

Ten Ton Snakes

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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I

YOU ought to know about ribbons. The yellow one with the two red stripes is for China Service. The red ribbon with the pair of triple white stripe, good conduct. Purple with white ends, Purple Heart. Blue, red and white stripes, Distinguished Service Cross. Blue, yellow and red bands, the Yangtze Medal.

The years and the terrors of a man's life worn over his heart. This boy had all of these ribbons. Except the good-conduct one. He didn't have that one.

He was wearing them, too. They looked like a flag on his chest. Normally he didn't wear them; he carried them in his pocket, in a little teakwood velvet-lined case wonderfully made for him by a Karen in Burma. The boy felt very deeply about them, but he wouldn't have admitted it for anything. However, he wasn't exactly a boy.

He was over twenty-eight. Not old enough for that gray to belong in his hair. He was leathery and rangy and long-nosed and blue-eyed and he looked at you as if he owned you. That is a thing American soldiers are beginning to do, look at you as if they own you. And they do, in a way.

He had a callous like a corn on a finger of his left hand, his 50-calibre trigger finger.

And now they were trying to kill him.

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He was walking down Fifth Avenue. Looking. Looking at everything gladly and hungrily, as if he wanted to eat it. Looking at the legs of the girls walking on Fifth Avenue. Ogling the plaster-of-paris legs of the mannikins in the store windows. Going "woo-woo" at the girls walking by him on the street. He wanted to jump over the buildings, you could tell. He would get up on his toes and dance a step or two, and whirl completely around. Like a ballet dancer. As if God had given him wings.

MURDER.

It was a very carefully planned thing, this project of sudden death. It was getting the care that a murder deserves. The boy with the ribbons, the boy who was so glad that he was almost sick at his stomach, was going to be slain in cold blood. Cold blood – if anyone knows why they call it that.

It was hard to be sure how many men were going to help do it to him. Thousands of people were on Fifth Avenue, probably no more nor less than are there any days. The murderers were of the crowd, and like the crowd. Pointing them out would have been as difficult as picking four maggots who had had catfish for dinner from a basketful of other maggots who had had sunfish for dinner. Very difficult. They weren't doing anything to get fingers pointed at them.

Keeping track of the boy, was all. Waiting. But waiting has its end. Suspense can draw out just about so far, and then something must happen.

So one of the men walked up behind the boy with a long knife and started to put the blade in between the boy's third and fourth ribs where it would reach the boy's happy heart.

IT was a walk-up-and-stab murder, but the sun was shining gaily, making shadows. The sun made the shadow of the man with the knife on the sidewalk, and it looked like exactly what it was, a man with a knife. This the soldier saw.

The soldier did more than dodge. The army had spent a lot in time and patience teaching him what to do when someone tried to shoot, club or stab him. He did it. He did it so fast you could hardly see it.

Slam, slam. Too fast to follow, but the knife was spinning in the air and he who'd held it was on his back with teeth loose in his mouth and an awful feeling where he'd been kicked in the belly. It was an army bellykick, Commando stuff, intended to gut a man if possible. It was no fooling.

The man fell on the sidewalk. He might as well have been dead. He was noisy and he was hurting, but otherwise he might as well have been dead.

The boy looked at the man.

"You blank blank," he said. "I think I know you."

He circled, looking at the man on the sidewalk.

"Why God bless you, I do know you," the soldier said. "What do you know about that. Doggone!"

And he began being un-nice to the man on the sidewalk. What the soldier proceeded to do was sickening, but it didn't sicken. He had been dealing with Japs, and the only safe Jap was one who couldn't be anything else.

He kicked in some of the man's ribs. The man was long and skinny, like a wolf with the sickness wolves get from eating too much carrion, so his ribs were close to the hide and broke easily. The soldier jumped on to

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the man's belly with both feet. This was guaranteed to rupture, to burst the bladder, etc.

The soldier got off the man's belly and leaned over the man's face and said, "Listen, bub, to what I'm asking you. Is Tucker French, my brother, all right? Is he going to be all right? What do you such-and-such plan to do to Tucker?"

The man on the sidewalk gargled his blood and teeth and pain. "Come on, boy," the soldier said. "Let's have an answer. Don't be bashful."

No answer.

"Come, come, boy," the soldier said. "What about Tucker? You're not going to hurt Tucker, are you?"

No answer.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot," the soldier said. "What about the heavy stuff? You boys fixing to do something bad with the heavy stuff?"

The man on the sidewalk finally got his throat sufficiently clear of blood and teeth to form some semicoherent words. When he spoke, he was down to greatest fundamental of all, the thing than which there is nothing much more important. He said, "Please don't kill me."

He said not to kill him in Spanish, because Spanish and not English was his mother tongue.

As if answering his prayer, his friends came to his aid.

THE soldier was fooled this time. There were no shadows to warn him. There was only a mild looking man in a blue serge suit who sidled up to the scene with one hand over his mouth as if he was showing horror the way a woman shows it. When he was close enough to the soldier, he slugged the soldier on the side of the face.

The soldier wasn't greatly damaged. He began to fight. He wanted to fight anyway.

Two other men drifted out of the crowd and took a hand, beginning beating the soldier.

"Hey, this guy tried to knife me," the soldier cried. "Cut it out! Call a cop, if you want to help."

This was what he said before he understood that they were part of an organized attempt on his life. When he did realize what they were, he stopped talking. He did everything with his fists and feet that he could.

The men, finding the soldier was extremely tough, began producing knives. These knives did not resemble the knife the first man had tried to use, except in one particular. They were individualized knives. That is, each one was a knife which its owner liked. Which meant that they were men who carried their knives as a habit.

Such men would know how to use knives, so the soldier got away from them as fast as he could.

He escaped by running. He didn't make the mistake of going in either direction along the sidewalk. Instead, he popped into the nearest doorway.

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They shot at him. The bullet went past his head and buried itself somewhere in the upper part of the luggage shop in which he found himself.

The soldier was afraid the place wouldn't have a back door. He was right. But it had a basement and a second floor. He took the stairs to the second floor.

There was a bank of elevators and he got in one of them and rode down to the basement, which was also a part of the leathergoods store. He waited around there for a while, looking at suitcases. He had the clerk show him a tan leather case, and faced the stairs and the elevators while he examined it. He saw nor heard nothing alarming. He asked the clerk if there was a back door, and the clerk got such a funny look that the soldier walked off and left him.

The soldier walked out of the front door.

The man who had tried to knife him was no longer on the sidewalk. The man was nowhere in sight. None of the other knife-wielders were to be seen. Nobody recognized the soldier as a participant in the action of a few minutes before. The soldier didn't stick around long enough to give them much chance.

He went to a bar. He had three snorts of rye. He burst out in a sweat and he became sick with the feeling that nerves give to a man's stomach. He was plain scared.

After he felt that he was able to walk down the street without falling on his face (and it took him some time to get back that much control) he got moving.

He went to a phone booth and looked in the phone book for a name: Renwick, John, civil engr.

JOHN Renwick, civil engineer, had an office in a ponderous building two blocks from Grand Central station on Fortieth Street. The office was not quite seedy, but it had no floss. The furniture was old, of walnut, and the middle-aged office girl also looked as if she were made of walnut. She listened to the soldier state that he wanted to see Renwick if Renwick was in town.

"He's in town," the office girl said. "Wait a minute."

She went into the inner office, closed the door and put her back against the door.

"A soldier to see you," she said. "Gives his name as Bob French. Says he met you at Yung-shun, wherever that is."

"Yung-shun," Renny Renwick said, "is in China."

You first noticed Renny Renwick's fists. They were too big. He was a big man, more than six feet, more than two hundred pounds, but the fists were still too big.

The fists, as a matter of fact, were the index to the man. They were capable hands, almost ridiculously strong, hands that were not made for soft work or for softness of any kind. Gentleness, yes. But not softness. There were scars on the fists where they had hit things, and the hide was leathery where the sun had beat them, and the palms calloused from handling heavy things.

"Hunan province in China," he said. "That's where we built that intermediate field for the B-29's. Holy cow, was that a place for you! Shoot this soldier in here."

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The middle-aged office girl opened the door and told the soldier, "Shoot you in, he says."

The soldier came in holding out his hand and saying, "You remember me?"

Renwick jumped to his feet and roared.

"Hell, yes! Holy cow!" he roared. "What are you doing here? Did they run out of rice whiskey in China? You're the last man I expected to see."

"My time was up and they shipped me home," the soldier said.

"When was that?"

"A week ago."

"Only a week? What are you doing sober? Sit down. What became of Sleepy Wilson? And what about what's-his-name, the flop-eared guy we stole the jeep from that night?"

The soldier didn't answer the questions. He started to, but his words stubbed their toes on his fears and fell flat on their faces.

What he did say was, "Look, I'm in trouble."

Renwick grinned and roared, "Borrowing money from me is getting blood from a turnip. But not for a man from Yung-shun. How much do you need?"

"I don't need money."

"No? You've come to the wrong man, then. I don't know anything about women."

"This isn't a girl."

Renwick examined the soldier intently.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I never did know it, I don't think."

"Bob French."

"All right, Bob French, sit down and see if you can't talk that scared look off your face."

Bob French sat down. "It's a story that has its goofy aspects."

"Shoot."

||

RENNY Renwick's voice was a great tumbling thing developed by bawling at steeljacks on towering skyscraper frameworks and bawling above the clatter of riveting guns. The voice had been rattling the windows, almost. Now that he was silent, listening for the soldier's story, there seemed almost too much stillness in the office.

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"It's a shame to drag this in on you," Bob French said. "But you're the only man I could think of that I knew in New York. And I'm scared."

"What are you scared of?"

"Here's the story. I got a brother, see. His name is Tucker. He is younger than me, and he's in South America. Colombia, back in the jungles. He's in the mining business in a small way."

"American citizen?"

Bob French took his eyes off Renwick and put them on the floor and didn't say anything for a moment. "Yes. I don't know why the draft missed him."

"Okay."

Bob French shoved his jaw out and said, "Okay or not, I don't give a damn. I've done enough fighting for all of our family, and I'm glad Tucker kept out of it and I hope to God he continues keeping out of it."

He sounded violent, as if he were taking something out of his heart.

Renny laughed. "Was I picking a fight with you?"

The soldier licked his lips. He looked at the floor some more.

"I got a cable from my brother. That was two days ago. I had cabled Tucker I was back in the States and had a twenty-one-day furlough that was just starting, so that's how he knew I was back and where to find me.

"This cable was funny. It said for me to go see a man named Sir Roger Powell, who would be at the Westland. It said for me to ask Powell about the heavy stuff. I was to ask Powell what the situation was on the heavy stuff. It said, – the cable said – to try to form a judgment about Powell. Well, I did an – "

"What," Renny interrupted, "did the cable mean by asking you to form a judgment?"

"Decide about Powell."

"Decide what?"

"Whether he was a crook or not, I guess."

"What is the heavy stuff?"

"That's all the cable said – heavy stuff."

"You mean it just said to ask about the heavy stuff, and that was all the description it gave?"

"Yes."

"And from that, what did you gather the heavy stuff was?"

"I couldn't figure it out."

"What's your guess?"

"I haven't got any guess."

"Then you have no idea what the heavy stuff could be?"

"None," the soldier said. "I told you this thing had goofy aspects. That's one of them."

"Mind letting me see this cablegram?"

"I'd be glad to show it to you, only I haven't got it."

"What became of it?"

"I destroyed it."

"Why?"

"Habit. I have the habit of destroying all the letters and telegrams I receive when they're not something I have to keep. I've done that for years, I guess."

"What did you do after you got the cablegram from your brother?" Renny asked, settling back to listen again.

Bob French seemed to require a moment to get his mind back on the telling of his story. Then he said, "I went to see Sir Roger Powell. I found him at the hotel, as Tucker's cablegram had said I would. I sent my name up to his room, and he returned word for me to come right up.

"Well, that name of Sir Roger Powell had sure fooled me," the soldier continued. "I expected an old geezer with a monocle and a white goatee. Sir Roger Powell wasn't anything like that. He could have been an insurance agent in Kansas City, for all you could tell."

"Is he a genuine title?" Renny asked.

"Search me. If you're a genuine Sir, don't you have to sit in the House of Lords or in Parliament or something?"

"Search me," Renny said. "I wouldn't know."

"Anyway, Powell didn't admit knowing anything about any heavy stuff. He knew my brother. That was all he would admit."

"You think, then, that he lied to you?" Renny asked.

"Everything he said might not be lies. But he sure lied about the heavy stuff, whatever it is."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell when a man lies to me."

"Always?"

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"I could tell this time," Bob French said. "He was lying, all right. There was another guy in the room with him. I didn't like the fellow's looks either. Well, I talked to this Powell fellow, asking him about the heavy stuff, and I didn't get a thing out of him. He just said he knew nothing about any such thing, and that he was very sorry. But I got the feeling he wasn't sorry, and that he knew plenty about the heavy stuff, whatever it is, and that the only thing he was sorry about was seeing me. My showing up that way worried him, all right. Well, I left."

The soldier scowled at the floor for a moment.

"I cabled my brother the results of the interview," he said. "I asked him what he wanted me to do."

"Have you had an answer?"

"Not yet."

Renny said, "You said you were scared. I don't see any reason for your being scared."

"Wait a minute, I haven't told you what happened just before I came up here."

Renny waited patiently. He was interested in the story. He was excited about it, too, and his eyes were bright and intent.

"They tried to kill me on the street," the soldier said. "First, a man tried to knife me. I knocked him down. I was pretty rough. Some other men piled in to help. Too many for me, I figured. So I cut and ran, and here I am."

"How," Renny asked, "did you connect this attack with Sir Roger Powell, the man your brother cabled you to interview about the heavy stuff?"

"This guy with the knife was with Powell when we had our talk."

Renny raised his eyebrows over this piece of information. "That would be a connection, all right. But I don't exactly see what you want me to do."

"Look, you're the only man in New York I know," Bob French said. "I've got some funny trouble on my hands, as you can see. I'm scared. I've had practice in being scared, because I've killed Japs and had Japs trying to kill me, and I've been scared for a week at a time. And I can still get scared, like when those guys tried to kill me. Right on the street like that, they tried to kill me. I tell you, I never heard of such a damned thing."

"So that's why you came to me?" Renny said.

"That's right," the soldier said. "I got to know you in China, and I figured you would be the man to help me or advise me." The soldier hesitated, then added sheepishly, "Don't get me wrong. I don't expect you to drop your business and grab a gun and rush out to fight my battles for me. Just kick in with some advice, that's what I want. When a man is scared, it helps to have someone around who understands."

"You didn't," Renny said, "come to me because you knew I was associated with Doc Savage?"

"Eh? You're what with who?"

"Associated with Doc Savage."

"Who's he?" Bob French asked.

Renny thought over the answer for a moment, then he laughed. "That's fresh," he said. "That's wonderful."

"WHAT are you laughing at?" Bob French demanded.

Renny chuckled over it for a while. "The idea of you not having heard of Doc Savage, coupled with the coincidence of your popping up with a piece of mysterious trouble like this, strikes me as funny," he explained.

"Who's this Savage?"

"A friend with whom I frequently work," Renny said. Then he frowned, and shook his head quickly. "No, that isn't the way to put it. Let's change that, and say that several years ago I met the most remarkable man I have ever seen. A man with so much ability that it sounds silly when you start telling the truth about him. I'll explain what I mean by silly by saying that his profession is other people's troubles, righting wrongs and punishing evildoers in the far corners of the earth. See how wild that sounds? Like something out of a book about knighthood. It gives you an idea."

"You work for this fellow, that it?" Bob French demanded.

"I work with him, not for him," Renny corrected. "There are five of us who do that. I'm an engineer. I'm the engineering specialist. The others are also specialists. One is an electrician, one a chemist, one a geologist and archaeologist, and the other a lawyer." Renny was silent a moment, grinning. "Here's something else unusual about it. None of us get paid for it."

Bob French stared fixedly at Renny. "When I knew you in China, I figured you were a pretty levelheaded guy."

"And now you don't think so?"

"I don't know what to think. This sure sounds pixyish."

Renny chuckled. "You'll understand it when you meet Doc Savage, the 'man of bronze,' as they call him sometimes."

Bob French gave a visible jump, and said, "The "

man of – " and didn't finish.

"The newspapers call Doc the 'man of bronze' now and then," Renny said. "Have you heard of him under that description?"

"I guess I have," the soldier said.

Renny watched the soldier curiously. Bob French wasn't a fellow who hid his feelings very well. Renny could tell what was going through French's mind. First, French mentally reviewed what he had heard about Doc Savage. This review, for some reason or other, made French apprehensive. French suddenly decided that he didn't want Doc Savage involved in the affair.

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"If you don't mind," French said, "let's you and I work out this thing ourselves."

"You mean you don't want Doc to know about this?"

"I'd rather not."

"Why?"

Bob French didn't reply immediately. He was becoming cautious, stopping to plan his words. "This isn't a very important affair, and Savage is a man who is accustomed to large matters, if what I recall about him is right. I don't think we should bother him with this."

"Didn't someone try to murder you?" Renny demanded.

"Yes, but – "

"Isn't that important?"

"Well – "

"A murder is always important," Renny said. "We'll go to Doc with this thing. Wait'll I get my hat and coat."

RENNY went into an adjoining room which, Bob French decided, must serve the big-fisted engineer as living quarters. At least French got a glimpse of a cot and a dresser through the open door.

Now that Renny was out of sight, some of the emotion inside French suddenly appeared on his face. The emotion, a sick apprehension, got the best of him for a moment.

He went to the door leading into the reception room and opened it, not as a man who was in flight, but as a man who was so worried that he felt the need of moving about.

It was when he made the unexpected discovery that the middle-aged office girl was not in the outer office that French's frightened brain hatched a quick plan.

The key in the partition door was on the inside. He had already noticed that. He seized the key and changed it to the other side of the door, stepped through, closed the door quietly, and locked it.

He lifted his voice, yelled, "Renny! Watch out! For God's sake!" He screamed the last part.

He snatched up the office girl's chair and broke it over her desk. He hurled the fragments against the connecting door. He emitted a series of loud grunts and gasps, and shoved the office girl's desk around.

Renny hit the other side of the partition door, rattling the locked doorknob.

"French, what's happening?" Renny yelled.

"They've jumped me!" the soldier howled.

He stamped and slapped the desk. He seized his blouse, deliberately tore it half in two up the back, wrenched off the blouse-half including the sleeve, and threw it on the floor.

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Then he ran out into the corridor. He had been afraid someone would have heard the uproar and come into the corridor to investigate. But no one had.

Bob French ran to the door at the end of the corridor which was marked EXIT. This led to the stairs. He went down the stairs in clattering haste.

III

HALF an hour later, Renny Renwick was saying to Doc Savage, "He got a cable from his brother to ask a man named Powell about something called the heavy stuff."

Renny went on with the story, and Doc listened.

Doc Savage was a taller man than Renny Renwick, and probably as heavy, but it was only when he was near Renwick that this was apparent. Standing apart, Doc seemed of slighter stature. Most muscular men and most big men look muscular or big. Doc didn't.

There were two or three startling things about his appearance. His hair was bronze-colored, and only slightly darker than the sun had made his skin. He had golden eyes that were unusual, almost weird. Otherwise he was not particularly handsome. He dressed with an obvious effort to make himself inconspicuous, but with little success. He was a man who would be conspicuous anywhere.

He had received an excited telephone call from Renny. He had hurried to Renwick's office, and now he listened to the story of Bob French's visit.

"They grabbed him," Renny concluded, "when I was in the other room getting my hat and coat. They must have jerked him into the reception room and locked the door between the two offices before he began to fight. The fight must have been a beaut. It only lasted a couple of seconds, because it was over, and everybody was gone, by the time I could find something heavy enough to break down the door."

"You searched for French?" Doc asked. He had a voice which was somewhat startling because of the impression it gave of controlled volume and power. It had a quality which highly trained voices have.

"Sure I looked. I ran into the corridor, yelling for French. I didn't get an answer. I dashed back and telephoned the elevator starter downstairs to keep his eyes open for a man of French's description. But I must have been too late, because French hasn't left since. He might still be in the building, of course."

"Where did this fight take place?"

"The reception room."

Doc said, "Let's have a look."

In the reception room, he picked up the broken pieces of the office girl's chair and examined them.

"Where was your office girl?" he asked.

"Mrs. Carter goes home at four," Renny explained. "It was about four-fifteen when this happened. She had already gone."

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The office girl's desk was overturned on the floor.

"Where was the desk placed before?" Doc asked. "Let's put it back where it was."

Renny returned the desk to its original position. "About here, I think," he said.

Doc Savage examined the desk, and thoughtfully compared the parts of the chair to the marks on the top of the desk. He gave more attention to scratches on the side of the desk.

Renny said, "They tore half of his blouse off him. Here it is."

Doc looked at the blouse.

"Would you like to hear some Sherlock Holmes work on this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Renny inquired.

"Nobody attacked your man," Doc said. "He staged the thing himself."

RENNY scratched his head doubtfully. "I don't see how you figure that."

There was only a narrow space between the desk and the wall, where the office girl's chair would normally have been. Doc stood there.

"From the marks on the desk, the chair was swung by someone standing about here," he said. "You'll notice there is hardly room for anyone to have been in front of the chair when it was swung, indicating French picked up the chair and smashed it down on the desk.

"The marks on the side of the desk indicate it was kicked several times in the same place. That could happen in a fight, but it is hardly likely.

"None of the chair fragments show traces of having hit a man. A chair, or even a chair leg, is a heavy weapon, and if you struck a man with one, some blood or hair or hide should adhere to the weapon."

Renny nodded thoughtfully.

"Of course any one of those freak things could happen in a fight," Doc added. "But it isn't likely that all of them would happen in the same fight."

"Holy cow!" Renny said. "Now that you bring this up, I remember that French didn't seem so happy about bringing you into the case."

"Oh, he showed some reluctance?"

"Yes, he did. At first, he didn't seem to know who you were. Then it dawned on him that he had heard of you, and right away he suggested that we shouldn't bother you with his trouble."

"Did he give any reason?"

"No. He only said that he didn't think we should bother an important man like you with the matter," Renny said. "Doggone it, I should have attached more importance to his reluctance."

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"It looks as if he staged a fake attack, then escaped down the stairs."

"That's the way it seems, all right."

Doc asked, "When French first began asking you for help, did he seem sincere?"

"As sincere as anything."

"When did he change?"

"When he realized who you were."

"As I understand it, you first told him that you would bring me into the thing, calling me by name," Doc said. "Was that when French got excited?"

"No. He got excited when it dawned on him who you were. He'd heard of you as the man of bronze. I mentioned that was who you were, and that was when he changed his mind about wanting you in it."

Doc looked thoughtfully at the half portion of Bob French's coat.

"He wanted us to investigate the thing," Doc said. "But he didn't want to appear in it himself any more."

Renny was startled. "How you figure that?"

"He must have staged the fake attack to get us excited," Doc pointed out. "Otherwise he would have merely slipped away from you."

Renny clapped a hand to his forehead. "By God, that's right. What's the matter with my brains, anyway!"

DOC went through the half of Bob French's blouse. In the pockets he found cigarettes, book matches, two Chinese cash coins with square holes in their middles, an English shilling coin, a cigar.

Renny scrutinized the book matches. "None of this stuff means anything. I thought the matches might, but they're from a chain outfit that has branches all over the city."

Doc indicated a small white cloth tab clipped to the blouse collar. It had inked markings.

"Laundry tag," Doc said.

Renny brightened. "By golly, that's as good as an address. Doesn't the New York police have a directory of these laundry marks?"

"I think so," Doc said. "But tracing it down is going to take time. We want to talk to this Sir Roger Powell fellow without delay. So we had better turn the job of tracing down the laundry mark over to Monk."

"Good idea," Renny agreed.

Monk Mayfair was the only other one of their group who was in New York, or in the United States for that matter. Monk was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, the chemist of their outfit.

Doc got Monk on the telephone.

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"The blouse with the laundry mark will be in Renny's desk in his office," Doc said, after he had told Monk what had happened. "Your job is to get it, check back the laundry mark with the police, and find Bob French if you can. Better not waste any time."

Monk had a small squeaky voice. He wasn't too happy about the assignment.

"You guys wouldn't be shoving off some routine on me, so you can go after the exciting part?" he demanded.

"What makes you think that?"

Monk snorted. "I've had some previous experience."

"If you're not interes – "

"Oh, I'll go after the laundry angle," Monk said hastily. "But it's funny I always get this leg work."

Doc mentioned Monk's reluctance to Renny Renwick while they were riding an elevator down to the street. Renny said, "Monk always finds something to squawk about. But he's worse lately. I think he misses fussing with Ham Brooks since Ham went to Europe to work on that legal tangle the Nazis left."

Doc agreed that Monk certainly missed Ham. He added that it was a relief, though, not to have to listen to the quarrel the two had carried on for years, and not to have to put up with the practical jokes the two liked to pull on each other.

They got a cab.

"The Westland," Renny said.

"That's on Madison, ain't it?" the driver asked.

"Right."

During the ride, Renny told Doc Savage what he knew about Bob French. On the Yurig–shun job, on which Renny had been supervising engineer, French had been with the army engineer group assigned to the project. Renny had been assigned the same living quarters as French, a Chinese farmer's house, and they had become friends in the same fashion as any two men would become friends under the same circumstances. French's two-fisted ability had impressed Renny.

It was Renny's opinion that French would have been a Major or a Colonel – French was a buck sergeant – if the man had been more amenable to discipline. French was one of those fellows who didn't regard the war as a career, hadn't the slightest intention of staying in the army a minute longer than was necessary, and got away with anything and everything he could. Some of it he didn't get away with. He had been busted back to private grade several times for just helling around. But there was nothing wrong with Bob French's war-making. He was a guy who was in it to lick the Japs and Nazis, and the hell with the rest of it. Renny had liked him.

None of which shed much light on the matter at hand, Renny admitted.

"Here's the Westland," Doc said, looking out at a radio prowler car, a detective squad car and a police ambulance.

IV

"HOLY cow!" Renny said. "Things don't look too peaceful around here!"

Doc paid off their cab, and entered the Westland. It was a luxury hotel. Modernistic, chrome and black, with surrealist murals on the walls. Not garish, though. And not cheap.

In the cavernous, indirectly lighted lobby, business was proceeding as usual. However, the doorman and another man, evidently the assistant manager, were standing with two detectives. They were okaying people who entered, it was apparent, when one of the plain-clothes sleuths came over and stopped Doc and Renny.

"You are not guests here, I believe," the officer said.

Doc produced a billfold, and leafed through the assortment of permits, licenses, memberships cards and identification cards. He found what he wanted. The detective looked at the document and said, "Huh!" explosively.

Doc said, "If whatever has happened here concerns a man named Powell, we'll want the low-down on it."

The detective glanced from Doc to Renny dubiously, then said, "You'd better wait here a minute." He went to a telephone and spoke over it, reading from the card Doc had given him during part of his conversation.

Coming back, the officer said, "Okay. Sorry to keep you waiting. This is the first time I have had one of these things sprung on me. The card Doc had given him was an honorary commission in the New York City police force.

"What's going on?" Doc asked.

"Fellow named Powell got shot at," the officer explained. "He doesn't know who did it, he says. We're checking people in and out of the hotel in hopes of getting a line on something. No luck yet. Can you help us?"

"I haven't met Powell," Doc said.

"What do you want to see him about?" the detective asked.

"On a private matter," Doc said.

The police detective didn't like the answer. He still held Doc's card of identification. He glanced at it as if wondering how much weight it carried.

"People are generally better off if they give us information when we ask for it," the officer said finally, thinly veiling a threat.

"I'm sure they are," Doc told him. "Where will we find Powell?"

"He's in his suite, eighteen-eleven," the officer said reluctantly. Riding up in the elevator, Renny said, "The cop was disappointed."

Doc nodded. "Normally I would not advise anyone to withhold information from the police. But,

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unfortunately, the newspapers have an uncanny facility at finding out what the police are doing, and we can do without any front page splurges."

SIR Roger Powell was a lithe, neat young-acting middle-aged man in a blue pin-stripe suit and white shirt. His black hair stood up like a fresh brush and his moustache was a work of art.

He opened a door which had two holes, bullet holes, in the panel, after they knocked on it.

"Ah, some more police," he said not unpleasantly.

"Not exactly," Doc told him. "You are Powell?"

Powell hesitated, smiled, said, "Well, you must be newspapermen, then. Won't you come in? Yes, I'm Powell."

They entered, and there was a uniformed police patrolman sitting in a chair watching the door intently. He had a revolver on his lap.

Doc went to the policeman and showed him the same identification he had shown the police detective downstairs.

"Mind if we talk to Powell privately?" Doc asked.

The cop knew what the identification meant. He had a better idea than the detective. He said, "Be okay if I wait out in the hall?"

"Sure."

The cop went out.

Powell stared at Doc and Renny. "I say, have a bit of influence, haven't you?"

Renny said, "My name is Renwick. This is Doc Savage, Mr. Powell."

Powell was startled into being very English.

"I'll be damned, really I will," he said. "You know I thought there was something familiar about you."

"We've met before?" Doc asked.

"I've met your reputation a number of times," Powell said amiably. "I never saw you personally before, that I know about. I think I'd have remembered, old boy."

The suite was large, airy and expensive looking. Through a door there was a bedroom, and on the floor and on a rack were two pieces of handsome, monogrammed luggage.

From the looks of the walls, at least five bullets had clouted into the plaster. The floors had not been swept, and some of the plaster had been tracked on the carpet.

"Any idea why we're here?" Doc asked.

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Powell gave them his smile again. "Considering that I have lately had a gun emptied at me, that would be a logical guess as to the reason."

"I believe you know a man named Bob French," Doc said. All amiability, almost all emotion, left Powell's face while he looked at them.

"Oh, that," he said.

"Know him?"

"I met," Powell said, "a man who claimed to be Bob French."

Doc said, "He came to see Renwick here. Renwick knew him in China. He wanted Renny's help. When he found out that I was associated with Renny, he changed his mind about the help. He ducked out."

Powell frowned. He got out a cloth bag of tobacco and a book of papers and went to work on a cigarette. He didn't look like a man who would be rolling his own. It didn't fit him. He took plenty of time to think while he was rolling the cigarette.

He said, "Ordinarily I wouldn't call that a sound reason for your being here."

"That was no reason; it was something to start us talking," Doc explained.

"I could," Powell said, "tell you to go to hell."

"Are you?"

Powell laughed. There was utterly no humor in the laugh. "Tell Doc Savage that? Naturally not," he said. "Because I have heard of Savage. I have heard that you make a business of helping people out of trouble, provided the trouble is unusual enough to interest you. However, I'm going to ask you one question: Just whom do you think you are helping out of trouble?"

"Bob French," Renny said.

Powell turned to Renny. "Pardon me, but I don't get it. Bob French ran away."

"He's a pal of mine and he was scared," Renny said. "He came to me for help. He's going to get help."

"Perhaps he doesn't want it now."

"He hasn't said so."

"And you're going to help him?"

"If we can."

Powell's laugh came, still without heartiness. "In anyone else, that would be unreasonable, you must admit. You have no actual interest in the matter. The man who asked you for aid apparently doesn't want it now." He examined them and suddenly smiled as if he understood them thoroughly. "But of course I don't consider your interest as unreasonable. I've heard of you, and I know that the things you do which are seemingly without motive really have a very strong motive, which is your love of excitement."

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Doc asked patiently, "Do we talk about Bob French or not?"

"Of course we talk," Powell said.

POWELL snuffed out his cigarette, then took a stand facing them, his back to the window so that, intentionally or not, the light was in their eyes and they couldn't see his face too well.

"There's much I don't understand. I want to say that first," he told them.

Renny said, "Begin with Bob French's brother. You're supposed to know him."

"With Tucker French? That was where I was going to begin anyway. I got acquainted with Tucker in Colombia, South America. Tucker French is one of those somewhat strange and mysterious white men who take their living, in one way or another, out of the jungle."

Powell wheeled abruptly and went into the bedroom. He came back with one of the neat, monogrammed traveling bags, opened it and showed them the contents.

The bag held two-way airplane radios of the smaller sort, and a salesman's prospectus of larger outfits.

"I sell this stuff," Powell said. "I sell it in South America, and that's how I met Tucker French. He wanted a portable radio for use in the jungle, and I sold him one, and we became acquaintances. I suppose you would call us friends, except for one thing: I never got to know too much about Tucker."

He closed the suitcase. Then he resumed his stance with the light at his back.

"Three weeks ago, I happened to mention to Tucker French that I was coming to New York to brush up on my contacts with manufacturers and new post-war types of radio equipment. He asked me to bring a shipment of snake skins to New York for him. I agreed.

"So I was given a very heavy box of snake skins. Or rather, the box was put aboard the ship which was to bring me to New York, after having been passed by the Colombian officials who, in times like these, examine the things which are exported.

"I came to New York, and the customs officials here passed the box of snake skins, and I had them transferred to the warehouse where I usually store my radios. The case of snake skins was very heavy.

"I was to contact a firm named Blassett and Morris about the snake skins. I did so. Blassett and Morris said they didn't deal in snake skins. They didn't know Tucker French, either, and said they'd never had any dealings with him."

Powell paused and puffed his cigarette.

"You see the thing was beginning to get strange," he said.

Doc Savage asked, "What did you do next?"

"I cabled Tucker French the facts. I have not received an answer. The same day, this man saying he was Bob French called on me and made some mysterious remarks about something he called the heavy stuff. I told him I knew nothing about it.'

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Powell paused again, this time to get their attention. "Remember, I'm not sure Tucker French has a brother," he said. "Tucker never mentioned having one."

"What happened after Bob French's visit?" Doc asked.

"Nothing, until today," Powell said. "A little over half an hour ago, there was a knock on the door of this hotel room suite. I opened the door. A man fired a revolver at me. He missed. He fired, in fact, three shots while I was holding the door open. I slammed the door. He fired two more shots, emptying his gun, the bullets going through the door."

Doc Savage said, "The bullets all missed?"

"That's right. The man was very excited. And of course, I did some dodging."

"Did you know the man?"

"No."

"Ever seen him before?"

"Not that I recall."

Doc Savage had been sitting on a straight-backed chair. Now he came to his feet, took a few strides toward the window as if to look out. This brought him in a better position to study Powell's face. The man's countenance was as pale as ivory and coated with nervous perspiration.

"Powell," Doc said, "what do you think is behind the trouble?"

Powell threw out his hands. "I don't know. I told you I didn't know when I began talking."

"You're sweating," Doc said.

Powell blew up.

"By God, of course I'm sweating!" he yelled. "Why wouldn't I be? I've never been shot at before. It was a miracle that fellow didn't kill me when he emptied his gun at me."

"You are sure," Doc asked dryly, "that he really tried?"

Powell threw up both clenched hands preparatory to a tirade. But before the words got away from him, he took control of himself. He lowered his hands and straightened his coat by jerking at the sleeves.

"If he didn't," he said, "he gave an imitation that utterly convinced me."

Doc changed to a manner that was friendly and said, "We are not trying to accuse or irritate you. If my questions seem pointless, or too pointed, it's because the affair seems confusing."

"It's confusing enough," Powell agreed.

"Would you," Doc asked, "like to plunge into it and see if we can find out what it's about?"

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"You're damned right," Powell said vehemently.

"Then why don't we take a look at the box of snake skins?" Doc suggested.

Powell hesitated barely long enough for it to be evident that he had hesitated. "All right," he agreed. "But I don't see what good that will do."

THEY went out into the hall, and Doc told the policeman, "Mr. Powell is going with us. Will that be all right?"

The officer nodded, then said, "I think I ought to check on that, to keep myself clear."

"Go ahead."

The cop was back shortly. "It's okay."

They found a cab downstairs. Powell gave the driver an address, then leaned back. Powell looked controlled, smug, righteous.

Doc said, "By the way, I overlooked something."

"Yes?" Powell smiled slightly.

"When Bob French came to see you, were you alone?"

"Yes, I – " Powell hesitated, puckering his forehead thoughtfully. "No, I wasn't, either. Mr. Jessup was there."

"Jessup?"

"D. B. Jessup. He happened to be there when Bob French called, and I think he was present during the interview."

"Who is he? Friend of yours?"

"Not exactly a friend," Powell said. "D. B. Jessup had written me a letter to my Colombian headquarters, saying he had some army surplus radio equipment in which I might be interested. He asked to call on me when I came to New York. So I got in touch with him, and he called."

"Buy any radios from him?" Doc asked.

"No, as a matter of fact I didn't."

"Why not?"

"His prices were too high. I didn't even bother to go look at his stuff. His prices were clear out of reason."

Renny leaned forward. "This D. B. Jessup – was he a long, lean man. Dark hair. Sallow skin. Very skinny, with kind of a wolf face and an unhealthy look?"

"Why, yes – " Powell bolted upright in the seat. He held himself there with arms rigid, fists clenched. He showed utter alarm. "You know him?"

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"Is that Jessup?"

"It answers his description."

"That's the man," Renny said, "who tried to stick a knife into Bob French."

The tip of Powell's tongue showed between his teeth for a moment. Then he leaned back, very carefully, as if he was afraid he would fall, and said, "God love us!" in a horrified voice.

"You know where we can find Jessup?" Doc Savage asked.

Powell shook his head slowly. "The man told me he was leaving town, checking out of his hotel. He said he was going to the Coast to see what luck he would have selling his radios."

"Was it after Bob French visited you that Jessup said he was leaving town?"

"Yes, it was." Powell shuddered.

V

THE warehouse was far downtown on the East River, not far from where the South American shipping lines had their docks. It was not a beautiful neighborhood. The wind brought some of the smell from Fulton Fish Market. There was a name, Powell Export, over the entrance.

"I use this place for storage," Powell explained. "There are occasions when I have a chance to buy up a good deal of radio equipment at bargain prices, and I need a place to store it. This is a particularly opportune time for that, with the war near its end and the army and navy contracts being canceled."

He unlocked the door and went inside.

There was some out-of-date radio equipment standing around. Old battery sets. Some newer stuff, but none of recent manufacture.

"Some of my bad investments," Powell said wryly. "The French case is back here."

The case was about three by four by four feet.

Renny was surprised by the heaviness of its construction.

"Looks like a machinery case," he said. "Look at that iron reenforcing."

"There's nothing but snake hides inside," Powell said. "The customs men opened it in my presence."

"Suppose we open it," Doc suggested.

Powell was agreeable. "There is a pinch bar and a wrench somewhere around." He went hunting the items, found them, and they started on the case lid fastenings.

"What kinda snake hides are these supposed to be?" Renny asked. "Something for a museum?"

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"Oh, no. They're commercial," Powell explained. "There are several varieties, but most of them are anacondas. You know what anacondas are – anyone who has been to South America does. Sometimes they're called boa constrictors, but they're not true boas. You hear wild native stories down there about anacondas fifty feet long that can swallow a full-grown bull. However, I think they only get to be about thirty feet long, and not very often that."

"What're the hides used for?"

"Women's shoes, purses, or whatever is made out of skin. I think they're sold by the pound, much as any other hides, although I'm not sure."

Renny asked, "Is that part of Tucker French's business, marketing snake hides?"

"So I understood."

They got the lid off finally. It was bolted, not nailed, and as Renny had remarked, it was heavy.

The hides were heavy also, most of them salted. It was a messy job as they unrolled each skin, and inspected it.

They finished the job, then looked at each other foolishly. "Blank," Renny said. "They're just snake hides, as far as I can tell. What do you say, Doc?"

Doc eyed the hides with no approval. "They seem to be snake hides," he said, with no attempt to be funny. "We'll look at the box itself, then put them back."

Renny climbed onto the edge of the box. He gave it several whacks with the pinch bar, said, "It sounds solid enough. I'll take a look at the bottom."

He jumped to the floor, grasped the box and heaved. Nothing happened.

"Holy cow!" he said.

DOC Savage frowned suddenly. "What's wrong?"

"The dang box weighs a ton," Renny said. "How about you helping me turn it over."

"You should be able to handle a box that size."

"I must be getting weak in the push. Give me a hand," Renny said.

Doc joined him. Together, they heaved at the box. With no result.

Renny, exasperated, said, "The danged thing must be nailed to the floor."

Doc turned to Powell. "You notice this thing being particularly heavy before?"

Powell hesitated. "Well, not – yes, I did. You understand, I haven't handled the thing myself. But it broke the sling when they were loading it off the lighter on to the steamer at Cartagena. But I just supposed that green hides were very heavy."

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"No box," Doc said, "should be this heavy."

Powell showed sudden emotion. "You mean the box has a double bottom or something?"

Doc scooped up the pinch bar. "We'll soon find out." He went to work overturning the case.

It became ridiculous. The pinch bar split the flooring, but finally he did get the case pried up about two inches. Renny had found an iron pipe, which he rammed under the case. They pried and grunted and heaved and finally got the box up on its side.

"I'll be danged!" Renny said sheepishly. "Did you ever see the equal of that?"

"How do you account for the empty box being so heavy?" Powell asked.

"The thing's got to have a false bottom," Renny told him. "I'll see in a minute."

The big-fisted engineer, with the end of his gas pipe, gave the box bottom a wallop. The solid sound he got obviously astonished him. He scowled, growled, "Gimme that pinch bar," and went to work.

By the time he had pried a board off the bottom of the case, his long face had a foolish expression.

The case bottom was obviously solid.

"God bless us, what kinda wood is that?" he blurted. He produced a pocket knife and took shavings off different parts of the case.

"Well?" Doc asked.

"Oak," Renny said. "Plain oak."

"An oak box should not be that heavy."

"You're telling me!" Renny picked up the pinch bar again.

"What are you going to do?" Powell demanded.

"I'm going to take this thing to pieces a board at a time," Renny said.

"That seems foolish to me," Powell said. "You can see it's an oak box."

Renny's voice was becoming a rumble, the way it did when he was excited. "Brother, this box weighs three tons if it weighs an ounce. I'm an engineer and I know it's an impossibility for it to weigh that. I want to know why."

Renny began beating at the stout oak planks.

Powell looked contemptuous of the whole thing. He said, "This is getting childish. Here, I'll find you an axe and you can split the boards."

He went away and came back with a fire axe that was sharp. Renny took the axe. It was large, heavy, made for the sort of thing he wanted it for. He came down on the oaken planks, one after another, splitting them. He

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split the right side, first, then the left side, then the bottom, which was uppermost. The planks split readily enough. They were, after all, just wood.

Disgusted, puzzled, Renny lowered the fire axe, and rested. The back of the box was unhandy to get at, and after he swung at it a couple of times, he gave the box an angry shove.

The box skidded across the floor.

Renny's eyes popped.

He seized the case and turned it over without much trouble.

"Holy cow!" he blurted.

DOC Savage himself grasped the box. He found that now he could lift it entirely without difficulty, whereas a few moments ago he couldn't have gotten it a quarter of an inch off the floor without leverage. It had taken the utmost strength of Renny and himself combined, exerted on levers and the pinch bar, to lift the case at all. Renny might have exaggerated slightly when he said it weighed three tons, but he could not have been far off.

Three tons was about what thirty heavy men would weigh. At least three tons was thirty times two hundred pounds. Now the box didn't weigh as much as one two-hundred-pound man.

"It's impossible!" Renny rumbled.

Doc turned the box over two or three times more. He made, for a moment, a small trilling noise. It meant the same thing as a whistle of astonishment.

There was some salt on the floor, salt from the snake skins which had stuck to the inside of the box and been dislodged by Renny's pounding. Mixed with the dirty salt were snake skin scales, dirt and small litter.

Doc raked the fire axe through the salt and litter, but it was immediately evident there was nothing of any size in it.

Powell suddenly giggled. It sounded hysterical. "What do you expect a couple of handfuls of salt to weigh, three tons?"

Doc straightened. He felt foolish, and he was angry with himself for being so completely baffled.

He said, "A moment ago, that box weighed as much as a heavy truck. Now it weighs less than I do. How do you account for that?"

Powell tittered wildly. "Maybe there was a three-ton mouse in it."

Doc said violently, "Don't be a fool!"

The silly merriment slid off Powell's face, which became strained. "Will you name one reason why I should stand around and tolerate being called a fool?" he demanded.

Doc got hold of himself. He had lost his temper because he was baffled and confused. He became ashamed of having done so.

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"Calling you a fool was uncalled for, and I apologize," he said.

Powell was mollified. "It was my fault. What just happened to that box is so unbelievable that my first impulse was to laugh at it. What do you think made it suddenly lose its weight?"

"I have no idea," Doc told him. "But we are going to find out."

"Well, if I can do anything to help, tell me," Powell said.

A new voice said to them, "Help is what you're going to need – if you make one jittery move!"

THE voice was in the warehouse. But where? Doc turned slowly, searching.

"Stand still, damn you!" the voice warned.

Doc froze.

The voice said, "Now turn your head to the right. See it?"

It was a rifle muzzle projecting from a large packing case that looked fragile. The rifle snout wagged to get their attention.

The voice added, "You've probably got guns. All right, don't use them. I've got brick stacked up inside here, and unless you hit this crack first shot, I'll kill you all!"

No one said anything.

There was a stir inside the box. A brick sailed out over the top and hit the floor.

"See, bricks," the voice said. "Now, turn your backs to me."

They turned their backs.

"Okay," the voice said. "Now drop your guns on the floor and kick them off to one side."

Renny carefully produced a pistol from an underarm holster. It was a spike-nosed weapon which would take either a clip or a ram-horn magazine and would fire either single shot or fully automatic.

"All right, Savage!" the voice said.

"I do not carry a gun," Doc said.

"Powell!"

"I am unarmed," Powell said shakily.

There was a silence. The hidden man appeared to be debating the truth of their statements. He cleared his throat noisily.

"Buck, I guess it's safe to come out and frisk them," he said. Buck proved to be a heavy man with a large cornplaster strip across his nose. The adhesive, about an inch and a half wide, placed diagonally, had been put

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on so that it pulled the upper part of his face out of shape on one side and the lower part out of shape on the other. It was probably as effective a disguise as a mask, and certainly more efficient.

Buck searched them. He did it as if they were red hot, and he seemed to grit his teeth each time he touched them. He was scared.

Renny asked him sourly, "What would you do if I jumped and said boo!"

Without a word, Buck whipped out a blackjack and laid it against the side of Renny's head, hard. Renny fell, going down in sections, making a heavy noise on the floor. He landed with his face in the salt that had been knocked from the packing case when they were working on it, and hardly moved afterward.

Doc, the violence in his voice poorly controlled, said, "That wasn't necessary."

"Guys who get funny make me nervous," Buck said. "They ain't scared, and when they ain't scared they're liable to do anything."

"I can assure you that I'm scared," Doc said.

"Then get your hands behind you. Both you birds."

They were working to a plan, because Buck had lengths of rope in his pockets, already cut to the length for tying wrists and ankles.

Buck tied them. He knew his knots. He used a highwayman's hitch on their wrists, then made them lie down, carried the rope up around their necks, gave it a twist, carried it down and doubled their legs back and did another highwayman's hitch around their ankles.

It was a vicious tie. If they struggled, they would strangle themselves.

Buck tied Renny.

Then he gagged them all. He had the materials for that, too. Adhesive tape and three large sponges, for stuffing in their mouths.

The man in the box – he was still in the box – said, "If I was you, Buck, I'd scatter them out around the place. Otherwise they might get together and untie each other in a hurry."

Buck said, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

He hauled Renny off to the back of the building, dragged Doc around to the side, and hauled Powell forward and dumped him behind a pile of boxes.

Of the three, Doc was the only one left where he could watch what went on.

The man in the box came out. He was stocky and dark-skinned, as if recently from a climate of heavy sunshine. He had a thin wire of a scar on his chin and a thick cluster of pocks on the left side of the neck.

"Get the jug," he said.

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The jug was a glass one, gallon size. It was full of yellowish liquid. The skull-and-crossbones label said sulphuric acid.

The other man dug out a package, and from a spot in the corner of the ware room took a large pottery crock. He dumped the contents of his package into the crock. Doc knew immediately what it must be – some form of yellow prussiate of potash.

"Dump in the stuff in the jug," the heavy man said.

THERE was quite a chemical commotion in the crock, which was understandable. The fumes which arose had no great amount of color.

The two men got out in a hurry. There were no words of parting.

They slammed the door and locked it.

Doc stared at the crock. He tried the binding on his wrists. Tight. Very tight. And the sponge in his mouth, taped there, was an effective gag. The chances of making enough noise to bring help from the street were not worth mentioning.

Shots, of course, would have been heard on the street. That was why there hadn't been any shooting. That was why they were being killed this way.

Doc Savage closed his eyes tightly, trying to shut out the vision of poisoning by vapor of hydrocyanic. It would be quick. One breath usually brought oppression and suffering at the temples and the nape of the neck. The eyes grew cloudy, and it would be almost impossible to keep from throwing the head back. In a moment would come vertigo, then prostration, that awful hypertension in the head, the ghastly stiffening of the body, the legs stretched and flexed and the arms flexed and the fingers splayed. Then respiration would cease.

First there would be the odor, of course. The odor of bitter almonds, the scent a peach seed has.

Quick. He remembered, dry-mouthed, the medical aspects of the stuff which he had studied. It acted directly on the nerves, the only objective lesion being a spasm of the respiratory system, the lungs contracting in the lower thoracic cavity would become blood-tinged and – on autopsy – the veins would stand out as clearly as if filled with the brightest red ink.

The bronchial tubes would be affected, too; an autopsy would show them constricted and almost entirely closed.

All of this in a minute or so. Unconsciousness first, and then a stiffness, and then one gigantic awful wrenching inspiration of breath, and then death.

But first the odor of almonds. And he thought he could catch it now.

VI

THE old cop who had charge of laundry marks didn't like being called back to the office after hours.

"You might at least get around here during the day," he said.

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Monk laughed at him. "Don't tell me the police never have a laundry mark looked up except between eight and four."

The old man snorted. He took the half of Bob French's blouse from Monk, but before he would do anything about it, he insisted on filling out a lengthy form. "Name?" he growled.

"Monk Mayfair," Monk said.

"That's not your full name."

"Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair," Monk said wearily. "Height five foot four, weight two hundred, occupation chemist, avocation chasing excitement with Doc Savage, favorite bobby blondes preferably over twenty-one –"

"You're as funny as a crutch," the old man said.

He finished filling in the blanks, had Monk sign, then went away with the blouse half.

He was hardly out of sight, it seemed to Monk, before he was back again.

"Blouse was last cleaned or washed by the Univex Laundry, in Jackson Heights," he said.

"Great grief, did you have the information in your hat?" Monk gasped.

The ancient sneered at him. "It's done by television."

Properly impressed and amused, Monk left the police station and got in his car. The car was eye-filling. It was a second-hand job which had belonged to a Balkan dictator who had been chased out of his country by another dictator. The car, a special job from end to end, was but slightly less a spectacle than a Grand Canyon sunset.

In many ways, the car was Monk. It was loud, spectacular, in not too good taste, and unless one liked ultra-modernism, it was as ugly as a sore thumb on an angel. Monk was like that. And he was homely. His looks were something to scare the socks off babies, except that there was a certain gleeful pleasantness about him. The car was efficient; the very best metals and the very finest workmanship were in it. The same with Monk. He was one of the world's best industrial chemists, when he worked at it. His difficulty was not working at it often enough. He liked excitement, and preferred chasing it as a member of Doc Savage's group of five aids to working at his profession. As a result, his habitual financial condition was one to interest the sheriff and the wolf. It certainly wasn't something to interest the incendiary blondes Monk spent his spare time pursuing.

He crossed Queensborough bridge to Roosevelt Boulevard and Jackson Heights. The Univex Laundry was closed. He spent an hour finding the office manager of the laundry and dragging him away from a dinner party.

The laundry was efficient enough to keep a record of their work.

"The blouse was done for a soldier named Robert French," the laundry man said. "Here's the address." He wrote the address out. It was a little farther out in Jackson Heights.

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IT was a cottage, a private home. There weren't many of those in Jackson Heights which was an apartment house and duplex home development. But this was out toward flushing, a part of a block where there were small houses. This was a frame house. Frame houses were scarcer than just plain houses.

Monk drove past and looked over the place. The lawn was cut, but he could tell from other signs that the house hadn't been lived in for a long time. The shrubs, for instance, had grown wild and untrimmed. And the place needed painting. It had that look that houses get when they aren't lived in.

Monk wondered if he'd drawn a blank. Wondered if Bob French had given a phony address.

At the corner was a neighborhood drugstore. It was the kind of a drugstore that had pinball machines and a soda fountain and tables on the sidewalk for the customers. A neighborhood loafing place. He parked in front.

Monk went in and asked a middle-aged man with an apron, "Know anybody around here by the name of Bob French? I've got the wrong address, or something."

"Fifth house from the corner, this side of the street," the man said, naming the address Monk had.

"Swell," Monk said enthusiastically. "Now, if he's just home."

"Bob's living there, anyway, the man said. "Just got back from the war. Been in China, where it's tough. Got his hat full of medals. I was talking to him the other day."

"You sound like an old family friend," Monk said.

"I – "

"Where's the brother, Tucker, now?" Monk asked.

The man frowned, hesitated, then said, "I didn't ask."

Monk thought: Why didn't you ask? You're an old family friend. There was something here.

"Tucker been gone quite a while, hasn't he?" Monk said, fishing for more information.

The man said, "I don't know anything about Tucker. If you're from the draft board, I still don't know anything about him."

Monk got it then.

"Draft evader, eh?" he said.

The man tightened up. "I wouldn't know."

Monk laughed and said, "That Bob is a great guy. He's done enough fighting for the whole family. Buddy of mine was with him in China, place called Yung-shun. They built an air field there, and I guess they had themselves a time on the side. I hope Bob is at home. Don't want to miss him."

"Saw Bob around this morning," the man said.

"Any of the rest of the family at home with Bob?" Monk asked.

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"Mother and father are dead, didn't you know that?"

"Never heard it," Monk said.

"Car accident two years ago. Tucker was the kid of the family. Just the two boys, Tucker and Bob. House has been closed while they were away. Don't know of any other relatives, so I guess nobody is there with Bob."

"Thanks," Monk said.

He intended to leave then, but didn't. He changed his mind when he saw how the man was looking at him, weighing him.

The man seemed to decide he liked Monk. He leaned over the counter and lowered his voice. "This friend of yours who was with Bob in China. What was his name?"

"Renwick," Monk said. "Renny Renwick."

The man nodded. "Why, sure, Bob was talking about him. Laughing about the time they'd had in China."

"They had the time, I guess," Monk said.

The man dropped his voice even lower. "What I wanted to ask you about – there was a girl in here a little while ago. Asked where Bob French lived. She was a damned good-looking girl, and so I told her where Bob lived, then I wished I hadn't."

"What made you wish you hadn't?"

The man pointed. "You see the black coupe parked yonder?"

Monk said he saw the car.

"She didn't go to Bob's house. She's sitting in that car, watching the house. Kind of a funny way to do."

Monk chuckled and said, "Maybe a disappointed girl friend. I better warn old Bob."

"She ain't no disappointed girlfriend," the man said. "Not her."

"What makes you think so?"

"Nobody would disappoint her," the man said. "You walk past and take a look and you'll see."

MONK had a way with women. Sometimes it got him a poke in the eye, but frequently it didn't. His method included everything but tact.

Monk opened the door of the black coupe and got in.

"Has he come out of the house yet?" he asked.

The girl didn't quite tear the other door of the car off getting out, but it was only because the door flew open instantly.

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She looked back into the car at Monk, much as one would look through the zoo bars at a jackal. She didn't say anything.

It was Monk's theory that all women liked to hear you say that they were beautiful. He said, "You're the loveliest thing I've seen, as lovely as the flowers in the valley of Kashmir, which are supposed to be the most glorious sight that man's eyes – oh, brother!"

What ended his speech was the fact that she was more beautiful than he was saying she was.

"Time out while I learn to breathe again," he said weakly.

"Must you?" she asked coldly.

"Now, now, let's keep the conversation in a warm climate," Monk said. "I chill easily. Anyway, you should only look like that at Hitler and Hirohito. Also at all other guys."

She examined him. Apparently she found nothing of which she approved.

"Just who do you think you are?" she demanded.

"Not the same man I was a moment ago," Monk said, grinning. "Rest assured of that, and I doubt if I'll ever be the same."

She continued to scrutinize him distastefully.

"What was it you said when you got in the car?" she asked.

"I asked you if Bob French had come out of his house yet," Monk said. "But already I can think of much better subjects to talk about. Your eyes, for instance. And our plans for the next few years. Oh, boy! Some of the things I've got to talk about may have been talked about before, but I'll bet you I can give them a new –"

She astonished him by getting back in the car. "First things first," she said. "What about Bob French?"

"Really, must we –"

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"I don't know yet, and anyway –"

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere," the girl said. She took an object out of her purse. "Maybe this will."

The object from her purse was black, made of steel and had a remarkably large hole where the bullets could come out.

"Bless us! Do be careful with that!" Monk gasped.

"Can you drive a car?"

"No."

"You can learn on this one then," she said. "And don't be coy. I saw you drive past a while ago in that combination of a sunset and an earthquake on wheels."

"But I don't want to drive anywhere," Monk protested.

"You're not being asked for an opinion."

"I can't drive. Meeting a vision like you has been too much for me: Look, I'm shaking all over," Monk protested.

"You had better shake." She poked him in the ribs with the gun, rather emphatically. "There is nothing whatever wrong with this gun."

"You wouldn't shoot me!"

"Right in the edge of Jackson Heights, I would," she assured him. "Get going. Go around the block, and we'll pick up Bill."

VII

WHO the hell is Bill? Monk did fast thinking while he drove.

Bob French got into his thoughts, which he shouldn't have. Bob French, according to the version Monk had received from Doc Savage over the telephone, had come to Renny Renwick for aid. Bob French had told Renny that he, Renny, was the only one in New York whom he knew, which was why he'd come to Renny. This seemed to be shaping up as a darned lie.

Who was Bill?

"Your brother?" Monk asked hopefully.

"Who?"

"Bill."

"Watch where you're driving," the girl said. "You run into the curb and blow out one of my tires and I'll probably shoot you anyway."

Monk gave more attention to piloting her car. "This suspense is murdering me," he muttered.

They rounded the block and traveled a short distance and she said, "Pull over and stop."

Monk obeyed. A tall woman leaning against a light pole stepped on the cigarette she had been smoking and came toward them. The lamp post which had been propping her up, it occurred to Monk, commanded a view of the alley behind Bob French's house, and all rear exits to the French house. This could be a good reason for the woman being there.

Monk examined the woman from the lamp post. It was his candid opinion that there must be a carnival

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around and she was the lady performer who straightened horseshoes with her bare hands.

This female peered into the car at Monk. In a voice reminiscent of a bullfiddle, she said, "My goodness, I thought it was a bearskin rug you had picked up somewhere."

Her own wit apparently struck her as hilarious. Because she upset the whole neighborhood with laughter. Frightened sparrows flew out of trees.

Monk was somewhat hairy, but he didn't feel it called for that much noise.

"Go away, before you lose a friend," he told the thundering female.

"My, my, you've got a nice voice," the big girl said. "Like a frog after something had swallowed him."

Another laugh, and more sparrows flew out of the trees.

"Why didn't I say my prayers," Monk muttered.

The female turned to the beautiful vision and asked, "Who is he, Grace? What tree did you get him out of?"

"He got in the car with me, Bill," Grace said.

"What do you know! They never get in the car with me," Bill said.

Monk pointed at the roaring woman and asked, "Is this Bill?"

"Yes," Grace said.

"I'm not as relieved as I thought I'd be," Monk said dubiously. "Does she bite, too?"

The two girls held a conversation about Monk, but omitted him from participation.

Grace, the gorgeous one, said, "He got in the car and asked if Bob French had come out yet."

"He must be a friend of Bob French's," Bill said.

"I don't know," Grace said. "But at any rate, he's not a friend of ours."

"Who is he?"

Both girls now looked at Monk, and Bill thundered, "Who are you, handsome?"

Monk maintained a peeved silence.

Grace said, "He's a wolf. You should have heard the awful, corny line he pulled on me."

"That was before I got a good look at you and lost my voice," Monk said.

Bill whistled admiringly. "Say now, that wasn't bad. That wasn't bad at all. Maybe he's a higher grade of wolf than you thought he was."

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Monk said nothing.

Bill told him, "I do hope you're a medium grade of wolf or better. Because I do some wolfing myself, if offered medium grade or better material,"

"God save little Andrew Blodgett Mayfair," Monk mumbled.

"His name is Andy," Bill said. "Little Andyandy. Isn't that sweet?"

Why the hell did I ever get in this car, Monk wondered.

Grace was frowning at Monk. She hadn't at any time shifted the muzzle of her gun away from the most vulnerable part of Monk's anatomy.

"Bob French hasn't come back and I don't think he is going to," she told Bill.

"What makes you think he won't be back?" Bill asked.

"Because, I searched the house, and it looked as if he had closed up the place for quite a while, His army clothes were all gone, and the water was shut off. It looked as if he didn't plan to be back.

"What did the man in the drugstore know? You were going to talk to him."

"Nothing, Grace said. "He knew French, but he didn't know anything else that would help me. I think he became suspicious when I was questioning him, too. I think he told Andyandy that I was watching the house, too."

"Stop calling me that!" Monk pleaded. "My name's Monk Mayfair."

They ignored him.

"I think Bob French has gotten away from us," Grace said.

"Could be," said Bill.

Monk said, "Well, I wish I could say it has been pleasant meeting you." He opened the car door and prepared to get out.

"Where you going?" Grace demanded.

"Away," Monk said. "Away to reflect on the adversities of life. I may become a hermit."

"No, you don't," Bill said.

He swung out of the car.

Then he was back in the car. His midriff felt as if a blockbuster had landed there. He couldn't believe it was only Bill's right jab.

Bill got in the car beside him. The three of them made a tight fit. Bill held Monk's head tenderly. "He hurt his little tummy," she said.

Grace said, "If he tries to get out, swat him again."

She put the coupe in motion.

THE lovely girl and the strong-armed character were going to take Monk to their office and have a talk with him. They discussed their plans quite freely. If Monk didn't wish to talk, they were going to get the words out of him anyway. Bill said she knew how. Monk didn't doubt it.

The two girls talked about someone called Benjy. Benjy was an old dear, they agreed, and he was supposed to be doing something for them and they hoped he had been successful. Monk gathered that Benjy was employed by them. He had been employed by them a long time. In fact, Monk rather gathered that old Benjy had been employed by the fathers of the two girls before their time.

The office proved to be on upper Lexington Avenue. It was located in an impressive office building.

It was now getting dark, after hours for office building traffic, and Monk wondered how they were going to get him inside. He couldn't see how they would do it, if he chose to try to prevent them.

It was simple.

Bill said, "Oh look, isn't that a beautiful girl going yonder."

The next thing Monk heard was Grace telling somebody, who proved to be the elevator operator on night duty in the office building, that, "It was something called slivowitz that did it. He got along fine as long as he stayed with gin, rum and bourbon, then he had to try slivowitz."

The elevator operator said he would help them get Monk into the office.

"You hit me again," Monk accused Bill, and Bill patted his shoulder comfortingly.

The elevator operator finished helping with Monk and went back to his work.

There was another man in the office. Benjy. He was a little taller than Monk and between forty and eighty years old, the doubt about his exact age being the result of innumerable wrinkles. He looked like a pleasant old geezer. The faithful old bookkeeper type.

Benjy was worried,

"I'm afraid I've done something awful," he said.

BILL was pleased. She said, "My God, Benjy, don't tell me you finally have a misdeed to your credit."

Benjy squirmed. It was not a light matter to him. He gave both girls a rebuking look. "I'm not at all sure we're doing the right thing, not at all sure."

"Skip the sermon, will you Benjy," the girl said. Benjy became indignant.

"Listen to me, both of you!" he said seriously. "Your fathers, neither one of them, would approve of what you are doing, and you know it. I promised your father" – he pointed at Grace – "and I promised your father" – he pointed at the herculean Bill – "that I would look after you. That's exactly what I promised them."

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The girls had a system on the old boy. They put their arms around him and patted his back and chucked him under the chin and told him he was fine, he was doing a wonderful job, they couldn't get along without him, and they loved him like everything. Old Benjy ate it up. If he'd had a tail, he would have wagged it so hard he would have fallen down.

"Now tell us what happened Benjy," Grace said.

"I followed that fellow, and he didn't see me," Benjy said.

"You mean the one who hung around trying to watch us?" Grace demanded.

"That's him, the short one with the scar on his chin and them pockmarks on his face," Benjy agreed. "Well, here's what happened. This fellow met another one. That one was heavier and meaner looking. The two of them went downtown to a warehouse marked Powell Export."

Bill puckered her lips and whistled. "Then they were working for Powell!"

"That's what I thought, but I think I was wrong," Benjy said. "Because they went in the warehouse and they hid. The back windows of the warehouse were boarded over, but there was a crack in the boards where I could see what went on. There was a shed over the crack, or rather a shed built on the back of the warehouse, and the window that had the crack between the boards was in that so I could –"

"You could watch," Bill said. "What did you see?"

"Well, these two fellows hid themselves in packing boxes in the shed. They waited. They waited three or four hours."

Monk was keeping very still. He was afraid, if he said anything that would draw attention to himself, that they would lock him up somewhere to get him away from the conversation.

Benjy continued, "Three men came. One was Sir Roger Powell. The other two I didn't know at the time, but I thought there was something familiar about one of them. Later, when I found out who they were, I could understand why that one looked familiar. Well, these three men had come to look –"

"What were their names?" Grace interrupted. Old Benjy grinned at them coyly.

"You'll be surprised," he said. "These three men had come down to look at a box. It was a big, heavy box. It was a box which Sir Roger Powell had brought from South America for Tucker French."

This had an effect on the girls.

"Wow!" Bill said. "Wow! Oh, boy!"

Grace just gasped, but she could gasp very prettily.

Benjy was as proud of himself as Hitler was in 1940. "As soon as they began taking the snake hides out of this box, I knew what it was," he said.

"Snake hides!" Grace said, with another gasp.

"Sure. Them big boa constrictors they grow down in South America."

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Bill frowned and demanded, "Where were these other two fellows all this time."

"They were hid, I told you that."

"Oh."

"They got the snake hides out, and then they tried to move the box," Benjy said. "They couldn't."

Both girls said, "Oh!" together. They said it as if they couldn't be more excited.

Monk didn't get it at all.

Benjy hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, like a politician who had just been re-elected. "Wait until you hear the rest," he said. "It gets more exciting as it goes along. After the three men took out the snake hides, they couldn't lift the box. So they got suspicious. They got a fire ax and –"

"You mean," Grace demanded, "that they didn't know what was in the box?"

"Didn't seem to."

"Didn't Powell?"

"Acted as if he didn't."

"Oh, oh," Grace said.

Benjy said, "Well, they cut loose on the packing case with the ax, and chopped and chopped. They found out the case was ordinary wood. Then, all of a sudden, they found they could lift the case. That surprised 'em some."

Benjy paused, grinning.

Grace asked, "Was there loose salt? Were the snake hides packed in salt or something? And did it get scattered over the floor?"

"Sure."

"Then I know what happened," Grace said. "I know what happened to make the box lighter."

Monk wished he knew. The whole story sounded far-fetched to him. He suspected they might be telling a pack of lies in order to confuse him. Grace asked, "Didn't they find out what made the case lighter?"

"No."

"They must have been pretty dumb."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that Doc Savage is so dumb," Benjy said.

Monk jumped straight up and yelled, "Doc Savage! Was Doc with Powell?"

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Bill and Grace were dumfounded as well. For the next few seconds, everyone stared at everyone else, and Benjy teetered with his thumbs in his vest armholes.

Then Grace said, "Doc Savage – you mean that big bronze fellow who is such a mysterious figure when he is mentioned in the newspapers? The one who is so handsome?"

"That's him," Benjy said.

"And he's not so handsome," Monk said.

"What do you know about him?" Grace demanded.

"I've never been able to understand this effect Doc has on the wenches," Monk said gloomily. "He doesn't run after them, and in fact he's what you would call inaccessible goods. On the other hand, take me. I'm accessible, and I chase 'em. I don't savvy it."

Bill examined Monk and said, "Oh, I don't know. You sort of interest me, handsome."

Monk shivered.

Grace demanded of Benjy, "Is Doc Savage involved in this affair?"

"Yep." Benjy nodded vehemently. "Don't you want to hear the rest of the story – how they almost killed Doc Savage, his friend Renny Renwick, and Powell?"

VIII

THE remainder of Benjy's story got their close attention. It was worth it.

"Those two fellows hidden in the wareroom came out," Benjy related. "They had guns. They surprised Doc Savage, Renwick and Powell and fled them up. They gagged them, too. And then they did a bad thing."

Old Benjy faltered. He lost his thumbs-in-vest-armholes pride. He became an old man, a timid old man, who had been close to death, to murder.

He mumbled, "They had some kind of chemicals, something in a jug and something else. They put the stuff in the jug in a crock and put the other stuff in it, then they ran out and shut the door."

The old man shuddered.

"I could look at Doc Savage's face and I could see the stuff in the crock was going to kill him," he said.

"What did you do?" Grace asked.

Benjy shuddered. "I ran out of the shed. I ran around to the front of the warehouse. The two killers were there, waiting for the men inside to die, I guess. I yelled, 'Help! Police! Murder!' And the two men ran away. I scared 'em away."

Monk began breathing again. He believed old Benjy's story now. The old man wasn't that good an actor.

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Benjy said, "I held my breath and ran into the warehouse. I figured the stuff in the crock was making gas. I got out my pocket knife. I keep it sharp. I cut Doc Savage and Renwick and Powell loose. Maybe I didn't save their lives, because Powell had his hands almost loose. Anyway, Doc Savage and Renwick and Powell ran out of the warehouse, chasing the other two fellows who had tried to kill them. They told me to run out of the warehouse, too, and I did."

Old Benjy winked foxily.

"After they were out of sight, I ran back in the place, though. I picked up the crock and carried it out and dumped it down a storm sewer grating in the street. I held my breath."

Benjy began to look pleased with himself again.

"I left the warehouse door open for the wind to blow in, and I went and got a hand truck and a crowbar. I borrowed the hand truck and crowbar from a place down the street that moves heavy machinery.

"I got what had fallen out of the packing case and was lying in the loose salt, kind of embedded in the floor where they hadn't seen it. I was lucky. I wheeled it down the street. It was almost more than I could manage to move. I sure got tired.

"Finally I hired a truck. I didn't know where to take it. Finally I took it to your apartment, put it on the freight elevator, and wheeled it into your front room. The building super at the place knew me, and let me in. I left it there, and came here."

Benjy let out a long breath.

"That's all there is to it," he finished.

The girls screamed, "Our apartment! Maybe it isn't safe there!" They started for the door.

"Wait for me!" Monk yelled.

They looked at Monk as if they'd forgotten him. Bill said, "Let's take him along. On the way, we may be able to find out who he is."

They didn't take the coupe this time: There were four of them – Benjy was going along – and there wasn't room in the small car: Benjy's car was parked near, so they took that. It was a sedan, one that had been built back during Hoover's administration.

"My feelings are hurt," Monk confided to them. "Or anyway my ego is."

"That's too bad," Grace said with almost no interest.

"My name is Monk Mayfair."

"So you mentioned."

"But haven't you heard of me?"

"Of course not," Grace said.

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"Such is fame," Monk complained bitterly. "Anyway, I'll let you in on something. I'm a spear-carrier for Doc Savage."

Grace showed a disgusting amount of interest in this. "You work for Mr. Savage?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is he as handsome as his pictures?" Grace asked.

"Oh, hell!" Monk said, and he wouldn't answer another question.

The girls had an apartment in one of the fashionable buildings close to Radio City. To live there cost plenty. Monk knew, because he had been thrown out of one of the place – not this one, but one much like it – for being unable to pay his rent.

There was nowhere to park directly in front of the building, and they finally had to use the Radio City garage.

The girls hurried on ahead, and Monk and Benjy fell behind. "They're so excited, aren't they?" Benjy said to Monk.

"Everybody is excited, including me," Monk told him. "What's the matter with that Grace, anyway. I don't get any office there at all. It was my idea that the prettiest girls fall for the homeliest guys."

"They're lovely girls, both of them," Benjy said. "I've known them since they were babies. Both their fathers joined the army, but they didn't do it until I promised them that I would look after the girls. I'm like a second father to them."

"That Bill," said Monk, "scares the socks off me."

"She likes you."

"That's what scares me." Monk frowned at the old fellow. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"It's a little secret the girls have," Benjy said firmly. "If they want you to know, they'll tell you."

THE man they thought was dead was lying as if he had tried to crawl under the modernistic lamb-colored couch in the bright living-room. He had one arm and part of his face under the couch. There was considerable blood about.

It was a very gory mess and Bill further dramatized the scene by making a sound like a large mouse and fainting.

Monk looked around for a place to put her, complaining, "She weighs a ton."

Old Benjy levelled both arms at the man on the floor and cried, "A dead man! A dead man!"

Grace, much more practical, pointed at the floor two or three times, at different places each time, then turned to Benjy and demanded, "Benjy, is it gone? It's gone, isn't it?"

Benjy stopped ogling the man on the floor long enough to bleat, "Yes, it's gone."

Monk deposited the cumbersome Bill on the floor.

He didn't like the job, but he picked up the wrist of the man partly under the couch. He found pulse. It was evident that a firmly harmless bump on the head had made the man unconscious, and that the impressive gore was the result of a fist having hit the fellow's nose. Monk hauled him out from under the couch and turned him over.

"Bob French!" Grace cried, pointing at the man.

Monk agreed that it was Bob French, recalling the second-hand description of the soldiering French brother which he had received from Doc Savage.

Monk asked, "Is this your apartment?"

"Yes," Bill admitted.

"What," Monk demanded, "do you mean by having dead men around the place?"

This alarmed Bill sufficiently to give Monk some satisfaction. But Bill fooled him. She went to the door, examined the edge near the lock, and pointed. "See here," she said. "They drove something in between the door and the jamb, forcing the lock. You can see the marks."

"Who did it?" Monk asked.

"I have no idea."

Monk turned to Benjy. "Do you?"

Benjy was calm. He wasn't completely calm, but he was calm enough to surprise Monk. The old man was evidently at his best when the going got tight. It was a rare fine trait, and Monk's opinion of the old man climbed considerably.

"It might," Benjy said, "have been those two bad men who tried to kill Doc Savage, Renwick and Powell. They might have managed to trail me here."

"Thought you said they didn't."

"I didn't think they did. They might have. I don't know for sure."

Monk shook Bob French. "Maybe this guy will tell us if we can wake him up. Can you bring me a pan of ice cubes from your refrigerator?"

MONK'S methods were direct. He unbuttoned Bob French's shirt and pushed the ice cubes inside, pan and all. French made some tittering noises, like a silly girl, and came out of it. Monk, in withdrawing the pan of ice cubes, had a slight accident and spilled the contents inside French's shirt, causing some excitement.

"Take it easy," Monk told French.

Bob French got himself organized. Apparently he didn't know who Monk was Monk was fairly sure French knew the girls, Grace and Bill. But the acquaintance didn't include old Benjy.

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Monk said, "My name's Mayfair. Monk Mayfair."

This didn't click with French.

"Renny is a pal of mine," Monk said. "I'm one of Doc Savage's group of assistants."

Bob French moistened his lips. He was doubtful. "Are you kidding?"

Monk shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Bob French looked around the living-room of the apartment. He became visibly alarmed. "Did they get it?"

"Get what?" Monk asked.

French blinked owlishly. He decided not to confide in Monk. At least, he did not answer.

Old Benjy leaned over Bob French.

"Somebody got it," Benjy said. "Can you tell us who it was?"

"Renny?" French was looking at Monk. "You mean Renny Renwick, the engineer? You're a friend of his?"

"That's right," Monk assured him.

French grasped his shirt front and flapped it vaguely, fanning the wet cloth. He fished around inside and brought out an ice cube which he had missed. "What time is it?" he asked finally.

Monk pointed at the electric clock. It said a quarter until midnight.

Bob French became alarmed.

He said, "Three of them did it. They were watching this place."

Grace demanded, "What did they look like?" And then she described the two Benjy had followed, the pair who had tried to kill Doc Savage, Renny and Powell.

"No," French said. "No, that sounds like the two who were watching this place first."

"My God, who's watching who!" Monk complained. "This is getting confused."

French looked pained.

"All five of them work together. It's simple," he said. "When I first got her – " He hesitated, glancing at Monk. "You apparently know I went to ask Renny Renwick for help?"

"Yeah, I got a telephone call to that effect," Monk told him.

"Well, I was seized at Renny's office, but I escaped from – "

Monk's laugh was loud, bitter, skeptical. "French, are you going to tell us any truth at all?"

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French looked uncomfortable.

"Doc figured out that nobody jumped you at Renny's office. You faked it," Monk added.

French's deeply tanned neck got darker. He shook his wet shirt some more. He got out a handkerchief and dabbed at the bloodstains on his chin.

Suddenly he said, "Okay, that was a phony. I was so scared I didn't know what to do, so I scrambled out."

Monk opened his mouth, then closed it. He'd been about to ask Bob French why he'd been terrified when he learned Doc Savage was going to be involved. That was what had happened.

But French was tough guy, he had just barely decided to talk to them at all, and calling him a liar would probably shut him up. Better let him go, Monk decided, and try to pick the truth out of whatever he had to say.

"Go ahead," Monk muttered.

BOB French scowled and spoke emphatically. He had some truth to tell now, Monk decided, and he wanted them to know that it was the truth.

"I didn't know what to do, but I knew where the girls lived, so I came here to see them," French said. "I was going to walk right in and talk to them. That was what I planned. But outside, down the street a ways, I happened to see a mug who looked familiar. He hadn't seen me, so I kept out of his sight. I looked him over, and pretty soon I realized I had seen him three or four times the last couple of days. You know what that meant?"

"He'd been following you?" Monk suggested.

"That's right. Part of the push that was following me around before they tried to put that knife into me."

"Then what'd you do?"

"I camped around. This guy had some pals. Four of them. They were hanging around with their eyes big. Watching the apartment."

French indicated Benjy. "Pretty soon this old gaffer slipped out and followed two of them off. He did a pretty slick job. I almost didn't catch him doing it, I stayed here and watched the other three. I was here about four hours. Then this old fellow came back, wheeling something on one of those heavy hand trucks. He took it in the apartment house. The three guys watched him. Pretty soon the old fellow came out and left."

Benjy looked sick. "The three men saw me?"

"Yep."

Benjy's shame was pitiful. He had been stupid, and he was bitterly discouraged with himself.

"Well, I could tell the three guys who had been lousing around were excited about what they'd seen the old fellow wheel in on the truck," Bob French said. "They were gonna come up to investigate, I guessed. So I decided to beat 'em to it."

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French got up and essayed a step or two, then reached out quickly and grabbed a table for support. "Wow! My head sure whirls! Two of them were sapping me at once, the last I remember."

Frowning, Monk asked, "Didn't you leave out a little in between?"

"Oh, you mean how did I get in? Back way. I didn't lose any time. But, damn the luck, when I got up here, those guys were already here. They had one posted around a corner in the hall. While I had my ear to the keyhole, he came up behind, cut loose on me, and knocked me through the door into the apartment. Well, they swarmed over me with saps, and that's where I took a blackout."

He indicated the floor.

"The freight hand-truck was sitting right there, I remember."

Bill planted her hands on her hips angrily. "We're sunk! We don't know what to do next!"

Bob French grinned without much pleasure.

"I got a little climax," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I woke up before the three guys left," French said. "I heard them talking. They're going to scam out for South America. They're going after my brother."

MONK asked suspiciously, "If you regained consciousness and overheard that, how come –"

"How come I was asleep again when you got here?" French grimaced. "They popped me one for the money before they left. It's a wonder they didn't mash my skull."

"You know where they're going in South America?"

"Better than that," French said, "I know where we may be able to head 'em off before they go."

Monk yelled, "Why wait until now to tell –"

"If you had my head, you'd know why!" French snarled dizzily. "But let's go."

He named an airport in New Jersey.

"Let's head for there," he said.

They decided riding down in the elevator that they would use Benjy's old sedan for the New Jersey trip. Benjy seemed confident it would hold together for the journey. Everyone else was dubious. They were arguing about it, striding down the sidewalk, when Bob French let out his yell.

His squawl was hair-lifting. It was about the most arresting sound Monk had ever heard. It was formed of words, not noise, and it was a practiced thing. It was a warning, one he'd used before.

While he was still making the sound, French had scooped up both Grace and Bill, one in the crook of either arm, and yanked them across the sidewalk and behind a parked car.

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Monk realized by now what had alarmed French.

A black object, small and round, that had skipped across the sidewalk and under one of the cars.

A grenade? Bob French seemed to think it was. Monk reasoned that soldier Bob French had seen enough grenades to know what one was. So he grabbed for Benjy – Benjy wasn't there, though – and got going. Old Benjy didn't need urging. He was ahead of Monk.

They joined French and the two girls.

French yelled, "Grenade! Get going! Run!"

Monk had a second thought. He said, "I don't think that was a grenade."

French and the two girls were running. Old Benjy told Monk, "It was a hand grenade, brother."

Benjy joined the flight. If it was a grenade, there was no point in getting blown up to prove it, so Monk legged it after the others.

"It wasn't," Monk puffed.

"I know one when I see it," Benjy said. "I was in the other war."

They reached Benjy's car, which was fortunately pointed the way they were going. Benjy landed behind the wheel. The two girls, Bob French and Monk piled in the back. Monk, scrambling to get inside, yelled, "It hasn't gone off, so it wasn't any grenade."

"Sometimes they miss fire," French said.

Benjy was twisting and stamping on gadgets. The old car began moving.

French, on his knees on the rear seat, looked back through the window. He yelled, "Watch out! The guy's out on the sidewalk, ready to throw another!"

Monk raised up to look. He got a glimpse of a man standing on the sidewalk, whirling one arm above his head in what looked like a pitcher's windup. "Godamighty!" Monk croaked, and hauled the girls down on the floorboards.

The car took the first corner with a noise like canvas tearing. There was no grenade explosion.

"Decided he couldn't throw it that far," Bob French said. He looked at Monk. He was sweating. He said, "I vote for that airport. I don't want any part of guys with grenades. Not when I'm empty-handed."

"That's two of us," Monk agreed shakily.

"Three," old Benjy said. He settled down to his driving.

IX

RENNY Renwick was not normally a man of many cusswords. But after the car carrying Monk, Grace, Bill

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and old Benjy vanished, Renny spoke for approximately two minutes without using a word that could be found in a dictionary.

Sir Roger Powell took it, but his face got gray with rage. "No man has talked to me like that!" he said finally.

"I should do more than talk to you!" Renny yelled. "What the blue-blaze-coated edge of hell were you trying to do?"

"Get their attention after they came out of the apartment house!" Powell snapped.

"Why not just call to Monk?"

"I wanted to get their eye furtively. I thought someone might be watching. I didn't want to create a disturbance."

"No disturbance! Holy cow!"

"It didn't turn out like I expected," Powell muttered. "That Bob French is war-simple. He thought I had tossed a hand grenade and he went crazy."

"What did you toss?"

Powell went to the curbing, got down on hands and knees and fished something out from under an automobile parked there. He brought it back. "This," he said.

It was a wad of paper. Dark brown paper. Renny unrolled it. The wrappers off a couple of candy bars, loosely wadded.

Powell explained, "We haven't had a chance to eat dinner, as you well know. So I bought a couple of large candy bars to fill in. These are the wrappers."

Doc Savage arrived. He had been farther up the block, parking their car.

"What caused the uproar?" Doc asked.

Renny explained the mishap, omitting the cussing. "I wasn't close enough to get Monk's attention," he said. "That ball of paper looked like a grenade to Bob French, I suppose, and he started a stampede."

Powell said, "What kind of a fool would think a grenade would be thrown at him on a New York street!"

"Look, Bob French is a soldier and he's been where it's hot. Where he's been, any unexpected thing the size and color of that wad of candy-wrapper could be a grenade," Renny said. "I know. I was in China with him for a while."

"I didn't intend to frighten him."

Renny complained, "Did you have to wave your arm like you were getting ready to throw another one?"

"I was trying to get their attention." Powell pushed his jaw out wrathfully. "What's the matter? Can't anyone but you make mistakes?"

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"Where have I made a mistake?" Renny rumbled. "Listen, brother, if you want – "

Doc Savage said, "Oh, stop it! A mistake is a mistake."

Powell said, "Yes, and a loud-mouthed fool is a loud-mouthed fool."

"Meaning me?" Renny asked ominously.

Powell examined Renny deliberately. He examined Renny's fists with the most care. He moistened his lips. "I don't think I could lick you," he said. "Anyway it would be foolish to try, wouldn't it? I mean, what would be the purpose?"

"You figure I'm a fool?"

Powell grinned slightly. "I figure we all probably feel like fools right now," he said. "You want an apology?"

Renny finally grinned himself. "Ah, not right now," he said. Doc Savage said, "We might as well take up where we left off, now that you've stopped acting like kids."

THEY walked to the apartment house from which Monk and the others had come.

This, Doc reflected, is like getting all set for the ball game, and the other team not showing up. He was suddenly tired, hungry, baffled

The most baffling thing was that box in the warehouse which had been so unbelievably heavy – and as unbelievably become light again. He wished that he had examined the thing more closely.

For the last three hours, they had been running their heads off. The progress they had made hadn't been easy. Luck had been with them, or they wouldn't have gotten as far as they had.

Luck had been with them when they discovered the trucking establishment where old Benjy had rented the hand truck. They'd been looking for the hand truck. Doc had found marks in the spilled salt, elsewhere on the warehouse floor—marks obviously made by a hand truck.

A hand truck had suggested something heavy to be moved, and that had started them hunting for a trucking concern that might have done the job. They had found it eventually. Old Benjy and his hand truck – and something remarkably heavy on the hand truck, in a small box – had been brought to this apartment house. One of the men with the truck knew the apartment number to which the box had been taken. He'd been impressed with the building, and remembered the apartment number because he supposed it was the living-place of some big shot.

When one looked back, their finding the apartment seemed simple and direct. But it had been hard work.

They got the apartment house superintendent because they wished to enter the apartment at least half-way legally. They noted the evidences of violence – the traces of the door being forced, and the bloodstains on the living-room rug.

Doc's quick search of the place' turned up nothing of value. It was just a rather fine apartment occupied by two girls.

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The apartment superintendent answered questions. Grace Blassett and Willa Morris were the occupants. Two fine girls. Very fine. Paid their rent on time. No wild parties.

The two girls operated the firm of Blassett and Morris. Their fathers had gone to war, enlisting in the army about a year previously, and the two girls had taken over the firm. Yes, the super had some idea of what sort of a firm Blassett and Morris was. They were purchasing specialists, industrial supply. If you had a factory, for instance, and needed a special machine, a supply of steel, or any hard-to-get raw material, you employed Blassett and Morris. They went out and bought it for you at the lowest possible price.

Sir Roger Powell listened to this. He smiled thinly, and got out his cloth sack of tobacco and papers and made a limp cigarette.

Doc said, "We might as well go back to headquarters. Monk will contact us as soon as he can, and he will call us there."

They rode back in Doc's car.

"All right," Doc said to Powell. "What about Blassett and Morris?"

"Eh?"

"You mentioned them before," Doc said.

Powell contemplated Doc and Renny. Powell still looked well-tailored, neat, although his pinstripe suit and white shirt were a mess. It was the man's manner which gave him that prim quality. He had combed his black hair and given his moustache a twisting with his fingers, getting it back in shape. The hand-made cigarettes still seemed incongruous for him.

"Oh, yes," Powell said finally. "When Tucker French in South America gave me the mysteriously heavy box of snake skins to bring to New York, I was to get in touch with the firm of Blassett and Morris. That's what I told you."

"Was it the truth?"

Powell flushed. "Certainly."

"You said you contacted Blassett and Morris, didn't you?"

"I did. They didn't deal in snake skins. They didn't know Tucker French."

"How did you contact the firm?"

"Telephone. I talked to a woman. I presume one of the young ladies whose apartment we just left."

"Know anything more about them?"

Powell said violently, "Dammit, I wish I did."

They reached headquarters. There was no message from Monk. There was a gadget which would have recorded one, had Monk telephoned in. Doc liked gadgets, and he had developed this recorder affair, an automatic gimmick which told a caller, with a recorded voice, that no one was in the office, but that if the

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caller would speak his or her message, it would be put on record. The recording was done magnetically, on a wire.

They ordered up food from an all-night restaurant. While he was eating, Powell told them more about himself. He got to talking about his birthplace, which he said was Epping Forest, near London. The pleasant memories of his youth and early manhood there, he said, were good to have with him. He talked about the deer in the forest, the herons and the kingfishers and the many small songbirds. He understood, he said, that the Germans had bombed nearby High Beech, where Tennyson was living when he wrote "The Talking Oak" and "Locksley Hall."

Doc said, "High Beech is five miles south of Epping Forest, isn't it?"

Powell drew slowly on another hand-made cigarette. "That's about right."

Doc looked at Powell intently. "It wasn't when I was there."

Powell froze. He picked up his fork, then put it down again slowly. He muttered, "You've been there."

Doc nodded. "And you haven't."

Powell grimaced sheepishly. "Believe it or not, this is the first time I've been caught. Dammit, I should have remembered High Beech is part of Epping Forest. I've read enough about the place that I should have remembered that."

"Are you an Englishman at all?" Doc asked.

"No," Powell confessed.

RENNY put down his own knife and fork. He stared at Powell, then at Doc. "Is this important?"

"I don't see why it should be important!" Powell said instantly. "I've been telling that lie for years. If you want to know the truth, I was born on the wrong side of the tracks in Kirksville, Missouri. My name is Roger Powell, all right. I put the Sir on to it back in the days after the other war, when titles were all the rage. It helped me, so I kept on doing it."

No one said anything. Powell sat there looking sulkily at his plate. He didn't seem ashamed particularly. Just disgusted that they had found him out.

The telephone rang. The outside wire.

Monk.

"Santa Isabel," Monk said. "It's on the Rio Negro River, Brazil. Back in the godforsaken jungle. You can find it on the map.

"All right," Doc said. "What about it?"

"Get down there," Monk said. "That's where I'm going."

"Why?"

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"That's where everybody we're chasing seems to be headed. Listen, I can't give details. Just get down there. I'll leave a message at the biggest store in town, if I get there first. Okay?"

"If you know what you're doing," Doc agreed.

"I hope I do."

"All right."

"And, Doc, will you talk to a guy here. I'm renting a six-place plane from him. You know me, always broke. I want you to tell him you'll pay for it. And hold your hat. He wants plenty for rental."

"We have planes of our own," Doc said.

"No time to get one."

"Put the man on," Doc said.

The man wasn't particularly suspicious. He just wanted to be sure he got his money. He was trying to overcharge, and they had an argument about that, but came to terms. By this time it developed that Monk had gone. He had taken off in the rented plane.

"Just what happened out there?" Doc demanded.

The man – he was the operator at an airport about forty miles out in New Jersey – talked freely. He was somewhat alarmed, and wondering if he shouldn't make a report to the CAA or the Army.

Four days ago, a two-motored plane had arrived at his field and been hangared there, which was not unusual. About half an hour ago, several men, he didn't know exactly how many, had arrived in a hurry and piled into the plane and taken off. They had signed out for Miami.

"Did they load anything heavy into the plane?" Doc asked.

No, they hadn't, the man said. He added, "But during the four days the ship was hangared here, one of the men brought out stuff in boxes or suitcases at various times and put it in the plane."

"Are they gone?"

"They're taking off. So is the ship your friend rented from me. What shall I do about this? Is there something wrong?"

"Give me the NC numbers of both planes," Doc said. "And their types, cruising range, and radio equipment, if you have it."

"Sure, I've got that. Wait'll I get the register." The man soon supplied the information. He asked again, "What'll I do?"

"Let us handle it," Doc said.

He hung up.

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Renny had cut in an amplifier–speaker gadget on the telephone, so that he and Powell had heard both ends of the conversation.

"South America!" Powell blurted. "This is fantastic!"

"Know anything about Santa Isabel, in Brazil, where they're going?" Doc asked.

Powell nodded. "I've been there. It's not too bad. But the country around there is really something. It's probably the least–known stretch of country left on the face of the earth."

Doc nodded, watching Powell. Whatever the trail Monk was following, it must be hot and important. Monk was no fool. So Doc intended to go to South America. He intended also to take Powell, because Powell was part of the queer affair. It would be simpler if Powell agreed to go willingly.

"Going along?" Doc asked.

"You're damned right!" Powell said instantly. "And if you wonder why, I'll tell you. It's because two attempts have been made to murder me, and I'm mad."

"That's reason enough," Doc said, glad there was not going to be an argument over Powell's going. He added, "Say, I made a dumb mistake. I didn't ask who went with Monk in the rented plane."

He called the New Jersey airport operator again. Five people had left in the plane, including Monk. The operator described the other four. The descriptions fitted Grace Blassett, Willa Morris, old Benjy and Bob French.

Doc told Renny, "Let's get some equipment ready in a hurry. Jungle stuff. Quinine, insect repellent, machetes, weapons, some trade stuff for natives. We'd better work fast."

Powell was getting doubtful. "My God, that's thousands of miles down there. How do we know we'll find anything when we get there?"

"We'll keep track of those two planes," Doc said.

"How on earth can you do that?"

"The Army and Navy interceptor network," Doc said dryly, "has a setup which they think can track a mallard duck from Cuba to Canada."

"Will they cooperate?"

"We'll see. I'll do some telephoning while you and Renny get equipment together."

The Army and Navy would cooperate. It took some telephoning to Washington to get it done.

Powell was impressed. He told Renny. "You fellows get things done."

Renny said sourly, "It sure looks it, don't it? Here we are busting our necks to get to South America, and we haven't the least idea why."

"How," Powell asked, "do you suppose Monk Mayfair found out that we should go to Santa Isabel?"

"I wish I knew," Renny said.

X

THEY began the southward flight. Renny flew. Doc began fishing with the radio, prowling the wavelengths which Monk might use to call him.

Finally he got Monk. Monk spoke Mayan, an almost unknown dialect, as far as the civilized world was concerned, which Doc and the others had learned in Central America a long time ago.

Monk said his plane had a standardized wavelength radio transmitter. He didn't dare use it much. But he could receive on any of the aeronautical frequencies. Would Doc use two hundred eighty-five, a little above the standard control tower frequency, and keep him posted about the whereabouts of the plane they were trailing? He said he presumed that Doc had the Army and Navy interceptor service at work tracing the ship.

Doc said he would.

After that, they got half-hour reports from the Army in code. Renny had brought one of the little portable decoders used by the military. He made the settings, and keyed off the translations.

Powell was skeptical.

"They won't be able to keep track of the plane," he said.

"Watch them," Renny told him.

"What makes you so damned sure?"

With some indignation and pride, Renny said, "I helped the Army and Navy set up their interceptor alarm system. It was primarily an engineering job in communications."

Powell raised his eyebrows. "Didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't," Renny rumbled. "Ignorance never does."

As the pair sat scowling at each other, Doc wondered if they were going to have a fight after all. But they took it out in unpleasant looks for the time being.

Doc relayed the army reports to Monk from time to time, speaking Mayan on the two-eight-five waveband. Monk's ship immediately dropped back about forty miles in order not to be sighted by the other ship. So Monk was receiving the information, although he wasn't acknowledging it for fear that the ship they were following would pick up his signal and recognize his voice.

"How long," Powell asked, "is this easy stuff going to last?"

"Until we get well across the northern coast of South America," Renny told him.

Powell whistled. Later he asked, "Where do you suppose they'll refuel?"

That had been bothering him, Monk said.

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But the refueling turned out to be a simple matter. The ship simply doubled right a hundred miles, set down at a designated civilian field in Florida, took on a load of gasoline, signed out for Atlanta, Georgia – which was a lie – and took off. Ten minutes later Doc knew exactly how many gallons of gas and oil they had taken aboard.

Spotter reports showed the ship was heading out across the gulf stream.

Doc Savage refueled in Miami. His plane was an amphibian, two-motored, not particularly large, and not the fastest thing in the air. But it was stable, capable of long range, and with the flaps cracked, could set down in any field capable of handling a lightplane.

Powell expressed an interest in learning to fly. Renny killed time by letting him play with the duals, first switching on the auto pilot and not telling Powell about it, so that Powell thought he was handling the ship. Renny thought it was very funny. But Powell eventually became suspicious, and they came near having another fight.

It was monotonous.

DOC Savage finally talked a little about himself. It was the first time Renny had heard him do that.

Doc talked about the strangeness of his early life, the different outlook it had given him. He said that he had never known just what had happened to his father to cause him to put his small son, Doc, in the hands of scientists for training. It was a weird upbringing, aimed entirely at making Doc into a combination of mental marvel and physical giant – if science could do it. The elder Savage had not lived to see the final outcome of his plans for the boy.

"It was effective, but probably not as effective as he hoped," Doc said slowly. "Looking back on the fantastic business, I feel lucky as anything, because it seems to me that what I got was a psychological course guaranteed to make a freak." The bronze man grinned slightly. "I find myself doing, or on the verge of doing, many queer things as a result of the training."

He fell silent, then started again and explained that what he had missed most was a normal youth, the thrills and the heartbreaks and the excitement of devilment, which boys have. He had not missed these at the time he was not getting them, because he hadn't known about them, but he missed them now.

He frequently suspected that being a juvenile was something a man had to work out of his system, like getting rid of his baby teeth, he said. He still had the kid stuff in him. He'd never had a chance to work it off. As a result, he spent his time chasing excitement now, whereas if his youth had been a normal one, his adult life would have been normal. In other words, he would now be a young settled family man with a wife who dragged him out to bridge parties.

Renny laughed at that. The idea of Doc being dragged out to bridge by a henpecking wife struck him as funny.

Doc shut up, made somewhat uncomfortable by the levity.

"We all look back," Powell said, "and wish that our lives had been different. I don't think there breathes a man who doesn't do that."

For four hours they flew above an overcast that ended at twelve thousand. Renny got busy with an astral sextant, the Maggie, and stuck his head up in the astro dome. He tinkered with the computer and chart.

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"South American coast should be below," he said.

Doc nodded, pointed. Far ahead were snow-capped coastal Andean peaks, like muddy froth on the vast whiteness of the cloud floor.

"From here on, there'll be no spotter network to keep track of Monk and the plane we're following," Doc said. "The thing for us to do is refuel somewhere and head straight for the Rio Negros country."

Renny dug around in his navigation stuff.

"There's open weather at Fernando, on the Orinoeo," he said. "According to my dope, we can get ninety octane gas there. That should do us for a round trip, in case we can't get gas in the Amazon headwater country."

"Give me a course and ETA for Fernando," Doc said.

FLYING down out of the rather open mountain country into the Amazon basin was an experience that somehow discouraged talk. They were going into one of the most untouched places in the world.

Doc flew fairly low; there was no sense in flying high. There were no places to land, because now they were traversing the immense expanses of jungle where there were many small streams, but no rivers large enough to show through the overcoating of green growth.

The world was a green carpet, not smooth, but knobby and limitless. Certainly a drab thing to the eye. But when the plane flew low, the hobgoblin nature of the jungle was evident. Occasionally through the umbrella of foliage, they could see the undermass of the jungle, the fallen and decayed trunks everywhere, over and about them the thickets, the vines that draped from trees a hundred and fifty feet high, the incredible tangle of lianas everywhere, and the gaudy sick-bright colors of the flowers.

Renny knew something of this jungle country. He had been into it before. But for the sake of devilment, he pretended complete ignorance and got Powell talking.

Powell took the bait. He knew the jungle, and wanted to tell about it.

"The small blue birds you see occasionally in flocks are uirapuru, or charmer bird," Powell said. "They're called charmer birds because of their beautiful singing, and the weird effect it has on other birds. You'll see flocks of different kinds of birds being led through the forest, and the leader will be a charmer bird."

"No kidding!" Renny said.

Powell nodded. "Some of the natives make no-devil charms out of the charmer bird skins. Other natives buy them for very high prices, the price varying according to whether the charm is a woman charm or made for a man. It's very fascinating. But of course the funny thing is the way the charmer bird can lead all the other birds through the jungle."

"I'll be darned." Renny tried to keep a straight face.

Renny caught Doc's eye, and his glee cooled. Doc knew, of course, that Renny was almost as familiar with charmer birds as he was with blackbirds or sparrows.

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"How about doing some navigating?" Doc asked Renny dryly. Renny went back and prepared to get another astral fix. There was a foxing of cirrus clouds in front of the sun, and he decided to wait until they were out of the way.

He cut in the radio directional loop, intending to get a fix on one of the broadcasting stations at Caracas, Venezuela, and perhaps at Bogota, Colombia. As a matter of course, he had the receiver tuned to the frequency which Monk had last used to communicate with them. He changed to broadcast wavelength, and fished for the Bogota station, getting mostly static.

That Powell, Renny thought sourly, talks too much. Probably that's because he's a salesman. And he's got that damned superior way which high pressure salesmen get.

A shout from Doc Savage blew Renny out of his reverie. "The loop!" Doc yelled. "Cut the loop in on Monk's frequency!"

Renny grew cold. He'd left Monk's wavelength unguarded, the first moment they'd done that since leaving New York. But Doc, with the other receiver tuned from the cockpit, had covered the wavelength when he'd noticed Renny fiddling with the loop.

"Hurry up!" Doc shouted.

Renny got the loop set tuned to Monk's frequency. Monk's voice, weak, gorged with horror, was saying, " – I wasn't expecting the right one to turn out to be a crook." There was considerable garbled by static. Then Monk's voice saying, " – right-hand gear up through the wing, so we groundlooped. One motor is out of the mounts and the gasoline tank in that wing split over everything." More garbled, then, " – I'm pretending to be unconscious so I can talk. Hope you get a radio fix. The men are coming into the plane now. This was all rigged, I can see that. For God's sake, be careful. I think – " What he thought they didn't learn. That was the last of Monk's voice.

RENNY sat there with both hands on the loop knob, afraid to take them off lest he disturb the pointer setting. Seventy-three degrees, he thought, ogling the pointer. Holy cow, I hope I really had the null before Monk got shut down.

He took his hands away from the pointer. He stumbled forward to the cockpit.

"What happened to Monk?" he gasped.

"Did you get a null?" Doc shouted.

"Seventy-three," Renny said "What went wrong?"

"Static," Doc said. "So much static we missed just what did go wrong. Monk's plane was forced down. Evidently one of the group in the plane caused it."

"Which one?"

If Monk said, it was garbled by the static. "Seventy-three," Renny said hoarsely. "The pointer was on seventy-three. The bearing has got to be that, or two-fifty-three degrees, which would be the opposite."

Doc considered for a moment. "We will try the two-fifty-three bearing."

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He brought the plane around to correct for the mile or two they had covered since getting the bearing. He leaned back to look at Renny's loop, on the chance Renny had misread the dial. It said seventy-three degrees, after correction for deviation and variation.

"Break out equipment," Doc said. "It may not be long."

"Doc, you heard Monk's signal," Renny said. "Did it sound close?"

"Fairly close. Not over fifty miles," Doc said.

They could discern streams below, most of them black, as black as the Rio Negro into which they fed. Doc climbed the ship. He cut in the engine mufflers and reduced speed somewhat to decrease the prop roar.

"Use binoculars," Doc said. "If we can spot them from high enough that they don't see or hear us, we might come down in the sun and accomplish more."

Renny rumbled, "Who the devil do you suppose doublecrossed Monk?"

Powell scowled. "That Bob French fellow, probably. He struck me as a shifty sort."

"Nuts!" Renny said.

Renny was angered. He had been through a good deal of rough stuff with young Bob French in China, and he was inclined to trust French. Bob wasn't shifty, not in Renny's opinion.

Then suddenly his wrath froze. For an instant he thought: No man should ever get mad! Because his rage had almost caused him to miss Monk's plane.

"There!" he yelled at Doc. "About two hundred degrees, five miles away! Monk's plane!"

DOC put the big plane in a glide. He cut the switches. He didn't quite close the throttles. Powell's hair seemed to visibly stand on end.

"My God, you'll need motors to land!" he screamed.

Renny said, "They've got starters."

The sun was low. Not quite on the horizon. But there wasn't more than an hour of daylight left.

They came down to three thousand before they could tell much about Monk's plane.

It was Monk's plane, all right. They could distinguish the NC number on the upper wing panel.

"That's a landing field, isn't it?" Doc demanded suddenly. The same idea had hit Renny. A landing field. Not a paved runway, but a fairly clear landing strip.

Monk's plane was piled up at the midway point of the runway.

A ground loop had obviously taken it to the left, and it was jammed among the small trees at the edge of the runway.

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A figure appeared in the open, waving both arms.

"Who's that?" Powell demanded.

Doc said he couldn't tell. "We've been seen; so we might as well start the motors," he added.

Shutting plane motors off in the air, then getting them going again with the electric starters was always ticklish business. The starters wailed, and the props went over jerkily. Then the stacks coughed blue smoke, the engines got going and Doc resumed breathing.

Doc said, "Keep your eyes open for funny stuff."

He sent the ship down in a spiral, watching the ground.

Powell muttered, "A runway! The way this jungle grows, it would take a young army to keep a runway like that cleared."

"It's not such a mystery," Renny told him. "I think it's an old lake bed, a dried mud flat that is so impregnated with minerals, possibly salt – that the vegetation won't grow on it."

"Watch for trouble!" Doc warned.

They were getting down low enough now to make a stab at identifying the figure which was gesturing at them. It was broad, not tall.

"Monk!" Renny yelled. "That's Monk! That's the suit Monk was wearing in New York. He always wears the same suit a week at a time." He scowled. "Wait a minute. His face doesn't look right."

They were around six hundred feet, so identifying a face, even Monk's face, was mostly guessing. Doc sent the ship lower.

"Seems to be blood on his face," Doc said.

"Uh–huh," Renny muttered. "Could be red berry juice, if it wasn't Monk, too."

The figure below solved their doubts by suddenly dashing into the jungle, and reappearing dragging a limp man. He waved his arms triumphantly, jumped around, went back and came out dragging another figure.

Renny roared, "Holy cow! It's Monk! He cleaned up on them after he radioed us! That explains the blood on his face. They had a fight, and Monk licked the pack of them."

This struck Doc as a natural conclusion. Monk was phenomenal in a hand to hand fight.

Doc put the plane across the field at a hundred and fifty feet, then banked back explaining, "We will drag the field at about ten feet altitude to be sure it's all right."

He arched back, adjusting flaps and props and getting down the gear. He could see the landing strip clear ahead. It seemed okay. The only moving figure in sight was the one they had identified as Monk.

He was thinking how fine everything was when the trip-rope of vines flew up in front of the plane. He hardly saw the thing before he hit it.

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Things began coming off the plane, the first thing being the right-side motor.

XI

THERE were probably no tougher vines in the world than those which grew in the Amazon basin jungle. They were the greatest obstruction to movement. Some were three or four inches thick, and from that they shaded down to fine threads that were as tough as buckskin. The trip-rope was made of vines.

It was no five-minute job. The main rope was a braided cable effect, with stringers hanging down. There must be, over at the side in the jungle, a devil of an efficient weight and pulley gadget to yank it up so quickly.

The starboard motor went out of its mount because the bent prop blades threw it off balance. It just tore itself loose.

The shock was not too terrific. The plane was heavy, and it snapped the vine cable.

The vines were tangled in the left motor, which was still running. The vines beat and flailed and knocked the glass out of the cabin windows on that side, tore the wing covering. The noise was of many bullwhips.

Doc cut the motor-switches. He whirled the control wheel and did a fandango on the rudder bars. He didn't get the ship quite level. But he did get it munched out in landing attitude. The only trouble was that they weren't going straight down the runway any longer. The jungle was puffing up in front of them.

The plane fuselage dived into the jungle, leaving both wings behind. It shed wheels, fuselage-skin and other things including anything resembling its former streamlined shape. The uproar was as if several sacks of very big cans were being dragged over rocky ground. Early in the uproar, Doc hit the safety catches and the cabin doors and escape hatches flew off the plane, propelled by the jettisoning devices.

The first thing to do after any plane crackup was get out. Get free. Because nothing burns quite as vigorously as an airplane. Doc twisted about, said, "Renny, are you – "

"Hell, yes," Renny said.

Powell was fighting with his safety belt. He couldn't get the fastener unhooked. He seemed all right otherwise. Doc reached up – the plane was on its nose – and twisted Powell's belt fastener open. Powell was merely confused.

They piled out of the ship.

"Get away from here!" Doc said. "Move fast!"

Powell lost his confusion. He bored into the jungle with the practice of an expert and the vigor of a mail with death blowing on his heels.

Renny said, "Holy cow!" and charged after Powell. Renny would keep track of Powell, Doc knew.

Doc himself moved rapidly for a few yards, or as rapidly as the tangle of the jungle would permit, then gave all his attention to being silent. He went back to a spot where he could see the landing strip.

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The man they had thought was Monk was gone. He hadn't been Monk, of course.

The "unconscious men," who the pretended Monk had hauled out into the clearing, were gone. Doc surmised they had arisen and fled under their own power.

You mutt, he thought. What did you use for brains a minute ago?

HE went back to his wrecked plane. It had not burned. He scouted the vicinity carefully, decided it was safe to enter the ship, and did so swiftly. The stuff he wanted was the medical kit and portable radio. He got them. He left the plane quickly.

His plain white shirt was nothing to be wearing in the jungle if one wanted to escape discovery. He stripped it off. To help against the heat, he used his pocket knife to make his trousers into shorts. All the time, he was listening.

Nothing seemed to be stirring in the jungle. That puzzled him. As protection against insects, he rubbed some chemical repeller into his skin. The jungle mosquitoes could be a fright, so bad you carried a sack and sat with your legs in that whenever you rested. There were puim, the little lice with wings and the maquim, which had the habits of chiggers, but considerably more voracity, and others as bad.

After a while, he caught a sound. He heard it again. He began moving, stalking the noise.

It was a native. An unlovely, insect-welted little jungle man. He had a pot belly and muscles like wires and a gee-string and a blowgun as long as he was. He had the tiny arrows for the blowgun tucked in his frizzled hair.

He was stalking the plane.

Shortly he put an arrow into the blowgun, raised the long tube to his lips, and blew out his cheeks, held them a moment, let the air go. Actually, the little arrow's tink! on the metal flank of the plane was louder than the blowgun sound.

The small native waited a while, warily. Then he took another shot at the plane, as if he thought it was some great wounded bird that he was going to dispatch with his arrows.

Doc waited, watching. He kept his ears open, lest other natives approach and surround him before he knew it. They could move silently in the jungle. Their stealth could surprise you. But they weren't superghosts. He was not afraid of being taken unawares.

Now the one native was advancing.

The little jungle ruffian held both hands up, palms out, an accepted gesture of peace, and walked to the plane.

He stood beside the plane, listening.

"Anybody home?" he asked.

Doc came near starting violently enough to betray his hiding place. The native's English wasn't good. But it was plainly understandable, with a slightly slangy swing. And it was so utterly the last thing Doc expected the little imp to say that he was dumfounded.

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The pet-bellied little man looked into the plane. He stepped up on the wing stub, opened the cabin door, which had swung shut, and looked inside. He scratched his head, puzzled.

He knew what planes were, Doc decided. When he'd fired those arrows, he hadn't thought he was attacking a big bird.

Doc watched the fellow prowl around the ship. The man found the tracks made by Doc, Renny and Powell. As soon as he found the tracks, he whirled and dashed for the landing strip.

Out on to the landing strip, head back, stomach out, he sped toward the southern end of the strip.

He vanished into the jungle.

There was time to second-count to about twenty.

Then shots. First one rifle bang. Then three more, scattered. A shotgun crashed, evidently a double-barreled gun because it went off twice.

Someone swore in good New York English and said, "The little son-of-a-gun got away!"

Another voice called, "You see the plane?"

Monk's voice!

The first speaker said, "I can see where it crashed into the jungle down yonder."

NOW men came out on the landing strip. The first was a very tall young man with stooped shoulders. Then, in a group, there were Monk Mayfair, Bob French, old Benjy, and the two girls, Grace Blassett and Willa Moms.

There were about a dozen natives with them. These natives looked better fed and were wearing different articles of European clothing in the individualistic fashion which natives like. One man had two neckties tied around each forearm.

The tall, stooped young man was the leader. He shouted, "There's their plane!"

The group raced down the landing strip.

Doc remained where he was. Not far from the plane. But hidden among the vines.

Monk, he saw, seemed to be in fair shape. Monk looked somewhat confused, however, as if things had been moving too fast for him.

Bob French and old Benjy he identified without trouble. He had their description – Renny had described French, and they'd learned about old Benjy at the New York apartment house of the two girls.

He found it interesting to identify Grace Blassett. Monk had been acting somewhat queerly in the course of recent events. Doc began to see what was probably causing Monk's deviations.

The racing group reached the plane. They searched it. Monk scrambled inside the fuselage.

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"They're not here!" Monk yelled angrily. "Dammit, those natives must have packed them off!"

The tall, stooped young man turned to one of the natives, happening to choose the unorthodox wearer of the neckties. He grunted and gurgled at the native. The native looked at the ground for a while, then did some grunting himself.

"He says," the tall, hunched young man translated, "that there are not enough native tracks for the natives to have carried them off."

Monk scratched his head. He examined the ground himself, and evidently decided it was logical.

Monk lifted his voice.

"Doc!" he bellowed. "Oh, Doc! Are you all right?"

Doc kept silent. He wasn't sure what was going on. It struck him there was something queer.

"Doc!" Monk was howling. "Renny! Hey, this is Monk. Come here, before the gooks find you!"

His roar shook the jungle. Obviously Renny and Powell heard it.

SHORTLY Renny called, "What gives, Monk?"

"Come on outa there," Monk shouted at the jungle.

Renny appeared then. Powell was with him.

Doc Savage watched Monk and Renny pound each other on the back. The situation seemed to be all right. And yet in the back of Doc's mind there was a specter of doubt, a black threatening uncertainty. It sat there like a dangerous beast.

Monk was yelling, "Where's Doc? Good God, do you suppose they got Doc?"

His concern got the best of Doc's better judgment, of his vague conviction that he shouldn't be doing this.

He walked out of the jungle, joining them.

THE tall, stooped young man was Tucker French. Bob French – who was still in his army uniform – made the introduction.

"This is Tucker, my kid brother," Bob said.

There were family resemblances. Both had long noses and blue eyes and a gangling length that was almost awkwardness.

Tucker French put out his hand.

"Savage? Doc Savage?" he said, as if puzzled. "Well, I've never heard of you, but apparently my brother has. And he seems impressed."

Monk had a story to tell.

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"Doc," he said excitedly, "Doc, when we came down to land in that clearing, a vine rope tripped us."

"Just how," Doc asked, "did you know about the landing strip?"

Monk indicated Bob French. "He knew."

"Naturally I knew the location of the strip," Bob French said.

Tucker French, his brother, put in – too quickly, it could have been – saying, "Bob should know. I've written him about it often enough, and it's easy to find, in the fork of two rivers the way it is."

"That's right," Bob said.

Their glibness gave Doc Savage a queer feeling, and the reason for the queerness he didn't exactly understand. He said, "Let's go back farther than that. Monk, how did your parry happen to head for here in the first place?"

"For South America, you mean?"

Monk scratched his head. "Well, back in New York after Bob French called on Renny asking for help, then skipped out so mysteriously, you assigned me the job of tracing Bob French through the laundry mark on his blouse. Well, I traced it to his address in Long Island City, where I met these two girls who were also hunting French. We joined up with Benjy, here, who works for the girls, and then we found Bob French in the girls' apartment."

Monk deviated to explain about the mysterious, very heavy something which old Benjy had moved from the downtown warehouse to the girls' apartment – the stuff having been stolen by the men who had knocked out Bob French.

"Bob French had regained consciousness after they kayoed him and heard them say they were headed for South America, and what airport they were leaving from," Monk continued. "We figured we could tear out there and head them off. Well, we tried, but they were already taking off. So I rented a plane in a hell of a hurry, telephoned you, and we followed them.

"You didn't exactly follow them," Doc reminded him. "You had Santa Isabel on your mind. You said you thought that was where they were heading."

"Sure."

"What put Santa Isabel in your head?"

Monk pointed at Bob French. "Him."

Bob nodded. "That's right. I remembered hearing them say they would fly a straight course from Caracas to Santa Isabel on the Negros river in Brazil."

Doc said patiently, "Now, what put this particular landing field in your head."

"Him again." Monk indicated Bob French.

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Bob French scowled slightly. "I got that idea no more than an hour ago, when it suddenly dawned on me that this flight course would put us over brother's landing strip."

"So," Monk said, "we thought we'd sit down and ask brother Tucker what it was all about."

"You made a queer landing," Doc reminded him.

NOW Tucker French entered the conversation. "If you don't mind," he said, "I think we had better get the more important material you wish to salvage out of the plane, and head for the safety of my trading post."

One of the natives had been grunting uneasily, and now he burst out in a series of vocal sounds, interspersed with grunting and snorting, to express himself. Tucker French evidently understood the primitive language, because he showed some concern.

"There are hostile natives nearby in the jungle," Tucker French told Doc.

Doc made no comment. Could be, he thought. But if there were, the grunting and snorting native hadn't heard them. Doc had been listening himself. He was willing to bet that there hadn't been any sounds in the jungle which were man-made.

Monk said, "The natives wrecked my plane. They seized us as soon as we crashed. They were carrying us off."

Tucker French said, "Fortunately, I heard the plane come down, and so I rushed to the spot, surmising what might have happened. With my men, I was fortunate enough to overhaul the war party which had your friends, and rescue them."

Monk grinned. "That was nice timing, too."

"Much of a fight?" Doc asked.

"Not much. There was some dart blowing, then the little devils who had us just faded away into the jungle."

Tucker French said, "They're not anxious for a pitched fight with me. They're marauders, more cunning than violent." He grimaced. "However, they did surprise me, when they wrecked your plane."

"My plane, you mean?" Doc said. "They wrecked it?"

"Of course.

"They're persistent."

Tucker French laughed grimly. "That's right. They're after me, of course. But they've been after me for a year or so."

"They've tried this plane-wrecking gag with a vine rope before?" Doc asked curiously.

"Oh, yes. Matter of fact, that's why I no longer use the strip. They nearly got me."

"What," Doc asked, "is the trouble between you and these natives?"

Tucker French shrugged. "Why did my grandfather have to fight Indians in Dakota? Much the same sort of thing."

He glanced about uneasily at the jungle. And one of the natives grunted excitedly, pointing.

Tucker French walked over to the object which was exciting the grunter, and plucked it from a thick leaf in which it was embedded. It was one of the tiny blowgun darts.

"I don't believe we should stand around here any longer," he said. He opened his shirt and showed them that he wore a metallic mesh undershirt of the type often worn by explorers in the poison-arrow country. "Even with one of these, I don't feel safe."

They got going.

XII

THE walk was not long. About half an hour. Powell dropped back with Doc Savage, and talked glibly about the jungle. It sounded to Doc as if Powell was talking from nervousness. Some of what he told them was trite stuff.

The piranha, for instance. The piranha were the small flat fish with the ferocious expressions and teeth that could cut like razors, the fish which suddenly appeared in a stream by the thousands at the trace of blood, and in a moment or two would leave nothing but the skeleton of a man.

Doc listened patiently. Everybody, he supposed, had heard of piranha.

Another thing Powell talked about was the difference between the black jacare and the brown one. The black one frequently reached a length of twenty-five feet, and was the most dangerous of the caiman family. You could guess the mind of a light-colored jacare, he warned, but for God's sake be careful about the black ones.

Powell was scared, Doc finally decided. Whether Powell was frightened of the natives or not, Doc couldn't tell.

The going was not hard. They were on a path, a well-trimmed one, and they went fast.

Tucker French dropped back and told Doc Savage, "The path we're on now is my main road to the river. We use it frequently. My place isn't far."

Doc said nothing. He was wondering why nobody had said a word about the pink elephant in the affair – he cause of all the scuffling; the "heavy stuff," whatever it was.

It seemed that everyone was avoiding it.

They reached Tucker French's place.

Anywhere but in the jungle, it wouldn't have been impressive. In the jungle, it was. It was in a stretch of country which an explorer would have called palmy. Which meant simply that it was higher ground, well-drained, that there were tall babassu palms, the fronds of which met overhead to form a cathedral-like effect with the last of the evening sunlight streaming down.

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There was an outer cultivated fence of thorn trees, something like the "hedge" fences found in Iowa and Missouri. But thicker, more rank. Nothing larger than a mouse could pass through the fence readily.

The trading post was in the center of the fenced circle, the fence being far enough away that no blowgun arrow could reach it.

There were four buildings, none of them large, connected with a low wall so that the effect was somewhat that of a fort, but not too much so. Stone was the building material used. The stone had been dug up on the site, and laid with a mortar of local siliceous sand and lime made by burning limestone on the spot.

There was nothing extraordinary about the spot, except that Tucker French's personal quarters were air-conditioned. The air-conditioning was not too good, but it was better than the jungle heat. Tucker French was obviously proud of it.

"I have some good mate'," he said. "How about a highball?"

Doc said grimly, "You might also serve up a little more information."

This sounded, he realized, more angry and suspicious than he intended.

Tucker French's innocence was almost baby-like. "I don't understand."

"The box of snake-skins," Doc said. "What about it?"

Tucker French looked vaguely dumfounded, as if he didn't in the least know what a box of snake-skins was.

Sir Roger Powell said, "He means the box of snake hides you gave me to take to New York."

"Oh, those," said Tucker French vaguely. "Why, I ship a few snake hides now and then. What about them?"

"The box seems to be behind this trouble," Doc told him.

Tucker French smiled. "Oh, you must be mistaken. They were just snake skins."

Doc said, "You gave them to Powell to give to Blassett and Morris."

"Yes, that's right."

"Blassett and Morris had never heard of you and they don't deal in snake hides," Doc countered sharply.

"We discussed that before your plane landed," Tucker French said easily. "I'm afraid I made an error."

"Error?"

"I understood Blassett and Morris were snake-skin dealers. I was wrong." Tucker French smiled again, but it wasn't very genuine.

Doc could feel tension growing in the room. There wasn't anything visible. It was just a feeling.

"The box was pretty heavy," he said.

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No one said anything. Grace Blassett wasn't looking at anyone. Her face, Doc thought, was getting a little gray with fright.

"It was a pretty heavy box," Doc said. "Three of us could barely lift it with levers. Then it suddenly became as light as a normal box should be."

Tucker French smiled. "Is this a ghost story?"

Doc was silent. It was a difficult silence, because he was trying to hold down a growing impulse to smash things. He was, he saw, being roundly lied to.

He turned slowly to old Benjy. "What was it that you took from that downtown warehouse in New York to the girls' apartment?" he asked the old man.

Benjy looked him in the eye.

"Nothing," Benjy said. "I didn't take anything. You can't prove I did."

Doc looked intently at the ceiling.

"Does anyone have the least idea why we're down here?" he asked wearily.

"To have a drink with me, I hope," Tucker French said, laughing again. It was a queer laugh.

Suddenly Doc was sure that Tucker French was a very dangerous fellow.

"I don't drink," Doc said shortly.

THE night came on slowly. Now and then a native would come to consult with Tucker French to the effect that there was no sign of the other natives, the bad ones, the marauders.

Doc gave no inkling that he could understand the grunts and snorts and cackling that was the native language. He understood it fairly well. Well enough to know that the natives were saying what Tucker French said they were saying.

Also he understood the lingo well enough to know that the natives were mouthing exactly what they had been told to say. The natives were poor actors. They had poker faces, but they didn't get the necessary conviction into their grunts and other sounds.

Doc began to find cold sweat on the backs of his hands. He knew it was along his backbone, too. He was frightened.

The outward appearance of things was as social as any cocktail hour would have been in the jungle. It shouldn't have been. It was unnatural.

Monk and Renny felt the same way. He could tell. Monk was fascinated by pretty Grace Blassett, but fear was beginning to get the better of Monk's prowling instincts. Renny's long face was more composed, but his big hands were gripping various things, the arms of his chair for instance, very tightly.

A native announced dinner.

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"Perhaps you would like to clean up," Tucker French said easily.

Doc managed to get Monk and Renny alone in the modern bathroom.

"How do you feel about this?" Doc asked them.

Monk said, "I'm beginning to sweat icicles."

"We're being ganged up on," Doc said.

Renny nodded. He thought so, too.

Doc said, "Back there in the jungle, during this capture and rescue thing you fellows went through – did Tucker French have a chance to talk to Benjy, the two girls and Bob French without you hearing?"

Renny scowled. "Yes, he did."

"Notice any change after that?"

"Come to think of it, yes."

"All right," Doc said. "It's the three of us against the rest of them."

Monk asked, "What do you think they're planning to do with us?"

"I don't want to scare myself by wondering," Doc told him. "Keep your eyes open."

He went back to the living room. He found Powell and Tucker French holding a lips-to-ear conversation. They didn't quite spring apart guiltily. At least, Powell was the only one who sprang.

"Powell was just telling me the latest war news," Tucker French said. "I'm a few months behind on it."

They hadn't been discussing any war news, Doc knew. Powell looked too relieved. He looked like a man who wanted to giggle, like a man who had just won the sweepstakes.

"Don't you have a radio?" Doc asked idly.

"It's out of order," Tucker French said. "One of the fool natives broke the tubes."

Doc said, "Your brother Bob says he received a cablegram from you."

Tucker French smiled his worst smile.

"That's quite a mystery, isn't it?" he said. "I wonder who could have sent it?"

"Quite a mystery," Doc agreed, trying to use the same man-eating cheerful tone Tucker French was using.

DINNER was uneventful, but it was also as false as the gaiety of medical school students eating dinner on a dissecting table as a gag. Doc himself ate nothing which Tucker French did not sample first. He noticed that Monk and Renny didn't either.

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Throughout the meal, Tucker French kept up a running fire of questions at his brother. Bob, what kind of action did you see in the army? Was China very interesting? How many times were you shot at?

They weren't the questions, somehow, that a brother would ask another brother. And the answers weren't right, either. They were forced.

Doc formed a fairly certain conviction that Bob French didn't like what was going on, but for some reason or other felt that he couldn't do anything about it.

After dinner, Doc said, "I have a portable radio. We might tune in some news."

He went to get the little portable outfit – a transmitter–receiver combination affair which under favorable conditions could reach some other station, probably one at Manaos or Bogota.

He found the radio smashed.

"These damned dumb natives!" Tucker French said with anger which must be feigned. "One of them smashed it, I'm afraid."

Doc nodded.

"And the radio transmitters in both planes were doubtless ruined in the crash," he said.

"I'm afraid so," Tucker French said.

"That's too bad."

"Indeed it is," Tucker French agreed. "Do you and your two friends mind sharing the same bedroom?"

"Not at all."

"I'll show you where it is."

The bedroom was large and had several very small windows which Doc was particular to note were not large enough to permit a man to escape by crawling through them.

Tucker French, in the course of looking over the room, emitted a startled cry and sprang forward. He bent over a small object on the floor.

"For God's sake, keep away from this!" he cried. The insect on the floor was an ant.

It was a peculiar ant, however. It was about an inch and a quarter long, with a velvety appearance and an enormous head.

Doc had a near malaria chill for a moment. An isle ant. The bites of the things were deadly poison.

Tucker French told them what it was. He dressed it up a little, making it sound as if the isle bite was worse than that of a cobra.

"It's the work of those infernal natives who were shooting poisoned arrows at us," Tucker French told them emphatically. "Now and then they catch some isle ants and let them loose near my stockade fence. This one

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must have worked its way into the house. I'll help you search your bedclothing for more of them."

They didn't find any more isle.

"I don't believe it is safe for you to walk around the place during the night," Tucker French told them.

"Yes, that seems to be fairly obvious," Doc agreed, using the man-eating cheerful tone.

WHEN they were alone in the bedroom, Monk whispered, "Say, are we gonna stay in here tonight?"

"We are not!" Doc said vehemently.

"Then what – "

"We are going to the bathroom together again," Doc said.

They strolled to the bathroom. They met Tucker French en route, and told him they were going to the bathroom.

The bathroom had a window a man could crawl through.

"Crawl out," Doc said. "Hide. Don't move around and get yourselves seen. In an hour or so, or when everyone is asleep, come and get me out of that bedroom, because I have a hunch the door will be locked by then."

Renny, having difficulty keeping his whisper from being a roar like his voice, whispered, "And I've got a hunch nobody plans to sleep in this house tonight."

"Out of the window," Doc said.

"How you going to cover when they check up to make sure we're all in our little beds?"

"I'll try to sound like all three of us," Doc said. "Get going." Renny went out of the window. Monk followed. Monk whispered, "If those jungle natives hanging around – "

"You can forget the jungle natives hanging around," Doc said.

"Yes, but will they forget me?"

"They aren't."

"Eh?"

"Those jungle natives," Doc said, "are the figments of Tucker Powell's imagination, I hope."

Monk shivered before he disappeared and said, "I hope so, too."

Doc went back to the bedroom. He didn't meet anyone. He closed the door and locked it on the inside, after noting that there was a padlock hasp on the outside. It was a very strong door.

He took off his shoes and lay down on one bed and turned out the light, then waited for the check-up.

A knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"Thought you might like some cold beer as a nightcap," Tucker French's voice said.

Doc said, "Monk. Do you want some cold beer?"

Imitating Monk's voice as closely as he could, Doc said, "No, my feet are cold enough as it is."

"Renny?"

"No, thanks." Using Renny's voice.

"I guess not," Doc said using his own voice again.

"Well, sleep tight," Tucker French said. He sounded as if he had been fooled.

Surmising that the fellow might listen outside the door. Doc proceeded to carry on a three-sided conversation using the voices of Renny, Monk and Himself. He did that for a while. Then he had his voices agree that they might as well get some sleep.

Lying there after he had finished, he felt silly. He was pretty good at voice mimicry. He had practiced it a lot, and he had used it before. But he felt silly anyway.

He was somewhat pleased, too. It was a crazy sort of a thing to do. He liked such things.

He thought back, lying there in the darkness, of the monologue he had given, while flying south in the plane with Renny and Powell, about his strange youth. About the lack of a normal boy's devilment and small adventures which had featured his youth. Of how he was convinced that having missed such things as a kid accounted for his present interest in the fantastic and the adventurous and the quixotic.

The self-analysis was accurate, he hoped. It was a sensible explanation of the elation with which he seized upon a goofy way of accomplishing something instead of using a more normal, probably more sensible method. Like the trick he was trying to pull now.

Such methods probably meant he needed psychoanalysis, he reflected.

XIII

A COUPLE of hours later, Monk Mayfair clubbed someone over the head outside the door. It didn't make much noise.

Doc whispered, "Watch the door, it squeaks." They eased the panel open carefully.

"Lucky they didn't have it padlocked," Monk breathed. "Just stuck a bolt in the staple."

"Who did you hit?"

"One of the local boys," Monk explained. "He was standing here with a rifle, but he turned his back."

Ten Ton Snakes

They carried the native into the bedroom. Monk had used his fist on the fellow, so he would probably revive in time.

"Tie him and gag him," Doc said.

They ran into difficulty. The native had some kind of adenoidal difficulty which rendered him unable to breathe through his nose. If they gagged him, he would suffocate.

Renny said, "I've got an idea." He went away and came back with the carafe of mate' which had been served earlier in the night. He began pouring it down the native.

Monk started to giggle. He finally had to collapse on the edge of the bed and hold his mouth.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Renny demanded.

"What you trying to do to that native?"

"Make him drunk so he can't talk for a while."

"With mate'?"

"Sure."

"Mate' is a form of tea. It has no alcoholic content, and contains less caffeine than ordinary tea or coffee."

Renny stared at the carafe intently. Without a word, he put it down on the floor and walked out. Doc kept a straight face with some difficulty.

Renny came back with a square-sided bottle. He said, "At least I know what gin is." He began pouring gin down the native who had been on guard.

Doc shook a little with silent laughter, entertained by Renny's sheepish disgust. It was good, he suddenly realized, to be able to laugh. The mirth, like a clean shower, washed away some of the slime that continual fear was beginning to deposit on his nerves. While Renny was funneling gin down the native, Doc asked Monk, "Anything been going on?"

"Plenty big pow-wow in the main storeroom," Monk said. "What about?"

"No idea. Renny and I couldn't get near enough to overhear."

"Who attended?"

"Everyone."

"The two girls?"

"Uh-huh," Monk said sourly. "I can't feature Grace Blansett being mixed in something shady, but I guess she is."

Renny straightened.

Ten Ton Snakes

"Let's go see what the pow-wow has developed into," the big-fisted engineer suggested.

They moved warily through the house, stepping cautiously, stopping to listen. Doc found an outer door, moved it carefully and got it open without enough sound to worry them. They stepped out into the night.

Something seemed to be going on around at the front of the place.

"Careful," Doc breathed.

A moment later, they could see what was happening. Renny's, "Holy cow! They're all going into the jungle!" wasn't necessary.

It was a grim-faced group in front of the trading post. They were all there, except Tucker French. And he appeared shortly, with an electric lantern, dragging a two-wheeled iron cart. The cart was small, with wide-tread wheels. It was something like a wheelbarrow, except that it was two-wheeled.

Tucker French told Benjy, "You bring this." Benjy took the cart.

They walked toward the gate in the hedge. Tucker French unfastened the gate. He did not close it. The gate was unguarded.

Monk growled, "Say, they're not much scared of the boys with the blowguns!"

"There aren't any boys with blowguns besieging the place," Doc said.

"But that arrow Tucker French found sticking in a leaf – "

"He probably stuck it there himself," Doc said. "Then found it later for our benefit. Come on."

The jungle darkness was thick because of the canopy of palms overhead. Nothing happened when they passed through the gate.

Doc went ahead, feeling the way. There was a path, not hard to follow. The iron cart Benjy was dragging had taken to squeaking. The sound was a help.

The way led sharply upward. There was a hill which they had not noticed particularly from the air. Hills in the jungle were difficult to locate, because frequently the trees in the damper jungle grew a hundred feet taller than those on drier high ground.

This hill was rocky, too. The trees on it became not much more than rank bushes. The path was not wide, but it was solid, easily followed. The canopy of foliage above shut off less light now, so they could see where they were going, discern the path easily.

The cluster of lights ahead came to a stop.

"Take your time getting up on them," Doc warned. "And separate. When we meet, it will be on the west side, toward the moon."

He parted from Monk and Renny, silently.

Ten Ton Snakes

Because it was obvious the group ahead did not expect to be followed, he went ahead boldly, only using care not to make any noise.

Powell, Tucker French, Bob French and all the others were gathered together. Benjy was leaning on the iron cart, mopping perspiration.

Doc frowned. Evidently they were where they were going. But the spot did not look interesting. There was just rock. Hard stone, which could be some sort of quartz.

Tucker French made a speech.

HE said, "Like every explorer, I was always taking rock samples when I traveled. This rock here is quartz, and you find minerals in quartz veins frequently. So I prospected the place as a matter of course.

Powell said, "Your finding it was an accident, then?"

"Not entirely," Tucker French told him. "My compass was acting funny as anything, and that aroused my curiosity. It led me to the exact spot."

"Right here?"

"Yes."

"I don't see anything."

Tucker French laughed. "I hope not, all the trouble I took to hide it."

He began kicking brush aside, exposing an expanse of loose stone.

"Help me toss the loose rock aside," he said.

"How far down is it?" Powell demanded eagerly.

"Right on top, almost."

Doc watched them remove the loose stone from a small pit. All of them worked but the two girls and Bob French. These three stood back, white-faced, and watched.

Once Tucker French said to his brother, "Get in here and help, Bob."

Bob French said nothing, did not help.

They cleared the hole and climbed out.

Tucker French said, "Let's get our breath." He mopped his face, then continued, "Maybe it hit in the form of a meteor centuries ago. I don't know."

"What makes you think a meteor?" Powell asked.

"Well, the only thing that science has ever heard of that is anything like it is the substance of which one of the stars is composed. Astronomers found a star made of something like it."

Ten Ton Snakes

Old Benjy snorted. "How the hell can they tell what a star is made of?"

"They can, don't kid yourself," Tucker French told him. "They analyze the light from the star, somehow. I can't give you the exact procedure. But they get what they call a spectra by breaking up the light. If the body is hot they get what they call an emission spectra, and it's fairly easy to make a spectrum analysis with a gadget made of flint and crown glass prisms, I think."

"That's enough to confuse me," Benjy said. "I'll take your word."

Tucker French said, "All right. Let's get a chunk out. We'll have to use crowbars and tongs."

He got down in the pit with Powell. For the next ten minutes the men alternately struggled, cursed, and perspired.

It took four of them to lift out what they were after.

The object they had, as nearly as Doc could make out, was not much larger than a marble.

"Hell, this is a light piece," Tucker French said.

"You kidding?" Benjy said.

TUCKER French said they had better rest a while before trying to put it into the cart.

"This is lighter than the one I sent to New York embedded in the bottom of the box which held the snake skins," Tucker French said. "That one was not much larger than the eraser off a pencil."

Bob French frowned at his brother. "How'd you get the other piece out?"

"By stripping the inside of my cargo plane," Tucker told him. "Then I reinforced the ship so that it would carry it. I flew it as far as Cartagena, made up the special box, got enough snake hides locally to fill it, and turned it over to Powell to take north."

Bob French wheeled to Powell. "So you knew what it was all along – "

Powell hesitated. "Yes."

"And you were going to steal the sample?"

Tucker French laughed unpleasantly. "He was going to steal not only the sample, but the whole deposit. He got in touch with Blassett and Morris, told them what he had, and found out it was valuable. So he got a gang together intending to come back down here and do me in."

Powell said coldly, "I wasn't going to kill anybody."

"I can imagine," Tucker said bitterly.

Bob French growled, "Now wait a minute! Don't start a fight. Let me get this straight. Powell, I can see why you lied to me and said you didn't know anything about any heavy stuff. You didn't want to give away the secret. But what about that attack on you in the New York hotel?"

Ten Ton Snakes

"Fake. Arranged it myself." Powell sounded pleased with himself. "That was to fool Doc Savage, make him think I didn't know anything about anything – to make him think I was in danger and needed his protection. As long as he was protecting me, I would know what he was doing."

"At the warehouse, it was your men who tried to kill him?"

"Yes."

"You were with them. Why wouldn't the gas have killed you?"

"Because I would have got the hell out of there before it did. I wasn't tied like the others. My men just pretended to tie me. But old Benjy came busting in and ruined the plan."

Bob French shook his head strangely. He turned to the two girls, said, "And you were in on it too, murder and all?"

Grace gasped, shook her head mutely. Her companion, Bill, said, "No, no, we didn't have any part in that!"

"It looks to me as if you did."

Bill looked ill. She said, "Powell came to us and told us about the heavy stuff, and we knew it was valuable. But we didn't trust Powell, and began watching him. We saw he was up to something crooked. So we began trying to get the heavy stuff ourselves."

"Oh, you were going to steal it yourself."

Bill shook her head. "We were protecting your brother's interests. We wanted to handle the heavy stuff, but not if there was crooked work connected with it."

Bob French spat violently. "Just sheep in the wolf den!" he said.

His brother said, "Cut it out, Bob."

Bob French stared at his brother. He did not say anything more.

OLD Benjy, leaning on the cart again, said, "To put it all in a nutshell: Tucker French found this stuff. Tucker French couldn't go to New York to sell it himself on account of he is a draft-dodger. So Tucker gave a sample to Powell to take to New York and arrange a sale. Powell tried to steal the whole thing. Blassett and Morris tried to prevent it. Bob French tried to prevent it. Doc Savage tried to prevent it. We all wound up here."

"One big happy family!" said Bob French bitterly.

"Why not?" his brother shouted at him. "We decided there was no need for violence, that there was enough money in it for all of us. So we would all drop our schemes and work together. Isn't that sensible?"

"Doc Savage," Bob French said.

"WHAT do you plan to do with Savage and his two friends?"

Ten Ton Snakes

"Let him cool off," Tucker French said. "Then tell him the truth. If he wants to be contrary, there is nothing he can do. At the worst, we may have to make him walk to civilization, which will take him a couple of months."

Grace Blasset said anxiously, "You mean that? You're not going to kill him?"

"Good God, no!" Tucker French exclaimed. "Let's get this piece loaded and get back to the post."

They heaved and grunted some more, and finally got the small fragment of whatever it was loaded into the cart.

Tucker French flopped down on the ground, puffing.

"I'm exhausted!" he gasped. "Bob, you and Benjy and the girls go ahead with the cart. Powell and I will be along as soon as we catch our breath."

Powell puffed, "Golly, that's an idea." He flopped down beside Tucker French.

Old Benjy began wrestling with the cart. He and Bob French pulled. The two girls pushed.

They struggled down the trail with the unwieldy load.

Doc remained where he was. Tucker French and Powell, he was sure, had remained behind for some good reason.

Tucker French did nothing but breathe heavily for a while. Then he growled, "Well, you know where it is now."

"How much is in there?" Powell asked.

"Piece the size of a small house, nearly as I can tell."

Powell whistled softly. "That's plenty."

Tucker French asked anxiously, "You're sure it's worth a lot of money?"

"Hell, yes!" Powell exclaimed instantly. "I think the best market is to sell it in tiny bits to scientists and scientific institutions and museums. Divided up like that, it'll be worth as much as gold. More. There's nothing else like it on earth. Every scientific research laboratory will want a piece."

Tucker French nodded. "I hoped it would have some specific value immediately. It's a new element."

"You don't seem to realize the curiosity value of the stuff alone," Powell told him. "We would divide it up in pieces the size of a pea and get a million bucks peddling it to people who just wanted a chunk for a curiosity."

"You reckon that's the only value it's got?"

"I don't know. Probably not. We'll have to find out."

The two were silent for a while. The iron cart was squeaking in the distance.

Powell laughed suddenly. It wasn't pleasant.

"What's the matter with you?" Tucker French demanded nervously. "What are you laughing at?"

"At Doc Savage," Powell said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what we've got to do with Savage, don't you?"

"Eh?"

"Kill him. Kill Monk Mayfair and Renny Renwick, too."

XIV

THE two men sat there. Tucker French stared sickly at the ground. He didn't say anything.

"The two girls and that Benjy had better be gotten out of the way, too," Powell said.

Tucker French shuddered. "I – I can't stand for that."

"You won't have to."

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

Powell said, "You know my boys in the first airplane? The ones in the plane which Savage's plane, and the other ship with Monk and Benjy and the girls and your brother, followed down here?"

Tucker French shook his head. "What have they got to do with it."

"Plenty."

"But Doc Savage doesn't know they're here. He doesn't know that the plane bringing them landed ahead of everyone else, let them out, and then the pilot took the plane on to Santa Isabel to make a false trail if one was necessary."

"No, he doesn't know that."

Tucker French said uneasily, "I don't like your tone. What the hell are you driving at?"

"My boys are hiding out in the jungle near here."

"All right, let them stay out of sight! Pay them whatever you agreed to pay them, and don't tell them anything and –"

"You don't get the idea," Powell said coldly. "You're slow, brother."

Tucker French started to get to his feet. He acted like a man half-frozen.

Ten Ton Snakes

Powell took a gun out of his clothing, said, "Sit down, sucker."

Tucker French sat down slowly.

"You get it now, don't you?" Powell said.

"Yo – you're not–"

"Uh–huh. You bet I am." Powell cocked his gun. It was a revolver. "I'm going to take over. Savage and his two friends have to go. Why not you? Your brother, old Benjy, the two girls, too?"

"My God, you're insane!" Tucker French's voice was hoarse.

"Don't move," Powell said.

Powell put two fingers between his lips and whistled shrilly. Three times.

"That's the signal to bring my men," he said. "I told them to stick around and follow us when we left the stockade. Follow our lights, I told them."

Doc Savage came to his feet. He had, for the few brief seconds that he was given to have it, the ghastly certainty that he and Monk and Renny had walked into a devilish predicament. He was right.

From nearby, a voice, one of Powell's men, yelled, "Watch out, boss! Savage and two of his men are around here!"

Tucker French jumped at Powell then. And Powell shot French twice, putting both bullets in Tucker French's face.

The weird part of what followed was the part played by the flashlight which Tucker French was holding when he died. The convulsion which came when the bullets hit him caused him to throw the flashlight. It spun in the air for a moment, splattering light over the jungle as if there was a series of lightning flashes. And when it landed, it did not go out, but rested in a bush with the beam planted on Tucker French's body. It remained there, blazing light on the body.

Powell backed into the jungle after he shot Tucker French, backed slowly, holding his gun ready.

Doc moved silently, stalking him.

Powell called, "You say Savage and his men are here?"

"Yeah."

"How do you know?"

"They followed you up here. Ahead of us. We've been hoping to find –"

A fight broke out in the nearby jungle. Two blows, a shot, scuffling, brush snapping.

Monk. Doc knew. It had to be Monk. Anyone else would have had better sense than start a fight against odds in the jungle night.

Ten Ton Snakes

Doc lunged for Powell. It was too far, and moreover he tripped. The best he could do was slam his shoulder against Powell violently. Powell didn't fall. He just received a hard push, and kept going. Doc went down, tangled in vines.

Powell whirled. His gun made thunder and winking red glare. Doc rolled, got behind a tree trunk.

Powell screamed, "Get together! Don't try to fight them here! Get together! We'll go to the trading post – "

Where Monk was fighting, sudden silence came.

Then Monk's voice said, "I got two."

Gunsound crashed in the jungle again. A revolver made five splitting roars, emptying itself.

Then silence. Suddenly footsteps were pounding madly from the direction of the post. Up the trail.

It was Bob French. He stopped when he saw his brother. Doc couldn't distinguish him in the darkness, but he heard Bob French's breathing stop.

"Who did that to Tuck?" Bob French asked hollowly.

"Powell," Doc said. "This is Savage. Monk and Renny are around. So are Powell's men and Powell. Be careful."

"How many?"

"Shut up," Doc said.

"How many?"

A gun cracked as someone fired at Bob French's voice. Bob French shot back instantly. He killed a man. The man he killed didn't scream, but began breathing his life away with awful, labored sounds that were somewhat like snoring.

"I was hoping they'd shoot at my voice," Bob French said. "That's one."

Then they heard from Renny. He rumbled, "Here they are! The rest of them!" And his roar merged with the frantic splatter of gunfire.

Doc charged the sound. He heard Monk going for it, too. But Bob French was ahead of them both. Bob French, with fury, violence, jungle-fighting experience, and a gun.

For the next few seconds, it was one of those things you don't exactly remember afterward. Not that things moved too fast to remember. It was more the fear, the frenzy of trying not to be killed, and to kill, maim, mangle, do anything to save your life.

Doc himself had a throat when silence fell. He had to force himself, making quite an effort, to relinquish his grip before the man he was holding should die.

"How many?" Bob French's voice asked.

Ten Ton Snakes

Monk said, "Six. Seven including Powell."

Bob French said, "Renny?"

"I'm okay," Renny's voice said.

"A little like the Burma jungles, wasn't it?"

"Uh—huh. Is this all?" Renny asked.

"That's all," Bob French said.

"Providing," Doc Savage corrected, "the natives don't give us trouble."

THE natives didn't give them trouble. It made no difference to them, their spokesman explained to Doc, what the white men did to each other. They hadn't been enthusiastic about what was going on, anyway.

The natives would dig graves for those who had been killed, though.

Bob French insisted that his brother not be buried with Powell. Bob said he had no particular regret at having killed Powell.

"I blame Powell more than my brother," Bob explained grimly. "Tucker was a coward at heart, and I knew it and I never blamed him. Something like that, a man has or he hasn't."

Doc said, "Tucker did not start out trying to be crooked."

"I don't think so," Bob agreed. "Tucker was a draft dodger, though. I knew that. That's why, back in New York, when I went to Renwick for help, I acted so queer when I found out you would get into the affair. I knew you wouldn't have much sympathy for a draft dodger. So I tried to back out. I didn't want to see Tucker in the penitentiary. He was my brother. And I've fought enough of this war for our whole damned family."

"I'll tell the natives about the graves."

"Thanks," Bob French said quietly. His eyes were wet when he turned away.

The next two days were uneventful. Doc Savage was trying to get enough radio parts together to make a transmitter. He did not have much luck.

Renny spent most of his time fooling with the heavy stuff. It was a new element of some sort. New as far as anyone having actually gotten hands on any, although astronomers had discovered the stuff on a star. *

The stuff intrigued Renny. He began coming up with all kinds of ideas about how they would dispose of it.

Monk was also having ideas, some of them fairly desperate.

His prize idea was that Doc, Renny and Bob French take the two-fisted girl, Bill, along with them on the jungle trek to civilization. He, Monk, would stay behind with Grace and old Benjy. Benjy could be chaperone.

"Benjy is getting down with malaria, so he'd be an ideal chaperone," Monk said hopefully.

Ten Ton Snakes

"What's the matter with you and Bill?" Doc asked.

Monk shivered. "She scares me."

"You don't scare her, I've noticed," Doc told him. "She gives you quite a bit of her time."

"Yeah, so damned much of it that I haven't been able to make any hay with Grace," Monk complained. "You know what that Bill reminds me of?"

"What?"

"You know that big gangling bug around here they call a praying mantis? The female mantis marries the male, then eats him for her wedding breakfast. That's the way Bill affects me."

Doc kept his face straight and said, "Renny and Bob French and I were talking, and we thought we might leave you and Bill here with Benjy while the rest of us made the trip out."

"God help me!" Monk said.

In the end, none of them had to walk out. The man who had gone on to Santa Isabel with the plane came back. Evidently the arrangement had been for him to return with the plane in three days. He made a nice landing, and they did an equally nice job of taking him and the plane back intact.

----- *The existence of this extremely heavy matter is not imagination. Scientists have discovered a star in the sky composed of extremely heavy matter. As a writer on scientific oddities recently put it, a piece of it the size of a golf ball would weigh one thousand four hundred and sixty tons. Not pounds. Tons. —The Author -----

THE END