?"

No one answered. There must have been a nest of hornets up in the attic, because their buzzing was audible; and shortly one hornet came down through the hole that Doc had kicked in the ceiling laths and cruised around, sounding like a miniature pursuit plane out looking for an enemy.

Concern over what might have happened to Monk suddenly overcame Ham.

"Monk!" Ham squalled anxiously.

The dapper lawyer rushed out of the door, and all but fell over Monk.

"Fire somewhere?" Monk asked.

Ham yelled, "You awful mistake of nature! Some day I'm going to cut your toenails off close up to your ears!"

"What," Monk asked in an injured voice, "have I done now?"

Ham went to work on Monk with his tongue in a way that made his previous concern over Monk's safety seem incongruous; while Monk protested with growing indignation that he had merely gone into the woods to escape the traces of gas which still lingered around the schoolhouse. The others did not listen. They were interested in the man with Monk.

The fellow who had done the hacking and gasping in the corner of the schoolhouse was a tall young man.

Pat, from the schoolhouse door, took one look at him.

"Say, he isn't bad!" she murmured.

"My name," said the young man with dignity, "is Phil van Blair."

Chapter IX. MONK, THE BEAUTIFUL

THEY had plenty of time to size up Phil van Blair during their search—a hunt that was entirely fruitless—of the schoolhouse and vicinity.

Phil van Blair, it at once became evident, was a young man that Ham was going to like—and Monk was going to detest. Monk didn't like handsome men, and this Phil van Blair was, as Pat whispered to Ham, "just about the handsomest thing put on this green earth recently."

Also, Phil van Blair had a habit, whenever he looked at Monk for any length of time, of emitting a well-bred titter. He seemed to find Monk's homeliness indescribably funny. This alone was enough to put Phil van Blair in solid with Ham.

Monk began wearing his raw-meat-eating look. He was particular about who snickered at his homeliness.

Another point Phil van Blair and Ham Brooks had in common was clothes. Both, it developed, patronized some of the same tailors, and both knew the history of famous sartorial artists back to the days of Disraeli, Beau Brummell, and even beyond.

"The two rag-nags!" Monk gritted.

"The what?" Long Tom asked.

"They're two male clotheshorses," Monk translated.

Phil van Blair had certainly been built to hang clothes upon. He had the shoulders. Also the arms, hands, chest and legs. In college football, they learned later, he had just missed making the All-American. There was a suntanned look about him.

"A Palm Beach and Newport suntan!" Monk opined disgustedly.

Long Tom growled. "Between this aristocratic Phil van Blair and that practical joker, Heck Noe, you're going to be sliding a splintery plank."

Monk snorted.

"You just go back to worrying about how your television gimmick put out such super special performances!" he advised.

Doc Savage concluded further investigating about the schoolhouse was useless. The place had merely been used as a hide-out in which to hold Brick Palmer and Phil van Blair, just as the abandoned river steamer on the Hudson had been another hide-out.

They extricated Doc's armored car from the woods. Doc drove. He seated Phil van Blair beside him.

"While we go back to New York," the bronze man said quietly to Phil van Blair, "suppose you explain just who you are, as well as how you happened to be in the schoolhouse."

"If he can explain it," Monk muttered.

Phil van Blair turned around in the seat and the well-barbered hair on the back of his neck was standing on end.

"I don't like that crack!" he said.

"You have to be an animal lover to like Monk," Ham said.

PHIL VAN BLAIR, when he got the hot red out of his neck and settled back on the cushions, told a coherent and concise story.

"I belong to the Van Blairs of Bar Harbor," he said.

Ham nodded, impressed. Ham dabbled a bit in society.

"I am in love with Brick, here," Phil van Blair stated.

Pat looked disappointed, and the others saw where it was reasonable. Abricketta Palmer was small and lively, and even confinement and rough treatment had not detracted from her loveliness. Both Monk and Ham had been giving her a great deal of attention.

"Brick Palmer called me on the telephone," said Phil van Blair.

"That was after those ugly men seized me," Brick Palmer explained. "I got a chance to get to a telephone. I asked Phil for help. He was the only person I knew to call on. The men must have overheard me call."

Phil van Blair nodded.

"The men came and seized me," he said, "because they had heard Brick ask me for help."

Brick said, contritely, "I'm so sorry I involved you, Phil."

"That's quite all right," Phil van Blair said, and smiled at the young lady in a way that caused Monk to get an I've-found-a-worm-in-this-apple expression.

Ham said, "It seems to me to be a very reasonable story."

Monk blew out one of his biggest snorts.

"How come," he asked, "that you just waited to be seized after Brick Palmer called you for help?"

Phil van Blair scowled and did not look at Monk.

"If someone else will ask me questions, I will answer them," he said. "I do not care for this prehistoric person--this Monk."

"Suppose you answer the question," Long Tom said, while Monk was glaring.

"Miss Palmer," Van Blair said, "did not have time to tell me where she was. When they saw I wasn't of any use to them, they wanted to kill me. So they left me bound and gagged in this room with the dynamite. Luckily, you didn't come in through the door or window, so the explosive didn't go off."

Phil van Blair answered a number of other questions logically enough that Monk could find no reasonable grounds to object to, although he wanted to, and the others seemed satisfied.

When the questioning was over, Doc Savage made a summary and a suggestion.

"We are not," he said, "making much progress toward solving the mystery of that yellow cloud, or finding Renny. To work efficiently, we should streamline our party."

Pat gave a start.

"Now look here, Doc," she exclaimed. "If you think--"

Doc said, "Whoever takes over the guarding of Brick Palmer will have a dangerous job. The enemy, whoever they are, may attempt to seize her, or even take her life."

"Oh, sure," Pat said. "Remember that time you sent me off to the mountains with a goat picture?"

Doc continued, "The fact that Johnny Littlejohn, the other member of our group, is in Central America doing archaeological work, reduces our numbers. Renny, of course, is not with us, and we must find him."

Pat said, "So to simplify matters--"

"You will take Brick Palmer to your beauty establishment and guard her," Doc said flatly.

Pat planted her fists on her slender hips and looked as if she had at least fifteen minutes of steady objecting on the tip of her tongue. Finally, she thrust out her lower lip peevishly.

"I'm stuck again," she said. "Nothing ever happens to me."

THE next incident seemed so unimportant at the time that part of the group never noticed. In fact, no one but Monk appeared even slightly interested.

It happened when they drove past Pat Savage's beauty establishment on Park Avenue, to drop Pat and Brick Palmer. The latter had agreed to remain under Pat's guardianship.

Pat did not let her love of excitement interfere with her business sense. Her establishment of "Patricia, Incorporated," was an artful display of modernism that managed to be gaudy enough to knock the eyes out, and at the same time seem clever and in good taste. It was no mere beauty shop, although that was included.

There was everything necessary to take a fat dowager who was dripping chins and streamline her into a sixteen model, or make her think she had been streamlined, it being a profitable process for Pat in either case.

Pat's latest installation was a skilled plastic surgeon, an impressive-looking fellow with hair that stood on end, and a manner of insulting his clients that would probably make him quite the rage. He was, incidentally, a political refugee from Vienna, Austria, and that would not hurt his future.

Two things probably contributed to the incident that occurred to Monk. First, there was the fact that Brick Palmer, a very pretty girl, seemed totally unaware of Monk's existence. Second, Phil van Blair, who had a face more handsome than any man should have, seemed to have Brick Palmer hypnotized. Moreover, Pat Savage herself did not seem unaware of the perfect Van Blair physiognomy. Monk was disgusted.

Monk's disgust probably accounted for what happened later.

But first Monk happened to see himself in a mirror. He did not look in a mirror too often, because it always gave him somewhat of a shock. He now inspected himself dubiously.

"Ugh!" he said, displeased. "Something to scare babies with!"

Monk stood for a while and contemplated a white door on the seventh floor of "Patricia, Incorporated," a door that bore one word:

FLORENZO

"Florenzo" was the name used by Pat's new plastic surgical importation from Vienna.

"Hm-m-m," Monk said. "The idea never occurred to me before."

Conceivably nothing would have come of the thought that had been planted in Monk's mind, if Phil van Blair and Ham had not continued to treat the subject of Monk's homeliness rather unkindly. Monk had never minded Ham's pointed remarks; in fact, he always welcomed a fight with Ham.

Monk got to the stage where he would have welcomed a fight with Phil van Blair, too, but that young man always had the good judgment to avoid a personal encounter. Monk could take a horseshoe in his two hands and straighten it out, and he frequently offered to do the reverse to young Van Blair's spine.

Monk tried to explain that his homeliness didn't matter.

"People like me--people who aren't clotheshorses!" he yelled at Ham. "Dogs like me."

"Dogs like you, eh?" Ham asked.

"Strange dogs always lick my hands!"

"Why not eat with your knife and fork, instead?" Ham asked unkindly.

Following that crack, Ham got a look at Monk's face; so he lit out in a race for his life. Monk, it was apparent, had suddenly started taking seriously remarks about his looks.

Probably Monk's state of mind was just an inevitable thing that was bound to happen to a fellow who was that homely. He got to a point, in the next few days, where he imagined all his bad luck could be attributed to the fact that he looked as if he had been a piece of mortar that the Master Builder had scraped off the back of the trowel.

DOC SAVAGE was busy in the meantime. The bronze man, working with grim thoroughness, spread a network that included every airport in the United States, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean Islands. The purpose of this was to get a thorough check-up on all planes, and particularly any craft resembling the X-ship, the Bermuda Wind, or the commercial ship flown by Brick Palmer's brother, Chester.

Police teletypes carried a broadcast of Renny's looks, and a thorough description of all the members of the mysterious gang which Doc Savage or his aids had seen. There was also announcement of reward to be paid for information leading to any of them.

Doc Savage unearthed the fact that the airport waiting room in Philadelphia, where Monk and Ham had first encountered the enemy, had been freshly painted red. Doc analyzed the paint, concocted a chemical which would show traces of its presence on shoes, and had hundreds of bottles of the

chemical distributed to shoe shops and shine boys, with the information that there was five hundred dollars' reward for the identification of any pair of shoes that bore the paint stains. The only victim this netted was Ham, who had thoughtlessly sent his own paint-stained shoes to a cleaner.

"We're getting nowhere fast," Long Tom muttered.

The idea that a yellow cloud could have seized three planes out of the sky was still fantastic. As Ham expressed it, "I still won't believe it even if we find the yellow cloud and get it in a box."

The army was much agitated over the disappearance of the X-ship, and the navy was going around pulling hair over the loss of the Bermuda Wind. But worry could not help the matter.

Doc Savage and his men were plenty worried over the fate of Renny. Heck Noe explained repeatedly that he was convinced Renny was dead, as were all the passengers who had been in the Bermuda Wind.

"But the reason for all this!" Ham said wildly. "What's the reason?"

"Maybe there isn't any reason," Heck Noe muttered.

Ham said. "Don't be foolish. There's a reason for everything. The only time you think there isn't a reason is when you can't find one."

"I hope we hurry up and find this one," Heck Noe said.

They began to get accustomed to Heck Noe's practical jokes. The Eskimo's gags were harmless, except to the nerves. The principal drawback was that he seemed to have a million of them. When aristocratic Phil van Blair put his hands in his coat pockets, and found a raw oyster, they knew Heck Noe was responsible.

Monk thought the oyster rather appropriate, but the homely chemist was not so pleased when the zoo called up and said they would send a truck and a strong cage right down, and Monk discovered they were sending it after him.

There was a procession of minor jokes which kept Heck Noe from being very popular. Monk loved hot-dog sandwiches, and he chewed up half of a rubber imitation wiener, so heavily was it coated with mustard, before he found out the difference. Heck Noe had a rubber thing that lay under chair cushions and made a disturbingly loud and uncouth sound when sat upon, and someone was continually finding this in his chair. Once in a while, however, he pulled something that was really funny. Phil van Blair was distinctly the aristocratic young man of wealth, who did only the correct things, and did them the correct way. Fortunately—in particular, it was fortunate for Monk's sanity—he was not with them continually, but came and went.

He lived at home, with his folks, including a title-hunting pair of sisters, a class-conscious mother and a banker father who was somewhat of a stuffed shirt. Monk offered to bet anybody that young Phil van Blair would not eat an oyster unless he had the correct fork with which to eat it. Nobody took Monk up on that.

Long Tom tuned in his television receiver repeatedly, and received no mysterious or inexplicable pictures. Gradually, he came back to a state of mind where he spoke civilly to people. But one had only to look at his televisior and chuckle to be furiously sworn at.

"Long Tom's mechanical crystal-gazer," they fell to calling the television receiver.

Long Tom acted as if he wanted to offer a reward to anyone who would discover how his televisior had picked up the Bermuda Wind drama.

Monk went into a darker and darker mood over the shape of his own face.

One day he beat the inlaid desk in the reception room. "I'm going to Florenso!" he yelled.

HAM BROOKS nearly had joyful apoplexy. He couldn't believe his ears.

"What?" he gasped. "You're what?"

"I'm going to Florenso, the Vienna plastic surgeon," Monk snarled. "And no cracks out of you, you fashion plate!"

"But why?"

"To have my face operated on and beautified!" Monk said grimly.

Ham opened and shut his mouth like a fish.

"But this—I never dreamed—" Ham burst into a roar of laughter. "Oh-oh-somebody call a doctor!

This will kill me! It's the funniest thing—"

He screamed with mirth until he had to bend over and grab his middle and stagger around.

Monk stamped out indignantly.

Long Tom overtook him in the hallway and said, "Say, you pick a fine time to get yourself operated on and beautified."

"How d'you mean?" Monk snarled.

"We're trying to find Renny, who may be dead, although I'm getting the idea Doc thinks he isn't,"

Long Tom explained. "And we're right in the middle of tracing out a swell mystery."

Monk growled. "The trail to that mystery has gone up in smoke. We haven't got a smell of an idea of which way to turn."

"Speak for yourself."

"Who else would I speak for?"

"Doc Savage," Long Tom said, "seems to be remarkably confident. I can't see where he has a thing to go on. But unless I'm mistaken, he expects things to break soon."

Monk seemed affected by the argument.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe I oughta wait until this mess is cleaned up. Only I'm gettin' blasted tired of carrying this face around for people to laugh at."

Long Tom had another sensible point.

"You know Doc Savage is the best surgeon in existence," he said. "Why not have him operate on you, if you want yourself beautified?"

Monk snorted sheepishly.

"I wouldn't have the nerve," he said.

"Why not?"

"Listen, I'd have to put up with bein' kidded for the rest of my life!"

"What makes you think you won't, anyway?" Long Tom asked.

This caused Monk to depart with dignity. His enthusiasm for the beauty operation was considerably dampened, and he began to wonder just why he had been so much for it in the first place. He was something like a man who has gotten mad and had a fight, and then wonders afterward what was sensible about it.

Monk went to see Florenso, anyway. He figured it would not hurt to listen to a sales talk on plastic operations to beautify the human male.

When Monk did not come back that afternoon, Doc Savage telephoned "Patricia, Incorporated."

"Why, I thought you knew," Pat said. "Monk had Florenso give him a beauty operation this afternoon."

Chapter X. PAT GUESSES WRONG

DOC SAVAGE arrived suddenly at "Patricia, Incorporated." The giant bronze man was trailed by Long Tom, Ham, Heck Noe and Phil van Blair, all of whom were somewhat out of breath.

They were met by Pat Savage and Abricketta Palmer.

"Beauty operation?" Doc rapped. "Monk had a beauty operation?"

"This afternoon." Pat nodded.

Doc Savage seemed puzzled. "But what came over him?"

"I don't know. I was out shopping and I missed the excitement." Pat sighed disgustedly. "I miss everything. It seems Monk came in here and he wanted to be beautified right now, and Florenso beautified him."

"Florenso?"

"My plastic surgeon from Vienna," Pat said. "You've heard of him, and you know he's good. He won't do Monk any harm."

"He couldn't," Ham said.

"Where is Monk?"

"Upstairs in one of the patient's wards."

Before they reached Monk, they encountered Florenso.

Florenso was a tall, wide man, middle-aged or past-it was hard to tell-and his hair stood straight on end. There was a great deal of it, and it was only slightly less red than a red neon sign. He had piercing brown eyes, a large mouth, enormous hands with skin as smooth as velvet, and a vocabulary that would leave a mule-skinner breathless.

"This damned patient," he said, "don't want to be bothered."

"Why not?" Ham asked.

"He thinks you're going to laugh at him."

"Let us in," Ham chuckled, "and we'll show him just how right he guessed."

Doc Savage said, "It came as rather of a shock to us to hear that Monk had done anything like having his face beautified. Just what seems to have possessed him, anyway?"

Florenso cocked one eye at pretty Brick Palmer, shoved fingers through his red hair, and shrugged.

"Hell, women probably," he said. "The funny-looking devil just came to me, and he was glued to the idea of being beautified. He asked me if I could make him beautiful. I told him I didn't know about beautiful, but I couldn't hurt his looks even if I hit him with a hammer. So we had an operation."

"How is he?"

Florenso looked at Doc Savage.

"You're Doc Savage, aren't you?" he said. "I have studied your books, and motion pictures of your operating methods. You are six thousand nine hundred ninety-nine times the surgeon I am and I tell this Monk that, but he says, 'The hell with that, Florenso,' so we go ahead and operate. Do you want to see him?"

Doc Savage nodded.

They went upstairs and passed through a white door into a white room where stood two very pretty nurses and a bed on which reposed a wide, squat figure with a bandaged face from which stared two small eyes.

"How are you, Monk?" Doc asked.

"I'm all right," Monk said. "But did you have to bring Ham and that Phil van Blair along?"

Habeas Corpus, the pig, was under Monk's bed. The shoat seemed listless, bleary-eyed.

Ham pointed at Habeas. "What's the matter with the pest?"

"You lay off that hog," Monk said sourly. "He got to rooting around the anaesthetic gas tanks that Florenso used, and upset one. Habeas has got a gas jag."

Ham asked, "Monk, what kind of a nose did you order? A Clark Gable or a Robert Taylor? Or are you trying a Mickey Mouse?"

Monk reached for a pitcher of liquid. He must have placed it handy when he heard them coming. He dumped the entire pitcher contents over the immaculate Ham, who discovered that Monk seemed to have mixed gravy with water, and emitted indignant howls.

"You've ruined this suit!" Ham squalled. "Can't you tell I'm wearing expensive garb?"

"I know high-priced garbage when I see it," the bandaged Monk said. "Nurse, hand me those two tomatoes I saved from dinner. I knew this fashion plate would be around."

They got out in haste.

"When Monk gets well," Ham said, "I'm going to kid the life out of him. A beauty operation! Hah, hah, hah!"

Pat asked, "Doc, when is the excitement going to start again?"

The bronze man appeared not to hear.

"Nothing," Pat complained bitterly, "ever happens after I come around."

AN hour later, Pat decided she was slightly mistaken.

Doc Savage had gone back to headquarters, accompanied by Long Tom and Heck Noe. Phil van Blair had visited with Abricketta Palmer for awhile, then gone home. Florenso had departed for his penthouse apartment. Abricketta Palmer had gone upstairs to the emergency bedroom—the place had bullet-proof doors and a host of burglar alarms—which she and Pat were occupying until the mystery of the plane-seizing-yellow-cloud-and-the-men-who-didn't-want-Doc-Savage-investigating-it was settled.

It was now dark night.

The street doorbell rang.

"Yes," Pat said suspiciously.

The man standing outside wore the uniform of a department-store deliveryman.

He said, "A man named Ham Brooks ordered a dozen assorted hand mirrors delivered to a man named Monk Mayfair at this address. I have them here."

"That must be Ham's idea of a joke," Pat said.

Her suspicions were allayed, and she opened the door. The man reached in and took her by the neck. He would not have been able to hold her, but three other men came running from the shadows and helped him. These three did not wear department-store-deliveryman uniforms.

One of them was the color of a good English riding boot, and Ham would have recognized that one and the others as belonging to the gang who had taken Brick Palmer from them at the Philadelphia airport, and who had also been in the group of machine-gunners at the schoolhouse in the Pennsylvania tobacco patch.

They got Pat inside, and the fight became noisy. Pat was a young lady who believed in keeping in trim. Moreover, she employed female Japanese jujitsu artists in her beauty establishment, and had spent considerable time working out with them. There was grunting, gasping and groans—none made by Pat—and one of the men tore away and dashed to the door and yelled, which brought two more of the gang to help.

They upset a table and broke a chair. Pat got loose. She dashed up a stairs. A man threw a chair, hit her legs, and she fell. They caught her. The fight boiled on up the stairs into the second-floor corridor.

The establishment of "Patricia, Incorporated," employed a night force. Some of these people did cleaning, others worked on the books, and some prepared products for the next day's work.

These persons, of course, heard the fight and came running. It was they who told about the amazing fight put up by Monk Mayfair.

Monk joined the scrap about the time the observers got there.

Monk came down the stairs with nightshirt flying. They said he looked like a devil who had made a mistake and got in an angel's white robe. Monk bellowed as he came. He had a shiny metal chair. He hit the fight and dropped two men senseless with his first two blows. He bounced another off the wall. He got a third down, and walked on that one's face with his bare feet, jumping up and down. Monk did very well, until someone hit his nubbin of a head a blow with the heavy part of a large revolver. Then Monk lay down and was stiff.

Pat was next clubbed senseless.

One of the men ran upstairs, came back dragging screeching Abricketta Palmer.

Pat and Abricketta Palmer were carried out and loaded into two waiting cars. The raiders hauled their casualties outside, dumped them into the cars, and the machines departed at high speed and disappeared completely.

Pat and Brick Palmer had been carried off neatly.

THEY called Doc Savage when Monk regained consciousness and reminded them that was the thing to do.

"It was the same gang we've been trying to nail all along!" Monk yelled.

Monk's yelling, however, sounded a little weak and strained.

Florenso arrived, gave Monk a thorough cussing-out, assured him that he, Florenso, would take no responsibility if Monk looked like an anteater when the bandages were removed, and ordered the homely chemist to bed.

Doc Savage got the story of what had happened, listened to the tale of Monk's remarkable fight, agreed with Florenso that Monk might look like an anteater as a result, and did some routine detective work, such as photographic fingerprints off objects which had been used in the fight. They went back to headquarters, and Doc developed the fingerprint photographs.

He was examining the print pictures when he made, with more startled vehemence than usual, the low and fantastic trilling sound which was his peculiar habit in moments of mental stress.

"This thing," the bronze man said, "is becoming complicated."

Long Tom and Ham stared at the bronze man. So did Heck Noe and Phil van Blair.

"What do you mean, Doc? Ham asked.

But the bronze man was holding a magnifying glass to the fingerprints again, and he did not answer. Nor did he, although they stood around expectantly, explain what had provoked either the trilling sound or his remark about things getting complicated.

Ham went into the library and tried to keep his mind off Pat's disappearance by reading a book on corporate law procedure, which Doc Savage—no one knew how he had found time—had written.

Ham had always held a suspicion that Doc Savage knew more law than he, Ham, did, and reading the book verified the suspicion. Doc Savage, due to scientific and intense training which he had received from childhood—his parents had planned from the first for him to follow his present strange career—had given him a skilled and complete knowledge of many things.

Long Tom went into the laboratory to sit and contemplate his television receiver, and wonder how it had picked up a picture from a spot where there was no transmitter—and wonder how they could find Pat and Brick Palmer.

Heck Noe and Phil van Blair had never given any sign that they knew each other, or were in the least interested in each other. Heck Noe had repeated several times that his main interest in life was to get back his brief case containing his mineralogical survey reports, although the others suspected his main interest in life was his childish, practical jokes.

He was a rowdy, noisy fellow, this Heck Noe, always seeing a funny side to something, or trying to make one. He seemed to be fascinated by his proximity to Doc Savage, and watching the bronze man operate, or just sitting and staring at Doc.

The bronze giant, however, frequently affected people that way. There was something gripping in his mere presence in a room, even to someone who had never heard of the bronze man's reputation previously, which Heck Noe claimed to be his own case.

Heck Noe was an Eskimo, and a piece of living proof that it does pay to educate the poor savage, and that not all aborigines leave college and go back to their tepees or igloos.

Philip van Blair had never paid much attention to Heck Noe.

Phil van Blair was a young man who was a world apart from the educated Eskimo practical joker. He was a society boy, with the taste of a gold-plated spoon in his mouth at birth. He was not interested in people, because he had been born at the top and had never looked up to anyone better than himself, which was probably unfortunate. He certainly did not seem the type of young man who would be interested in Heck Noe.

Certainly not the type who would meet Heck Noe furtively in the corridor that evening.

"We better talk," Phil van Blair said.

"Sure," Heck Noe agreed. "But Doc Savage probably has this place coated with microphones and dictographs. We better go downstairs."

THEY found a booth in a candy store, where they could put their unlike heads together in privacy.

Heck Noe said, "You know that trilling sound of Doc Savage's."

"Yes," Phil van Blair said. "It was some time before I knew what it was. Strange sound, isn't it?"

"That Long Tom told me Doc does it unconsciously when he finds out something important."

"Yes?"

"You saw when he made it tonight."

"He was examining those fingerprints."

"Exactly."

"You think he already suspects the truth about Vikkers?"

Heck Noe asked grimly, "What would you say?"

Phil van Blair said, "I'd hate to be in Vikkers' shoes."

The two were silent while a waitress brought two ice-cream sodas, which they had ordered. She put a box dispenser of paper napkins on the table. When she had gone away, they resumed their conversation.

"Vikkers," Heck Noe said, "is a name that Doc Savage probably does not even know exists."

"I wouldn't," Phil van Blair muttered, "be too sure."

The Eskimo pondered, then nodded his head soberly. "You might be right at that. I've been watching this Doc Savage, and I think he's got us all fooled. I don't think even those men of

his—and they're clever devils, don't ever think they ain't—half suspect a lot of stuff that goes on in the bronze guy's mind. You know what? I think we'll make no mistake if we assume right now that Doc Savage knows who we are, and what we are."

"That would be incredible!" Phil van Blair exploded.

"But it wouldn't surprise me," Heck Noe said.

"I don't believe it!"

"I didn't say he knew. I said maybe."

"Impossible!"

"All right," Heck Noe said, "but don't ever underestimate this Doc Savage. Vikkers and the boys have been running circles around him so far, but they're just like a school of fish and this big bronze man is watching which way they've got the habit of swimming. Pretty soon he's going to have them all in a net. You mark my words."

"Doc Savage has never heard of Vikkers."

"Maybe not."

The two men sucked straws in silence. They wore very serious expressions.

"What are we going to do?" Phil van Blair asked.

"We could do plenty—" Heck Noe broke off. He pointed at the door. "Here comes Boots," he muttered. "The damn fool! Suppose somebody sees us meet!"

Boots was the man with the hide the color of a good English riding boot, the fellow who had taken Brick Palmer in Philadelphia, and taken both Pat and Brick again this night in New York.

Boots slid into the booth with Heck Noe and Phil van Blair.

"Hello, pals," he said.

"Beat it, stupid!" Heck Noe ordered.

"Sure, after I let go some wisdom," Boots said. "I just got word that Brick Palmer is on a plane bound for the castle."

Phil van Blair winced and became pale. Boots grinned at him.

"You love that girl, don't you?" Boots asked dryly.

Phil van Blair swallowed. His expression was affirmative answer enough.

"Swell. She's a nice kid." Boots stood up and looked down at them. "Nothing is going to happen to her," he said, "unless you two cause it."

He walked away.

PHIL VAN BLAIR and Heck Noe stared at each other, aghast.

"Damn!" Heck Noe said furiously. "If we make a move for ourselves now, they'll kill that girl."

White tendons stood out in Phil van Blair's clenched fists.

"Do you think," he asked, "that Vikkers knows we both are planning to double-cross him and take over the whole project?"

"He may. He's smart."

Phil van Blair took a paper napkin from the box dispenser and mopped his forehead.

"What'll we do?" he croaked.

"Tough it out," Heck Noe said.

"But—"

"We're in a swell position," Heck Noe explained. "We go along with Doc Savage and help him until he corners Vikkers and gets the whole mess under control. Then we step in unexpectedly and take everything away from Doc Savage. And we've got it."

Phil van Blair considered. "Everything depends on Doc Savage not suspecting us."

"Sure. He won't."

"He shouldn't," Phil van Blair said grimly. "That business at the schoolhouse, the trick of me lying bound and helpless in the schoolhouse with the case of dynamite that was wired to explode when the door or windows was opened, was very convincing."

"Mighty convincing," Heck Noe admitted. "I think it fooled Doc Savage."

"Of course it did. He didn't find out that the electric cap in the dynamite had been fixed not to explode."

"No, he didn't."

"The trick fooled Savage."

"Sure. We've got him fooled."

The two now got up and left the candy shop.

The waitress came back and picked up the box-shaped dispenser of napkins. The thing resembled the ordinary type found in low-priced restaurants, being made of metal on two sides and top, and the napkins being pulled out of the other two sides. The waitress carried this to the back door, the kitchen door, of the candy shop which gave out upon a side street.

She handed the napkin dispenser to a giant bronze figure which stood there.

"Thank you," Doc Savage said. He gave the waitress a five-dollar bill, added, "This is for your trouble in putting the napkin box on their table."

The waitress took the money quickly. "I don't know what it's about," she said, "but thank you."

Doc Savage tucked the napkin dispenser under an arm and ran, taking a roundabout route back to the building which housed his headquarters, but traveling fast enough to return before the arrival

of Phil van Blair and Heck Noe. He was in the laboratory and had put the napkin dispenser away in the steel cabinet where he kept such unusual gadgets, before the two appeared.

The napkin dispenser was a compact radio transmitting station, of the type commonly used by commercial radio networks in broadcasting crowd programs, the type of transmitter dubbed a "beer mug." The thing was complete—microphone, crystal oscillator frequency doubler, power amplifier, modulator, and power enough for several hours' operation—and it was sensitive enough to pick up ordinary conversation at a distance of several feet and transmit the words to another receiver to which Doc Savage had been listening outside the candy store.

The bronze man had heard everything said between Heck Noe and Phil van Blair and the man called Boots.

Chapter XI. NOT SOUTH AMERICA

DURING the next hour or two, Doc Savage seemed to be doing some intense thinking, and seemed to reach a conclusion. Then, because he knew the value of letting an idea cool and then reexamining it, he spent two hours doing his usual daily routine of exercises. He was aware that there are different ways of cooling an idea—sleep on it, or concentrate on something else completely different for a time.

The exercises were complicated and intense enough to completely occupy his mind. It was by taking them seriously that he had managed to derive so much benefit from them.

Some parts of the two-hour routine were unusual enough to border on the ridiculous—except that he happened to know of the excellent beneficial effects. The operation of reading Braille print, the raised-dot alphabet system used by the blind, to develop his sense of touch, had been highly efficient.

Having let the idea cool, he contemplated it again and apparently it still satisfied him.

Doc then joined the others in the reception room.

"Better get some sleep," he said, "because tomorrow we close in on the gang."

Ham and Long Tom gave astonished starts.

"You mean you've got a line on them, Doc?" Ham exploded.

"A plan, at least."

Long Tom asked, "What kind of a plan?"

Phil van Blair and Heck Noe sat in the background, wearing I-hope-I-don't-look-nervous expressions. Doc Savage did not give them enough attention to make them suspect what he knew about them.

"We finally have," the bronze man said, "not only a definite line on the gang, but a method of trapping them."

Ham demanded, "How much do you know about them, Doc?"

Doc Savage did not answer immediately.

"They are led by a man named Vikkers," he said. "This Vikkers is clever. He has an extensive organization."

"What's he doing?" Ham ejaculated. "What's behind all this strange business?"

"That," Doc Savage said, "may come out tomorrow . . . we hope."

To forestall further questioning by Ham and Long Tom, who were boiling over with inquiry, the bronze man went over to Phil van Blair and Heck Noe. He gripped each of them by the shoulder.

"We hope," he said, "that we can depend on you to help us. With Johnny Littlejohn in South America, and since Renny has disappeared, as well as Pat, that leaves only Ham and Long Tom as aids. Monk, of course, will probably be unable to assist us, due to his facial operation."

"I would give my right arm," Phil van Blair said fervently, "to see Brick Palmer safe. You can depend on me."

"All I've got at stake is a brief case full of mineralogical survey charts," Heck Noe said, "but you can depend on me, too."

Doc Savage thanked them seriously.

Ham flourished his sword cane.

"If I know Monk," he said, "a little thing like a beauty operation won't keep him out of this!"

THE group now separated to get sleep. Doc Savage, it developed, was going to remain in the skyscraper headquarters, sleeping on one of the huge leather divans in the library. Long Tom went off to the compartment which he maintained in conjunction with his electrical experimental laboratory. Ham departed for the swanky club in which he lived.

Phil van Blair, of course, lived on Park Avenue with his parents in a twenty-two-room duplex apartment.

"I think I'll go home," he said, and left.

Heck Noe, the Eskimo, had taken up residence in a gaudy midtown hotel, where there was a roof garden with a noisy floor show and plenty of undraped chorines.

"What time do we get organized in the morning?" he asked.

"About eight o'clock," Doc said.

"Good night," Heck Noe said, and walked out.

Heck Noe went to his hotel room, unlocked the door, sailed his hat on the table and went into the bathroom, where he drew himself a glass of ice water. He came back with the ice water and sat down

and stared at Phil van Blair.

"Anybody see you come here?" he asked.

Phil van Blair shook his head. "I don't think so."

Heck Noe gulped ice water.

"Doc Savage knows more about this than we figured. Like I suspected," he said.

"What do we do about it?"

"You mean about this trap Doc Savage is going to spring in the morning?"

"Sure."

The two men stared at the floor. They seemed to be getting headaches.

"I wish," Phil van Blair growled, "that we could stand back and let Doc Savage grab Vikkers and the whole gang."

"The whole gang would include us," Heck Noe reminded him.

"That's the hell of it!"

Heck Noe finished his ice water. "If we don't go ahead and do our part, Brick Palmer is going to wind up dead."

Phil van Blair nodded.

"That settles it," Heck Noe said. "Two things we can do. One: call Vikkers and tell him what Doc Savage told us; two: take a boat for Europe and hope the bronze guy don't catch us."

Phil van Blair stood up. "We call Vikkers," he said.

THEY got Vikkers by telephone from the hotel room. Vikkers had the voice of a bulldog with a bone.

A rather small bulldog, at least the voice was high-pitched. There were snarling undertones that gave it a vicious quality.

"Great stuff, eh?" he said. "Have we got this sewed up now!"

"It's not as sewed up as you think," Heck Noe said.

The other voice turned startled. "What?"

"Tonight Doc Savage told us," Heck Noe explained, "that tomorrow we were going to clean house on the gang."

The other voice made a strangling noise. "Was he kidding, you reckon?"

"He knows your name."

The hoarse bulldog voice of Vikkers barked a profusion of swear words and ended by yelling, "Tell me exactly what he said!"

Heck Noe demonstrated that he had a developed memory. He gave almost word for word the statements which Doc Savage had made that evening. Phil van Blair got on the telephone and gave corroboration. Vikkers said, "Stay there. I'm going to do things. I'll call you back."

Heck Noe replaced the telephone receiver and he and Phil van Blair sat waiting for Vikkers to call them again. Their faces were long and they were nervous.

"Vikkers," said Heck Noe, "is smart. Give him credit for that."

"He's a damn good actor, too," Phil van Blair said grimly. "Do you suppose that he suspects we figure on cutting him out?"

"We talked about that before," Heck Noe muttered, "but I don't think so."

"It's a tremendous scheme," Phil van Blair said slowly. "There's so tremendously much money in it that . . . well—"

"That nobody can very well back out."

"That's it."

The telephone rang twenty minutes later, and it was Vikkers' dog-growl voice on the wire.

"We're playing safe," Vikkers said. "Everybody, including myself, is going to clear out of New York City and go up in Canada."

"You mean," Heck Noe demanded, "that we desert Doc Savage?"

"No. You stay with the bronze guy. He don't suspect you."

Heck Noe asked, "Where will we get in touch with you if anything comes up?"

"Call amateur radio station C9XEN," Vikkers directed. "The fellow who operates it is ostensibly a trapper who is also a radio ham. We'll land our plane on a little lake close to his cabin and wait."

"You won't go on to the castle?"

"Not until later."

"We understand," Heck Noe said. "Is that all?"

Vikkers laughed grimly. "No, here's the important part. Doc Savage is going to be made to think we've gone to South America with that girl Pat."

"South America?"

"Sure. When the bronze man lights out for South America, don't be alarmed."

"We won't be," Heck Noe said. The telephone conversation terminated on that assurance.

DOC SAVAGE had the faculty of seeming tireless, which was probably due to his training and the remarkable physical fitness in which he managed to keep himself. He looked fresh.

Long Tom arrived looking anything but fresh.

"You look," Ham told him, "as if you'd had nightmares."

"Electric ones," Long Tom admitted.

"Eh?"

"I dreamed," Long Tom explained, "that this television contraption of mine had turned into sixteen ghosts, and they were all sitting around the edges of my bed."

There was a commotion at the door. It burst open and Monk, his face still bandaged, bounded in. Monk ran to the inlaid table, picked up a heavy dictionary which reposed there and returned to the door.

Florenso had appeared in the door. He looked angry.

Monk raised the dictionary menacingly.

"Unless you want to get hit with a lot of words," he said, "you beat it."

"You darn fool!" said Florenso disgustedly. "How can I make beauty operation successful if you get up and run around? That face of yours . . . hell of handicap to begin with."

"Vamose!" Monk said. "Scram!"

"But—" Florenso stopped objecting, dodged the dictionary and departed in rage, his last words being, "I hope you do look like an anteater!"

Monk recovered the damaged dictionary and returned it to the inlaid table. "That Florenso," he explained, "claimed I wasn't able to stand any excitement."

Habeas, the pig, got up from the floor where Monk had deposited him when he dashed in, and walked around the room with rubber-legged uncertainty. He emitted a plaintive squeal or two.

"He's getting over his gas jag," Monk explained proudly.

Ham snorted. "He looks it."

Monk then stared around and was impressed by the grim looks on their faces. "What's up?" he demanded. "Has something broken?"

Doc Savage answered that. "Long Tom is going to tune in his televisor," the bronze man explained.

Long Tom winced and peered at the bronze man to see if he was being kidded. He decided he wasn't.

"I don't get the idea of this," he said. "And it won't get any results. The only transmitter was that one at the schoolhouse, and we recovered it, and it's here. You can't pick up an image over anybody's televisor without a transmitter."

Monk asked, "How do you account for seeing what went on in the Bermuda Wind?"

Long Tom yelled, "Don't talk to me about that."

"Quit yelling and turn on your mechanical crystal gazer," Ham suggested.

The idea of referring to the televisor as a mechanical crystal gazer irked Long Tom particularly, but he switched on the device, muttering that he didn't expect results, and he'd be damned if he was going to put up with much more kidding.

The televisor made its whining sound, the assortment of lights appeared on the screen, and a gradual resolving took place, until a picture took shape on the screen.

"Blazes!" Monk said. "We got something again!"

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, took one gaping look at the picture on the screen, then grabbed his head and sat down.

"I give up!" he muttered. "Something's screwy with this thing."

As far as they could tell, the image on the screen was the interior of another airplane cabin.

Not a giant sky-liner like the Bermuda Wind, but a smaller craft.

They waited for something to happen on the screen. It was almost an hour before anything did occur.

WHILE the hour was passing, there was enough of interest in the plane to hold their attention. First the craft was flying; second it was full of men, and at least two women, and some of the men were Vikkers' followers, in particular one who had a skin like an English riding boot.

At the end of the hour, one of the women turned around in her seat.

"That's Pat!" Ham exploded.

It was undoubtedly Pat Savage, and she proceeded to make some furtive motions with her fingers.

"She's spelling out words on her hands!" Ham yelled.

Doc Savage and his men had learned the hand signals used for communication by the deaf and dumb, and Pat also knew the alphabet.

"She must know there's a television transmitter turned on her!" Long Tom muttered. "But how could she? Unless there's one in the back of the plane cabin. But there couldn't be— The only transmitter is here." He grabbed his head again. "What a mess!"

"

H-E-A-D-I-N-G F-O-R S-O-U-T-H A-M-E-R-I-C-A.

L-A-N-D F-I-E-L-D T-W-E-N-T-Y M-I-L-E-S

W-E-S-T O-F C-A-R-A-C-A-S, V-E-N-E-Z-U-E-L-A."

There was no doubt about this being Pat's message. She spelled it out four times in succession—and stopped instantly when one of the men passengers turned around in the plane cabin. Ham breathed, "What a break for us."

Monk barked, "The thing for us to do is head for South America by plane—in a hurry."

Long Tom glared at the televisor and said, "I wonder what that thing will pick up next!"

Heck Noe and Phil van Blair said nothing at all, but they exchanged the slightest of glances, and these said, "Well, Vikkers has got him off on a wild-goose chase to South America."

Then Phil van Blair put his hands over his middle and groaned. He groaned again. Then he sat down on the floor.

"It's my heart!" he gasped. "Too much excitement. The doctor warned me!"

Doc Savage said, "I will make an examination."

Phil van Blair shook his head wildly. "Not much you won't! You light out for South America and rescue Brick Palmer. I'll be all right. I'll go to my family doctor."

Doc Savage considered that.

"It might be the best idea," he said. "You will remain in New York under your family doctor's care."

They carried Phil van Blair to the elevator and took him down to the street. He was limp all the way. While they were waiting for a cab, Heck Noe got a chance to hiss in Phil van Blair's ear.

"You fool!" Heck Noe gritted. "What's the idea?"

"I'm going to fly to Canada and get Brick Palmer away from the gang," Phil van Blair said. "Then it'll be safe to go ahead with our double cross."

They put Phil van Blair in a taxi and watched the cab pull away.

Doc Savage said to the others, "Go to the water-front hangar. I'll meet you there."

The bronze man walked back into the skyscraper lobby. He was already out of sight when the others went in after him.

Chapter XII. BACKWARD FLYING

PHIL VAN BLAIR stopped his heart trouble gasping when his taxicab had gone a block. After it covered six blocks, he growled at the driver.

"Central Airport," he ordered.

The driver gaped. "But I thought—"

"Damn what you thought! Take me to Central Airport." The driver was puzzled, but not displeased.

Central Airport was out on Long Island far enough to make a good haul. Three dollars and thirty cents' worth of haul, to be exact.

Phil van Blair paid the hack off, said, "I won't be needing you."

The airfield spread vast and naked under the sunlight, the hangars neat with fresh paint. It was a large field, but used mostly by private fliers. Something of a society airport, for it was not far from the large Long Island estates of the wealthy.

"I want my plane out and serviced at once," Phil van Blair told the attendants. "Put in every drop of gas that the tanks will hold."

They rolled the plane out in the sun and stopped it beside the pits that held the gas pumps and hose. The plane was an amphibian, could be operated from land or water.

The fueling had hardly started when the fire broke out in No. 4 hangar. First warning of the fire was smoke. An incredible quantity of smoke, very black, that poured out of the hangar doors.

The wind caught the smoke and swept it across the field, and it enveloped Phil van Blair's plane.

Van Blair swore at the delay, cursed the fire, and ran to help the field attendants extinguish it. They found that the blaze was not serious—merely two oil drums that had somehow become upset and ignited.

They got the oil-drum blaze extinguished.

"More smoke than I ever saw before," a pilot muttered.

After awhile, the smoke was blown away from Phil van Blair's plane by the breeze.

By that time the big bronze figure that skulked unnoticed through the smoke had escaped from the field. He had not been seen.

The fact that he had concealed, in the back of the fuselage of Phil van Blair's plane, a compact radio transmitter that was sending out a steady series of dashes, had not been noticed.

The bronze man got in his car, one of the machines that he kept in his garage in the skyscraper basement. It was a fast machine, but not a gaudy one, and he had managed to trail Phil van Blair to the airport without much difficulty.

Doc Savage drove back to New York and eventually joined Monk, Ham, Long Tom and Heck Noe at the waterfront hangar.

"You been making departing arrangements?" Heck Noe asked curiously.

"Something like that," Doc admitted.

THEY rolled open the door of the water-front hangar and the bronze man taxied his largest speed plane out on the Hudson River. Doc himself handled the controls—the ship was heavily laden with fuel—during the take-off. There was a big English passenger liner backing out of one of the upriver piers, and they taxied slowly until they were beyond the vessel, with a clear river ahead. Doc put the plane in the air. Then he turned the controls over to Ham.

Doc went aft and spoke to Heck Noe. "I'm glad to have you along," he said.

Heck Noe tried to look proud of the part he was playing.

Monk came up, small dark eyes bright behind the bandages. He had a roll of charts.

"I'll get the radio going," he said, "and ask Pan-American for weather reports."

"Good idea," Doc admitted.

"Are we going to fly a direct compass course for South America?" Monk asked.

Doc Savage did not seem to hear. He was watching Long Tom, who was fooling around his television receiver. He had brought the thing along at Doc's suggestion, and he was nesting it down in blankets and pillows and air-filled rubber sleeping mats as if it were an overgrown and exquisitely delicate infant.

"This thing frightens me," Long Tom complained. "It does things it couldn't do!"

Doc Savage went back to the cockpit, took over the controls. They flew south-toward South America. After a while Ham got up and went back into the cabin to quarrel with Monk, and the bronze man was alone.

Monk and Ham had brought their pets, Habeas and Chemistry. Habeas still seemed groggy. Chemistry, the chimp, was subdued, as if worried about the condition of Habeas, his perpetual enemy.

Doc worked with the compasses a while. After he had finished his tinkering, they still pointed south, but the plane was flying north and west.

The plane was equipped with a radio direction finder of the highest type, used in taking bearings on radio stations. Doc adjusted this, tuned carefully.

He picked up the series of dashes coming from the radio transmitter he had hidden in Phil van Blair's plane. He kept the nose of his own ship pointed toward these.

There were clouds, a packed, unending layer of gray vapor that seemed to cover the whole hemisphere. That was a break. Doc flew in the clouds with neither sky nor earth visible, and the clouds lasted for hours on end.

Monk came and sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"South America is gonna be a change," he said. "I ain't seen South America for some time." He grinned and sighed, feeling of the bandages on his face. "I hope I ain't disappointed."

"Let's hope not," Doc said.

IT was night when they landed. There was a moon above, water below, and Doc Savage dropped the plane silently, the motors barely idling. The craft landed with a long, sighing splash. Later, it coasted up to a dark shore line. Habeas, the pig, squealed a feeble protest.

"Anchors out," Doc said. Chemistry bounded atop one of the seats, balanced there.

Monk and Ham scrambled out and wrestled with the light, collapsible plane anchors. There were two of the anchors. Monk was shaking when he got back in the plane cabin.

"For South America," he muttered, "it's dang-blasted cold."

Ham said, "I don't remember there being any lakes around Caracas, Venezuela."

"Not ice-water lakes," Monk added.

The homely chemist sat down in one of the plane seats. He was still trembling and he seemed weak.

"Blast it!" he muttered. "A fine time for me to get to feeling like this."

Long Tom, by steady peering, was beginning to get some idea of the lake shore. Tall trees thrust up like a wall at the water's edge. There were rocks, beyond them cliffs, and everywhere trees so green that they looked intensely black in the night. On a nearby ridge the trees were outlined against the moonlight in some detail.

"If those are not spruce trees," Long Tom muttered, "I'll eat this television contraption of mine!"

"Spruce trees!" Monk said weakly. "They should be palms."

The night stillness was broken by an impressive sound that echoed from the surrounding cliffs.

Ham gave a violent start. "That was a moose!" he barked. "They haven't got any moose in South America!"

Monk got up, his intention apparently being to open the cabin door and climb out on one of the wings to get a better look at their surroundings. After two steps he groaned, staggered, and went back to his seat.

"Florenso was right," he croaked. "I haven't got enough strength to slap a rabbit down."

"You had better stay in the plane," Doc said.

"I don't want to," Monk muttered, "but I don't see any choice."

Doc Savage said, "We are in the northwestern part of Canada. We followed Phil van Blair's plane.

It landed on this lake, I believe."

The night air was cold, but Heck Noe began to perspire.

THE plane was equipped with collapsible boats built along the kayak line, but a little more stable. They put one of these over the side and got in.

Doc Savage took a portable radio direction-finder. Long Tom sat in the bow and operated this.

Heck Noe, Ham, and Doc Savage paddled.

"I'll be all right," Monk said. "I got one of the machine pistols."

The lake water was ice-cold. They could feel it through the sides of the boat. The chill bit through their clothing and Long Tom soon began to shiver, although paddling kept the others warm.

Phil van Blair's plane was resting its nose on a small pebbled beach. The instant his trained eyes discerned the craft, Doc Savage sent the collapsible boat to the shore, breathed directions for the others to wait, and moved silently along the beach.

There was no one in the plane, or near it. The motor was still warm. Doc climbed into the cabin.

His tiny radio transmitter was sealed with wax, and the seal was unbroken, so the device apparently had not been discovered.

Doc went back to the fold boat.

"Paddle out in the lake where it will be safe," he directed, "and wait there while I look--"

A loud roar came from down the lake. One of their machine pistols! It fired a long burst. Then a voice began howling, bawling in rage and fright.

"Monk!" Ham exploded tensely. "In trouble!"

Doc Savage gave the fold boat a shove, sent it scooting out onto the lake.

"Paddle to help him!" he rapped. "I'll take the shore."

He pitched along the lake bank. It was tough going. Dead branches gouged him, live branches whipped him; big boulders walled his path and small ones turned underfoot. But he traveled much faster than an ordinary man could have done, and more swiftly than the fold boat out on the lake. The machine pistol hooted again. There were more yells. More terror in the yells.

Then Doc saw the cloud. He came to a clearing, was plunging across it, and saw the cloud. It was yellow.

Two hundred feet high, a fourth that in thickness, and dark-yellow. That was the cloud. Almost yellow-black. It was like a monster that stood on its nose over the lake, its snout touching the water where they had left the plane.

Seen by moonlight, it seemed black. But three or four times a luminous flush seemed to spread over the thing, and the flush was yellow.

The machine pistol gobbled. Its flame-tipping muzzle seemed to be on the water, as if Monk were swimming and shooting.

Doc raced on.

The yellow cloud lifted slowly and drifted, apparently with the night breeze, over the nearest ridge and beyond sight.

There was now no plane upon the water.

Monk swam to the shore and climbed weakly from the water.

"Doc!" he croaked.

Doc Savage listened, made sure no one else was on the lake shore, then went to the homely chemist.

"

The yellow cloud got our plane!" Monk croaked.

LONG TOM, Ham and Heck Noe arrived in the fold boat. They had seen the yellow cloud from out on the lake. Monk's cough-punctuated description—he was half strangled with lake water—of the cloud added little to what they had seen. The thing had just pounced onto the lake and the plane.

"I saw it in time to jump," Monk muttered. "It just settled over the plane, then lifted, and the plane was gone."

The moon was below the adjacent hills by now, so that the night was ominously black. The wind made faint hissings in the trees, and boughs scraped together as if, it suddenly seemed, skeletons were rubbing hands in anticipation.

"It got Habeas Corpus!" Monk croaked. "He was in the plane."

"And Chemistry?" Ham gasped.

"Chemistry, too," Monk said miserably.

"Van Blair's plane!" Doc Savage said suddenly. "We had better get it!"

They rushed for Phil van Blair's ship. The bronze man hopelessly outdistanced the others—so much so that it seemed an age before they came to the little beach where the Van Blair plane had stood. Doc Savage's giant form materialized in the darkness.

"Gone," he said.

Long Tom gulped, "But how—"

Monk made a gasping sound and sank to the pebbles.

"My face feels like hell!" he croaked.

Ham, unable to believe the Van Blair plane was really gone, had gone exploring along the beach. He came back.

"This leaves us in a fine mess!" he muttered. "Do you suppose Van Blair just decoyed us down and marooned us by having that . . . that cloud, whatever it is, get our plane?"

"Van Blair," Doc reminded, "did not know we were following him."

Ham digested that information.

"Then Van Blair had reached wherever he was going," he decided. "This is the spot. The thing to do is look around."

Long Tom snarled, "What're we looking for? A yellow cloud? That's crazy!"

Doc Savage said quietly, "Renny, Pat, and Brick Palmer have been seized. An army X-ship, a Navy bomber, a commercial plane, have all been seized. Just now, our speed ship was taken."

Monk asked weakly, "What makes you think they're all to be found here?"

Doc appeared not to hear the question.

"What is that yellow cloud?" Long Tom snarled.

Doc ignored that one, too.

"You get in the fold boat," Doc directed. "Ham, you take the bow; Long Tom, you the stern. Keep your machine pistols ready. Be ready for anything. I will search."

"What if the yellow cloud comes again?" Ham demanded.

"I can assure you," Doc said, "that it won't."

"You seem to know a lot about this, Doc?" Monk said curiously.

"Enough," the bronze man admitted, "to be fairly certain it is going to wind up shortly."

He did not explain his remark. They went back to the fold boat, found it intact, and got in. Monk stumbled, sank on the bottom of the boat, held his bandaged face, and groaned.

"Doc, take a look at my face before you go," he croaked. "It hurts like a widow's conscience."

"Of course," Doc said.

Monk folded his handkerchief and put it over the lens of his flashlight, so that only a glow of light escaped. He held this close to his face and Doc unwrapped Florenso's bandages.

Monk's face was purple, puffed, and there were slits which were closed by surgeon's stitches.

Ham peered at the hideous visage.

"I thought your looks couldn't be worse," Ham muttered. "But I was wrong."

"It's part your fault!" Monk snarled at him. "Always riding me about my looks!"

Ham glanced again at Monk's face and shuddered.

"I'm sorry," he said, for the first time in his life being contrite about something he had said to Monk.

Doc replaced the bandages, explaining, "It probably is not as bad as it feels. But you might keep an eye on him, Ham, in case he becomes delirious from pain. It wouldn't take much to upset that fold boat."

"Right."

"Heck Noe," Doc Savage said, "will you come over here?"

HECK NOE was nervous, uncertain, as he followed the bronze man in the blackness. Doc listened carefully to the educated Eskimo practical-joker's footsteps—and he heard them hesitate, then start sidling off in the darkness. Heck Noe had become frightened, was going to flee. Doc headed him off and clamped a hand on his arm.

"Too late for that," the bronze man said grimly.

"Eh? I . . . ah . . . I thought you went over that way," Heck Noe said, trying to make his escape attempt look innocent.

Doc said, "You and Phil van Blair are co-schemers. You belong to Vikkers' gang, but you are also scheming to take the gang away from Vikkers."

"What on earth!" Heck Noe ejaculated. "You get the craziest—"

"Vikkers doesn't trust you, and he's holding Brick Palmer so as to keep you and Van Blair from getting rash. Brick Palmer is one of the Vikkers gang, but she's in love with Van Blair, and he with her. So Vikkers brought Brick Palmer up here, and Phil van Blair followed, and we trailed him."

"I—"

"Yes or no?" Doc asked.

Heck Noe stuttered, not knowing what to do. His worst fears were justified; he was suddenly realizing that even he himself had underestimated the bronze man, despite the fact that he had assured Van Blair that Doc was far more equipped with wits than they imagined.

"Yes," he said. "Now what happens to me?"

"You have a choice," Doc told him. "You can help me."

"How?"

"Stay with my men. See that nothing happens."

"See that nothing—"

"You understand exactly what I mean," Doc said.

"Great blazes!" Heck Noe gasped. "You even know—"

Doc said, "We haven't much time. Do you help me?"

Heck Noe's answer was prompt. "I'm with you."

They went back to the water, and Heck Noe got in the fold boat, and the fragile craft shoved out into the lake.

The darkness of the shore swallowed the man of bronze.

Chapter XIII. CRAZY HOUSE

DOC SAVAGE did not leave the vicinity immediately. He waited until the fold boat was well out in the lake, his ears following the faint sounds made by the paddles. Then he went back to the spot where Phil van Blair's plane had been.

The bronze man did not follow the lake shore. He went higher up the cliff, where he would not be expected, and incidentally, where he could search for a path.

There was a path, a clearly defined one. It mounted gradually, zigzagging. Doc did not follow it exactly. He climbed, slowly, and with infinite regard for silence, pursuing the general route of the path. At times he was climbing sheer stone where there were almost no footholds.

The crest of the cliff was like a tabletop, furred with spruce. It was very still. Somewhere in the distance a wolf pack was setting up clamor. The moose called again. There was moonlight up here. Doc went toward the house.

Even at first glance in the moonlight, it looked like a crazy house. It was sprawled, and its shape—if it had a shape at all—was like a house that had had a convulsion. Some of it was white stucco, some of it painted clapboarding, and some dark logs.

It just began with one room, and there were other rooms that wandered in different directions, with some rooms stacked on top of those.

Doc Savage got down and crawled and listened.

After awhile he saw a figure at one of the house windows. The figure seemed to be trying to get in, and failing.

Doc crept close.

"Van Blair," he said.

The figure lunged, but the bronze man was in front of him. They crashed together. Their fight, a silent straining of strong muscles, was brief, and Doc had the other stretched out helpless.

"You came here to get Brick Palmer," the bronze man breathed. "We have a mutual purpose. I'm after Renny and Pat."

Phil van Blair panted for a few moments.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"Followed your plane. There was a portable radio planted in the back."

The young man digested that in silence.

"How long," he asked, "have you known I was working for Vikkers?"

Doc Savage answered frankly, "Since we found you tied up in the schoolhouse. I noticed that the detonator cap of the dynamite bomb in the schoolhouse had been doctored so it would not explode the charge. It was evident then that you were being planted on us."

Phil van Blair muttered incredulously. "Then why did you let me stay with you?"

"That should be obvious," the bronze man reminded. "Without you, we might not be here at this minute."

Philip van Blair took in a deep breath.

"And the yellow cloud—you know what that is?" he asked.

"Yes."

"When did you first find out?"

"The night that Renny and the X-ship disappeared, and the photograph came floating down. Or rather, when Monk and Ham later showed me the photograph."

"I don't understand. That picture was perfect."

Doc did not explain, and after a moment Phil van Blair asked another question.

"You know who Vikkers is right now?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Then why—"

"By letting things ride," the bronze man explained, "I was being led closer and closer to Renny and the secret of the whole mystery. It seemed best to let them ride."

Phil van Blair suddenly gave up questioning.

"I figured I might find the prisoners in this house," he said.

"Then we will, go in," Doc said.

"I don't know anything about the house," Van Blair said, "except what I have heard. It is a strange place. It is Vikkers' house, and something like the man himself, I've heard. Weird."

"We go in," Doc decided.

"You're crazy! They'll trap us and put us with the other prisoners!"

"That," Doc Savage said, "would be very good."

THEY went to a door, Phil van Blair looking as if he half suspected the bronze man was crazy. The door was locked, but it had a large old-fashioned glass panel.

"Breaking it will make too much noise," Phil van Blair breathed.

Doc Savage's tiny spring-generator-operated flashlight was equipped with a vacuum cup—the same type put on the accessory smoking sets which stick to automobile windshields—so that the flashlight could be stuck to metal or varnished wood surfaces. Doc pressed the vacuum cup to the glass door panel and it gripped.

He took out a special pocketknife which he carried, one that had, among other things, a diamond-cutter point. He ran the point around the edge of the glass, then tapped the glass, and the entire panel broke out. It was held by the vacuum cup, and he placed it on the ground beside the door.

"Watch the glass edges," he breathed. "We'll climb through. There might be a burglar alarm."

He helped Phil van Blair climb inside, then swung in lightly himself.

A sharp gasp came from Van Blair. The young man gripped Doc's arm, pointed.

"Am I nuts?" he gulped.

Doc Savage looked, and he, too, was startled. Enough so that he made his strange trilling sound

briefly.

One wall of the room was entirely open to the outer air. It was not a case of a door being open—the whole wall was missing. They could have walked in with ease, instead of going to so much trouble burglarizing the door.

"But I went all around the house!" Van Blair croaked. "There wasn't any wall open before."

"Sh-h-h," Doc warned.

They moved across the room, searching for another door. Van Blair kept ogling the missing wall, muttering, "Makes you feel silly, doesn't it? I'd swear that—"

Doc touched his arm. The bronze man had found another door. It opened readily at his touch. Doc listened, and there was only silence; so they went in.

Very briefly Doc splashed illumination from his flashlight.

It was a large room, furnished with a circular rug that was about fifteen feet in diameter, on which stood a circular table, and several chairs with circular bottoms. Directly across the room was another door.

Doc extinguished his flashlight.

They moved forward, shoulder to shoulder. Halfway across the room, Phil van Blair stopped, breathed, "I feel a little dizzy. Do you?"

Doc did. But the feeling passed a moment later and they continued, and the bronze man's sensitive fingers found a doorknob.

Doc opened the door and they stepped through. The bronze man closed the door.

"Hell and damnation!" Phil van Blair snarled. "Do you see what I see?"

"We're back where we came in," Doc admitted.

They were. There was the door they had burglarized, and the open wall they had found, to their embarrassment, after they got in.

Doc made his trilling again. It had a disgusted quality. Then he went over and examined the door again. This time he found what he had missed before—tiny wires cemented to the inside of the glass panel.

"Breaking the wires when we removed the glass must have caused the wall to slide down," he said.

"An electrical device."

The bronze man went back into the other room. This time he lifted the circular rug. A round turntable, it began to revolve, and made a half turn before it stopped. There was no need to remark that this explained their dizziness.

"We'll try it again," the bronze man said grimly.

"What you had better do," a voice growled, "is throw down your weapons, if you have any."

THE voice had come through some small opening—it had a hollow quality. Its direction was difficult to locate.

Van Blair hissed, "That's Boots! The worst of Vikkers' men!"

Doc asked, "And if we do not throw down our weapons?"

He wanted to get a line on Boots' voice.

"You won't have a chance," Boots snarled.

Doc said, "All right. I'm dropping the first weapon."

He dropped it—tossed it—close to the right wall. It was a metal egg with a tiny lever that he flicked just before he heaved it. He seized Van Blair with one hand, grabbed the table with the other hand, and upended the table shield fashion.

Even with the table as a shield, the explosion of the grenade he had tossed knocked them against the opposite wall with stupefying force. After the grenade's exploding flash, eye-hurting, débris flew.

Boots squalled. But he was making noise running away before Doc got organized.

The bronze man pitched across the room. The grenade had opened a splintered hole. He jammed through that, getting scraped, collecting splinters.

"Come on!" he rapped.

"I'm coming!" Van Blair gritted.

Doc used his flashlight. Boots was racing down a passage. He doubled left, was lost to sight. Doc flung after him.

"Why didn't you shoot him?" Van Blair yelled.

Doc did not have a gun. He never carried one.

The bronze man reached the end of the passage, turned left after Boots. There was no door there, exactly. It was a swinging wall panel, and once it closed, doubtless the wall would appear solid. But the panel had not had time to close; it was ajar a crack. He hit it. For a moment great bronze muscles and electrical panel-closing mechanism fought a battle. Muscles won; something broke—and they were through.

The room into which they came was wide, walls and ceiling a bilious shade of green, and the floor a darker green, and as smooth and shiny as glass.

Boots was across the room, flattened against the opposite wall.

Doc lunged for him—knew instantly that it was a mistake. He tried to double back. He would have

made it, although the floor was already opening. But Van Blair had slower wits and feet. He was in the way. The two men crashed together. And before they could do anything else, the floor had opened, downward.

There was nothing on the glasslike surface to grip. They went through, dropping into space.

It was a short fall, no more than six or eight feet. The bronze man landed cat fashion, but Van Blair struck on head and shoulders and was stunned. The surface on which they had landed seemed to be cone-shaped, sloping downward on all sides. Van Blair, stupefied, began to slide down this, and Doc caught him, slipped, fell, but managed to stop their sliding.

With a swishing sound and metallic clang the floor closed over their heads. Darkness came, intensely black.

Doc Savage had dropped his flashlight, and it had gone hopping down the cone and off into space.

"Matches?" the bronze man asked.

"I haven't got any," Van Blair mumbled thickly. "Where . . . what . . . where are we?"

"You have a gun?"

"Yes. I couldn't get it out of my pocket."

Doc Savage took the weapon. It was a revolver. Working by the sense of touch alone, the bronze man removed one of the cartridges, wedged the lead in the end of the barrel, and twisted it out of the brass cartridge case, saving the powder. He left some powder in the case, spread more on his handkerchief, and by shooting the improvised blank at the handkerchief fired the powder thereon and got the handkerchief burning.

He moved carefully to the edge of the cone—it was of polished steel—and looked down by the light from the blazing handkerchief.

Below was a stone-walled pit—a pit that looked at least fifty feet deep.

The pit floor was studded with gleaming metallic spikes, needle-pointed, standing almost as close together as wheat stalks.

Van Blair crawled to the edge and stared. He made a hollow sound of horror.

It was then that the cone began to turn.

THE turning was slow at first, a barely perceptible motion. But it grew faster.

Gripping Phil van Blair's arm, helping the young man, Doc Savage got back to the center of the cone. The center was steeper, but rounded at the apex so that there was nothing to grip. The bronze man gave low orders, and they gripped hands, stood one on each side of the peak, and tried to walk with the rotation of the cone.

"They have these things in amusement parks," Doc said quietly. "Ever try to stay on one of them? It looks easy. It isn't."

Van Blair said nothing for a moment. He was trying to time his walking with the cone. The handkerchief had burned away, and in the darkness it was difficult to keep a sense of direction. And the horror of those spikes below stuck in their brains like fish hooks.

"I've heard of this house," Van Blair gulped. "Heard Vikkers' men talk about it. Vikkers is a nut for practical jokes." He tried to swear, croaked instead. "But those spikes are no joke."

Doc said, "Heck Noe is a fiend for practical jokes, too. Maybe that is why Vikkers liked him?"

"Heck is clever, too," Van Blair said. "And he knows this North country. With Heck Noe as a guide, not even the Royal Mounted could catch Vikkers."

The cone turned faster and faster.

Doc asked, "Why did you join them? Your family is wealthy."

"It isn't," Van Blair said. "That's the point. We're as poor as anything. We live in that Park Avenue duplex only because dad paid the rent two years in advance. We've kept people from knowing. Dad thought it would help him make a comeback in the Street."

"Vikkers paid you highly?"

"He promised seventy-five thousand dollars a year. I get around in international circles. I know people. Bankers and diplomats and important people. My job was contact man."

"Salesman?"

"Well, yes. Of course, we sold what we didn't have, then went out and got it. Or rather, I guess you'd say we took contracts to get certain things for certain people."

"Not very nice."

Van Blair croaked. "As long as people didn't die, it wasn't so bad. But I saw that people were going to die. Heck Noe saw it, too. We thought we would take the game away from Vikkers and run it in a humane way, without killings."

Doc said, "Such a business has never been operated without killings."

They said no more—it was too hard to keep balance. Staying on top of the cone occupied all their attention. But they were managing, taking short skipping steps. The cone, by now, was spinning at furious speed.

Van Blair groaned once. The memory of the needle-pointed spikes below stuck like icicles in his brain.

Doc was half expecting what happened next. He flung his weight wildly when it occurred. But it was no use.

The cone stopped, began to turn the opposite direction. The change was instantaneous. And they went sliding off the cone, on opposite sides, and hit the smooth stone walls of the shaft. They fell helplessly toward the needle-pointed spikes below, and Van Blair began screaming a long scream that lasted throughout the fall, then ended more suddenly than it seemed any sound could end.

Chapter XIV. MADHOUSE RAID

THE fold boat sat on the lake. It had developed a slight leak, nothing of consequence, except that the water was cold; for there were no seats in the fold boat, and they sat on the bottom on the rubberized fabric that was stretched taut over the arrangement of alloy metal ribs. Long Tom was using his handkerchief to soak up the water and squeeze it out overside.

The darkness seemed to have become blacker, for the moon was lower behind the hills. The breeze kicked up waves that were large enough to rock the fold boat disagreeably when the craft was in the trough; so Ham and Heck Noe stroked with paddles and kept the fragile craft bow-on into the wind. Now they were tense and listening. They had been that way for some minutes.

Down from the crest of the cliff had drifted a hollow explosion—the blast of Doc Savage's grenade that had opened the hole in the wall and put Boots to flight, although they had no way of knowing that. They did not know what it was. They were worried.

Monk kept looking upward.

"That blasted yellow cloud," he squeaked, "could come right down in this darkness, and have us before we could do anything about it."

Ham dug viciously at the water with his paddle.

"We're going ashore!" he gritted.

Long Tom rapped, "But Doc said to stay—"

"I know what he said. But he's never told us not to use our own judgment. That explosion up there meant he was in trouble. Fighting."

"But—"

Monk said, "I vote with Ham, this time. We go help Doc."

Outvoted, Long Tom subsided. He did not dislike the idea of going into action; the contrary, if anything. It was just that Doc Savage's judgment was usually correct.

They drove the fold boat hard for the shore. Waves knocked against the bows, broke, and spray fell in the craft, or wetted their faces and bodies. They struck a boulder in the darkness close to shore, half swamped, and waded the rest of the way.

When they stood on the pebbled beach, Heck Noe started to speak. He had concluded he had better mention the text of his conversation with Doc Savage, particularly the fact that he had agreed to help the bronze man.

Heck Noe got as far as, "When I talked to Doc Savage—"

Then Monk stepped up and struck him on the jaw. It was a hard blow; it sounded as if someone had dropped a cement block on a concrete sidewalk. Heck Noe fell, kayoed.

"Listen, homely and stupid," Ham snapped, "what was the idea of that?"

"He hasn't been kidding anybody," Monk said grimly. "He and Phil van Blair are members of Vikkers' gang."

Ham made a strangled noise. "That's a lie!"

Monk said, "You're crazy if you think so. Doc Savage has known it all along. Doc didn't say anything, but I'm not blind."

Ham was so astonished that he felt around in the darkness for a boulder and leaned against that.

"I must be the one that's blind," he muttered.

"Sure," Monk said unkindly. "I've been telling you that you're an overdressed dope for years."

Long Tom growled, "Now that you two are in agreement for once, let's get going. What do we do with our igloo man friend?"

"Heck Noe? Take him along." Monk snorted grimly. "We may need a shield for bullets."

THEY found the path and the top of the cliff, and eventually, the house. The house was still wrapped in the moonlight that slanted across the cliff-top, and it looked as unusual to them as it had looked to Doc Savage.

Their straining ears caught no sound, no stir of life around the place; so they advanced and came to the door that was minus its frosted-glass panel, and the room which was open on one entire side.

"Kind of sleeping-porch effect," Long Tom muttered, "minus any screens."

"Do we go in?" Ham asked uneasily.

"Why not?" Monk growled. "We've got machine pistols, haven't we?"

They entered, passed through the first room, and discovered the débris on the floor, and the hole which Doc Savage's grenade had blasted through the wall.

"Doc did this," Long Tom guessed in a grim whisper. "But what's happened to him?"

They had been carrying the senseless Heck Noe. He was heavy. They put him down on the floor—unwittingly placing him on the round carpet.

There was a grinding noise—made by débris as the floor turntable began to rotate—that gave them a bad shock. They reached for Heck Noe; he wasn't there, and Ham cast a flashlight beam. The light

showed Heck Noe's form moving slowly away.

In the murk and confusion they thought Heck Noe was moving, not the floor. They dashed after him, seized him, and confused by the noise and unstable feeling of the floor, they backed through a door—what they thought was the same door by which they had entered. Actually, the floor turntable had carried them to the room's other door.

After they were through it, the door slammed.

They stood in the brightly moonlit night.

"We're outdoors again!" Ham exploded.

Long Tom muttered, "What the devil kind of a house is this, anyway?"

A gurgle of a laugh escaped Monk. It sounded hearty.

"Now is a dang poor time," Ham snarled, "to get hysterical."

Monk snapped, "I'm not hysterical. It just struck me as funny."

It was not funny to the others; just bizarre, and a bit blood-curdling, under the circumstances.

"If we'd paid a dime to get in," Ham gritted, "it might be different."

They stood in silence. There was only the yodeling of the wolf pack in the distance, and the chill of the night wind against their faces. They tried the door; it would not budge.

"Let's go around," Monk suggested, "and come in that other door again."

Ham snapped, "I'd prefer almost any other door."

Long Tom and Ham shouldered the limp Eskimo, and they crept furtively along the meandering walls of the crazy house. They rounded a second corner, a third—stopped at the fourth.

"

Uh!" Ham croaked. "Wuh—"

He didn't have words. But he didn't need words. They could see. The moonlight was bright enough.

The bear was big, so huge that it seemed to stand on legs that were like the trunks of gnarled apple trees. They could see the bear's claws; they looked like curved bone, inches long. The bear reared up, snarled and showed teeth. Then it lumbered for them.

Ham whipped up his machine pistol, yanked the trigger. There was only a click; no bullet came.

Long Tom and Monk also aimed, got useless clicks from their guns. They jacked the firing mechanism back.

"That Heck Noe!" Monk snarled, "has taken the powder out of our cartridges!"

THE next thing was to run. They did it. The bear was making for them with lumbering purpose. They did not drop Heck Noe.

Monk was unburdened. He seemed to have been revitalized with strength by sight of the bear. He got ahead of the others, tried doors wildly as he came to them. The third door—there seemed to be a legion of them—was open.

"What a break!" Monk croaked, and dived inside. The other two followed with Heck Noe. Monk slammed the door.

The bear made a snuffling sound and scraped wood off the other side of the door with its claws.

"That bear!" Ham snarled. "As if we didn't have trouble enough!"

Long Tom said, "Well, we're safe now."

As if his words had irritated the strange joke of a house, there was a mechanical rattle—and two sides of the room collapsed. They were hinged and fell outward, hitting the earth with a bang, leaving two sides of the room entirely open to the moonlight night.

Long Tom said something. He never did remember what. Monk giggled. And Ham kicked Monk, very hard and earnestly, and rasped, "You fool! That bear wants to eat us!"

The bear, judging by its noises, had such intentions. It had not yet discovered that it had only to walk around the one standing wall to reach them.

They had dropped Heck Noe. They, picked him up again.

"Why not leave him for the bear?" Monk asked.

"I'd rather leave you!" Ham said.

They ran again, and were just rounding another corner when the bear saw them. It came after them, bounding, snarling.

Coming at full speed to the room of the house which they had first entered, they dived inside, charged on into the room with the round rug.

Monk used his flashlight.

Ham snapped, "Let's try that hole blown in the wall. Maybe the blasted bear can't get through!"

They crossed the room—fast enough to make it before the turntable could trick them again—and pitched through the grenade-made hole in the wall. They stabbed themselves with splinters.

And when the bear put its head through the hole they went on, running, down the passage which Doc Savage had traversed. The secret wall panel stood open at the end, and they followed the bronze man's course into the room with the shiny floor, without knowing that Doc Savage had gone that way before.

A moment later the floor had opened and they were upon the cone. Long Tom put his flashlight beam downward and they saw the metallic spikes; so that they had a full minute of utter horror before the spinning of the cone sent them skidding off to fall into hideous space.

Chapter XV. PIT TRAP

THE spikes were made of rubber. They were like the toy daggers sold in dime stores—made of rubber and painted with aluminum to look real. The spikes, instead of stabbing them, actually cushioned their fall until it would not have been particularly unpleasant, under other circumstances. And the shaft was not nearly as deep as it looked—hardly more than a dozen or fifteen feet, the illusion of great depth coming from clever construction and the use of paint.

Ham felt of the spikes. He couldn't help, even after he found he could bend a dozen of them with one hand, recoiling in horror.

"Rubber!" he croaked.

There must be rubber cushions under the spikes, too, judging from the lightness of their falling shock.

Monk said, "What a place!"

He started to chuckle, but stopped suddenly, apparently having remembered Ham's boot.

Long Tom felt around in the darkness, recovered his flashlight from among the spikes and threw the beam.

"Here's a hole big enough to crawl through!" he said.

They crept into the aperture. Beyond was a tunnel of stone, so low that they had to crawl. Ham came last, dragging Heck Noe.

It was Ham who squalled that the roof was coming down. And it was, a mass of stone, slowly settling. Accompanying the descending tunnel ceiling, there was a grinding of stone, a realistic rumbling until—they knew by now that they were in, almost literally, a Coney Island crazy house—they could not help but think the tunnel roof was really collapsing.

Long Tom, leading, crawled with mad speed—and the tunnel ended in a stone wall. A dead end.

"Go back!" Long Tom barked.

They could not. The ceiling had dropped too much. And slowly it pressed upon them, mashing them out with awful force, until they were more certain than ever that this was no gag—the tunnel ceiling was really falling.

They lay there, pinned, sure life was being crushed from them. How long, Ham never knew.

Then, suddenly, the floor dropped, and he fell onto a smooth metal chute, went sliding for a distance, and went spinning out on a stone floor. A moment later Monk hit him, then Long Tom. Heck Noe's senseless form did not follow them.

It was intensely dark.

Doc Savage's voice said, "Who is it?"

"Doc!" Monk exploded. Ham and Long Tom identified themselves, and Long Tom said, "I was dragging Heck Noe. It felt like he was jerked out of my hands just before the tunnel floor opened."

Doc Savage explained that. "They got Phil van Blair away from me the same way. There are probably sections in the tunnel ceiling, and they lifted one of those and took Van Blair, and later, Heck Noe."

Ham said, "I think I still have my flashlight."

THE bronze man's aids carried the spring-generator type of flashlights, and Ham gave the base of his a twist to wind the motor spring, and the lens threw a fan of light which hurt their eyes and was infinitely comforting.

They were in a stone cell. There was no trick about the place. The door was of steel, heavy, with an opening perhaps a foot square that was heavily barred.

Ham went to the barred aperture and cast his light. He saw a long, penitentiary like corridor lined with other barred doors.

"Hello out there!" Ham called.

Voices answered him—a babble of voices, some plaintive, some hysterical, all scared. Among them was one bull-like tone that rumbled out above all the rest.

"Renny!" Ham yelled.

"Holy cow!" said Renny's deep voice from one of the cells. "How many of you have they collected?"

"All of us," Ham said gloomily. "Who are these other people?"

Renny boomed, "They're off that big plane, the Bermuda Wind, most of them. They were the passengers, as well as the pilot and crew. Then there's some other people. There's a chemist."

"A chemist?"

"He had a poison-gas formula," Renny explained. "There's a Japanese who just had a brief case. He's been telling me about it."

"Brief case?"

"Containing the details of a secret military agreement between his country and a couple of European nations."

"Oh," Ham said.

Pat Savage's voice said, from another cell, "Don't forget me. I didn't have any gas formulas or brief cases. Just a yen for excitement."

Ham said, "I hope you've got your craw full of it."

"Just about," Pat admitted gloomily. "Where's Brick Palmer?"

"Isn't she in a cell?"

"No."

"And Van Blair?"

"Not here."

Ham withdrew from the barred aperture to consider what he had learned and see what it added up to in his mind.

"I begin to see how this shapes," the dapper lawyer—he was not so dapper now—muttered. "But a lot of it still doesn't make sense."

Monk was sitting on the cell floor. He groaned, muttered something unpleasant about his face, and added disagreeable threats about what he hoped to do to plastic-surgeon Florenso, if he ever got his hands on the Viennese.

Monk said, "What do you say we take a vote?"

"On what?"

"Whether Doc tells us all he's figured out about this mess," Monk said peevishly.

"It is probably time for that," Doc Savage agreed quietly.

THEY listened to the bronze man's words.

"We are up against an organization," Doc said, "that has been stealing military secrets and selling them. It is not the only such organization in existence these troubled times, by any means. This one just happens to have a leader who is a bug for practical jokes, who likes to fool people." With brief, concise phrases he summarized what had happened, beginning with the disappearance of the X-ship and Renny, and the matter of the yellow cloud.

Doc Savage said, "There was no yellow cloud when Renny and the X-ship vanished. They knew Renny was going to test-fly the X-ship, so they prepared. There was a stowaway in the plane. In the air he knocked Renny out. The man could imitate Renny's voice, which was not difficult over the radio. He described an imaginary yellow cloud. He probably used a bunch of small firecrackers to make sounds that the listeners thought were the plane being crushed. And he had previously prepared the photographic plate showing the yellow cloud, which he tossed overboard. The plate was faked, of course."

Monk asked, "When did you first know the plate was faked? And how?"

"When I examined the plate. The stars gave the hoax away."

"Stars?"

"The stars," Doc explained, "were not in the position that the constellations occupied that night. The picture had been taken almost a week previously, and the cloud faked in."

"Blazes!" Monk muttered.

Doc said, "The activity of Monk and Ham alarmed the gang. So they had Brick Palmer appear and tell of another yellow cloud seizing her brother. She really has a brother and he is one of the gang."

"Half brother," Pat called. "He's that devil they call Boots."

Doc added, "Brick Palmer's appearance had a double purpose. They hoped to convince us there was a yellow cloud and get us hopelessly confused, and also have Brick Palmer join us under the pretense of helping us search for her brother. She could then spy on us."

"But they seized Brick in Philadelphia!" Ham pointed out.

"That was to make it look very, very good. And get her out of the way until they were sure you had checked on her story and believed it. Then they gave her back to us—at the schoolhouse."

Ham interjected. "And the yellow cloud seizing the Bermuda Wind! That was a fake?"

"The Bermuda Wind," Doc said, "was seized by force—plain armed force. The thing that we tuned in over the television was a motion-picture film they had carefully prepared. They merely projected the picture into one of Long Tom's television transmitters."

Mention of the television device touched a sore point with Long Tom. He sprang up and swore.

"They'd already stolen my television plans?" he yelled.

"Weeks and weeks ago," Doc surmised. "And they had made transmitters and receivers so they could sell the devices to the highest bidder."

"The skunks!" Long Tom snarled. "I've worked years on and off and worked my fingers to the bone—the polecats!" He added some choice opinions of persons who stole another man's brain fodder.

"Vickers," Doc said, "has imagination of a practical-joke turn. He doubtless thought it was funny, using the yellow-cloud hoax to confuse us, and Long Tom's television device to further the deception."

Monk made a growling sound. "Heck Noe was planted on us, too?"

"Of course. If we hadn't picked up the television picture—they must have timed the show right after we went to headquarters, and they reasoned we would tune in the television—they would have flown out and rescued Heck Noe themselves."

Long Tom said, "What I want to know is—"

Ham interrupted.

"What we'd better discuss," the lawyer growled, "is ways and means of getting out of here."

"Not yet," Doc Savage said.

"Eh?"

"We're coming to the important part."

"I don't see—"

"The identity of Vikkers," Doc Savage stated abruptly. "Isn't that important?"

"Say!" Ham exploded. "Nobody has seen Vikkers yet, have they?"

There was silence inside the cell. Silence that would have been utter, except for faint sound that came from one of the other cells, the sound of someone sobbing.

Then there was a sharp scuffling. A blow followed. A quick snap of a blow, so sharp that the others knew instinctively that Doc Savage had struck it. There was a brief groan. Doc struck again. A form fell heavily.

"Do not show any light!" the bronze man said steadily.

IN the cell they were astounded. There was a moment when they did nothing; then they surged silently to where Doc had spoken. Ham stumbled over something.

"Hey!" he breathed. "There's somebody on the floor here."

Doc Savage's voice explained, "There is a door in the cell wall here. A secret door."

"Open?"

"Open now," Doc said. "I heard this fellow opening it and caught him before he could get it closed again."

They eased through the aperture. It was a slit, not much more than a foot wide, but well over six feet high. It gave into a narrow stone cavity through which they had to squeeze. The cavity went two directions, away from the cell, and along its side. They followed along the side, came to a door, soon stood in the corridor lined with cells.

"No lights," Doc warned in a whisper. "Go along the cells warning them to be quiet."

The bronze man himself went to work picking locks. He used for this purpose a hairpin which he got from Pat. The cell locks, large and strong, were not complicated, because they were situated where there was no possibility of the prisoners reaching them from the inside.

Doc released Renny first. Then he opened the other cells. Although he worked fast, and had good luck with the locks, it seemed to take an interminable time.

But they made almost no noise.

There was a doorway at the end of the cell corridor. The bronze man explained that he believed an armed guard was posted in a lighted room beyond this door, because of glimpses he had secured through the barred cell opening before Monk, Ham and Long Tom arrived.

Doc went to the door.

He imitated, as closely as he could, Boots' voice.

"Guard!" he rapped. "Come in here! They've found out the truth about Vikkers, and it may be just too bad!"

Ham and the others were astonished at the way that wiped caution out of the guard's mind. He flung open the door, bounded through—and Doc hit him.

The guard walked crazily backward into the lighted room before he fell.

Another man in the lighted room sprang for a door howling, "They're out!"

Chapter XVI. THE MONKHOUSE

CAUTION went to the winds. It was useless now. The man went through the door, climbed stairs, bellowing at the top of his voice. "They're all out of the cells! Help, help!"

Doc charged across the lighted room, took the stairs. The late prisoners crowded him close.

Probably no army ever went into battle with more enthusiasm for it. Because they all had reason to suspect that eventually they would die if Vikkers had his way. He could hardly release them.

Shouting leaped through the devious passages of the crazy house. The alarm had spread.

Doc topped the stairs. His quarry was working at a door. Doc landed upon the man just as he got the door open, and they piled through into a room, and almost under the feet of the two men with rifles who were approaching. The two could not stop, tried to jump Doc and his opponent, and the bronze man freed arms and got hold of their legs, bringing them down. One lost his rifle.

Renny came through the door, swung fists larger than brickbats, and more formidable. Ham dived at a man, had the misfortune to get kicked in the face. That destroyed what patience the dapper lawyer had left, and thereafter his behavior was that of a wild cat, including the spitting sounds.

Doc took a man's neck, and his corded bronze fingers exerted pressure on the spinal nerve centers, in a spot which caused instantaneous paralysis to spread through the victim's body, a condition that would last for some time.

Ham got hold of the fellow who had kicked him, taking the man by the hair and knocking his head on the floor until he was senseless. Renny had already taken care of the survivor, seemed disappointed there were not more.

"Holy cow, where are they?" he roared.

They were across the room, opening another door to look in. At least, one of them was. He didn't like what he saw and slammed the door. Doc and Renny hit it. The panels left the door, although the

rest stayed in place.

The looker-in was a small man. He had been caught under Doc, Renny, and the door wreck. He yowled like a stepped-on pup. Renny reached for him. In some way the little man got up, dodged them, and fled like a rabbit. They pursued.

The fight began to spread all over the crazy house.

Long Tom, who had taken a different direction with the others, later claimed that fighting Vikkers' men wasn't so bad. It was the house. The nut house. "Everything you didn't expect happened," as he told it.

Doc and Renny agreed.

There was the room into which they chased the little man—and two other fugitives who had joined him. They plunged into the room, saw their opponents lining up against the opposite wall, and Renny laid hold of a chair. Chairs were Renny's favorite throwing missiles. But this one wouldn't come up. It was bolted to the floor.

Reason for the bolted-down chair became apparent when they dashed across the room. There was a loud clanking of machinery, deafening crashes and blinding crashes and bursts of white smoke; they lost their balances, flew through the air helplessly—

And then they were sitting on the ceiling of the room, it seemed.

It was stupefying, until they realized that it was a trick room and that it had turned over, the occupants of the insane place taking up positions on the ceiling when it became the floor.

The change had discomfited the others as much as Doc and Renny, but they recovered more quickly.

The fight was brief, marked by three shots which only damaged the walls, and two broken knuckles in Renny's right hand, which convinced him he might knock panels out of doors with his fists, but he couldn't knock holes in log walls, even by accident.

Leaving three foes asleep, one with a broken arm, Doc and Renny went on.

Renny sighted quarry, bellowed bloodthirstily, and set out again. It was only one man this time, so Doc let Renny go it alone.

Renny's victim fled out of a door into the night moonlight, and Renny followed. The chase went away through the spruce woods, with Renny doing considerable bellowing.

DOC SAVAGE turned right, drawn by shooting. The shots were deliberate, as if someone were entrenched. Crossing two rooms, the bronze man began using caution, and opened a door. He found that several of Vikkers' men had upended furniture to make a barricade, behind which they were crouched, covering the opposite door with rifles.

"Get our money together!" one man was snarling. "Hell, don't bother about anything else! We gotta get out of here!"

Doc took a table and rushed with it. He rammed the men from behind and mashed them into their barricade.

Ham and the rest came yelling through the opposite door and joined the mêlée. They outnumbered their foes now. Two of the enemy lost their rifles, and the others lost their courage, at about the same time. There was flight.

The flight led through a room—and the fugitives somehow doubled away in the darkness and got completely away for the moment. They simply disappeared.

Doc and his group hunted industriously.

Ham was rushing across a room with many hunting trophies on the wall when a lion head suddenly jumped at him and emitted an ear-splitting roar, scaring Ham so thoroughly that he fell down. He shot the mechanical joke lion between the eyes in his rage.

"They're outside!" Pat shrieked. She had peered through a window.

The fugitives were in flight down the path, it developed. And the chase was on.

The big and fearsome-looking bear was galloping along with the fleeing men, their flashlights disclosed. The bear was acting as if it wanted to play.

"That's a tame bear!" Ham snarled, remembering how it had terrified them earlier.

The chase led to a hangar, a large one for seaplanes. It was on the lake edge, made of wood and canvas, camouflaged to somewhat resemble stone, with a few prop spruce trees growing out of the top. There were half a dozen planes inside, including the X-ship, the Bermuda Wind, Doc Savage's speed ship, and others which were Vikkers' private craft.

THE fight in the hangar was noisy, probably sounded more dangerous than it was. Doc and the others found they could poke holes through the portions of the hangar walls that were canvas. They did so with their rifle muzzles. They had collected plenty of rifles.

First, they shot holes in the plane tanks, starting gasoline leaking. The fugitives took refuge behind oil drums. It did not occur to them to get in Doc's ship, which was fortunate. The fuselage of that one was coated with alloy armor that would considerably discourage ordinary rifle bullets. After enough gasoline had leaked to fill the place with fume stench, Doc spoke.

"We're going to throw lighted firebrands in there if you don't come out peaceably," the bronze man called. "In which case, you'll burn before we can do anything to help you."

Those inside thought it over until Long Tom lighted a match and set fire to a paper. Then there

were yells, and the Vikkers men came out with their arms up. Doc had them marched back up the cliff path, keeping plenty of light blazing from flashlights. "Keep the prisoners outside," Doc directed. "Some of us will go in and mop up, in case some of the other victims have regained consciousness." Ham said, "I sure hate to go back in that blasted house." "Vikkers!" a labored voice said. "I'm tied up in here!" Ham went into the room. It was dark. There was a blow. Then other blows—and Ham came flying out of the room backward and piled up on the floor. He clapped a palm to his left eye. The individual who had slugged Ham came waddling belligerently out of the room. Ham jerked the hand from his left eye to stare. The eye was already turning black. "Monk!" Ham yelled unbelievably. "Glory be!" Monk said. "Was it you I hit? I hope so." "But your face!" Ham exploded. "What happened to your beauty operation?" "What beauty operation?" Monk asked. Monk's face was puzzled. And it was certainly a face that had not been operated upon recently. It was as pleasantly homely as ever. "You went to Florenso—" "Oh, that," Monk said. "I didn't have any operation. I went to talk to that Florenso about it. And he hit me when I wasn't looking. Hit me with a blackjack. When I woke up, I was in a plane bound for here, also bound with rope." Monk pointed at the room out of which he had just come. "They've had me in there since. A minute ago I tried to change my voice and decoy one of Vikkers' men inside. But you came in." The homely chemist grinned at Ham's eye. "That was all right, too." Ham made a wild gesture. "But who's the other Monk?" he yelled. "The one with the bandaged face that's been goin' around with us?" "That," Doc Savage said, "is Vikkers."

HAM sat down and felt of his bad eye and tried to get it all straight. The others scattered to seize and bind the victims of the fight. They found Heck Noe and Phil van Blair locked in a room, and pretty Brick Palmer in another room, and brought them to Doc Savage, asking what should be done about them. "It won't hurt them," Doc said, "to get the same treatment as Vikkers and the others." Phil van Blair, Heck Noe, and Brick Palmer didn't think that quite fair, they explained vociferously. Which led Doc Savage into an explanation that they would merely go, with the other Vikkers' crew, to the bronze man's criminal-curing "college," an unusual institution which he maintained secretly in upstate New York. Here they would undergo delicate brain operations which were not dangerous when performed by the specialists Doc had trained, and which would wipe out all memory of the past. Following that they would be trained to hate crime and criminals, and taught trades or professions at which they could make good livings. Van Blair, Heck, and the girl still did not like it very much, even after Doc explained. But they gave up protesting. Renny was still missing. They dragged Vikkers up out of the cell which Doc and the others had lately occupied. "He could tell from our talk," Doc explained, "that he was going to be unmasked. He tried to sneak out of the cell. I was watching for that." "But you examined the fake Monk!" Ham yelled. "Tonight, down there on the beach! By flashlight!" "By very poor flashlight illumination," Doc agreed. "He was careful about that. He took the chance to allay any suspicions we might have had. He does resemble Monk, and he had paraffin and drugs shot into his face and a few cuts made, until he looked the part. Florenso must have done that for him. Naturally, I didn't reveal his identity then, because I had known for some time." "But why didn't you unmask him before?" "Because," Doc said, "while Vikkers was with us disguised as Monk, no mass attempt at murder was likely to be made."

LONG TOM found Habeas Corpus, the pig, and Chemistry, Ham's pet chimp, in the kitchen. The animals had broken into the food larder and were uncomfortably stuffed. Monk asked, "Doc, when did you get the idea this other Monk wasn't me?" "The first night, after the fight when Pat was seized," the bronze man replied. "The fake Monk rushed into that fight with a shiny metal chair. I found none of the fingerprints on the chair were yours, which was suspicious." Monk picked up the overstuffed Habeas Corpus by one winglike ear. "Did this thing act like that other guy was me?" "The fake Monk had doped Habeas," Doc said. "He said Habeas had upset the anaesthetic equipment

and gotten a gas jag. Habeas was really too drugged to know the difference."

Monk scowled at his pig.

"I was gonna give you to Ham for bacon, like he's been wanting for years," he said. "But I guess I won't now."

Long Tom said thoughtfully, "Vickers was Monk, so he just told us a story about seeing the yellow cloud on the lake tonight. Say, come to think of it, we saw the yellow cloud."

"What we saw," Doc said, "was smoke from an ordinary smudge bomb, with a yellow spotlight thrown on it--probably the beam from a flashlight that had yellow glass over the lens."

"Oh," Long Tom grunted. "And the fake Monk must have been afraid Heck Noe was gonna tell us who he was. That's why he slugged Heck Noe."

"No doubt."

"The whole thing happened," Long Tom said, "because Vickers was hired by some foreign power to steal the new X-ship and the new navy bomber, which was really the Bermuda Wind."

"

And he stole them."

"But he didn't make it stick."

Renny came back then, an ambling tower in the darkness, carrying fists. Over his shoulder he had a limp figure slung. He dumped this form on the ground.

Renny peered at Ham, who was massaging his eye.

"Something wrong with your eye?" he asked.

"I'm trying to see through my fist!" Ham snarled.

Renny snorted, and touched with his toe the limp form of the man whom he had chased into the woods, then brought back.

"Florenso, the plastic surgeon," he said. "Holy cow, could he run!"

Monk began rolling up his sleeves.

"Wake Florenso up!" the homely chemist ordered. "I'm gonna give 'im my private kind of beauty operation!"

THE END