

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

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"Up from earth's center by the seventh gate,
I rose and on the throne of Saturn sat—
And many a knot unraveled by the road,
But not the master knot of human fate—"

OMAR KHAYYAM

I

THE hours became days, and the days grew into weeks, and the weeks followed one another into a dull and terrible haze of time in which nothing really changed. Gilmore had scooped a shallow pit in the eroding chalk at the edge of a cliff, roofed it with a crude thatched trapdoor which he could close against the black things of night, and he spent the majority of his time there.

For a time, during Indian summer, one day was like another. It was then that Gilmore lost his shirt. He took off the shirt and arranged it carefully and, he thought, safely on the sandy beach, while he waded into the sea to stand motionless in hopes of clubbing an unwary fish for food. A huge and dour gray seagull, a typically thievish knave of a seagull, carried the shirt away. It was a sports shirt, and its gaudy plastic buttons fascinated the gull.

It was a small thing. The thin shirt was practically worthless as a protective garment. But Gilmore took it hard.

He ran wildly after the seagull, and the bird flapped out to sea, packing the shirt in its beak with gull-like greed. Gilmore, unable to swim, ran, screaming, up and down the beach, and when he was exhausted, he fell on his face and sobbed.

During the ensuing few days of Indian summer, Gilmore tried to teach himself to swim. He was unsuccessful,

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probably because he had no real heart left to put into it. It was pointless, anyway. A man could not swim the Atlantic.

The warm days ended. Winter came. The pools of rainwater in the potholes in the island stone began to have thin crusts of ice, and the rocks became bone-colored with coatings of frost.

Gilmore made hardly a move to thwart the certainty of freezing to death. It was too much of a certainty for him to compete against. It was inevitable. His pants now were frayed into shorts, and he stuffed them with dry seaweed, and tied seaweed about himself with other seaweed for binding until he resembled an ambulatory pile of the smelly stuff. Actually, it did no good, and it soon became definitely established in his mind that he would freeze to death. He began to wait for death almost as one would await a friend.

But rescue got there before death, although at first it was dull and undramatic.

Gilmore was sitting on a stone, contemplating eternity, when a pleasant voice hailed him. "Hello, there," the voice said. "Are you the proprietor of this heavenly spot?"

A glaze settled over Gilmore's sore eyes, and for a long time he did not turn around. In fact, he did not turn until he had conducted quite an odd conversation, in a small choking voice.

"So you finally got to me," Gilmore said. His voice had the hopelessness of a soul lost in interstellar space.

"Yeah. It took a little time to climb the cliff." The voice contained some pleasant surprise. "I didn't think you had seen us. You didn't give any sign. We were rather puzzled."

Gilmore shuddered and said, "I don't always see you, do I?"

"Huh?"

"Us?" Gilmore continued, selecting carefully from the words the pleasant voice had said. "Us? We? Is there more than one of you now?"

"There are eighteen of us," the voice said. "Say, what's the matter with you, fellow?"

"So you went back for more experienced help!" Gilmore went on.

"Eighteen of you!" croaked Gilmore. "Good God! They must have depleted the staff!"

"What staff?"

"The executive personnel in hell!" said Gilmore bitterly.

"Who are you kidding?" the amiably friendly voice inquired.

Now Gilmore swung around, to stare at the stranger, and to lose his composure until he was a shaking, gibbering man. Gilmore saw, standing before him, a tall middle-aged man with a fat ruddy face and a sheepskin greatcoat and a faint odor of good hair pomade that oddly fitted the icy island wind. Gilmore saw beyond the man, on the chopping sea, a sailing yacht of about eighty feet waterline, schooner-rigged, and on the beach a dory with shipped oars and a couple of waiting sailors in thick blue peacoats.

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Strangers all. Man, yacht, dory, sailors, all strangers and inconceivable. Unacceptable, an illusion, a figment concocted out of ghastly chicanery, a work of Satan as far as Gilmore could understand.

So Gilmore darted off the rock and fled screaming and whimpering, going as fast as a starvation-ridden string of bones could travel. Dr. Karl Linningen caught him easily, although the doctor was a portly, languid individual who secretly believed that exercise was poisonous.

THE schooner yacht, by name the Mary Too, sailed southward and westward over the heaving cold green seas, eventually rounding to the south of the Canadian-owned island of Campobello, and beating up through the narrowing tidal channel of Lubec, a small fishing village which is the most easternmost settlement in the United States, as far east in Maine as one can travel on dry land.

Dr. Karl Linningen, who was a psychiatrist by profession, and quite deserving of the title eminent, had by that time spent a goodly interval probing at Gilmore's body, and fishing in Gilmore's mind, and Dr. Karl was a puzzled man.

The tide in the rip that squirts past Lubec's stony chin was running a hellish stream when the Mary Too careened in, passed the stone jetty, wallowed about and labored into smoother water just off the docks where the sardine boats unloaded, and dropped anchor.

Dr. Karl immediately prepared to go ashore. Of the several guests aboard, none were doctors, because Dr. Karl felt that a man should get away from the familiar in order to relax. "You turn a race-horse into a pasture with other race-horses, and he's going to continue acting like a race-horse," was the way he phrased it. "When I'm on vacation, I want plow-horses in my pasture. One of the plow-horses was Bill Williams; a sports announcer on the radio, and the others were a broker, a shoe-shop owner, and three insurance men.

"You seem hell-bent to get ashore remarked Bill Williams, noting the doctor's preparations."

"That's right."

"Going to be gone long?"

"Don't know."

"What about our wild boy off the island?" Bill Williams asked. "Want to prescribe any medicine to give him in case you're gone a while?"

"He's the reason I'm in a hurry to get ashore," Dr. Karl muttered. "You can have him." Dr. Karl grinned wryly. "But keep him around until I get back, will you?"

"You mean if he wants to go ashore, tell him he can't?"

"In a gentlemanly way."

"And in case the gentlemanly way doesn't work, then what shall we do?"

Dr. Karl examined Bill Williams' considerable length, noting there were still a few signs of the old football framework under the lazy lard, and said, "I imagine you could manage suitable restraint, Bill."

"What is the legal leg I stand on while restraining?" Bill Williams asked.

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After hesitating, Dr. Karl said wryly, "I could fix that up, I suppose. Mind you, don't cripple him or anything."

"Gad, we sound like pirates consorting." Williams chuckled. "I get the picture. You think it wouldn't be any trouble to prove he was nuts and needed restraining. Righto. I'll keep your wild boy here for you."

Dr. Karl gripped the rail preparatory to swinging over into the dinghy, but turned to remark, "Why call him my wild boy?"

"Huh? Isn't he?" Williams inquired.

A wry smile touched Dr. Karl's lips. "No more than yours. Not as much. It was your donkeylike work as a steersman that brought us close enough to the witch's cake of a rock that we happened to see the poor looney." He dropped down into the dinghy, it rocked only a little under his expertly balanced weight, and he untied the painter after pulling the little craft along the rail with his strong hands.

"Back in an hour or two, Bill," he said, and took up the oars.

He used the oars in a powerful feathering stroke that sent the blades deep, then brought them back clear and flashing on returns. Dr. Linningen liked the sea, and he was not happy that he saw less and less of it as the years passed, nor was he pleased that this Gilmore had intruded into one of his rare vacation voyages. And Gilmore had intruded, all right. From the very first, he had been an article Dr. Karl couldn't ignore. No psychiatrist could have ignored him.

There was too much that was puzzling.

The Customs was in a gray wooden building beside the ferry slip, and Dr. Karl stopped there to check in and explain about Gilmore, and to answer the resulting questions.

"Is he an American citizen?" the official wished to know.

"Born in Kansas, I would say." And when the official's eyes widened doubtfully, Dr. Karl added quickly, "A matter of accents. I have studied them. The fellow has really told us almost nothing about himself, except to call him by the name of Gilmore."

"You mean he's too crazy to tell you anything about himself, Doc?"

"Crazy? That's too conclusive a word. His mental state hasn't permitted confidences or explanations"

"Be O.K. if I went out and talked to this Gilmore?"

"Go ahead, if you wish. It will do no harm, and probably no good."

"Then I will," the Customs officer said.

Dr. Karl nodded amiably, then changed the subject by asking, "How is the survey on the Quoddy project coming?"

"That engineer from New York, Renwick, is still around here," the official explained. "But they aren't puffing out any information that I've heard." He eyed the doctor curiously. "You read about it in the newspapers?"

Dr. Karl shook his head, said, "Radio." Then he went to the window, one facing north toward the area that had been the scene, some fifteen years before, of the Quoddy project for harnessing the resources of the terrific Fundy tides. A thin fog veiled the area, but he could see the stony islands that had been intended as an anchor for one of the dams that had never been built because Congress had concluded Quoddy was just so much dream stuff. "I happen to know this engineer, Renwick, and his associate, Doc Savage," Dr. Karl said suddenly. "That was the reason I asked."

The Customs man straightened; interest splashed over him like a stinging bath.

"Doc Savage?" the man repeated. "You're a friend of Doc Savage?"

Dr. Karl turned, lowered a shoulder deprecatingly, explaining, "In a professional sense, only." He prepared to leave, but hesitated when he noticed how the official was staring at him. "Something wrong?"

"I'm sorry," the officer said. He grinned. "This Doc Savage, a man with a reputation like that, you sort of wonder if he's real. Kind of a shock when you run across someone who really knows him."

"Savage is real enough." Dr. Karl moved to the door. "I sort of wondered if he would be around, visiting his associate Renwick."

"That would be something," the officer said. He followed the doctor to the door. "That would be something! Well, doctor, I'll look at this zany you picked off a rock and we'll probably let him in on your say-so. Be a shame to keep a guy out of this country just because he's a little nuts, considering some we've already got." The man was chuckling over his joke as Dr. Karl walked away.

THE rooming house stood on the rocky brow of a hill that formed the backbone of the town of Lubec. An ancient and large house, it had woodwork of teak fetched in sailing ships from the Orient, and could have been bought during the depression for five hundred dollars. The old lady who opened the door peered blankly and asked, "Who?"

"Savage," said Dr. Karl. "Doc Savage. Clark Savage, Jr. The Man of Bronze. All one and the same individual."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the old lady.

"Who is the landlady?"

"That's me."

Dr. Karl looked unsmilingly at the old face that was as crinkled and expressionless as a deflated toy balloon, and in a moment he asked, "Is Colonel John Renwick here? Renny Renwick?"

The old lady took her time. "Him? He over on the work."

"What time will Renwick be back?"

"Maybe about six. Maybe not."

Dr. Karl grinned wryly. "Thank you, madam. Would you tell him Old Doc Linningen called. Tell him also that if he wishes a decent cup of coffee, to drop aboard my schooner this evening sometime."

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The old lady stiffened angrily. "What's the matter with my coffee?" she snapped.

Dr. Karl looked surprised, then said, "Why, it's nectar, I'm sure." He had turned away and was halfway to the gate when the old woman suddenly yelled, "I make the best damn coffee in the state of Maine!" and slammed the door.

Grinning, wondering just what the old lady thought the word nectar meant, Dr. Karl walked back toward the waterfront. All routes from the top of Lubec's hill led downward, and presently Dr. Karl began a descent. He found himself walking rapidly, jarringly, as one does down a hill. Then he began running. Not running fast, just taking a series of crow-hops that must have looked rather ridiculous, and really were ridiculous because he couldn't stop himself. Finally, he had to throw out his hands and grasp a picket in a fence, and stopped himself with a jerk.

He rested there a moment to recover. "Sea legs," he muttered, putting in words the answer that seemed to explain his descent of the hill. But in a moment, when he began to descend again, he fell to running, and was helpless against it, and brought himself up only by steering against the side of a building. This happened once more, and he was perspiring and upset in his mind when he reached the foot of the street.

Kroeger, one of the crew, had watched him, and he saw Kroeger conceal a grin. Dr. Karl, irritated, snapped, "Dammit, man, I didn't have a drop!"

"I'm sure you didn't, sir," Kroeger said hastily, then added, "I came ashore in the other dink for supplies. Shall I give you a tow back to the vessel, sir?"

"No, thanks, Kroeger. I learned to row a boat several years ago," Dr. Karl said with a vehemence which he saw at once was excessively childish. But he did row back to the schooner in excellent style, and would have carried off a triumphant return if Gilmore hadn't started screaming and throwing things at him.

There was little sense to Gilmore's squalling, less to the things he threw. He just hurled what he could get his hands on – an oar, a boathook, a cushion, two life preservers, a lead squid used for mackerel trolling, the brass cover off the compass binnacle. Then Bill Williams, bouncing up from below decks, pinned poor Gilmore's arms and stopped the fusillade.

By the time Dr. Karl climbed thoughtfully aboard, Bill Williams had wrestled Gilmore below, and Kroeger had retrieved the thrown articles, except for the squid and the binnacle cover, which sank. Dr. Karl heard the unmistakable sound of a blow from the cabin, then Bill Williams reappeared, holding his right hand with his left.

"You shouldn't have struck him," Dr. Karl said.

"That's right. I darn near knocked down a knuckle. But that binnacle cover cost good money, didn't it?"

"No more than ten dollars, and he obviously wasn't responsible."

"Ten bucks is ten bucks, and he threw it in the drink," Bill Williams said. He shrugged. "O.K., maybe I shouldn't have hung one on him. Come to think of it, that was kind of silly of me, wasn't it?"

"Why did you?" Dr. Karl asked.

"Why, because – well, I fancied the idea at the time. I don't know. I hit him, and now I don't know why." Bill Williams looked confused. "Funny thing for me to do. I kind of like the guy."

"Did Gilmore say anything while you were struggling with him?"

"Nothing very coherent. Cussing – No wait. I think I did catch something about keeping Mr. Wail from getting aboard."

"Who?"

"Wail, or Wales, or Whale, something like that. It was confused." Bill Williams grinned wryly. "I wonder who Mr. Wail is to our guest Gilmore?"

Dr. Karl did not answer, and Bill Williams, who had not really looked squarely at Linningen since coming on deck, did so now. A considerable surprise wrenched at Williams, and he said, "You look pale! Aren't you feeling well? Did that loon hit you with something?"

"He didn't hit me with anything he threw," Dr. Karl replied grimly.

"Well, you look as if there was a rattlesnake in your pocket."

Linningen glanced oddly at the man, then away. And they were below in the main cabin, having a bracer, before Linningen muttered, "I would buy he rattler in preference."

He did not say anything further to remove Williams' resulting puzzled stare.

Later Dr. Karl stretched out on his bunk and endeavored to do what he frequently advised his patients to do, relax, take it easy, and grin away the worries, He was quite good at that; he frequently said that all a really good psychiatrist needs is the ability to show a patient how to kick his problems in the nose, and he could do this successfully with his patients. He didn't have much luck with himself now, however.

When he realized he was becoming wet with perspiration, he got up and took a shower.

Over the splashing water, he heard Kroeger shouting on deck. Lunging topside with a towel for clothing, he saw that Bill Williams, who could hardly row a boat in calm water, was trying to scull with one oar in the direction of Campobello Island, which lay half a mile distant across the tidal channel. The tide was now in full rip, and no place for a greenhorn in a dinghy.

Shouting angrily, Kroeger was in pursuit of Williams in the other dinghy, and he caught Williams, who apparently had thrown the other oar away. Kroeger towed Williams and the dinghy back, not without difficulty, making angry comments to which Williams gave a dazed, stupefied silence.

"Williams, what in thunderation were you trying to do?" Dr. Karl demanded.

Williams went below without a word of answer. He was pale. Kroeger asked, "What made Mr. Williams do a fool thing like that? He knows he's no hand with a boat. He'd have drowned sure, out in that rip."

Tense, an edge riding his voice, Dr. Karl asked, "Did you see him start out? How did he act?"

Kroeger had a queer look. "My God, yes. He just got in the dinghy, like a man sleepwalking. He untied the painter. Then he threw the oar away. He began to scull. Only he can't scull. He can't even row a boat decent. I yelled at him. He didn't pay no attention. So I overtook him, and when I did, I asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, and you know what he said to me? He said, "I was going after Mr. Wail." That's what he said. Just that. Then he looked more dazed than before, and he hasn't said a word since.

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"What was that name?"

"Wail. A Mr. Wail, he said."

Dr. Karl swung about and dropped down into the cabin. Williams was pouring himself a drink. A strong one. He looked up, and his face was strained and his deep-throated radio-announcer's voice was a thin harpish thing as he said,

"Don't ask me what the devil made me do that. I don't know."

"But you did know it was dangerous to get out in the tide rip with just one oar!"

"I should have," Williams muttered.

"What did you mean when you told Kroeger you were going after a Mr. Wail?"

Williams stared at his glass for a long time, as if he were afraid of the glass, and as if he were afraid of the things in his mind. "I didn't say anything like that to Kroeger," he muttered thickly.

Dr. Karl wheeled, and now he felt terror where he had been only puzzled, or perhaps it had been terror all along, and he had refused to recognize it as such. It was more heroic to be puzzled than afraid; it always is, he thought with horror. He jerked open the door of the cabin where Gilmore was, and saw the man inside lying on a bunk. "Gilmore!" Dr. Karl yelled.

But Gilmore was not dead. He rolled his head enough so that Dr. Karl saw his blank, wasted face and the pools of terror and desperation that the man's eyes had been from the time they found him on the island.

Closing and locking the door of the cabin, Dr. Karl told Kroeger, "Keep that man in there. I'm going ashore. Keep him there until I get back. And nobody else goes ashore. Nobody, understand!"

He went ashore, wrenching the little dinghy madly through the water with great oar strokes.

II

TWO small near-accidents happened to Dr. Karl Linningen during the next ten minutes. He did not at the time, he realized later, pay them the attention they deserved.

First, he almost fell out of the dinghy, which was a ridiculous thing to do, because he had been rowing small boats since he began breathing, practically. He swore briefly and bitterly about it, feeling it was a mishap due to overanxiety.

Still, if he had taken a dive into the icy water and ripping tide, he might have had a difficult go. He was not much of a swimmer, and the gulls were screaming and crying the sounds that a drowning man might have used to appeal for help.

Secondly, he was nearly run down by a car. That, too, seemed a mishap fitting his mood, the steepness and narrowness of the Lubec street, and the general confusion of things. It was a small car, quite ancient; after it was past, Dr. Karl noted that its rattle was a great thing like a whirlwind crossing a city dump, and he wondered how he could have missed such a clatter. The driver of the car? Dr. Karl tried to remember later. He thought it was a round little amiable man with large shining eyes, a little man who radiated a lovely

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temperament, the way a stove dispenses heat. A little guy you just naturally would like. Anyway, the old car missed Dr. Karl and so it did not seem too important.

Eventually, he got where he was going in such a hurry.

THE old lady said, "You!" and blew out her cheeks with sudden rage, causing all her wrinkles to disappear from the lower part of her face. "Who told you my coffee was no good?" she demanded.

Dr. Karl Linningen breathed heavily. "I'd like to see Doc Savage. It's very urgent. If I can find Mr. Renwick, he could help me locate Savage, I'm sure."

"My coffee – "

"I complimented your coffee, madam."

"You what?"

"I said it was nectar, probably. Very good, no doubt. I presumed it would be good, madam, without having sampled it." Dr. Karl was not very patient.

"Now is that so?" There was no friendliness in the old woman's eye. "Who you talk about?"

"Doc Savage. Renny Renwick."

"Not know either one.

Dr. Karl glared at her. "Madam, no doubt you're a character in your own opinion, and another time I might pretend to be amused. Just now, however, I've got damned important business with Doc Savage, and to find him, I've got to get hold of his aid, Renwick. When will Renwick be home?"

The old lady shrugged and started to close the door. Dr. Karl hastily inserted his toe in the crack, and shouted, "I want an answer! Where is Renwick!"

The woman glowered, asked, "You want to pull back a stub?" pointing at the foot in the door. Then she tried abruptly to kick Dr. Karl's shin. He was too quick, and shoved the door back while she was distracted. He entered the room.

The old lady backed away yelling, "Mr. Savage! Doc Savage!"

A rather striking man's voice from the room to the left said, "Easy does it, Marie. I was listening." The man appeared in the connecting door, and Dr. Karl recognized him immediately as Doc Savage.

Dr. Linningen had exaggerated somewhat when he said he knew Doc Savage. He had met the bronze man, and that was the extent of it. So he was astonished when Savage looked at him steadily and asked, "What is it, Dr. Linningen? You seem excited."

"I was here earlier!" Dr. Karl snapped. "I was told you weren't about. Not known here, as a matter-of-fact."

"You had better come upstairs, doctor."

"This is a funny kind of welcome. I'm not sure I like it."

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Doc Savage shrugged. "You came without an invitation, doctor." He lifted a hand, adding, "I am going upstairs, if you care to follow." He turned and mounted the stairs, and suddenly, when he was halfway up, he turned to say sharply, "If you do come up, it had better be for something worthwhile. We do not like pointless interruptions."

Dr. Karl snorted, but this hesitation lasted only a moment, and he followed the bronze man, thinking of some of the things he knew about Doc Savage, and of other things he had heard. He knew that Savage was an extremely fine surgeon, rather a wizard, for the man had devised some procedures in brain surgery that were exceptional, and his measurements of cerebri-fugal voltages were outstanding contributions to tabular analysis.

The man's physical build, Dr. Karl reflected, was more of a clue to his adventurous nature. Linningen was not small, but Doc Savage dwarfed him, and there was a metallic efficiency about the man, a dynamic force, a quality of power under close control, that was disturbing. Savage was not a man whose stature shrank on lengthening acquaintance.

They went into a rear second-floor room which had a spread of windows and much neat comfort. Linningen faced Savage and demanded, "Why be so hard to get to?"

Doc Savage appeared not to hear the question, but went to one of the windows and pulled back the curtains so that more of the afternoon sunlight could get in. Linningen, scowling because his question had been ignored, was about to speak when Savage forestalled him with a demand that was like a slap in the face. "What has driven you so far into fear, doctor?" Savage asked.

Linningen winced. "What's that?"

"You're a scared man, doctor."

"Oh, I am, am I?" Linningen growled, sounding like a small boy beginning a behind-the-schoolhouse brawl. "What gives you that idea? And did you notice that you're being a little insulting?"

"You feel that you're being insulted?" Doc asked dryly.

"I certainly do."

Doc Savage looked him over thoughtfully. "You're lucky, Linningen, that you weren't kicked out of here. You forced your way in, you know, by bulldozing an old lady. What do you think of that for bad manners?"

Linningen had taken a chair. He jumped up. "I'm leaving!" he snapped.

"Sit down," Doc Savage directed, "and get it off your chest."

"The devil with you!" Linningen shouted. He was halfway to the door when Doc Savage laid a firm grip on his arm, halting him. There followed a brief interval when Linningen debated taking a swing at the big bronze man, and also imagined what would probably happen to him. He grimaced.

'All right, Savage, the rough stuff wins. But I must say that I came up here for your co-operation, not your persecution."

"Sit down, Linningen."

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"Oh, all right. Take your hands off me." Linningen resumed his chair.

"Now, doctor, what's on your mind?" Doc Savage asked bluntly.

"I must say, Linningen retorted, "that this wasn't the way I hoped to start off."

"Let's not worry about the way it started, since it's already started," Doc Savage told him. "Let's be bothered about the ending. Go ahead with your troubles."

Doctor Linningen shrugged, scowled, got out a cigar, and noticed that the tobacco wrapper was broken and the cigar partly crushed. Without lifting his eyes, he remarked, "You seemed to know me by sight."

"Why shouldn't I know you?" Doc Savage countered. "You're a psychiatrist of some reputation. You have been in audiences to which I lectured."

"Yes, I heard you twice, and each time I was one in an audience of about three hundred specialists," Linningen said grudgingly. "You mean you noticed me?"

"You weren't in the audience either time by accident, doctor."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. Every man in those lecture audiences was carefully selected, whether or not he knew it. They were checked over, the quacks weeded out, and invitations given only to those who would be intelligent enough to understand what they were hearing."

"That's an egotistical statement," Linningen muttered.

"Not at all. If you will recall, I had but a small part in the lecture programs.

"The hell you did!" Linningen snorted. "You were the man they came to hear."

Doc Savage shrugged. "Suppose you get around to the story."

Linningen nodded. "I've got a boat. A sailboat, a schooner. I like to spend my free time aboard her, because I'm a nut on sailing. The name of the boat is the Mary Too. I named her after my wife, who is dead. For the past three weeks, I've been sailing the Mary Too with some acquaintances. We visited the northern shore of Nova Scotia, and on our way back we found a possessed man who was alone, starving and freezing, on a rocky island. We picked him up, and some things I don't understand have started happening. I want your help."

"Let's build up that part of the story," Doc Savage interrupted. "Let's put more parts in it."

"The island where we found the fellow doesn't have a name that I know of," Linningen explained. "It's about twenty miles offshore and two hundred miles from here. A grim place."

"Your schooner is about seventy feet on the waterline, isn't it, doctor?" Doc Savage asked.

"Yes, that's right. I'm surprised you knew it."

"And you were on a coastwise cruise?"

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"Yes."

"Do you customarily do your cruising twenty miles offshore? That's how far away from the mainland you say the island was."

Dr. Linningen moved his hand impatiently. "The ship is perfectly seaworthy. I'd rather risk her than an ocean liner in a blow."

"Seaworthiness has no bearing on it. Yachtsmen cruising the coast usually keep close inshore so that they can anchor in a calm harbor at night. It's more comfortable that way. Isn't that right?"

"Not always."

"But generally."

"Well, yes, generally."

"And your boat was twenty miles offshore and passed this barren island. How did that happen?"

"I don't see how that is important."

Doc Savage said, "Maybe it isn't. But if you're going to tell a story, let's have a complete one. How did you happen to pass that island?"

Linningen thought it over for a moment. "I guess it was because Bill Williams couldn't box a compass. Bill was steering, and he was told to hold north by east for a course, and he held northeast."

"This resulted in your passing the island?"

"I guess it did. You could hardly call it an island, though. It was more of a rock."

"Were you looking for a man on the island?"

"Of course not," Linningen snapped. "Who would expect a man on such a place? We were looking the place over through the binoculars, and saw him."

"Exactly who saw him?"

"I did."

"And it was an accident."

Dr. Linningen nodded grimly. "It sure was. It was a piece of bad luck, too."

"How do you mean, bad luck?"

"I'll get to that. This fellow had evidently been marooned on the island for three weeks or months. He was in bad shape. He had almost no clothes, and had tied seaweed around himself, for warmth. He was in ghastly shape. Starving and freezing."

"He must have welcomed rescue," Doc Savage suggested.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"On the contrary. Linningen shook his head. "He resented it. Here is exactly the way the rescue took place: This fellow – he says his name is Gilmore, but that's about all he has told us concerning himself – apparently didn't notice our arrival. Two of the crew rowed me ashore, and I approached Gilmore, who was sitting on a rock. I spoke to him. Without turning around, he said, 'So you got to me finally.' His voice sounded utterly hopeless. Then he explained his not noticing us by saying, "I don't always see you, do I?" Then he made a remark that indicated he thought we had all come from Tophet."

"From where?"

"Tophet. Hades. Hell. The place down under."

"That doesn't sound as if Gilmore was rational," Doc Savage said.

"That's right. He didn't act rational either. He jumped up and fled, screaming. We had to chase him to catch him and take him aboard the schooner. He fought us like a wildcat."

"He wanted to stay on the island?"

"That's the way he acted," Linningen agreed grimly. "The poor devil would have frozen or starved within a few days, so the humane thing seemed to be to remove him against his wishes. We did that. I'm damned sorry for it now."

"Sorry you saved the man's life?" Doc Savage asked. "What makes you say that?"

Linningen bit his lips. "The things that have happened since have started me wishing we'd never seen the fellow at all."

"What things?"

Linningen hesitated. "This stuff isn't going to sound very reasonable. It's stuff you have to see to believe."

"For example?"

"Queer things. Incidents hard to explain."

Doc Savage said impatiently, "You'll have to be more explicit than that, doctor."

Doctor Linningen was tense and uncomfortable on the chair. "It's hard to be specific about the intangible."

"You're a psychiatrist, doctor. The intangible is your business. You should deal with it very capably."

"Yes, I know," Linningen muttered. "If I wasn't a psychiatrist, I wouldn't be scared, probably. If I didn't have enough training along such lines to know better, I'd just think Gilmore was balmy, and let it go at that."

Doc Savage showed a sharper flicker of interest. "You don't feel Gilmore is crazy?"

"He's no more crazy than I am. Not as much so as I'm going to be if this keeps up," Linningen said.

"What do you mean by 'this'?"

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

Linningen compressed his lips, scowling at his clenched hands. Then he blurted, "There have been at least half a dozen unwitting attempts at suicide by the people on the Mary Too since that fellow Gilmore came aboard."

Doc Savage frowned. "Unwitting? Did you mean to use that word?"

"Yes. I'll explain it."

"You'd better," Doc Savage said dryly. "This isn't adding up to a very lucid or believable account."

"Let me tell you one thing that Bill Williams did. It will serve as an example. You know how the tide rips through the inlet here at Lubec? Well, Bill Williams got in a dinghy and threw away one oar and started sculling, – or trying to scull he can't row a dinghy passably, much less scull one – out into the tide. He would have drowned if one of the sailors hadn't noticed and overtaken him in time."

"Did Williams have an explanation?"

"Not a reasonable one. He said it just seemed like a thing he wanted to do at the time."

"He would have drowned?"

"The chances are nine hundred and ninety–nine out of a thousand that he would have."

"Did he know that?"

"He should have."

Doc Savage nodded. "This is interesting, doctor. You had better give me the other incidents."

"I will," Doctor Linningen said, and proceeded to relate a full account of events. He finished with the two narrow escapes which he'd had while en–route to the house a few minutes ago. "I don't know whether I should include those, because they might have been coincidences," he said.

"Who is this Mr. Wail, doctor?" Doc Savage asked thoughtfully.

Linningen shrugged. "You've got me. Just a name Gilmore has mouthed, is all I know."

"And Gilmore has explained nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"He hasn't said how he got on the island, or why he wished to remain?"

"He hasn't explained a thing."

Doc Savage asked sharply, "Have you passed over any cumulative impressions, doctor?"

Linningen hesitated. "I don't believe I understand what you mean by cumulative impression."

"Your story indicated that someone might have returned to the schooner with you at the conclusion of your first trip ashore," Doc Savage said.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

Linningen winced. "I was alone. I was absolutely alone in that dinghy when I rowed back."

"What about the crew member who was also ashore?"

"Kroeger? He came back alone, too."

"You're sure."

"Positive."

"And it was at you that Gilmore started throwing things?"

"He threw things at my dinghy, yes."

"At you, or at the dinghy, or shall we say at some presence in the dinghy of which you were not aware?"

Linningen shuddered. "Let's not be fantastic. I was alone in the dinghy. I would know if I was alone, wouldn't I?"

"But Gilmore threw things at the dinghy? As if trying to drive someone away?"

"Yes."

"And Williams, after he started off into the deadly tide rip with one oar, said that he was going after Mr. Wail?"

"Yes. Or Kroeger said that's what he said."

"Does Williams know a Mr. Wail?"

"He says he doesn't. Williams can't explain what he did."

"I see."

"I hope to God, you do see," Linningen blurted. "I hope you've got some explanation."

Doc Savage went to the window, opened it an inch, and the curtains immediately fattened under a little gust of inrushing wind. The air was chilled, freighted with the smoky odor from the herring sheds along the waterfront. It was a smell that hung over Lubec perpetually, the way crude oil odor pervades refinery towns.

Turning abruptly, Doc Savage said, "Linningen, you've omitted to explain why you came to Lubec. Don't tell me it was a planned port of call, because it's off the usual route and doesn't have a very good yacht anchorage."

Linningen nodded. "That's easy. I came in hope of finding you." The psychiatrist looked up, saw that Doc Savage was waiting for a further explanation, and added, "That's right. I knew Renny Renwick, your friend and associate, was here. I heard that on the radio. There was a newscast about a congressional discussion of the subject of going ahead with the dormant Quoddy project, and Renwick, the noted engineer, being employed to make a survey and recommendations to the committee."

"Because Renny Renwick was here, you thought I would be?" Doc Savage asked dryly.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"Not necessarily. But through Renwick seemed the best way of getting hold of you."

"And why were you so anxious to find me?" Doc inquired.

Linningen jumped up nervously. "Dammit, isn't that obvious by now? I want you to investigate this odd thing. Your sideline is dealing with the unusual, and I thought you would be interested, and the most capable man I could think of. God knows, it's unusual enough."

"You want me to talk to Gilmore?"

Linningen nodded eagerly "That's it. Better still, take him off my hands."

"You want to get rid of Gilmore?"

"You're darned tooting I want to get rid of Gilmore. He's giving me the compound willies." Linningen took a careful grip on himself, and added, "You understand, I'm not passing the buck. Gilmore is just something I don't understand. I'm sure you can fathom him. I can't. I'll bet you will be fascinated by Gilmore. I'm not. All I want is to see the last of him." 'And Mr. Wail?"

"I don't know who or what Mr. Wail is," Linningen said vehemently. "You can have Mr. Wail, too, with my blessings."

"You seem extremely anxious to shed your responsibilities, Linningen."

"Responsibilities!" Linningen yelled. "What responsibility have I got toward Gilmore? I saved the man's life by taking him off an island where he would have starved. Isn't that enough?"

"Is it?"

"Why don't you talk to Gilmore and see for yourself?" Linningen asked.

"I will."

Linningen's sigh of relief was a gulp. "When?"

"In about an hour."

Linningen's face fell. "I... was hoping you would go back to the boat with me now.

"No. In an hour, I'll be there. You go back to the schooner and wait, doctor."

Linningen nodded reluctantly. "All right. But you will be sure and come, won't you?"

"I'll be there."

III

AFTER he had closed the front door behind Linningen, Doc Savage wheeled, raced back up the stairs to the pleasant parlor, jerked open a connecting door, and confronted the two men there.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"Did you hear all that?" he demanded.

"Practically all," said one of the two men. He was a short fellow, nearly as wide as he was tall, with a face that would frighten his own mother. He was Monk Mayfair – Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair – and he had a worldwide reputation as a chemist, but was better known as an assistant of Doc Savage. "It impressed me as a screwball set-up which has a hidden gimmick in it somewhere," Monk added.

"Never mind the analysis," Doc Savage told him. "I want you to check the story. Visit the waterfront. See if the things happened that Linningen says happened. Find out if anyone saw Williams start sculling out into the tide rip."

"Right now?" Monk asked reluctantly.

"Immediately. I'm going aboard that schooner in an hour, and I want the information before then."

"O.K.," Monk said, seizing a mackinaw coat of a hideous green-and-yellow check design. "But I just caught Ham Brooks swindling me in a card game, and I was about to deal with him."

Ham Brooks snapped, "Your own stupidity and greed is the only thing that swindled you, you oaf!"

Monk rushed out, growling, "We'll take it up later, you shyster!"

Doc Savage eyed Ham Brooks narrowly. "Have you two started gambling against each other?"

Ham laughed. "Monk? That missing link is too tight to bet a penny against a sure thing. If he had a penny to bet, which he hasn't."

"You two promised to tone down your fussing."

"We have," Ham said virtuously "There hasn't been a blow struck in three days. Although, Heaven knows, he has provoked me."

Doc Savage, who had put up with this interminable quarreling far years, sighed wearily.

"Your job is to get the low-down on Linningen," he told Ham. "The recent low-down. Does the man need money? Is he mixed up in anything? Use the telephone and contact people who would know, his banker, his friends, and any other leads you can dig up in half an hour."

Ham grinned. "What about his sanity? Do I check on that?"

"The man is sane enough."

"His story didn't sound it," Ham said.

"A story doesn't have to sound reasonable to be true," Doc reminded him. "We just want to check on this one and make sure it is."

Forty minutes later, Doc Savage strode into a smoke-house on the north shore of the bay, a window of which gave a view of the Mary Too lying at anchor.

"Well?" he demanded. "Did Linningen's story check?"

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"It did as far as I went," Monk said. "I found two loafers who saw the whole thing. Williams starting out into the tide rip sculling the dinghy. And Gilmore throwing things at Linningen. It checks."

Ham Brooks said, "Linningen has thirty-odd thousand dollars in the bank, about his normal bank account. He isn't in any trouble as far as I can learn. None of his friends have noticed him acting nutty."

"Then the story seems true," Doc said.

Ham grimaced. "Not to me. Not a balmy yarn like that."

"You two keep an eye on the schooner," Doc directed. "I don't think anything will happen. But keep a watch, anyway"

Monk Mayfair had something on his mind, and when Doc was halfway to the door, he got it out. "Doc, what was the description of the driver of the car that almost ran Linningen down?"

"A little round man who looked so utterly pleasant that Linningen noticed how pleasant he looked, even when he was about to have an accident," Doc told him.

"That's him," Monk said.

"You saw the chap?"

"Yeah, I think he gave me the once-over," Monk replied. "For the love of Mike!"

Monk began to look uncomfortably at the floor. "He sort of gave me the run-around. I got kind of a surprise when I noticed him, because I hadn't seen him around. He was sure a pleasant looking little codger. Kind of made you think of a pint-sized edition of Santa Claus."

"I hope," Doc said, "that his pleasant looks didn't keep you from finding out why he was interested in you."

Monk ducked his head slightly. "That wasn't what kept me from questioning him."

"What did?"

"He went," Monk replied. "And I mean went. First, he turned around and strolled into one of these fisherman's supply stores, and I go in after him, and puff! He wasn't there."

"Couldn't anyone tell you where he went?"

"No one admitted seeing him," Monk replied, looking oddly at Doc. "That was darn funny, too, because the clerks were standing around with nothing to do but watch for customers. They certainly saw me quick enough when I came in."

"Did the incident seem queer to you, Monk?" Doc asked.

Monk made a face. "The guy just walked into the store and ducked out without anyone noticing him, that's all. I don't believe in this wild stuff Linningen was spilling."

"I'm going aboard the schooner," Doc said. "Keep an eye on the vessel."

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

Doc Savage strode to the ferry slip, sent a powerful hail in the direction of the schooner Mary Too, and a dinghy came bobbing toward shore rowed by a sullen middle-aged man with a leathery face. The latter held the dinghy near the slip with one hand and growled, "Jump aboard, if you're Doc Savage."

"You're Kroeger, aren't you?" Doc asked.

Kroeger stiffened, scowling upward, and demanded, "Did somebody tell you that, or is this more goon-dust?"

"Doctor Linningen described you, Kroeger," Doc told him.

"Oh." The man picked up the oars. "You sit in the stern. He began to row.

"Everything all right aboard the vessel?" Doc asked.

Kroeger did not answer immediately. He maintained a sullen silence all the way to the schooner. Then he said bitterly, "Everything's fine, fine, fine!" It had an explosive quality.

Doc noted that the Mary Too was a well-constructed vessel that was a compromise between the yacht type of luxury which appealed to landlubbers and occasional sailors, and the sturdy deep-sea traditional construction which went to the heart of a real salt-water man. "She's a neat ship," he told Linningen, when the latter popped up from below decks.

"Yes, yes, of course," Linningen agreed nervously "I... I'm afraid that poor Gilmore is going to be difficult."

"In what way?" Doc asked.

"Well, Gilmore won't leave his stateroom," Linningen explained. "But come below. We'll try again to get him out."

Linningen, with the quick movements of a man on the ragged edge of nerves, hurried below and jerked at the knob of a stateroom door. "Still has it locked on the inside," he said with exasperation. "Gilmore, open that door! Stop this foolishness."

From inside the stateroom, there came silence.

"Isn't he speaking?" Doc asked.

Linningen shrugged. "Gilmore has maintained a sullen silence most of the time. I can't understand why he's in a huff, though."

"Did you tell him I was coming aboard?" Doc asked curiously.

"Yes, I did."

"How did he react to that?"

Linningen suddenly pounded on the door with his fist. "This is his reaction, I suppose. Anyway, he went into his stateroom, and hasn't come out, and won't answer."

Doc asked impatiently, "Aren't there portholes through which you can get a look at him? Are you sure he isn't ill?"

"There are portholes, all right, and a skylight, too, but he drew the curtains over them," Linningen replied. "Dammit, I'm going to break the door down."

"That will cost you the price of a repair," Doc reminded him.

"I don't care if it does!" Linningen snapped, and threw his weight against the door. His first attempt was not successful. In a burst of rage, Linningen leaped back, then plunged at the panel, which burst out around the lock. Linningen stumbled inside, immediately blurted, "Good God! Who are you?"

Doc Savage, stepping to the door, saw an amiable-looking plump little man seated casually on the edge of a bunk. He was familiar, but not because Doc Savage had seen him before. He answered the description of the friendly-faced man who had almost run down Linningen in a car, and who had given Monk the once-over.

Doc pointed at the amiable man. "Is this Gilmore?" he demanded.

"No!" Linningen said. He seemed completely dumfounded.

"Who is he?" Doc asked.

The chubby man answered that himself.

"I'm Mr. Wail," he said.

IV

Fifteen minutes later, Doc Savage strode angrily on deck and stood there drumming his fingertips on the boomcrutch which supported the mainsail and its boom. Doc's bronze face was composed, but his mind wasn't. Presently he stopped drumming, rubbed his jaw, and walked quickly to the forecabin hatch. The hatch was open, and peering down it, he saw Kroeger and two other sailors sitting at a table playing cribbage.

"Kroeger," Doc said sharply.

Kroeger was smoking a pipe, and removed it to say, "Yes, sir?"

"Did you know Gilmore had left this boat?" Doc asked.

Blankly, Kroeger said, "Huh? He has?" Kroeger thought it over for a moment, then exclaimed, "Hey, he couldn't have. Nobody came or went but you, Mr. Savage."

"Nevertheless, Gilmore isn't aboard now," Doc told him.

"I don't believe it! This boat ain't so large but that we hear everybody who comes aboard or leaves."

"You didn't see Gilmore leave?"

"I sure didn't."

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"Who brought Mr. Wail aboard?"

Kroeger's jaw dropped. "Mr. Wail? Who's he? There ain't nobody come aboard but you, Mr. Savage."

"You're positive, are you?"

"You're darn tootin', I'm sure. I'd bet my right arm on it."

"You would lose that arm, fellow," Doc told him. "Because Gilmore is gone, and Mr. Wail is aboard."

The sailor grinned foolishly. "Gilmore must have told you his name was Wail. That guy's nutty."

"If Gilmore is the guy who just talked to us or rather didn't talk to us," Doc said dryly, "he has shortened his height about a foot and put on seventy pounds of weight."

Wheeling, Doc went back to the cockpit, and encountered Linningen, who looked excited and relieved. "Mr. Savage, I think this Wail is ready to talk," Linningen exclaimed.

"It's about time," Doc said. He dropped down into the cabin and confronted the chubby Mr. Wail, who gave him an amiable grin. "Have you decided to give an accounting of yourself?" Doc demanded.

Wail's grin widened, giving him an appearance so completely friendly that it was almost unnatural. Wail's voice was soft and had the qualities of a rich, sticky syrup.

"It distresses me to see you unhappy," Wail said. "So I suppose I should relieve your curiosity."

Doc eyed the man narrowly. "Let's have it!" He had not been able to figure Wail, and there were qualities about the man that bothered him. He didn't like the completely happy and friendly manner the man had. There was something unnatural about it.

"You don't seem to like me," Wail remarked cheerfully.

"Let's not waste time on who likes who," Doc told him briefly. "The point is, there was supposed to be a fellow named Gilmore in that stateroom. We broke in, and we didn't find Gilmore. We found you. Now, let's hear you account for that."

The fat Mr. Wail chuckled. "It's quite simple. I was there. Gilmore wasn't."

Doc said grimly, "It's not that simple, Wail. If anything unpleasant has happened to Gilmore, it will be a lot less simple than that, I can assure you."

Wail gave a hearty laugh. "Are you threatening me?"

"Draw your own conclusions," Doc retorted.

Shrugging, Wail said, "Well, I was in the stateroom and Gilmore wasn't. As to why I wouldn't open the door – I notice it seems to bother you – it was simply because I didn't wish to open the door. Why? Because I was irked."

"Irked by what?" Doc demanded.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"By being struck over the head." Wail examined Doc's face for disbelief, saw plenty of it, and laughed heartily. "Really, I'm not spoofing you. I came aboard and went into that stateroom, and someone sapped me over the head. I didn't see my assailant, but I could hazard a guess as to who it was?"

"Are you intimating Gilmore assaulted you?" Doc asked bluntly.

Wail smirked. "In a delicate way, I might be intimating exactly that. Someone did. And Gilmore is missing, you say.

Doc threw an intent look at Wail. The man wore an expensive suit, a clean blue shirt of good cloth, a rather loud regimental cravat, and his shoes shone. There were, Doc noted, no signs of salt water having splattered his shoes.

"Look here, fellow, you're putting on quite an act," Doc said coldly. "If Gilmore hit you, come out and say so. Then you can go right ahead and say why."

"I didn't see Gilmore hit me.

"Would you know if it was Gilmore, had you seen him?"

"Meaning do I know Gilmore by sight? I certainly do. And I would have known if he struck me, had I seen him." Wail smiled.

Doc nodded. "Now you're getting started on a story. You know Gilmore. Now, who is Gilmore? Let's have that."

"I'm not sure I like your prying at me," Wail murmured.

"I don't expect you to like it," Doc said. "Who is this Gilmore?"

Wail shrugged. His grin hadn't diminished. "Maybe I'll not tell you a thing." At this point the sailor, Kroeger, who had come to the companionway to listen, struck a match to light his pipe. It was not getting dark outside, and the igniting match made a little splash of light. Mr. Wail showed an emotion besides friendly glee for the first time. He started violently, paled, and turned his face away from the companionway.

Doc asked curtly, "How did you get out here, Wail?"

The chubby man shuddered, then regained control. "In a small boat. How does one travel over the water? Walk on it?" he snapped.

"Where did you get the small boat?"

"I rented it, naturally."

"No one saw you come aboard," Doc told him. "Didn't they? They should have had their eyes open. No one heard you, either."

"They might try opening their ears, as well," Wail said slyly "I assure you I came aboard. As evidence, I offer myself as being among the present." The little man smirked once more, added, "I believe I wasn't going to give you information I shall adhere to that course, I think." He went over and sat primly on a bunk.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

Linningen caught Doc's eye, blurting, "I don't see how he got aboard. I really don't. It's uncanny. Doc shoved past Linningen, pushed open the door into a forward cabin, and said, "You're Bill Williams, aren't you?" to the bulky young man sprawled on a berth there.

"Yeah, I'm Bill," the young man said. He lifted his head, got a good look at Doc, and hastily swung out of the berth. "Say, you're Doc Savage!" he exclaimed. "I've got a head-ache, and I had dozed off in a nap. Linningen told me you were coming aboard, and I'm sure sorry I wasn't awake to greet you, but I slept through that."

"You slept through several things, Williams," Doc said dryly "Will you come in here a minute? I want you to meet a fellow."

A moment later, Williams stared at Mr. Wail blankly, and asked, "Am I supposed to know this chap?"

"Don't you?" Doc asked.

"No." Williams peered at Wail again. "No, I don't know him."

"Better think over that answer, Williams," Doc said. "This is Mr. Wail, the fellow you said you were going hunting for when you started off into the tide rip with one oar."

The jerk of astonishment that Williams gave seemed genuine. His next reaction was harder to define. He stepped back, his face grew strained, and he narrowed his eyes. Then he growled, "I don't remember a damned thing about starting off in a dinghy with one oar! Somebody's ribbing me. And I've stopped thinking it is funny!"

Linningen exclaimed, "Bill! Nobody's kidding you!"

"The hell they aren't!" Williams snarled, and wheeled back into his cabin and slammed the door.

Mr. Wail laughed outright. "Another silent man on your hands," he said. Ignoring Wail, Doc crossed the cabin, bounded out on deck, and stood facing the shore. He used his arms to signal, semaphore fashion, instructions to Monk and Ham, who should be watching through the dusk. They were watching, because presently he saw them leave the shack where they were stationed, both at a run. In a few minutes, they were back, and Monk wigwagged some information with his arms.

Doc dropped back into the cabin, strode to Wail, and seized the man's arm. "Nobody on shore rented you a small boat to row out here, Wail," Doc said emphatically. "And no one saw Gilmore row ashore. Now you're getting the choice of talking to me, or telling it to the police, either way you want to have it. The police will have the same questions I've got – have you been hiding on the boat, and did you chuck Gilmore overboard to drown when you got the chance?"

Wail was not surprised. At least, his grin did not waver. "I believe you might find a friend of yours who can say I was ashore not more than an hour ago," he said. "You have a friend named Monk Mayfair, haven't you?"

A flicker of respect crossed Doc's face. "You're a sharp one, Wail." Then he added, "But you're an odd one, too. And I think you're going to give us a lot of words in about one minute."

Wail snorted. "In one minute, I shall be just as silent as far as information is concerned, as I am now I don't like your way, and I've decided not to say a thing – "

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

His eyes widened in terror and he jumped back. "Here! Damn you! Don't do that!" Wail's back slammed against a bulkhead, stopping his retreat.

Doc Savage had done nothing more menacing than strike a match on his thumbnail. The red flame sizzled around the tip of the match. Doc waved the fragment of fire casually in front of Wail's face. Wail screamed in terror. He lunged sidewise in an effort to escape. Doc tripped him, and he fell flat. Doc immediately planted a knee on his stomach, holding him down, and passed the lighted match in front of Wail's eyes. Wail screeched, his whole body convulsed in an agony of horror, and then suddenly he relaxed into a limp mound of soft flesh. Wail had fainted.

Linningen gave an astonished exclamation. "An extreme case of pyrophobia!" the psychiatrist ejaculated. "How in thunder did you catch on, Savage?" Doc indicated the companionway, where the sailor, Kroeger, had dropped his pipe in amazement. "Kroeger lit his pipe a minute ago, he said. "I caught it then."

"You mean that guy's scared of a little thing like the flame of a match?" Kroeger demanded. Heaving Wail's limp figure onto a bunk, Doc said, "Get some cold water to dash in his face. I think Mr. Wail is going to talk his head off when he wakes up. Kroeger, you be handy with a few matches if he doesn't."* * *

Wail moaned, turned over, and presently managed to focus his eyes on Doc Savage, whereupon beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead.

"We're all ears," Doc told him. When Wail seemed to show signs of thinking it over, Doc told Kroeger, "Have you got a newspaper that would make a nice blaze?"

Wail emitted a choking sound. "Cut it out!" he croaked. "God, I can't stand being around fire. I'll tell you all I can. Gilmore is only his first name. He's really Gilmore Sullivan. Gilmore James Sullivan, in full." Wail fell silent, swallowing.

"You've got a fine start, so go right ahead," Doc told him.

"Gilmore Sullivan is twenty-nine years old. He studied geology in Harvard, and has worked at it some since, but not much. He is unmarried. He has money, which he inherited from his father."

As he spoke, Wail was looking at his fingers as if checking off the items by the digital system.

"Gilmore has a sister," he continued. "She is his only immediate family Gilmore lived at a lodge about a hundred miles inland from here. The sister lives there, too. I can take you there. The sister's name is Leona. She is in her early twenties, and pretty She has some money also. The father divided his estate between the brother and sister."

When Wail hesitated, Doc said sharply, "That was just background stuff. Go ahead with the part that counts."

Wail said, "About four months ago, Gilmore disappeared, and I was hired to find him." Wail stood up, adding, "That's all. Now I think I'll get out of here."

"Wait a minute," Doc told him. "You're just starting. What were the circumstances connected with Gilmore's disappearance?"

Wail was getting the eternal grin back on his face. "He just got to acting nutty, and went away. The sister, Leona, figured he had blown his top. I guess she was touchy about maybe there being insanity in the family, and didn't want any publicity, because she hired me to hunt for Gilmore, instead of notifying the authorities."

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"Are you a professional finder of lost people?" Doc asked.

"That's right. That's exactly what I am." Wail nodded vehemently several times. "I'm a private investigator. A sleuth.

"Is that all?"

"It's all."

"You're making it a little too simple. You've neglected to explain how you found Gilmore was aboard, and how you got out here to the boat without anyone seeing you.

Wail grinned. "It's just as simple as I'm making it. I was in Lubec by accident, and I heard talk ashore about Gilmore having been found on an island. I rented a boat and rowed out. If nobody saw me, I can't help that. They just didn't look, because I sure wasn't invisible."

"You weren't heard boarding the schooner," Doc reminded him.

"I can't help that either. Nobody was on deck, and I went below to see who I could find. I didn't see anyone, and started opening stateroom doors. The first one I opened, I got bopped over the head. When I woke up, I was lying on the floor."

Mr. Wail put on his smirk. "I'm a little sensitive about being knocked out. I was scared, too, and I locked the cabin door. I kept it locked because I was afraid, and for no other reason. Now that's all I've got to say and it's the truth.

"You think Gilmore went ashore in your rented dinghy?"

"Why not?"

"Where do you think Gilmore would go next?" Doc asked.

"Who knows what a crazy man will do? Maybe he took out for home."

"Home? You mean where his sister lives?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Can you take us there?"

"I can if you want me to", Wail told him.

V

AS the automobile rushed around a curve in the road, Doc Savage told Monk Mayfair "Turn on the gadget. Let's see what Linningen and Williams have to say to each other."

"This radio, you mean?" Monk hauled a small portable out of the rear seat, turned the switch, and asked, "What frequency are they on?" "Try eight hundred and sixty megacycles," Doc said.

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Monk tuned in the receiver and got a rush of background noise along with the kind of sounds that would come from a microphone concealed in a car.

"They're kinda quiet," Monk said.

The Maine woods, a thick green mass all around them in spite of the early winter, rushed past almost brushing the car. The second car carrying Linningen and Williams was about half a mile behind them. "Do you suppose they suspect we have a radio transmitter concealed in their car?" Ham Brooks asked.

"There's a small chance," Doc replied. "But I don't think so.

Wail was riding with Doc, Monk and Ham. They noted that he was staring at the radio in perplexity. Finally, his puzzlement got the best of him, and he asked, "What is that thing?"

Monk and Ham both laughed. Then Monk said, "It's a high frequency radio receiver, buddy. The sending set is hidden in the car in which Williams and Linningen are riding."

"I don't understand," said Wail.

"I don't know how I'd make it any clearer," Monk told him. "But if the thing works, we can hear anything Williams and Linningen say to each other."

Mr. Wail looked vaguely alarmed. "Indeed? I don't believe it."

"Aw, don't be a sap. It's a very ordinary radio set-up. You should see some of the complicated stuff we use.

"You mean you can hear them in that other vehicle without being there?" Wail demanded nervously.

"That's right."

Wail's eyes popped slightly. "And you don't consider such a miracle unusual?"

"Nope," Monk said. "It's nothing, compared to even such a commonplace thing as television."

Wail examined them in apprehension. "You... uh... haven't been where I have been, by chance?" he asked uneasily.

"What," Monk asked, "do you mean by that?"

"I... nothing." Wail seemed sorry he had brought up the subject.

Monk flung out a large hand and gripped Mr. Wail's loud necktie before the latter could dodge. "Just what did you mean by that crack, hub?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Wail insisted.

"You ain't pretending you don't know what radio is, are you?" Monk asked.

"I... I shouldn't have said a thing," Wail mumbled.

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"Because if you're pretending that," Monk said, "I'll bat you one on the ear. I've listened to all the preposterous stuff I want to hear."

Wail only ducked his head.

"And furthermore," Monk went on, "if you're talking us off into the Maine woods on a wild goose chase, I'll shake you loose from your feathers. We'd better find poor Gilmore has a sister living back here in the woods, and that she hired you to locate Gilmore, or you're in trouble."

Mr. Wail looked uncomfortable.

"I think he's lying to us," Ham Brooks put in.

"If he is," Monk said, "he probably isn't the only one. Just between you and me, nobody connected with this crazy affair has said two consecutive words I can believe."

The road became rough and crooked, and it climbed into rugged hills. In the car behind, Linningen and Williams hardly spoke, although Linningen growled once, "This is a hell of a road. I wonder if they know where they're going?"

"Who cares?" Bill Williams asked bitterly. "Everybody is crazy, anyway. I must say you certainly acted demented," Williams added.

Linningen snorted. "You should talk!"

"Let's not argue about it," Bill Williams muttered. "But we're free of that Gilmore, and I don't see the sense of trying to find him again. That guy is trouble."

"He's trouble, all right," agreed Linningen.

"A kind of trouble I don't understand," said Williams.

"You're sure right about that," Linningen told him emphatically. "But I don't think we should drop it now. I think we should satisfy our curiosity"

"Satisfy your curiosity?" Williams asked bitterly. "Or keep straight with Doc Savage?"

"A little of both," Linningen replied.

Doc Savage smiled slightly. Monk Mayfair complained, "That doesn't give us much, except the reason they tagged along so readily when you asked them to. I wish they'd talk more. They must be scared."

Doc locked the brakes, skidded to a stop at a fork in the road, and asked, "Which road do we take here, Wail?"

Wail seemed confused. "Let me step out a moment and have a look," he said.

Ham Brooks burst out impatiently, "Dammit, my man, there are the road signs as clear as the nose on your face. Route F or G? Which one?"

"The road signs don't mean much to me," Wail mumbled.

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"Why not?" Ham barked.

"The roads weren't here when I passed this way last!" Wail retorted, with his first show of temper. "Things have changed. You've no idea what a handicap that is when I try to find my way around!"

Ham's jaw dropped. Wail jumped out of the car, and Ham looked at Doc and Monk and made a twirling motion with a forefinger beside his forehead. "Our happy-faced guide is as full of nuts as a squirrel's dream," Ham said. "Doc, how long ago would you say these highways were built?"

"Some time hack," Doc said. He was thoughtful. "We might ask at the next service station."

Wail sprang atop a large boulder, and peered in the direction of some distant mountain peaks. He seemed to be making a sincere effort to get his bearings. In a moment, he returned, pointed to the right-hand turn, and said, "That one."

Two miles farther on, an elderly farmer riding a cart came into view, and Doc brought the car to a stop. "Hello, there," he called to the farmer. "Have you lived in this neighborhood long?"

"All my life," the farmer replied.

Doc nodded. "Fine. You're just the man to give us the answer to something we were wondering about. How long ago was this road, and the one back a couple of miles at the fork built? Could you give us an idea?"

The farmer asked, "You mean how long ago were they paved?"

"The roads were here before they were paved?"

"Oh, sure.

"In the same spot?"

"That's right. The State just graded 'em and put on the blacktopping."

"When was that?"

"Right close to thirty years ago," said the farmer.

"But the roads were here prior to that time?"

"Oh, sure.

"How much before that, would you say?"

"Well more'n a hundred years, I could say fur sure," the farmer replied. 'About half a mile down the road, there's a stone bridge with the date cut in it, 1839. The road was probably here before that." Doc thanked the farmer, and put the car in motion. Monk and Ham exchanged puzzled glances, and Monk gave Wail a poke in the ribs. "The road wasn't here when you passed last, but it was here more than a hundred years ago," he said.

Wail winced. "I could have told you that."

"My God! You're not sticking to that story?" Monk demanded.

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"I certainly am!" Wail snapped.

"You think I'll swallow that?"

"I wish," said Wail violently, "that you would swallow your own head. As for believing me, I am accustomed to not being believed."

"I can sure see where you would be," Monk told him. "You're full of nice believable stories."

Doc Savage whipped the car over a hilltop, pointed and demanded, "Is that the place, Wail?"

Wail smirked. "It is. Didn't think I would find it, did you? Well, I can find anything, give me time."

In a moment the car carrying Linningen and Williams came to a stop alongside. Doc got out and walked to their car. "Wail says the place yonder is where Gilmore's sister lives," he told them.

"It looks like a fancy joint," Williams said. "Mountain lodge, or something."

"It seems impressive," Linningen appended. "Do we all descend at once? The whole army of us?"

Doc looked at the psychiatrist sharply. "Is there a reason why we shouldn't arrive as a party?"

"It occurs to me that such a large number of us might make the young lady nervous," Linningen said.

"Do you have a reason for not wanting Gilmore's sister to see you?" Doc inquired.

"Of course not!" Linningen replied hurriedly.

"The young lady might be attractive and worth meeting," Doc suggested dryly.

"I don't know she is young!" Linningen snapped.

"You said she was, just now

"Well, it was just a thoughtless remark!" Linningen barked. "Look here, Savage, what do you mean by this line of questioning? I believe I resent it!"

Doc said, "Let's pay the lady a visit and see how near you came to the truth without thinking."

The two cars climbed a hill. The lodge, an attractive structure made of logs, stood against a backdrop of low mountains which bore a covering of snow. There was frost on the gravel that crunched under the tires as they came to a stop.

"I wonder if Gilmore is here," Monk murmured.

"We should know before long." Doc strode to the door, glanced at two pairs of skis which were propped against the lodge wall, then knocked. The skis were well waxed and the snow caught in the harness looked fresh.

The lodge door was opened by an elderly man in a checked wool shirt and corduroy trousers, plainly the servant.

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"We'd like to see Mr. Gilmore Sullivan," Doc said.

"Gilmore hasn't been here for weeks," the servant replied promptly.

"In that case, we'd like to see Miss Leona Sullivan, Gilmore's sister," Doc told him.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Tell her Clark Savage, Jr., and party"

The servant withdrew, closing the door in Doc's face. Hearing a commotion behind him, Doc wheeled. He saw Monk in the act of making a flying tackle at Mr. Wail, who had started a hasty departure. He brought Wail down, and said, "Oh, no you don't! Try to skip out, will you?"

"You'll regret this!" Wail declared bitterly.

Now the door was opened by a redheaded girl wearing skiing trousers and a wool sweater. Her friendly face was also wearing, Doc thought, an expression that came from making a great effort to repress fear. "I'm Leona Sullivan," she said.

Doc Savage made the introductions. "This is Dr. Linningen, whose yacht rescued your brother from the desolate rock where he was marooned. And my two associates, Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks – "

He paused, trying to decide what was causing Miss Sullivan to become pale.

"And these gentlemen," Doc added, "are Mr. Williams, a guest on the yacht, and Mr. Wail, whom I believe you are supposed to know"

She didn't speak, and Doc noted that neither Wail nor Williams had faced the young woman. They were turned in another direction.

"Mr. Wail and Mr. Williams," Doc said deliberately. "This is Miss Sullivan."

Wail and Williams turned reluctantly.

Miss Sullivan's breath in her throat made a low sound like paper tearing, and she swayed and would have fallen had not Ham, moving with alacrity caught her. She had fainted.

Throwing the door open, Doc gestured for Ham to carry Miss Sullivan's limp figure inside. Monk had jumped around to a spot where he could head off any contemplated retreat by Bill Williams and Wail.

Scowling at Wail, Monk said, "I would say she knew you, all right."

Williams glared at Wail. "I don't blame her much for her reaction," he told Wail. "You give me the creeps, too." Wail smiled. "She was looking at you when she fainted." Williams lunged forward, his fist flew out. There was a smacking report as the fist landed, not against Wail's cherubic face, but in the palm of Doc Savage's outflung hand. Doc jerked, and Williams spun into the lodge, stumbled, and landed in a chair. He started to get up, hands fisted, but thought better of it. He shouted, "By God, you can't manhandle me and get away with it!" Linningen, gazing at Williams in puzzled alarm, said, "Take it easy, Bill. What has got into you?"

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"I don't come up here to be pushed around!" Williams snapped. "Why did you come?" Monk asked pointedly.

"Damned if I know. Because I didn't have any better sense, I guess," growled Williams.

The old manservant in the checkered shirt came in, gazed at them with disapproval, and did not seem reassured by the information that Miss Sullivan had merely fainted. He ran away shouting for his wife. "Mary! Mary, come quick, something's happened to Miss Leona!" His wife was a bustling plump lady several years his junior, and she didn't seem alarmed. "Miss Leona hasn't been feeling well lately," she said. "I'll get some brandy."

Doc asked, "Has Miss Sullivan been ill?"

"Just nervous," the woman explained. "Just nervous and jumpy. Will you carry her into one of the bedrooms? I'll take care of her."

When they were alone, Linningen took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "What do you make of this, Savage? Somehow, I have a feeling there is something intensely wrong here."

"If you ask me, the girl had a reason for fainting," Monk said. He scowled at Ham Brooks. "Depend on old Johnny—come—legal to be ready to catch her, though."

"It was nice work," Ham told him. "Too bad you didn't think of it first."

That being exactly the thought in Monk's mind, he merely scowled.

"I think they all seem frightened," Linningen observed. "The two servants as well."

"You don't look as if you were at a picnic yourself," Ham Brooks observed.

"Nevertheless, I think I'm still competent to recognize fear when I see it!" Linningen snapped.

Fifteen minutes later, the woman appeared and announced, "Miss Sullivan will see you, Mr. Savage."

Leona Sullivan was resting in a comfortable chair, but the hands in which she held a cup of coffee, probably laced with brandy, were not too steady. She arose, extended her hand, saying, "I'm afraid I got off to a shocking start as a hostess. I'm sorry. I'm particularly sorry to extend such a distressing reception to Mr. Linningen and Mr. Williams, the men who rescued my brother."

"You knew Gilmore had been found?" Doc asked.

Without looking directly at Doc, she said, "I remember your saying so. That was what you did say, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps we should have broken the news more gradually," Doc said.

"No. It was very good news. One doesn't mind how good news comes."

"You didn't seem surprised."

"Didn't I?"

"No. You appeared frightened."

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"Why shouldn't I?" she said quickly. She resumed her chair, and picked up the cup and saucer. When her shaking hand caused the cup to tinkle on the saucer, she put them down again. "I've been frightened for weeks," she added.

"Of what?"

She shuddered. "Of something terrible that might have happened to Gilmore. You have no idea how disturbing it is, just waiting, after something strange has happened to your brother."

"Strange?" Doc inquired pointedly. She did not answer immediately, but took a sip of the coffee. "I wouldn't say I'm frightened, as much as worried."

"Miss Sullivan," Doc Savage said, "I have some questions I'd like to ask you about your brother,"

Leona Sullivan frowned. "Why are you interested?" she inquired.

"I'm afraid that I have a weakness for the odd and the unusual, Miss Sullivan."

She nodded. "I know. You could have said you were interested because you are Doc Savage. I've heard of you, Mr. Savage."

"That's fine. Then you won't consider my interest so odd," Doc told her pleasantly. "I'd like to know a little more about Gilmore, Miss Sullivan. I have heard enough to outline picture of him in my mind, that of a well-educated young man, on the scholarly side, interested in geology."

"What else do you want to know?" she countered.

"I want you to fill in the picture of Gilmore. Put color in."

She thought for a moment. "Gilmore was a geologist. He was a specialist dealing with the subterranean materials composing the earth and how they were formed." She hesitated, then added quickly, "He wasn't very practical, I am afraid. He was interested in caves. Natural caverns. He would spend weeks exploring a new cave, and often did."

"Was cave-exploring Gilmore's profession?" Doc asked.

"You might call it that, yes."

"It doesn't sound profitable."

"It wasn't," Leona Sullivan told him. "But Gilmore inherited a little money from father, and he didn't spend much, and he got along."

"You do not sound as if you had a high opinion of your brother's specialty" Doc Savage suggested.

She smiled faintly. "I can't say I did. I don't like caves. They're clammy places, and I quit going into them with Gilmore when I was a little girl. Gilmore certainly didn't share my dislike."

"Gilmore spent a lot of time in cavern exploration, I take it?" Doc said.

"Yes, more than was good for him," she agreed, after hesitating a moment.

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"Why did you hesitate before saying that?" Doc asked.

"Did I? I didn't intend to. It meant nothing," she replied quickly.

"I don't think you intended to hesitate either," Doc told her. "But I think it meant something."

She grimaced. "Yes, it did, I'll admit that. And I'll tell you why – " She fell silent, biting her lips, clenching her hands tightly. Then she blurted, "It isn't easy to discuss mental aberration in one's family. It's hard to do, in fact!"

"You mean," Doc suggested quietly, "that Gilmore's mind became unstable?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean," she murmured miserably

"As a result of spending too much time in cavern exploration?"

She nodded quickly. "I can't think of anything else that would bring it on."

"What," Doc asked, "was the exact nature of Gilmore's trouble?"

"Hallucinations," she replied.

"Of what sort?"

Leona Sullivan started to speak, jerked the words back, and Doc saw her compress her lips firmly. "I can't discuss such a personal matter with a stranger!"

Doc, in a serious tone, said, "Not even if it might be vitally important to Gilmore's well-being?"

"No. It couldn't be important, anyway. No, I can't discuss his hallucinations." "In that case," Doc said, "I feel you should know that Gilmore has disappeared again, under very puzzling circumstances.

Leona Sullivan glanced at him sharply. She leaned back in the chair and took a sip of coffee. Her hand was a bit steadier.

"I'm afraid I don't know a thing that will help you," was all she said.

Doc Savage jumped to his feet, saying, "I'm sorry to have bothered you when you weren't feeling well, Miss Sullivan."

"I don't mind." She smiled wanly. "I'm glad you're trying to help poor Gilmore. Thank you for that."

Swinging to the door, Doc appeared to recall something, and wheeled to ask, "Did you get a good look at the man I introduced as Mr. Wail?" "Yes, I did." He couldn't read much from her expression.

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"No." She shook her head promptly. "No, never.

"Then why did you faint when you saw Wail?" Doc threw at her. "Or was it Bill Williams who brought that on?"

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The girl gave Doc a cold look. "You're being utterly preposterous! If I fainted, it was only because I didn't feel well."

"I see," Doc Savage replied. "Well, if that is your story, stick to it." He rejoined the others.

To Monk's questioning look, he answered, "Miss Sullivan says she never saw Wail before in her life."

Monk spun and collared Wail, who didn't look very surprised nor apprehensive. "All right, wipe that smirk off your face and explain why you lied to us!" Monk yelled in Wail's face. "You're certainly gullible," Wail told him. "You believe everything you're told, don't you?"

And that was all they got out of Wail.

The manservant appeared bearing coffee and a tray of sandwiches, explaining, "We dine rather late as a rule. My wife thought you might get hungry before dinnertime."

"Are we invited to stay?" Doc asked.

"Why, I suppose so. Miss Sullivan told my wife to prepare the guest rooms," the servant explained. "It's a long, tiresome drive to the nearest hotel. The tourist camps are all closed at this season of the year."

The sandwiches were good. In the west, a snow-covered mountaintop speared the sun, and the long gray winter twilight set in. They sat about, all of them uncomfortable, except Mr. Wail, who went after the sandwiches with the celerity of a glutton, dropping crumbs off his chin now and then.

Miss Sullivan joined them, wearing a long hostess gown of a shade of green which did a lot for her red hair and figure. She was carrying a bulky scrapbook, and she handed this to Doc Savage.

"This is a scrapbook which I kept of articles, mostly scientific ones, which Gilmore wrote and had published," she explained. "I thought you might want to look them over."

Doc Savage examined the book for some time, reading a number of the items, some of them from beginning to end. Here was convincing evidence that Gilmore Sullivan knew his geology and his caves, and he was evidently a pretty fair photographer as well, judging from the color photographs of mineral samples and rock strata which accompanied a number of the pieces.

Doc returned the book. "This indicates your brother knew his business, Miss Sullivan." He watched her intently, saw she was not satisfied with his comment, and with a trace of satisfaction, he added, "But answering the question you had in mind when you handed me the book, the writings don't sound like the work of a man who had anything basically wrong with his mind."

Tears suddenly filled her eyes. She murmured, "Thank you!" and quickly left the room.

Bill Williams scowled at Doc Savage and growled, "Why kid her? She looks like a nice babe. Brother Gilmore is as screwy as a pet coon, and you know it."

"Linningen doesn't think so," Doc told him.

Leona Sullivan didn't rejoin them until dinnertime. The manservant – his name was Clancy – showed them over the lodge, which proved to be a homy place that had cost a considerable sum. Clancy pointed out several spare sets of skis, indicating they were welcome to use the boards if they cared for that winter sport. Doc

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gathered that it wouldn't grieve Clancy too much if they went skiing and broke their necks.

Clancy's wife turned out an excellent dinner, which was served at eight o'clock in a large beamed dining room with candlelight and a blaze in the fireplace. Doc noted that Leona Sullivan hardly touched her food, and he thought that several times her eyes were on him appealingly.

After dinner, Doc sought the girl out in the privacy of a glassed-in veranda which gave a wide view of an impressive amount of blue-cold moonlight and too-bright stars.

"Miss Sullivan," Doc told her quietly, "we're here to help you, you know. I'll admit that curiosity brought us, but that's a motive that gets us into quite a few things."

He thought she wasn't going to reply, and when she did, the terror in her voice shocked him.

"Curiosity," she gasped. "Would you tell me curiosity about what?"

"Sit down, Leona," Doc said gently. "I'll tell you the whole story, as much as we know of it."

The narrative took several minutes, and Doc included the finding of Gilmore and the latter's unwillingness to be rescued and his odd statements to Linningen at the time. He left out nothing in the way of incident, but drew no conclusions, and did not complete the recital, because Leona Sullivan suddenly shuddered, gripped her hands together. She drew up, pale and tense.

"Mr. Savage!" she gasped. "Is there a hell?"

"What?"

"If there is a hell, is it where they've always said it is?"

"Good Lord!" Doc said.

"Is Hades down below?" she blurted.

"Underfoot?"

"Yes."

Doc took a moment to control his surprise. "I'm sure I couldn't say for certain," he replied. "That's one place I haven't visited as yet."

Leona Sullivan made a whimpering sound. "Don't treat it facetiously!" she wailed.

"I'm not. And don't be so upset – "

"Gilmore found hell!" she gasped. "He was exploring in a cave near here, a tremendous cavern which he has been exploring on and off for several months. Gilmore was in the cave nearly two weeks, and when he came out he...he had undergone a terrible change. He said he had found hell was exactly where they have always said it was, in the center of the earth, and he'd had a look at it."

Doc reached for her hand. "Oh, come now, Miss Sullivan!"

"No, it's true! Gilmore said

" "Take it easy," Doc broke in sympathetically. "You must understand that Gilmore could have suffered a fall and an injury that would disarrange his mental processes. You shouldn't really believe – "

She jerked her hand away.

"I hoped you wouldn't take a patronizing attitude," she said bitterly.

"Really, you don't expect me to believe – "

"Mr. Savage!" she whimpered. "That Mr. Wail! He isn't human! He's a... an assistant devil sent up to dispose of Gilmore because of what Gilmore learned!"

Doc swallowed. "Miss Sullivan, what you need is rest. Perhaps a bromide to make you sleep – "

She twisted, her hand flew up and cracked against his cheek. Then she turned and fled.

Doc stood there, his face blank, a hand motionless against the cheek she had struck, for quite a while.

VI

MONK Mayfair doubled a hand into a great fist, smashed it down on a knee, and exploded, "Of all the cock-and-bull stories, this one is the winner! It lays me out flat!"

Doc Savage assumed a look of disapproval.

Ham Brooks said, "It's a dilly, all right."

"It's a honey," Monk added.

"Don't you believe in hell?" Ham asked Monk. "Don't you feel there might be a Tophet and a devil?"

"A little spot down below, with brimstone heating, and a host with a spike tail and horns?" Monk sneered at him. "What are you trying to start?"

"I should think," Ham told him dryly, "that you would have given a little more thought to your future residence."

Doc Savage gestured impatiently. "Don't start one of your rows now. We have a job cut out for us here, if we can only get our teeth into it. I'd like to see you fellows concentrate on that, instead of a private fuss."

The pair looked at Doc in surprise. "You don't put stock in this hell stuff, do you, Doc?"

Doc jumped to his feet. "Let's deal with proven facts, the ones in front of our nose. First, this one: Miss Sullivan knows where her brother is.

Monk and Ham stared at him with open mouths and round eyes.

Doc added, "Gilmore isn't far away, either, I have a hunch."

"How do you know?" Monk demanded, swallowing his surprise.

"Miss Sullivan is a perfectly normal young woman who would show a normal anxiety about the welfare of a brother who had vanished several weeks ago, and who had been found starving and freezing on an island. Isn't that right?"

Monk nodded. "Yeah, she's normal enough, except about six times prettier than that. But I don't see –"

"The tip-off," Doc told him, "was that she wasn't the least bit anxious about Gilmore. She didn't ask how he was, not convincingly, and she didn't show genuine surprise when told he had disappeared again."

"Gosh!" Monk said.

"Exactly The logical explanation for her unconcern is that she already knew about it, knew where Gilmore was, and that he was O.K."

Ham Brooks frowned. "She's a mighty good-looking liar, and that's just what she is."

"What do we do about this?" Monk wanted to know.

"You," Doc said, "don't do anything about it. Except this: Monk, you shadow Mr. Wail. Latch onto him. Don't let him make a move without your surveillance."

"Do I let him know I'm watching him?" Monk demanded.

"I don't care what Wail knows," Doc exclaimed. "His feelings about it do not enter the picture. I want him watched. Watch Wail every minute. Keep your eyes on him. Got it?"

"Right," Monk said. "I'll clamp an eye on him right now." He wheeled for the door.

"Wait! If anything odd begins happening, make plenty of uproar about it. Don't just stand there and let it happen."

Monk's expression became queer. "O.K."

"And, Monk, don't take too lightly Miss Sullivan's statement that Wail isn't what he seems."

Monk started, then swallowed. "Oh, for cripes sake!" he said. "When you're kidding me, why don't you use the tone of voice that goes with it!"

"Because I might not be kidding," Doc replied grimly. "Get on the job."

Doc swung to Ham Brooks. "Linningen and Bill Williams are your babies, Ham. Glue yourself to their backs. Watch everything. Count how many breaths they take, if you have to."

Ham said, "I'd rather count Miss Sullivan's respiration." "Never mind."

"Somebody should sort of watch her, shouldn't they?" Ham suggested hopefully.

"She'll be watched."

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"Oh, you thought of that already," Ham said in a crestfallen voice. "How do you want me to report in, if I notice anything unusual?"

"Report it," Doc told him, "the quickest and loudest way. Don't bother being subtle. I have a feeling that if something breaks, haste will be the watchword. So don't blow any gentle bubbles about it."

Ham grinned. "You're expecting action?"

"Plenty of it," Doc said. "I think the stage is set."

The screech, when it came, had teeth like monstrous fangs, and it bit into the calm cold night and punished it and shook it as a dog shakes a rat. The quiet of the night died violently.

Doc Savage, rolling out of the chair in which he had been sitting, hit the floor uncertainly on all fours. He remained there briefly, not quite positive what had occurred, not even positive of the shriek, and most of all, unwilling to credit the apparent fact that he had been asleep.

The shriek broke off and fell away like a great fragment broken from a cliff and falling into space. There was silence and absolutely nothing in the silence. There was the silence for long enough to show that it had been a very effective shriek, one that had paralyzed the night. And then an old hen began cackling in alarm in a nearby henhouse, and in a moment at least fifty other hens joined her.

Doc Savage came to his feet now; he did it by seizing a chair and thrusting himself upright, and this, the fact that he needed a chair, seemed to confuse and puzzle him. But not for long, and he swung around and crossed the room and hit the door. The door was locked. He did not remember locking it.

But it was not a strong door, and he hit it once with a shoulder and got through.

The hail was quiet enough. No one had stirred in the house, as far as he could tell. There was a strange cavity-like silence, with the hens cackling.

He saw the stuff on the floor, the tiny patches of it that he had sprinkled in front of the doors of the bedrooms. It was powder, the grains of which would become very sticky when they absorbed a bit of moisture from the air. The powder had the same basic ingredients, with just a little variance in each type so that the fluorescence would have a different color.

The powder was stuff he had used often before, and it should not have seemed as important to him as it did now. He stared at it and could not think why it was so prominent in his mind. There didn't seem to be a good reason. It was just stuff that would stick to your shoes, and a little would rub off as you walked during the next day or two; the particles that rubbed off would be microscopic, but with a good black light projector, and preferably in darkness, a trail would be left that could be followed. Also the trail could be photographed with the proper equipment, if evidence was needed in court. But it didn't seem vital now. What counted was the scream.

Now he got it clear – the screech had been in Monk's voice. Doc wheeled and lunged toward Monk's room, the room supposed to be occupied by Monk and Mr. Wail, as a matter-of-fact, and reaching the door, he found it locked.

He struck the door four or five times with his fist, hard blows, and it was like hitting the head of a drum that had gone soft.

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Back of him a door opened, and he wheeled at the sound and saw Linningen, the psychiatrist, standing there in the open door. Linningen seemed to weave slightly in a dazed fashion, and he kept blinking.

"What is the difficulty?" Linningen asked in a voice that, somehow, did not seem his own.

"You hear that yell, Linningen?"

"I . . . something awakened me."

"Where did it come from?"

Linningen stared blankly. "I haven't the least idea. Where has everyone gone? What's up?"

Doc stared at Linningen. Ham Brooks and Bill Williams were supposed to be sharing Linningen's large room.

"Isn't Ham Brooks in there?" Doc demanded.

"No. He and Williams are gone. I don't know where they went, or how they did it without arousing me. I'm a light sleeper – "

Doc, lunging past him into the room, said, "Look for signs of a struggle!"

"Struggle?" Linningen repeated in a foolish tone. "Why, there couldn't have been the least sort of commotion, or it would have awakened me.

"They could have taken the house apart around you!" Doc told him grimly. "You've been doped, man. It shows all over you.

"Doped? I was fed something at dinner?" Linningen asked blankly.

"I don't know when you were fed it," Doc snapped, "but it was a pretty slick job, because they got me, and I was looking for it."

The room clearly bore no sign of a struggle, however, and Doc Savage, with Monk's howl again on his mind, raced back into the hall. He was about to strike Monk's door when it opened, and the chemist shuffled out.

"You yelled?" Doc demanded.

Monk batted his eyes owlishly, held the palm of his hand up in front of his nose and examined it, suddenly rubbed the palm violently over his face. "A yell?" he said. "You call that a mere yell? Why, that was the most noise I've made in years. I tried to shake the house down."

"Why?"

"I'd... uh. . .rather not say," Monk mumbled.

Doc lunged past Monk, saw that Mr. Wail was sitting upright in bed, staring in alarm, and asked, "What made Monk shout?"

"Shout?" said Wail bitterly. "You can refer to such a noise as a shout? I can assure you that no man ever uttered a worse squawk on finding he had been assigned to hell, and I have listened to some excellent efforts

in my time."

"You don't know what upset Monk?"

"I have no idea, although he might have chanced to get a look at his own face in a mirror. That might do it," Wail said.

"He awakened you?"

Wail nodded. 'Awakened me, and made me a paralytic and a nervous wreck at the same time.'

Doc Savage swung on Monk. "All right, Monk, out with it. You didn't sound off like that without a good reason.

Monk was rubbing his face, and pinching his cheek. "I've been doped," he said. "I've been fed something to make me sleep."

"Along with the rest of us," Doc said. "Why did you let loose the howl?"

Monk wouldn't meet Doc's eyes. "Do I hafta tell you, Doc?"

"Yes. Hurry it up, too."

Monk took a deep breath, then spoke rapidly in a tone of knowing he wouldn't be believed. He said, "I saw a devil floating around the room. I couldn't describe him exactly, except that he didn't have the customary forked tail and horns, but he was a devil. There wasn't a bit of doubt in my mind that he was a devil."

Doc asked dryly, "How in God's name do you recognize a devil as such if you didn't see enough of him for a description?"

"When you see a devil," Monk said sheepishly, "you just know he's the devil. You don't need a description. Take it from an old boy who just saw one.

Doc gestured impatiently. 'All right, now you've described your sensations. What actually happened? Where did this demon go?'

"When I yell like that, I close my eyes," Monk said somewhat guiltily. "After I got the whoop out, my visitor was gone. That's all I know."

Doc Savage noted that Mr. Wail was pale and pasty, and the man's chubby hands were twitching. "Wail, what is the matter with you?" Doc demanded.

"They've sent one of the boys to check on me," Mr. Wail said gloomily.

"One of the boys?"

Wail jerked a thumb downward. "From down below. They probably think I haven't been doing my best. To tell the truth, I haven't."

Monk emitted a howl of anger. "You and your talk about devils!" Monk bellowed. "Damn you, that's what caused me to have a nightmare like I had. Dreaming I saw Old Nick walking around in here. It's your fault!"

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"You didn't see the head boy," Wail told him with an air of certainty. "You wouldn't be standing there unscorched, jumping up and down like an ape, if the head rascal had paid you a visit."

"Oh, shut up, before I flatten your nose!" Monk bellowed at him.

"Monk, get control of yourself," Doc said. "You think it was a nightmare?"

"Sure it was! Somebody did dope me, though, because I can tell – "

"Ham is gone," Doc broke in.

" – tell from the way I feel. It was a barbiturate or some – " Monk's mouth remained open a moment. "Ham isn't here? What's that?"

"Neither is Williams," Doc said.

Mr. Wail showed considerable excitement. "Williams is gone too?" he shouted. "If that fool amateur knew what he was monkeying with, he wouldn't be so persistent. The silly loon! I thought I'd taught him a lesson."

"What lesson?" Doc demanded.

"When I caused him to start to paddle out into the tide rip," said Mr. Wail, leering. "And a few other little things that I caused him to do, that he didn't tell you about."

"Deviltry, you mean?" Doc asked dryly. "That's right."

"What," Doc inquired, "do you think Williams is doing, and where is he right now?"

Mr. Wail snorted. "Find that out for yourself."

Monk debated between belaboring Wail with a fist and investigating to see whether Ham Brooks and Williams were really gone; the latter won, and he rushed into the hall. A moment later he was bellowing, "Miss Sullivan! She's gone, too!"

This proved true. Leona Sullivan's room was empty.

Now the manservant, Clancy, came from the rear of the lodge, bearing a double-barreled shotgun and a flashlight. He was trailed by his wife, who had a .22 rifle. Their faces were anything but peaceful.

"Master Gilmore is gone!" Clancy croaked.

Doc took a step forward. "What's that? Gilmore is – "

"We hurried out to see if Gilmore was being molested; we heard a shriek," Clancy explained excitedly. "Gilmore is gone. I'm afraid there was violence." His voice had risen to near incoherence.

"Gilmore has been here?"

"I.. .yes. "How long?"

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"Since this morning. He came in haste, and we hid him because he did not want anyone to know he was here – "

"Clancy!" his wife snapped. "You're talking too much! You're not supposed to tell about Gilmore – "

"Oh, hell!" Clancy snapped. "I'm tired of these goings-on that nobody can understand. I'll talk if I want to."

Doc demanded, "Didn't Gilmore tell a story to explain his long absence?"

Clancy shook his head. "He didn't tell any story, and I wasn't a bit surprised. Gilmore is a nice boy, but he's as nutty as a fruitcake – "

"Clancy!" his wife exclaimed.

"I don't care!" Clancy told her. "He's crazy, and he's not the only crazy one around here. And if all this doesn't stop, you and I are going to hunt a new job."

Doc asked quickly, "Will you show us where Gilmore was hiding?"

"No, he won't!" Clancy's wife snapped.

"Yes, I will!" Clancy said. "I don't care what happens. I'm sick of mystery, talk about devils, and goings-on. I want to stop it, and I figure Mr. Savage is the man who can stop it. I've heard about you, Mr. Savage."

Doc told Monk, "Get your blacklight scanner. I'll get mine."

Clancy, paying no attention to further objections by his wife, led them about two hundred yards up the mountainside to a stone-and-log structure that at first seemed to be a guest cabin, but which Clancy said was rented out every summer. "Gilmore was holed up here," Clancy explained. "From the window, you can see the trail to the lodge, and there's practically no other way to get up here. You can come down from the other side, down the mountain trail, of course, but it's a roundabout way, and you can see that route from the window, too. There's a back door, so – "

"What do you find?" Doc demanded of Monk. The latter had been casting the beam of his ultra-violet light projector about experimentally.

"You sprinkled that tracer stuff where everyone would walk in it!" Monk exclaimed, wheeling to turn the beam on his own footprints, which glowed a rather evil shade of green, mixed with a reddish cast.

"Poke around with that scanner and see what colors you get," Doc told him. "That'll tell us who was here. Let's not waste time."

They cast the beam of light about, calling out colors as they distinguished them. Monk found another shade of green, Doc located a yellow-purple and a blue.

"Williams brought Ham Brooks and Miss Sullivan here," Doc said, interpreting the findings. "They picked up Gilmore Sullivan – presumably Williams did that by force, probably with the threat of a gun – and they departed on the trail that climbs the mountain."

Clancy had been a skeptical onlooker. "That sounds like tall guesswork to me."

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"No, it's probably close to what happened," Doc told him. "Ham Brooks and Miss Sullivan walked close together in approaching the cabin, they stopped in one place while Williams moved over to a window, then came back. After this, they all entered. Ham and Leona then stood in one spot, while Williams did the moving about. That indicates he probably had a gun and was making them stand still. And from the places Williams walked, it is pretty clear he aroused Gilmore Sullivan from sleep on that bunk yonder, and forced him to accompany them. We have, of course, no record of Gilmore's footprints."

"Aw, nuts," Clancy said unbelievably "How come they're leaving footprints?" substances in the bedrooms they occupied, and they walked in it and now they leave prints which become conspicuous under black light," Doc explained.

"I don't believe it," Clancy said.

"You're a hard guy to convince," Monk told him.

"If you had been around here the last six months," Clancy said, "you would be a hard guy to convince, too."

"What do you mean by that?" Monk asked.

"Clancy!" warned Clancy's wife.

Clancy said, "For six months, or almost that, Gilmore's been sure a devil was chasing him. Not a full-fledged devil, but a junior-grade one of some sort, who didn't have full devil powers. Lately Miss Leona has started believing it was a fact. Now I ask you –"

"We have heard all that, Clancy," Doc told him. "Why are you repeating it?"

"I was just going to ask you how a man could believe anything around here," Clancy said. "With such goings-on! My God, everybody has jumped the trolley"

Doc shrugged. "A little skepticism keeps a man on solid ground, Clancy Too much of it keeps him from realizing when he's undermined. Come on, everybody Let's see where the trail leads."

The moon had dropped out of sight, but there was some bluish cold light from stars. They managed the steep, narrow trail with difficulty. The footprints were quite obvious, except at times when there was some fluorescence by minerals in the earth or stones underfoot to confuse them.

"The tracks turn off here," Monk exclaimed suddenly He thrust into the bushes, using the white beam of his regular flashlight. "Hey, here's a side trail. They took it."

"Ye gods, they're going to Gilmore's cavern," Clancy exploded.

"Leona told me about this cavern of Gilmore's," Doc said. "So it's up this way, is it?"

"Pretty close, not more'n a quarter of a mile," said Clancy.

"I understand Gilmore spent a lot of time the last few years exploring this cave, so it must be a large one.

"I guess it's a big one, all right."

"You've been in it?"

"Not me. Well, about ten feet," Clancy admitted hurriedly "Me, I'm no caveman. I keep wondering what if the roof fell in on me."

They continued the climb, and came eventually to a heavy wooden door that closed an aperture in the stone.

"That the cavern entrance?"

"That's it," Clancy replied. "And they went in, didn't they?"

Mr. Wail burst out in a shrill voice, "I'm getting out of here!"

"Grab him, Monk," Doc ordered.

VII

A FEW red fingers of dawn were thrusting upward in the eastern sky The cave entrance was high, affording a view of the valley, which was now floored with cottonlike fog. Presently Monk Mayfair returned, panting, from the lodge. "Here's the stuff you wanted, Doc," he said.

"You brought the rope, the gadget case, the generating flashlights, and sandwiches and water?" Doc demanded.

"Yep. All of it. Why you wanted grub enough for a week, I can't imagine. I don't plan to stay in nobody's cave a week."

"Me, neither!" declared Clancy vehemently

"Clancy, you're not even going in there!" his wife told him.

Clancy nodded. "My idea exactly, if I can make it stick." He looked up at Doc Savage anxiously "You seem to suspect everybody around here, Mr. Savage, and I can't say I blame you. We did hide out poor Gilmore, pretending we didn't know he was here. But what about it? Do I have to go cave crawling? I sure don't hanker after the idea."

"You'd like to stay outside, is that it?" Doc Savage asked.

"Didn't I make myself clear?"

Doc eyed him intently "You have some plans, I take it?"

"Not any you would object to, if you're on the up-and-up, Clancy said.

"Indeed?"

Clancy said grimly, "I'm going to call the State Police. That's my plan."

"Good for you, Clancy. You do that," Doc said.

"Whew! You mean I don't have to go in there?"

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"Not if you call the police."

"I'll see that he does, Mr. Savage," Clancy's wife said emphatically. Doc approached the wooden door, listened, heard nothing suspicious, and wrenched the door open. Nothing happened. He tossed a rock inside. It clicked against stone, magnified echoes returned, and there was silence.

"Monk, are you ready to go in?" Doc asked.

"No," Monk replied. "But I'm as ready as I'll probably ever be. You want me to go first?"

"Tie one end of the rope to Mr. Wail, and we'll let him lead the way like a bloodhound," Doc said dryly. "Does that meet your approval, Wail?"

Wail sneered. "You'll wish you hadn't done this. You'll wish it more than you ever wished anything in your life."

"Lead on, Wail," Doc ordered curtly. "Leona Sullivan and my friend Ham Brooks are in there somewhere. If you think we're not going to help them, you're crazy."

To enter the cavern mouth was a nerve-racking thing. The entrance was narrow, even the pallid icy moonlight must have been a background that silhouetted them, and it was a perfect spot for an ambush. But they passed inside and traversed about forty feet without contact with any physical danger.

When Doc was inclined to halt, Mr. Wail gave the rope an impatient jerk, saying, "Come on, come on! Nothing is going to bother you yet."

Doc gave the rope a wrench of his own, hauling Wail back on his heels. "I take it you've been this way before," Doc said.

"Did I say differently?"

"No."

"I chased Gilmore Sullivan all over this place," Mr. Wail said. "And, believe me, it was some job. Not a very successful one either, or I wouldn't be here now."

Doc said dryly, "We're to understand that you didn't catch Gilmore?"

"I caught him all right. Several times. But it didn't do me much good. I couldn't handle him all in one batch, and he got to the exit and escaped before I got him worn down to my size."

"You're frank, anyway," Doc told him. "An unusual sort of frankness, too, the kind that can get you into trouble."

Wail snorted. "You haven't any trouble that will compare with the doses of it I've already had. In fact, speaking as a lad who has had quite a sojourn in Hades, I can say that when you threaten me with trouble, you're being pretty damn childish."

Monk put in grimly, "Tell me this, Wail: How are your physical senses? Do you feel pain?"

"Unfortunately, my body for the time being is as human as yours."

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"Then," Monk said, "if I gave you a good kick on the fantail deck, you would feel it? Now, if you don't shut up about this Tophet stuff, that's what you're going to get."

"Worry you, do I?" Wail asked.

"You irritate me, anyway

"That's right, you probably haven't brains enough to be worried. Worry is the exclusive burden of the intelligent mind."

Monk said, "Oh, dry up and let's listen. The footprints show Miss Sullivan, Ham, Williams and probably Gilmore Sullivan entered here. This place can't be so big, and we may be able to hear them."

"It'll surprise you how big this place is," Wail said.

Their straining ears caught no sound. Not even the dripping of water, Doc noted, and he reflected that it was evidently a dry cave at this level. There was a pronounced flow of air against their faces, and it was freighted with a faint and not distasteful odor.

"Odd odor," Linningen commented. It was practically the first word the psychiatrist had spoken.

"What," asked Wail curiously, "would you say the odor was?"

Linningen pondered in the darkness. "It has a flowery quality," he remarked. "I would say, if I were outside, that there were flowers some distance away. But in here, I presume it means the presence of some sort of subterranean plant life, or possibly a reaction of chemical nature between the content of rock strata and moisture."

Wail seemed to consider this funny. He burst into a cackling roar of hilarity. The sound of his laughter rose and tumbled away, hit the walls and interstices of the cavern and came gobbling back with a tremulous labyrinthine overtone that gave it a demoniacal glee. The laughter kept up, and Doc Savage, suddenly unnerved by the satanical reverberations of the mirth, gave Wail a hard poke in the ribs with his thumb. That stopped the unholy yakking.

"Lead on," Doc said. "Monk, you fall back about fifty feet with Linningen. Better just keep us in sight, in case there is an ambush. That way, we will not all be trapped. And use your flashlights sparingly."

"Flowers!" Wail exclaimed, giggling. "Can you beat that! The boys in the outer room would think that very funny."

The way led downward. Doc Savage played his flashlight beam on the walls, took note that the strata was not unusual, being typical of the caves which were a tourist attraction in New York state, and parts of New England. Like practically all such subterranean labyrinths from Mammoth Cave to Carlsbad Caverns, the two best-publicized natural caves, it was the work of time and seepage water against rock strata that was either soluble or softer than the surrounding stone.

One fact became evident. At least one person in the party they were following knew where he was going.

There being no trail, progress was vastly a different matter from strolling along a prepared route inspecting the wonders of such a cavern as Carlsbad. This one was far from being as large as Carlsbad, and for the time being there were no stalagmites or stalactites. Jagged patterns in the stone, however, often bore a resemblance

to the stone icicles.

The rate of descent was astonishing. More and more frequently, there were declines where they had to slide for yards, where the return trip would not be easy.

Monk called nervously from some distance back, "Doc, is there much danger of this fluorescein stuff fading so we can't find our way back out by following the trail it makes?"

"Not much," Doc said. "But pick up loose stones whenever you find them, and make cairns.

"O.K. But there aren't many loose stones."

Several times they halted to rest. Now the silence came to their attention, the utter and complete silence of a tomb, and coupled with the darkness which was absolutely complete when their flashlights were extinguished, it was an unnerving experience. Monk began clicking two small rocks together during the rest periods, working out a signal code based on Morse, and Doc Savage, after his initial feeling that the act was childish, welcomed the little sounds that broke the silence. After that, he replied to Monk.

Consulting his watch, Doc was astonished to find they had been engaged in the descent into the entrails of the earth for nearly six hours. Time had passed rapidly, and he called a halt for lunch.

"You better go easy on your stock of food," Wail said contemptuously "You've got farther to go than you think."

"We've come quite a distance already" Doc remarked.

"A couple of miles," Wail said.

"No, more than that. We must be making at least two miles an hour, and we've been at it six hours."

"I meant straight down," Wail said.

"Oh!" Doc was impressed in spite of himself. Wail was probably right, at that.

"How much farther would you say we'll have to go before overtaking Williams and his prisoners?" Doc inquired.

This drew no answer, although Wail had been quite willing to talk up until now. Turning the light of his flash on Wail's cherubic but somehow evil face, Doc saw with astonishment that Wail looked greatly worried.

"Well?" Doc said sharply "Haven't you a guess as to how much farther? You've been mighty positive about everything until now."

"If I knew for sure how much brass this guy Williams packs, I would have a better idea of what to expect," Wail replied.

"By brass, do you mean rank?"

"That's it," Wail said. "If he's a junior grade imp, like myself, we haven't much to fear. I mean, you can cope with these fellows who rate as about ninety-ninth assistant devil. But if the chap has more rank, your goose is cooked." And in a moment, Wail added gloomily, 'And so is mine.' "If you and Williams are fraternal

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brothers, there's probably no cause for you to be alarmed," Doc said dryly.

Wail groaned. "What kind of place do you think hell is? It's full of devils, and they keep in practice with their work by deviling each other."

Doc chuckled in spite of himself. "Practice makes perfect, eh?"

Wail became resentful. "It's not amusing, I can tell you. It isn't a pleasant place."

"You don't sound as if you liked it down there?"

"I sure didn't," Wail declared vehemently. "I'd have liked it less, only I arrived with a pretty good record." Then Wail added thoughtfully, "I got in about a hundred and seventy years ago, when the entrance requirements were stiffer."

"Oh, you died a hundred and seventy years ago?"

"That's right. 1781, to be exact." Wail sighed. "A bunch of colonials were chasing me with the notion of hanging me, and my horse stumbled and I fell off and broke my neck. I wish they'd hanged me, because it would have looked better on my record. Maybe I could have made better rank than junior grade devil by now."

"But you say you arrived pretty well equipped with entrance credentials?" Doc prompted.

"Well, right fairish," Wail admitted. "I was quite a scoundrel, if I do say so myself. I looted a bank, married seven wives, financed some piracy expeditions, and sailed on one myself, although pirating was a rougher business than I liked." He sighed. "We had rugged times back in those days. But nothing compared to chaps like Genghis Khan and a couple of the Caesars and Napoleon."

"Oh, you met them down there?"

Wail sniffed. "No, of course not. Do you think a fellow could circulate and meet all the guests in hell in a mere hundred and seventy years? But I've heard they were there, and hold pretty good ratings."

"But you didn't like it?"

"You're darn tooting I didn't," Wail said gloomily "That's why I sort of laid down on the job of catching up with Gilmore Sullivan, and fetching him back."

"The object hasn't been to kill Gilmore?"

"No, of course not. That would be worse than his staying alive on earth, although that wouldn't be good either. He would be sure to pass around information about our place down there, and people would find out about conditions in the future, and it would make the deviling business tougher. A lot of people don't believe there's a hell. That makes our job easier."

"And if Gilmore died?"

"Oh, he'd go packing his information off in the other direction. That would be bad for our side. You see, Gilmore Sullivan got a good look at our layout, and he'd have firsthand information to pass along."

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"How," Doc asked, "did Gilmore happen to get this look at your place?"

"You remember a slight earthquake shock about six or eight months ago?" Wail asked.

"There was something in the newspapers about one, yes.

"Well, it opened a crack," Wail said. "Gilmore Sullivan was down about fifteen miles, exploring. And he came across the crack, and peeked through. You can imagine how he felt, and how quick he got out of there. I was dispatched to bring him back, not because I was a qualified devil, being only junior-grade, but because I was the handiest man at the time."

"Only fifteen miles down?" Doc inquired.

"Yeah, they been enlarging down there, and I guess they carelessly pushed out too close to the surface."

"How about the crack? It still open?" Doc asked.

"Why? Do you want to have a look?"

"I don't believe I would care too much about that," Doc replied solemnly

"You're wise. Well, about the crack – they've got a bunch of apprentices busy closing it up, but I understand it's going slow."

"Working like the devil, eh?"

"Well, they're in there trying," Wail said.

Monk Mayfair, in a mixture of plaintive rage and terror, called, "Cut out that line of kidding, will you! You may think it's an amusing pastime, but I don't! Not in a place like this!"

"So he thinks it's kidding, no less," Mr. Wail murmured, and sniffed.

VIII

THE nature of the cavern underwent a change as they descended, growing somewhat in proportions, becoming more precipitous, not unpleasant, the air taking on a different and more pungent quality, the strange blossomlike odor they had noted earlier becoming more pronounced. At length, alarmed by the growing pungency of the aroma, Doc Savage stopped and used some materials from the equipment case he had been carrying, a few chemicals capable of making a fairly accurate analysis of almost any substance, to examine the air for dangerous gas. Monk's party joined him for this, and stood watching, tense and poised, as if momentarily expecting that the intense silence, which had become a ponderous force against their peace of mind, would explode or in some other way become a danger.

The analysis having shown nothing dangerous, not even what the odor was, they resumed the descent in the same manner as before, Doc Savage and Wail leading, Monk and Linningen trailing a precautionary distance to the rear.

Doc still kept the rope end fastened to Wail, giving the man twenty feet or so of play, which seemed ample. Wail had not objected, and, in fact, it was a good safety measure, because the way was becoming

increasingly trying.

Suddenly, things began happening. The rope, which Doc had been keeping snug, did not respond with the proper feel when Doc tugged it. Lunging forward, Doc found that Wail had adroitly slipped the rope and secured it to a rocky stalactite, numbers of which were to be found around them.

"Wail!" Doc rapped, and dashed the beam of his flashlight about.

Monk yelled anxiously, "What is it, Doc? An ambush? You need help?"

At that moment, Doc caught a flicker of expensive gray coattails vanishing in a thin forest of stone pillars. He sprang forward.

"Wail's escaping!" Doc shouted over his shoulder to Monk. "You and Linnigen stay where you are! Don't leave the trail we've been following. You might never find it again!"

Monk howled that he understood, and added an imprecation directed at Mr. Wail.

Doc himself had an opinion of Wail at the moment. More respectful. The man was fleet, faster than Doc believed such chubbiness would have permitted. However, they were on good firm footing as his flashlight disclosed.

Then it came to him how incredible it was that Wail could make such speed in blackest darkness. Wail had no flashlight! Yet the man was making respectable time, and doing it almost without sound.

Angered by Wail's performance, disgusted by his own gullibility in being duped by the rope tied to the stone, even though that had been for only a few moments, Doc made better speed himself than he would have conceded he could make.

The chase went on and on. Wail managed to keep tantalizingly out of reach, although he seemed to be losing his lead. Doc fell twice.

Finally, when Wail began to change course, Doc gained confidence. He used the black-light generator continually now, pumping the generator handle with his fingers. It, like their flashlights, was generator-driven, so the problem of batteries that would exhaust themselves was not a plague.

They must have covered, Doc reflected, at least two miles of labyrinthine caverns, before he got close enough to chance a lunge at Wail. To his disgust, his fingertips merely gave Wail's expensive suit a futile rake. The near-capture stimulated Wail to greater speed, and he drew slightly ahead.

And now Doc began to believe – and condemned himself for being fool enough to think so – that Wail in some fashion could make his own illumination. That, incredibly, there was a kind of luminous aura about the fat little scoundrel.

Wail, in a voice more of anger than terror, shouted, "You'd better go back, Savage!"

"That," Doc retorted, putting on a burst of speed, "would be a fine break for you, now that you're about to be caught!"

Wail responded by spinning around a stalagmite, so that Doc momentarily lost trace of him. A scraping sound, a small noise with frenzy in it, drew Doc ahead, and he came to a narrow fissure which slashed into

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the stone about forty–five degrees from the vertical, and which seemed to extend endlessly.

Wail was squirming along the fissure, standing upright, moving sidewise. Doc followed. For the next several minutes, each man put everything into effort and, as the fissure narrowed, he fastened his hands into Wail's coat.

A stifled shriek came from Wail. The man exerted himself tremendously – there must have been a crevice, because he pushed ahead, literally dragging Doc Savage, and then suddenly Wail was out of the crevice, into a larger chamber beyond. And out of his coat, too.

Carrying Wail's garment, Doc sprinted after the man. There seemed to be light here, a phosphorescentlike illumination of greenish–purple nature. At least, Doc was able to see Wail, and presently he hurled Wail's coat, the garment entangled the chubby man's feet, and the latter fell headlong. Doc landed astride him.

Wail was limp and very still for a long time, and when finally he spoke it was to say, "Damn you!" This was in the bitterest of tones.

"I didn't think you had it in you to give me a chase like that," Doc told him tiredly

"Damn you!" Wail repeated acidly "If it hadn't been for your nagging, I would never have come back here. I don't think I would have had to. I could have coped with that Williams. He didn't have full powers, either. I don't think he ranks any higher than I do."

Doc said, "So you're still keeping up that pretense."

"Pretense! Look around you!" Wail blurted.

Warily, suspecting a trick, Doc glanced about. He had been conscious of the strangely unholy purplish illumination; now its abnormality and downright impossibility hit him a full blow. Not impossibility, exactly, because there was, indeed, luminance.

"What makes the light?" he demanded of Wail.

Sneeringly, the fat man retorted, "Nuts to you. From now on, you're going to have too many questions for me to bother answering. You remember that crevice we just squeezed through? Well, that's the one the earthquake opened."

"The one Gilmore Sullivan found?" Then Doc caught himself. "Cut it out, Wail. I've had enough of this Hades stuff."

"Oh, you have, have you?" asked Wail. "Just where do you think you are, anyway?"

Doc, more at a loss for a reply than he would have liked to admit, countered with a question. "What goes on here? Some kind of secret mining operation? Are they mining atomic fission materials?"

Wail refused to answer. Doc rolled him over, lashed the man's hands securely, took turns of the rope around the chubby body, and retained the rope end as before. "This time," he said, "you won't slip out of it so easily."

"It's too late," Wail said. "Just look around."

"I intend to do so."

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This alarmed Wail, and he gasped, "No, no! You can still escape – maybe. One thing sure, you can head off Williams and the girl and her brother."

"You seem sure Williams and his prisoners haven't reached here yet," Doc remarked.

"Of course they haven't. We circled around them on the way down."

"We'll see." Doc jerked Wail to his feet, returned to the mouth of the fissure, and used his black–light projector. He didn't find traces of the Williams party. There was no sign of fluorescing footprints.

"No, no, please!" Wail croaked, when Doc turned away from the fissure. "Go back! I'll even show you the way!"

"Shut up!" Doc said. "We're going to learn what goes on here."

He advanced a step at a time, patting his pockets to make sure that a half–dozen small high–explosive grenades he had placed there earlier were safe. Wail was almost a dead weight, and he had to push and drag the man along. He kept the flashlight ready, but there was no real need of it, the grim and inexplicable glow that seemed to pervade everywhere furnished at least adequate light for walking, although it was impossible to see a distance of more than a few yards.

Harsh premonition of impending evil wrapped a clammy sensation about him, but Doc Savage went steadily ahead, for he was a man who, while taking every precaution against any logical danger, was not inclined to permit mere forebodings to stay him. He was familiar with danger; he had walked its path many times before, and he believed that care and a reasonable amount of discretion, plus the right kind of action at the right time, was ample armor.

However, he was not prepared for the whispering sound he presently heard. He stopped, arrested by the note, for it was not vocal nor even human, but it had a multitudinous quality and seemed to come from many directions at once.

Then his eye caught movement over to his right, and he tensed, faced that direction, making out a dim, shapeless object or substance that seemed to have nothing in the way of reality except motion. Doc was a brave man, but his skin broke into gooseflesh and revulsion jerked at his stomach as he perceived that a grim, uncanny shape was taking form.

So great was the horror created in him that he stood, rooted, paralyzed, the instinct to flee beating in futile weakness against the frozen coldness – terror, if it were that – which held him motionless.

The shape became a mass, formless and gibbous and evil. It had movement, and body, but little else that seemed natural; it had no arms, no legs; it was headless and leathery, with a sour gray color that shed the ugly purplish–green light with a skull–like sheen. It came toward him, lurching, rolling, so that he could not actually tell how it progressed. There was some odor, not the flowery one, but a dead scent of lifelessness and emptiness. "Why, I saw the thing earlier, and mistook it for a large boulder," he thought. "And it isn't alone!" Electrified by the last thought, and struck by premonition, he whirled to see a towering mass flying at him, too close upon him to be avoided.

So violent was the impact with which the thing struck Doc Savage that he was driven reeling, knocked breathless, stunned. The flashlight flew from his grasp; it seemed utterly unimportant that he carried a spare. He was down and the forms were lunging for him.

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Wail shrieked now Terror choked the outcry down to a small thing such as a mouse would make. And Wail wheeled and went flying away, ignored by the creatures which were assaulting Doc Savage, but in no way reassured by that.

The weird assailant proceeded to attack by falling forward upon Doc Savage. As soon as he understood that, Doc moved with frenzied speed, and was partially successful in evading the attack, only his right foot being caught.

But the weight of the thing was terrific, the pain in his foot a splintering agony, forcing him to cry out. Doc gave the attacker a savage kick with his free foot, which was the wrong thing to do, because it was like kicking solid stone. He wrenched wildly, sure his foot would never come free of that great weight; then it did, and he stumbled backward, gaining his feet, hardly able to use the foot.

He ran, though, as he had never run before. And he kept presence of mind enough to combine flight with pursuit of Wail; sooner than he expected, he saw Wail, and realized that utter terror had rendered the man incapable of doing his best. But Wail was still traveling a respectable pace.

Turning his head, Doc saw there was pursuit. There seemed to be dozens of the shapeless objects, all bobbing along, an occasional one losing balance and tumbling headlong, but seeming to keep coming even while falling.

Doc whipped a hand to a pocket, located one of the explosive grenades, and plucked out the firing mechanism, then hurled it. Excitement caused him to throw the grenade much too hard; it traveled well over the pursuers, and landed and exploded at least ten yards behind them.

The explosion split his eardrums, filled the cavern with blue-white blast flame and cataclysmic noise. It had a surprising effect on the pursuers as well, setting them into utter confusion, so that they moved this way and that, bumping together with hard stony sounds and milling senselessly Doc overtook Wail. The fat man was lying prone where he had been sent either by a tumble or by the blast force.

Jerking Wail to his feet, Doc demanded, "What are those things? Why did they attack me?"

Wail, his words a gabble of hysteria, said, "It wouldn't help if I told you. You're believing nothing I say"

"Don't quibble," Doc said angrily. "Come on, let's have an explanation!"

Wail drew in a sobbing breath. "They're inmates. They're sinners.

"Cut it out!" Doc snapped. "They're some kind of mechanisms, disguised as boulders. Isn't that it?"

Wail said, "That's childish, and you know it. They're stones, all right. They're stones and they can move, but they can't ever escape being stones.

"And you don't call that childish?"

"Not when you're in the outskirts of Hades," Wail replied grimly "And, brother, that's where you are. This is only a mild sample of what it's like down in the main area.

Driven beyond patience, Doc lifted a fist to strike the man, but the pointlessness of that stayed him. Wail was as terrified as man, or minor devil, could get, it occurred to Doc; if Wail wouldn't talk sensibly now, he never would.

"Get moving." Doc gave him a shove. "The crevice is over yonder."

"Oh, now you're willing to leave?" Wail snapped.

"Yes. We can come back later, with better equipment."

"Once you get out of here," Wail said, "you'll never come back. Not that you'll get out."

Doc shoved him violently. They began to walk carefully and warily through the evil semi-glow. There were now an incredible number of boulders around them, and Doc's apprehension ran high, until they came abruptly to an end of the stones, and Doc released his breath in relief.

Pleasure was short-lived, however, because they were confronted by a forest of what he took to be some kind of freak trees capable of growth in the cavern. They pushed forward, squeezing between the trunks of the trees, which were either purplish in color, or so tinted by the lighting. The tree trunks were spongy to the touch, like toadstools, and Doc soon found that he could force them apart by main strength whenever they became too thick to permit ready passage.

"Let me set the course," he told Wail, when the latter seemed inclined to veer to the right. "We could get lost in here."

"What's the difference? You'll never get out," Wail muttered.

Seizing Wail, Doc flung him forward, jamming him through openings between the weird trunks. When the way became tight, Doc flung a shoulder against the tree nearest at hand, forcing it to bend, and instantly there was a vicious hissing sound from the tree. The thing moved; he felt a clutching, slimy, tentaclelike thing around his ankle.

Doc's first thought was that they had disturbed a serpent of some kind; the idea that followed swiftly was that no snake, even a boa, could have such spongy softness. Then another tentacle fell upon him. And another. He struck out wildly; in the midst of his struggle, he heard Wail howling, and turned his head to discover the man was also being enveloped. Doc swung back to strike out again at the clammy attackers, but his arm was seized. A tentacle slid around this throat, ropelike, soft and yet strong. He endeavored to kick out, sought to use his arms. "I'm caught, helpless," he thought. "My God, what are these things? Can this really be hell?" A moment later, he was dragged down, the spongy arms covered his face, his mouth, and then he could no longer breathe.

IX

MONK Mayfair and Dr. Linningen, after Doc Savage had left them to go in pursuit of Mr. Wail, did not remain where they were for long. It was Monk's idea that they push ahead on the main purpose of the expedition, which was freeing the Sullivans from Bill Williams.

"Doc'll catch that Wail guy in no time at all," Monk stated. "He can retrace his way to this spot by the footprints Wail is making. So I can't see that we're needed here. Let's get along."

"I'm game," Linningen said in a tone which denied that he was very enthusiastic.

"You've got quite a bit of nerve," Monk told him approvingly

"Don't get the idea I'm not scared," Linningen said.

"I don't care for this cave-crawling myself," Monk said. "Let's whip it up. The sooner we overtake Williams, the sooner gooses are going to be cooked."

They traveled rapidly, running whenever they could. Monk was inclined to be more reckless than Doc Savage, so that he took more chances with the precipitous going. Linningen, a spry man, managed to keep up, although his nerves began to fray

"Take it easier!" Linningen blurted finally "I don't like the idea of getting killed in a fall."

"Not this close to Tophet, anyway, eh?" Monk chuckled hollowly

Linningen breathed heavily, traveled in silence, and presently asked, "You still take no stock in the Hades story?"

"Now don't start that on me!" Monk growled hastily "It was bad enough, listening to that guy Wail."

"But you don't believe a word of it, is that right?"

"That's right," Monk said.

"How," Linningen asked, "do you account for the several strange things that happened – Wail's presence on the yacht in the cabin where Gilmore Sullivan should have been, Williams paddling out into the tide rip, the accidents that nearly befell me and the other incidents?"

Monk spoke rapidly He'd clearly prepared the answers earlier for his own reassurance. "Wail told how he got out to the yacht, in a rented boat. Gilmore left the same way. It just happened nobody saw either of them. As for Williams and the tide rip – we know now that Williams is not on the up-and-up, and he was trying to build up this devil story. That's why he paddled out into the tide. He and Wail are probably in cahoots in this thing."

"Oh, you think there's a plot underway."

"Don't you?"

"I confess I can't figure it out," Linningen admitted. "Do you feel they're after something? Something in this cave, perhaps?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"What, for instance?"

"An ore deposit down here, maybe. You know yourself that there could be. Maybe gold, maybe something more practical, like tin or a pitchblende deposit."

"I hope you're right," Linningen said fervently.

"I better be right," Monk said. "Because if it should turn out that this Wail put it straight, I'm going to be a little upset."

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Linningen chuckled bitterly "Think of the problem we would have when we got outside and tried to make ourselves believed."

"I was thinking of that," Monk said. "Let's stop. Do you hear anything?"

They stood there, listening until their ears began the strange ringing that seems to be the human ear's response to silence that is too utter. Then they caught, from ahead and far below in the blackness, a clatter. Presently it was repeated.

"That's either Williams and his prisoners, or Doc," Monk said. "Let's not stand here."

They proceeded on with all the speed they could make and still maintain caution. Monk wrapped a handkerchief about the lens of his flashlight, to cut down the display of light to that barely necessary.

There came a moment when Linningen seized Monk's shoulder, thereby startling Monk nearly out of his skin, and blurted, "Look! It's Williams!"

Far below, outlined clearly by a splash of light, they could see Williams moving, driving two figures ahead of him.

"Gilmore and the girl are still O.K.," Monk breathed. "See, Williams is keeping a gun on them, the way Doc had it figured."

"Come on," said Linningen grimly "Let's overtake them, end it or get ended ourselves, and backtrack out of here. I've had my caverning for today"

Monk hurried forward, drawing his pistol. He did not share Doc Savage's feeling that a firearm was a source of trouble and a crutch which a man should not come to depend upon, and whereas Doc never carried a gun, Monk went armed with a type of machine pistol which he and Renny Renwick, the engineer of their organization, had developed for their own use. The gun could get rid of an astonishing number of cartridges in a few moments, and handle a variety of missiles – explosives, armor-piercing, so-called mercy bullets, gas pellets, thermite slugs for melting metal and incendiary purposes.

As it developed, Monk would have done better to keep his hands unimpeded, because suddenly and at exactly the wrong moment, his feet slipped on a slimy chute of stone, the underpinning shot from under him, and down he went. He slid several yards with all the stealth of an unloaded truckful of brick. Worse, in the pawing for security – he didn't know what kind of an abyss he might slide off into in the darkness – he lost the machine pistol.

Smashing against a solid bottom finally, he lay gasping. Then there was an ear-smacking crash, the noise of a gun exploding. The bullet hit very close; the lead splashed and went into Monk's cheek skin like needles. He howled and rolled frantically in the wrong direction, too, because suddenly he saw Williams standing a few feet away and drawing a deliberate aim on him.

Then Williams barked in pain, and the rifle was smashed from his clutch. Linningen, from above, had hurled a large stone with wonderful aim.

Wondering where Williams had got the rifle, Monk dived at the man. Williams gave up an attempt to retrieve the gun, swung a shoulder and met Monk's charge with a straight-arm that was very good football. Driven aside, Monk managed to kick the rifle, which no doubt Williams must have found around the ledge, or perhaps in Gilmore's possession.

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"Damn you, Williams!" Monk said, and reversed the rifle as a club. Williams instantly wheeled, fled; the darkness swallowed him. Monk yelled, "Stop! I'll shoot you, Williams, damned if I won't!"

Williams kept going. Monk, taking no time to aim, fired the rifle and was presented with one of the lucky escapes of his lifetime, because the rifle barrel had been bent, or more likely cave slime jammed into the bore, so that the whole breech went out, and violently Williams went on, faster if anything.

"Monk, be careful! For God's sake, be careful!" a male voice, evidently belonging to Gilmore Sullivan, shrieked from nearby.

Already lunging after Williams, Monk shouted, "Is Leona O.K.?"

The voice said she was. It added, "Careful of Williams! He's a devil!"

Which statement, considering the circumstances, meant more to Monk than it would normally have conveyed. Gilmore Sullivan's voice had the thin, weary, desperate quality of a loose fiddle string. Monk imagined him as a collection of bones held together by a few threads of hopelessness. That was, come to think of it, about the way he had been described by Linningen, the man who had found him on the rock in the sea.

The chase lacked nothing in feverish effort. Monk had much the same experience as Doc Savage earlier – his quarry began showing signs of speed and endurance beyond the human. In Monk's case, however, astonishment was not as intense, because he recalled hearing Williams had been a former football notable.

Williams, a noted football man?

"Who says so?" Monk thought wildly. Monk himself was a sports fan, one of the breed who read all the records and can quote from them for twenty years back. "I don't remember any guy of his description!" Williams had held forth to be a radio commentator in the sports field, as well. "On what station? I never heard of him!"

Monk got no further with his mental inspection of Williams. Two things made a sudden appearance to black his mind of anything but action and terror. First, there was the sudden feeling that Williams didn't need any light, that the fellow could move full speed through the blackest of stygian murk without illumination. Before that could fully develop in Monk's head, Williams popped into a narrow crevice that slanted somewhat from the vertical, and disappeared.

Plunging into the crack after Williams, Monk found himself in an unnerving position. He was a sitting duck, in case Williams had another gun and chose to use it. Williams would certainly choose; the fact he didn't cut loose now seemed proof he didn't have another. And there was Monk's claustrophobia.

Monk's revulsion against tight places applied particularly to stone. Now, squirming sidewise through a crevice which seemed to be narrowing, Monk began to have the ghastly conviction that the stone, several billions of tons of it, was slowly sliding together to close the crack. The fact that the inroad of terror immediately made his apish body swell was no help.

Finally, he wedged helplessly, and had to sink his teeth in his tongue to keep from bawling in an agony of frustrated terror. This happened about twenty-five feet from the far end of the crevice, and Williams, completing the passage, immediately pounded on a loose stone and hurled it into the slit in an effort to brain Monk.

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The hard-thrown rock was a blessing Monk badly needed; it hit his head, laid open his scalp, kayoed him for a moment. The brief unconsciousness forced his body to relax; thus loosened, he became free in the crevice and sagged. Also, dazed rage replaced terror, so he did not tighten his muscles until he had scrambled out of the thin passage.

Williams ran. Howling incoherently – the roaring was characteristic of Monk when violently aroused – Monk pursued him.

The cavern gave a weirdly different impression now; there was a feeling of vast space without there really being space. There were columns, passages, weirdly meandering tunnels. A vile pale glow-yellow, it seemed to Monk, although there was later argument about that, gave some illumination.

The tangle of stone increased, became labyrinthine, unreal. It was exactly like a forest. It was a forest, Monk suddenly concluded; the stuff around him was not stone, but felt spongy and nasty to his touch. It was moving! Swaying, writhing, the things about him seemed to be clutching at him!

Now Monk did what he had been planning to do as a last resort – hauled out one of Doc's explosive grenades and pulled the pin and got rid of it. He threw the metal pellet carefully, sending it through an opening in the impossible thicket of slimy, clutching objects. The grenade exploded about thirty feet distant.

Sheeting flame, noise. Then an odor, sickening and weird, a smell that Monk knew instinctively to be the scent of fear. And then silence. Utter stillness and motionlessness, and Monk, who had been knocked off his feet by the blast, chanced to touch one of the tree-like forms that had been slimy and spongy, and now it was as hard as stone.

There was a voice, Doc Savage's voice, shouting, "Monk! Where are you?"

"Damned if I know where I am," Monk croaked. "It beats me."

"Did you come in through that crevice?"

"Yeah."

"Get back to it. Fast."

Monk said, "Williams is in here somewhere. There's some kind of tree-sized weeds, or something, that grab at you, and I threw a grenade and –"

"And you'll never get out of here unless you move fast! Run, you idiot!" Doc interrupted.

Monk got into motion, wheeled, and ran in the direction of Doc's voice. He saw the bronze man presently. Doc was running also, and they sprinted in silence to the crevice.

Doc said, "That crack is a tight fit, but try not to kill any time getting through."

"I don't plan to," Monk told him, and he stretched his arms above his head and began to sidle through the crevice with more speed than he had imagined possible.

Doc Savage, following close behind Monk, said, "It was a good thing you used that grenade. It saved things for me."

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"It didn't do me any harm either," Monk assured him. "Something was closing in on me in there, and the explosion – I think it was really the flash of flame – put a stop to it."

A scrambling and whimpering came from behind them. Doc, turning his head, decided that Mr. Wail was following through the crevice. Wail made good speed. He was on Doc's heels when they finished negotiating the narrow passage.

"I don't like this place," Wail gasped. "Let's get out of here."

Which could well be, Doc reflected, the understatement of the day.

X

"THEY'RE following us!" Monk said, and pointed at the crevice.

Gold sweat stood on Doc's face as he stared back into the split of a passage. He saw that the far end of the crevice was filling with dark masses. They either had no real shape, or there was not the light to give them form.

"Get back!" Doc shouted into the crevice. "Get back, or we'll use another grenade!"

The warning had no effect. The passage continued to fill with dragging, inexorable figures, and now they were making a sound, a clicking and hissing, a sound that was rage and hunger and bestiality.

"Run!" Doc told Monk. "Linningen and the Sullivans are back there somewhere. Keep shouting so they can identify you. And keep a hold on Wail, if you can."

Wail shrieked, "Throw fire at them! Flame will stop them. They're afraid of flame! Throw – " Monk seized him by the collar and hauled him away

Doc Savage, searching in his pockets, found only two more of the explosive grenades. He unpinned one, smothered a frenzied impulse to throw it directly among the horde of pursuers that now packed the crevice far half its depth, and dropped it at a point where he hoped it would loosen a slide of rock that would fill the crevice.

When the explosion came, he was yards away and running hard. The solid stone seemed to jerk away under his feet from the blast force, making him stumble. Somewhere overhead and to the left, a great shaft of stone broke free of the ceiling and fell with a jumbled roar that mixed with and accented the avalanche of stone that was closing the crevice. He could hear loose boulders hopping down inclines.

Sounding far away, he heard Linningen begin bellowing anxiously demands about their safety.

"Go on!" he shouted after Monk. "Keep running!"

He waited until he saw the white ghost of Monk's flashlight beam, felt absurdly grateful that Monk had retained the little flash, and wheeled to watch the mass of stone, now jagged and jumbled where the crevice had been. He put his own flashlight beam on the spot.

Several minutes passed. He could hear the excited shouts as Monk and Wail joined Linningen and the Sullivans; he heard them continue onward. Their sounds nearly died away.

X

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Then he heard weak, horrible sounds coming from the mass of fallen stone that had filled the crevice. He heard the sounds grow stronger, until at last they became movement, and a hideous figure began to drag itself from an aperture between the blocks of broken stone. The creature, a hideous caricature of humanity, spread itself over the broken stone, clawing, whimpering.

It began crawling toward Doc Savage, moving on all fours, stiffly and on dead limbs. "Help, help!" it wailed. "We must go back. Help us to go back."

Clawing its way to Doc's feet, the creature clamped its paws about his ankles. "Help!" it gasped.

Suddenly, Doc screamed, probably the first shriek of unadulterated terror he had given in his lifetime. He kicked wildly at the creature, which had buried its bony claws in his legs.

He fought madly. The thing began to climb up his body, sinking clawlike fingers into his flesh, reaching upward for another handhold. Doc slugged, pitched about; with ghastly persistence, the thing clung to him getting nearer and nearer his face. Then the creature was at his throat, trying to drive small blunt teeth through the skin. Doc stumbled and fell, conscious of the thing gnawing, gnawing like a vile rat, seeking his jugular and his blood.

The tentacles of the creature that embraced him, indeed the thing's whole body, felt spongy and slimy, and about it was the odor that Monk had noted, the sickening odor of fear. It seemed to have, except for its ability to remain fastened upon him, no real strength; he felt its teeth gnawing madly at his throat with a futile desire to eat.

He remembered then about their fear of flame. His hands were free; the creature seemed to have no desire to pin his hands. He fumbled insanely in his pockets, found his cigarette lighter and thumbed it into flame. Instantly, the repulsive thing flew away from him, covering many feet in one leap, and flattened itself against the broken stone, wailing with maniacal terror. Doc Savage sprang to his feet, more filled with fear than he had ever been, and began running. He did not look back. He had no desire to look back.

He climbed until he was spent, shaking, and then continued climbing, until the pounding exhaustion brought some return of clear thinking. After that, he kept his eyes open, and at last chose a place where his final grenade, judiciously placed, would bring down a great section of cavern roof, choking any channel below.

He time-fused the grenade, and he was four or five hundred feet higher when it exploded, bringing down a thundering mass of stone and sending upward a cloud of rock dust from which he fled in unreasoning terror, and which pursued him for a long time, seemingly.

XI

THE sergeant of State Police was named Griswold, and he was a slender, soft-spoken, middle-aged fellow whose practical outlook seemed unshakeable.

"I think Linningen's explanation is the most practical one," he said.

It was mid-afternoon, bright sunlight beating against the pleasant log walls of the lodge and melting the slight skiff of snow that had fallen. Doc Savage stood at a window, frowning thoughtfully at the icicles which were forming at the eaves.

"We were down in that cavern four days," Ham Brooks said grimly. "I don't get that. There was no

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impression of being there that long."

Sergeant Griswold ignored that and told Linningen, "Let's have your theory again, sir. It sounds solid to me."

"I feel it's the only possible explanation," Linningen said. "In fact, it's quite reasonable. It amounts to simply this: Gas. Gas of one sort or another is often found in natural caverns. There was gas in this one, gas that was a bit unusual in that it opened the way to hallucinations in the minds of the victims. There are, as you know, certain anaesthetics that are conducive to hallucinations on the part of the person being subjected to the effects of the stuff. Mr. Savage, I'm sure, can cite you a number. Personally I recall having some ghastly dreams while having my appendix removed."

"That's what sold me," said the police sergeant emphatically "They gave me a shot of gas a few months ago to set a broken arm, and the dream I had would scare you stiff."

"Right," Linningen said. "We had all been pumped full of this hell-down-below stuff before we went into that cavern. So, when the gas got to us, we naturally had nightmarish dreams involving our own ideas of hell."

Monk Mayfair snorted violently "Do two people have identical dreams?"

"It's possible."

"Well, Doc and I sure saw the same version of the outskirts of Hades," Monk told him.

"Nothing unusual about that. You, Mr. Mayfair, and you, Mr. Savage, have been closely associated for a long time, and the best of friends. Naturally, your mental processes would have a similarity. That would account for your identical versions of Tophet."

Monk shuddered. "I'm glad something accounts for it. I tell you, I was a believer there for a while."

Ham Brooks said, "I'm sure Linningen's right about this devil stuff."

"How would you know?" Monk snapped. "You didn't pay the place a visit."

"I know that." Ham touched a bandage which swathed his head. "I slept it out. That Williams guy gave me a whack over the head and left me for dead well back in the cavern. But I've explained that." Ham nodded at the police officer. "I was still out when the sergeant found me."

Sergeant Griswold nodded importantly "I found or rather one of my troopers found Mr. Brooks lying unconscious near the trail. I can assure you that Mr. Brooks had no delusions of having visited hell."

"How could he, he wasn't there," Monk snapped.

"He wasn't deep enough in the cavern to come under the influence of the gas, you mean."

"Oh, have it your own way." Monk grinned sheepishly, adding, "God knows, I'm glad somebody thought of a peg I can hang my peace of mind on. I don't guess I'll even ask you if you can explain Gilmore Sullivan's conviction over a period of months that he had taken a peek at hell and they'd sent a junior-grade demon up to shut his mouth."

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Linningen looked impatient. "Longer exposure to the gas – and remember, Gilmore Sullivan spent literally weeks on end in the cavern—produced a more permanent breakdown in the mind. The delusions stayed with the victim. They weren't quickly tossed off, as you gentlemen and Miss Sullivan have been able to toss them off."

"O.K.," Monk said. "I won't argue."

Sergeant Griswold, whose buttons and leather belt shone brightly, smiled at them. "I have gathered a pretty good idea of why Williams kidnapped Miss Sullivan and her brother and took them into the cavern. Williams thought there was a vein of valuable ore to be found there."

Ham Brooks asked, "Where'd you get that idea?"

The sergeant looked confused. "Well, it's logical. How would you account for it any other way?"

Doc Savage spoke quietly "We might question Gilmore Sullivan about it."

Sergeant Griswold said that was a good idea, a darned good idea, and they went to the sunny bedroom where Gilmore Sullivan was lying. Gilmore listened in some embarrassment to their questions.

"I'm a geologist and always looking for valuable minerals, naturally," Gilmore explained. "I don't recall finding any gold or anything like that, but after I fell victim of the gas, I might have, and I might have given Williams the idea there was something like that in the cavern."

Doc eyed Gilmore sharply. "When could you have given Williams an idea like that?"

"Oh, after I was rescued from the island. Williams was on the schooner, you know."

Doc asked, "Do you remember telling Williams such a story?"

Gilmore hesitated. "Well, no. But there's quite a lot I don't exactly recall." "Remember how you got on the Island?" Doc inquired.

Gilmore nodded. "In a small sailboat. I landed, then shoved the boat off and let the wind drift it away I was quite insane."

"You're going to be all right now," Linningen comforted him.

Sergeant Griswold told Doc Savage, "Since you seem skeptical about that Bill Williams, I've asked our head office to check on the fellow. He's supposed to be an ex-football man, a radio commentator, and fairly well known. Right?"

Doc glanced quizzically at Linningen, who nodded. "That's right," Linningen said.

Leaving the bedroom, Doc Savage sauntered along a hall, down a flight of steps, and stopped before a windowless storeroom before the door of which a policeman stood.

"Your prisoner behaving himself?" Doc inquired.

"Sure," replied the cop.

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"Mind if I talk to him?"

"I guess it'll be all right," the policeman said. He unlocked the door, permitting Doc to enter, then closed and locked the door.

Mr. Wail was lying on a bunk on his back. He turned his head and smiled benignly. "Good evening, or good afternoon, rather. How is the inquisition coming?"

"Not too good for you, Wail," Doc told him dryly "The police have about concluded you and Williams were in cahoots, and after the secret of a vein of valuable ore you thought Gilmore Sullivan had found in the cavern."

"They're nuts," Wail said pleasantly "I was a devil, junior-grade, sent up to silence Sullivan. Williams was a slightly higher-grade devil sent up to ascertain why I was dallying with my job."

"The police don't believe that, of course," Doc told him.

"Naturally. They're happier with the other story, and I'm happy that they are happy"

"You're going to stick around?" Doc asked.

"I am, you bet."

"As a deserting demon, aren't you likely to be picked up and pressed back into service?"

"Not if I can help it," said Wail fervently "I think I can outfox the boys. Remember, I had over a hundred years experience knocking around down there."

"You like it up here?"

"I sure didn't like it down there."

Doc nodded. "You're likely to spend a few years in jail, if the police have their way." "No, I won't." "No?"

"I'll just walk out," said Mr. Wail blandly "Stone walls and iron bars do not a prison make, not as long as I've got a few of my devil powers left over."

"I see."

Wail snorted one of his best efforts. "No, you don't see. You don't believe a damned word of it."

Doc turned to the door. "Well, I'll be seeing you, since you're going to stick around."

"No, you won't," said Mr. Wail. "I meant stick around this good old earth, topside. I didn't mean stick around in jail."

"You're leaving?"

"I'm leaving," Wail declared. "I won't be seeing you again. Keep your nose clean."

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

Doc stepped out, the policeman eyed him carefully, then the cop locked the door, after peering inside to make sure Mr. Wail was still there. "That little fat guy kinda gives me the willies," the officer confided. State Police Sergeant Griswold wore a rather odd expression when Doc Savage rejoined him. He had apparently been shouting at Linningen, and the psychiatrist was manifestly uncomfortable.

"Perhaps I didn't investigate the fellow fully enough," Linningen mumbled. "You see, he was introduced to me by a friend, expressed an interest in yachting, and I invited him along as a guest. He was an amiable and pleasant guest, I assure you.

"But you think he coulda managed so the schooner went past that island and found Gilmore Sullivan?" Officer Griswold snapped.

"Well, possibly," Linningen admitted.

"What's this?" Doc inquired.

Officer Griswold said emphatically, "Williams was no football player or radio commentator. There's no record of him."

"No record at all of Williams?" Doc asked oddly.

Officer Griswold frowned. "Now, don't get on that devil stuff again. Williams is just somebody that Wail guy picked up to help him get the ore deposit they imagined existed."

"I hope you can prove that," Doc said fervently.

"You watch me!" Griswold barked. "I'm going to pump it all out of Wail. I'm going down there right now and do that."

The officer stepped through the door of the storeroom with a completely blank and unbelieving expression on his face. "Where the devil did he go?" he gasped.

The storeroom walls were intact, so were ceiling and floor, and there were no windows. And no Mr. Wail.

Sergeant Griswold said, "When did you let him out?"

"I didn't let him out!" the policeman declared emphatically "Nobody let him out. He's gone. Nobody went in there but Doc Savage, and he came out alone after talking to this Wail guy for a while. Isn't that right, Mr. Savage?"

Doc Savage was wearing a thoughtful expression. "Right to some extent. You didn't hear me talking to anyone, did you?"

"Huh?" The policeman stared. "Wasn't he in there when you went in?"

"Did you really think he was?" Doc countered.

The officer swallowed. "My God! Why didn't you say the room was empty? No! No, it couldn't have been empty. I looked in after you left and saw this Wail – Oh, nuts! I was imagining – Why didn't you tell me the room was empty, Savage?"

UP FROM EARTH'S CENTER

"I thought it might be some sort of joke," Doc said.

Sergeant Griswold swore. "I don't know how that Wail got away, but we'll catch him." The sergeant fisted his hands. "We'll make him wish he was back in the brimstone country, where he claims he came from."

"Want to bet on either statement?" Doc asked dryly.

THE END