

Quest of the Spider

Doc Savage, #3

by Lester Dent, 1904-1959

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Inside the grim, swamp-surrounded »Castle of the Moccasin«, the Man of Bronze and his faithful, fearless band are trapped—perhaps forever—in an insidious web of evil by a master-devil known only as the Gray Spider!

Chapter I

The Plotters Strike.

A „comet“ hurtled through the cloudy summer sky. It was a manmade comet of toughened steel and alloy—the New Orleans-to-New York passenger plane. A hoarse, unending snarl of power poured from the exhaust stacks of the 3 speed-cowled motors.

About a dozen people lounged in the cabin. Some toyed with magazines. Others played bridge. They could not have been more at ease under a reading lamp at home.

Two of the passengers were not so calm, however. Their faces were tense. Their eyes held Fear.

It was plain that they were not scared merely because they were riding in a plane. Their gaze fanned the surrounding clouds time-after-time. It was as if they momentarily expected some hideous fate to pounce from the dingy heavens.

„Take it easy, Edna,“ murmured one of the two. „I think we are safe here.“

The speaker was a man. He bulked big in the wicker plane seat. His rugged hands were drawn into knobbed fists. His blond, coarse hair was peppered with gray at the temples. It had been touseled by nervous stroking of the man's blunt fingers. He seemed very worried.

The man looked like a picture that an imaginative artist might paint of that 2-fisted Norseman „Eric the Red“.

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His name actually was Eric. He was „Big Eric“ Danielsen—president of Danielsen & Haas; the largest lumber company in the southern United States. Every man in the lumber business had heard of Big Eric who had worked up from lowly shed stacker in a sawmill to power and millions.

„Big Eric Danielsen ... now there's a nice guy!“ they'd generally say. „Hasn't got an enemy in the World!“

They would have changed their minds now could they have seen Big Eric's drawn face and tense muscles as he sat in the speeding plane. He was like a man apprehensive of being stricken by a fiendish enemy at any instant!

„Try to get some sleep, Dad,“ suggested the young woman who Big Eric had addressed as „Edna“. „You sat up all night with an automatic pistol. And don't try to say you didn't! I awakened during the night and saw you.“

The resemblance between Edna and her father was strong. She had his firm features, blonde hair, and blue eyes. She was nearly as tall as Big Eric. And she was a ravishing beauty!

A famous motion-picture concern had once offered Edna Danielsen a young fortune if she would enter the talkies. The company had been flabbergasted when the entrancing young woman pointed out that her salary as an executive vice-president of her father's lumber corporation exceeded that of the film offer. It was an event when such beauty and brains came together!

The fact that the men passengers on the plane—those who didn't have their wives along—had selected seats where they could steal a covert look at Edna now-and-then showed what a pippin she was.

One male passenger alone had not done that. Strangely enough, this fellow was the cake-eater type who usually ogle pretty girls in an ill-mannered fashion. His hair was slicked down until the top of his head resembled the greased back of a black turtle. He had an evil face.

A moment before, this unsavory fellow had visited the washroom in the rear of the plane. In passing Big Eric and Edna, the man had carefully kept his face turned away.

„There's something queer about the way that man acts!“ muttered Big Eric.

„I was just thinking the same thing, Dad,“ replied the gorgeous Edna.

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The plane cabin was partially soundproofed. Up forward in the pilot's compartment, they could hear the assistant pilot talking into the radio-telephone instrument which was in communication with the nearest plane dispatcher of the airline. The man was giving the condition of the air they were passing through and information on visibility ahead as reported by other planes.

„I'm gonna keep an eye on that slick-haired gigolo,“ growled Big Eric, still watching the evil-faced man who sat forward. The massive lumber king removed a large Army automatic from a hip pocket. He put it in a coat pocket where it could be gotten at more swiftly.

„Don't do anything reckless, Dad!“ warned Edna.

Big Eric tried to chuckle. He was under such a strain that the sound he produced was hardly more than a hollow rattle.

„I'm not so jumpy that I'll start shooting everybody that even looks suspicious just on the chance that I'll get the Gray Spider or one of his men.“

At mention of the Gray Spider, dread flashed to Edna Danielsen's pretty face. It was obvious the name had a terrible significance.

„Do you ... think our trip to New York will really be of any help?“ she asked hesitatingly.

Big Eric clenched his jaw and said firmly, „I'm sure of it!“

„I have never met the man we are going to see,“ murmured Edna.

„Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks!“ Big Eric's rugged face lost some of its worry. He spoke reminiscently. „I met him when I was working my way through Harvard. We were pals. I was a plodder. *Ham* was a brilliant man—one of the quickest thinkers I ever knew. But we got along swell.“

„Ham? Is that his nickname?“

„Sure. Ham got it in the Big War. He was always a lover of adventure. Even back in college days, he carried an innocent-looking black cane that was in reality a sword cane. It got him out of many a tight spot. He was always tumbling into trouble. But he still managed to become the greatest lawyer that Harvard ever turned out.

„In the World War, he advanced to a brigadier generalship. His quick thinking saved the lives of thousands of our soldiers.“

Edna Danielsen seemed doubtful. „But can even a great lawyer and quick-thinker help us? The Gray Spider must have hundreds—perhaps thousands!—of men in his evil organization. A lawyer can't whip an army. Not even a *superman* could!“

Big Eric's firm lips arched in a tight smile. „That is exactly why I'm going to see Ham Brooks. Ham knows a person who is just what we need—a *superman*!“

„I don't understand!“ Edna was puzzled.

„Doc Savage!“

Something like awe was in Big Eric's voice as he spoke that name.

He mentioned Doc Savage in the same manner an Italian peasant would speak of Mussolini. Or a deeply religious Mohammedan would refer to Allah. Or a Christian minister to his Deity. It was obvious from Big Eric's tone that he considered Doc Savage nothing less than a Supreme Being.

„Ham knows Doc Savage,“ he said proudly. „We may be able to get Doc Savage to help us against the Gray Spider!“

Big Eric spoke as if he believed that would solve everything.

* * * * *

Pretty Edna Danielsen puckered her charming forehead in an amazed fashion.

„You speak of this Doc Savage as if he was just about the most remarkable person in the World,“ she murmured. „Yet I’ve never even heard of him.“

„You never heard of Clark Savage, Jr.?“

„Oh!“ gasped Edna. „Is that your *Doc Savage*? He’s the wizard who perfected that new species of fast-growing tree. Why with that rapid growth, the forests of this World will never be exhausted! But what good will he do us? We don’t need forests!“

„No,“ grinned Big Eric. „But this Doc Savage is just as great in other things. Medicine, geology, engineering—all these fields are his familiar territory...“

„...and still,“ interrupted Edna, her mind centered upon their immediate troubles, „that doesn’t help us out in the least! Neither your Ham nor your Doc Savage can cope with the Gray Spider!“

His daughter’s exasperation now mildly amused Big Eric. He went on then, explaining his purpose in seeking out Doc Savage in their trouble.

„Perhaps neither Ham Brooks nor Doc Savage could help us against the Gray Spider. But Doc and Ham and the rest of their pals can help us, I’m sure!

„You see, it’s not Doc alone—though he is the mainspring and regulator of the group. There are 5 of them in addition to Doc Savage. They’re all men who are experts in their respective lines. And all of them owe so much to Savage—even their lives—that they will do anything for him. Not only that, but his knowledge is also so great that he is the one person to whom all must bow.

„And I know they’ll help us because that’s their work! Their lives are devoted to the task of smashing those who plot evil and of helping those who need help. They want Excitement; they yearn for Adventure; they live on thrills. They’re real men! And it will take real men to get the Gray Spider!“

Father and daughter now fell silent. Discussing the power and mastery of the mighty Doc Savage had renewed the courage of both. They stared steadily beyond the nose of the speeding plane. In that direction lay the city of New York.

There in that metropolis, they hoped to find their salvation—Doc Savage!

* * * * *

The assistant pilot was speaking again into the radio-telephone transmitter.

„All going okay,“ he intoned calmly. „Looks like a perfect trip.“

But he was wrong.

There came a sudden, terrific explosion!. It was within the washroom at the rear of the plane. The washroom door popped off its hinges. It flew the length of the cabin. A great tongue of scorching flame seemed to pursue it!

Sheets of the thin metal skin of the plane were ripped from the rear of the fuselage by the blast! Windows burst outward! Acrid smoke boiled in the cabin.

Miraculously, no one aboard the plane was killed. But the ship began to flounder crazily. The tail structure had been nearly torn off. Controls were severed. The craft was helpless as a bird with a broken back!

The pilot and his assistant seemed stunned with surprise. There had been no fuel tank in the rear of the plane. No part of the regular equipment could possibly have caused the explosion.

„Dad!“ exclaimed Edna Danielsen. „That slick-haired man went into the washroom a few minutes ago! Remember?“

„Sure, I remember!“ rumbled Big Eric. „The dirty rat! He lit the time fuse of a bomb and left it in there if my guess is right.“

The plane careened more crazily. The mangled airliner was going to crash! The altimeter in the pilot’s compartment read 10,000 feet. It was indeed fortunate the plane had been flying so high. There would be precious minutes in which to escape.

This airline was one which equipped their planes with a parachute for each passenger. The packs and the quick-attaching harness were in baskets above the seats. One ‘chute to each passenger. But no spares!

The pilot and his assistant still seemed paralyzed with surprise.

Big Eric showed the stuff that had taken him from a lowly sawmill worker to the heights. He assumed charge.

„Put on your parachutes!“ he boomed commandingly. „You will find them in the baskets over your seats! Then jump! One at a time! Quickly!“

A fat lady promptly screamed.

„Be calm,“ urged Big Eric. „There’s nothing to be scared of.“

But pandemonium seized the dazed passengers. Parachute jumping might hold no terrors for Big Eric and his blonde beautiful daughter who stood so staunchly at his back.

But to the others, it smacked of the next thing to suicide! Another woman screeched. Men bellowed senseless words at each other in their fear.

Big Eric caught sight of the slick-haired man. The evil-faced fellow had been crouching from view behind a seat. But now the plane door opened.

The man leaped through into space! He had donned a parachute before the explosion.

This proved to Big Eric that the man had set the bomb. The fellow was one of the Gray Spider’s minions!

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Big Eric stood in the center of the plane cabin and used his vast voice and powerful arms to quell the excitement. He knew how to handle panic-stricken crowds. He had learned that trick in many a sawmill disaster.

„Cut out the fool screeching and jump!“ he roared. „Pull the ripcord ring of your parachute when you’re clear of the plane!“

Big Eric’s brain was racing. Why had the Gray Spider’s man set the bomb IF the fellow was really one of the sinister gang? How could it be an attempt on the life of Big Eric and his daughter? The other passengers seemed in as much danger.

The torn plane was falling faster. Air was roaring through the rent portion of the fuselage. The Earth was swelling upward like the green-and-bloated paunch of a vast monster.

In faltering succession, the passengers pitched through the plane door. The faces of some held white terror as they jumped. A few were grimly composed. Others sobbed belated prayers.

The pilot and his assistant had awakened to their sense of responsibility. They were left alone with Big Eric and his daughter.

„Jump!“ the pilot shouted. „We shall go last!“

Big Eric understood. No doubt the pilot and his assistant felt bad because they had not been first to rise to the emergency and take charge of the passengers. They would feel better were they the last to quit the fast-falling plane.

Swiftly, Big Eric swung for the door. Other passengers were safe.

With a lunge, his daughter got in his path. Her horrified look brought the big lumberman up short.

„What’s wrong?“ he demanded.

„If this is an attempt on our life, our parachutes must have been tampered with!“ gasped the girl.

A sharp rumble came out of Big Eric’s chest. Wrenching his ‘chute pack around, he tore open the brown canvas covering. He stared at the silk folds of the ‘chute itself.

„Look!“ he bellowed.

A powerful acid had been poured into the parachute pack. The stuff had destroyed the strength of the silk!

A quick examination was made of Edna’s ‘chute. They found the same condition.

Big Eric swallowed rapidly. The nimble thinking of his attractive daughter had saved both their lives. To have jumped with those mutilated ‘chutes would have been certain death.

The pilot and his assistant came forward with an offer that redeemed their earlier failing.

„Our packs are okay! Two of us will jump with each ‘chute!“

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The huge, mangled airliner had paused at about 4,000 feet as though to chase its own broken tail about. But now it careened downward in a steeper plunge than ever!

The pilot hastily wedged pretty Edna Danielsen into his own ‘chute harness. The two of them leaped bravely through the plane door.

There was no time for Big Eric to note whether the two had made the jump safely. Seizing the assistant pilot, Big Eric sprang clear of the plane. He was trusting his work-hardened muscles—now wrapped around the other man’s body—to withstand the shock of the opening ‘chute.

When they had tumbled well clear of the plane, the assistant pilot gave the ripcord a yank. With a swish like a large bird spreading its wings, the silken folds poured out. A shock followed that seemed to draw Big Eric’s arms an inch apart at the joints. Then they floated in the air.

Big Eric glanced about. He emitted a bellow of rage!

The slick-haired man had landed and cast free of his 'chute harness. The fellow had dashed to a nearby highway. He was stopping a motorist using a pistol for the purpose.

Big Eric dug his automatic out of his coat pocket, twisting one arm around for a firmer hold. It vomited a deafening pow, pow, pow!

But the distance was too great. He saw the bullets spade up dust far wide of the target. He stopped shooting, not wanting to hit the innocent motorist.

There was quite a shock! as the overloaded parachute lowered Big Eric and the assistant pilot to a cornfield. Big Eric dashed madly across corn rows to learn whether his daughter had landed safely.

He found Edna giving the pilot a ravishing smile of thanks. It was a smile that the airman would undoubtedly remember the rest of his life.

„C'mon!“ shouted Big Eric. „That slick-haired skunk is getting away from us!“

He charged to the highway. But he was too late. The shiny-haired, evil-faced man who had set off the explosion was already out-of-sight in his commandeered car.

Big Eric glanced at Edna and said grimly: „I'd bet a million that he was a tool of the Gray Spider!“

They hurried to a farmhouse telephone and put out an alarm for the would-be murderer.

It was of no avail, however. The man had vanished.

From the nearest town, Big Eric and Edna caught a train for New York City.

„I'm not going to breathe easy until we put ourselves in the hands of Doc Savage!“ Big Eric said uneasily as he listened to the click of the speeding train wheels.

Chapter II

Cult of the Moccasin.

Alighting in the vast Grand Central Station in midtown New York City, Big Eric and Edna hurried to a telephone.

„I'm going to call Ham,“ Big Eric explained.

He looked up „Ham's“ number, then lifted the receiver.

He did not pay particular attention to a man who hobbled near by on a pair of crutches. The fellow had one arm in a sling. His face was swathed in bandages. His hair projected a tousled mass from the gauze swathing. It was curly and yellow.

Big Eric replaced the receiver.

„Ham was not at his home,“ he told Edna. „But he left an address where I can find him.“

The 2 travelers from Louisiana quitted the station and engaged a taxi.

They failed to note that the bandage-swathed man had hobbled out after them on his crutches. The fellow showed remarkable agility.

Over to Fifth Avenue ran Big Eric's cab. It wheeled South. The hour was near dusk. Myriads of lighted windows in the skyscrapers made them like stacks of flashing jewels.

The bandaged man had taken another cab. In the obscurity of the machine, he was keeping a close watch on Big Eric's vehicle. At the same time, he fingered his bandages as though their presence was irksome.

Big Eric Danielsen and his daughter alighted before a great building that ran upward like a white slab for nearly 100 stories. It was one of the largest and most sumptuous in New York.

They rode in an elevator to the 86th floor. Big Eric touched the bell button beside a door which was severely plain and devoid of all lettering.

The door opened, framing a man.

„Ham!“ boomed Big Eric. „By golly, I'm glad to see you!“

Ham was a slender, quick-moving man. His garments were of the very latest cut and the most expensive fabrics. He was sartorial perfection.

In one well-groomed hand, Ham carried a harmless-looking black cane—the sword cane which Big Eric had mentioned. Ham was seldom seen without this necessary item of his dress.

Big Eric and Ham began pumping hands and giving each other terrific thumps on the back.

„You fuzzy-eared pirate!“ Ham chuckled.

„You skinny ambulance chaser!“ rumbled Big Eric.

The lumber king turned proudly to Edna. „This, Ham, is my reward for getting married instead of bouncing around over the World tumbling into-and-out of messes as you have done. My daughter!“

„I find it hard to believe“—Ham smiled gallantly—„that such a homely father could have a daughter so entrancingly beautiful!“

After a few more ribald pleasantries passed between the old friends, Big Eric glanced about the office curiously. The place was furnished with great luxury. A large safe stood at one side. A massive and exquisitely inlaid table was near the large windows. A door on the other side of the room was closed.

„This your office, Ham?“ the lumberman inquired.

Ham shook his head. „No. This is the New York Headquarters of Doc Savage.“

Big Eric glanced about anxiously. „I hope we can meet Doc Savage soon. We certainly need his aid.“

At this, Ham's well-barbered face showed regret. „I'm afraid I have some bad news for you.“

„Eh?“ Big Eric's ruddy features paled. „What d'you mean?“

„I cannot find Doc Savage,“ replied Ham soberly.

* * * * *

A shocked silence filled the room for a moment.

„Golly!“ gasped Big Eric. „You don't mean the Gray Spider heard I was coming to Doc Savage and killed him to keep him from helping me?“

Ham waved the suggestion away with his sword cane.

„Not at all! It is something entirely different. You recall that I told you a great deal of Doc Savage. Especially did I dwell upon the fabulous fund of knowledge

that he possesses. I mentioned great discoveries he has made in the fields of Chemistry, Electricity, Surgery, and so on. In your own field, you know of the marvelous quick-growing timber tree that he perfected.“

„I certainly do,“ affirmed the lumber king. „In my opinion, that is the outstanding piece of plant wizardry of all time!“

„What I am getting around to is this,“ continued Ham. „These marvelous discoveries are made by Doc Savage during periods when he drops from sight. He simply vanishes. Nobody knows where he goes. Nobody can get in touch with him. It is as though he had dropped from the Earth.“

„Then our trip to New York is for nothing!“ Edna Danielsen said sharply. „Your Doc Savage is supposed to devote his services to Mankind. Yet he goes off some place where he cannot be found when he is needed the most!“

Edna was disappointed at not finding Doc Savage here and—with an unreasonableness not uncommon to the fair sex—was inclined to blame Doc for not being there.

„Young lady,“ Ham said severely, „you do not realize that Doc Savage’s benefactions to Humanity extend beyond helping every Tom, Dick, and Harry or Mary, Jane, and Anne out of their private troubles.

„Doc has a great laboratory at some remote spot in the World—a laboratory that is unquestionably the finest in existence. That is my opinion although even I—one of his 5 best friends—am not sure. No doubt he has retired there. And when he appears, he will be bearing some new contribution which will save thousands of lives.

„That contribution may be a new method of curing some disease. It may be anything. But it will be of vastly more importance than any personal misfortune that you or anybody else might have met in the meantime!“

Ham had spoken with a passion to which he was seldom moved. At his words, the pretty young woman looked very angry ... then thoughtful ... and finally, contrite.

„I’m sorry,“ she murmured.

Ham bowed an apology. „Pardon my bluntness, if you will. I realize you were not fully aware of the amazing character of Doc Savage.“

Ham now conducted Big Eric and Edna through the rest of Doc Savage’s skyscraper aerie.

In an adjoining room was one of the most complete scientific Libraries to be found. Thousands of volumes lined the walls and filled massive floor cases.

Next came the Laboratory—a very large room replete with benches of apparatus and case-after-case of rare chemicals and metals. Efficient electric furnaces, mixing machines, exhausting machines, and equipment—of which no one but Doc Savage knew the use—were set on permanent bases here-and-there.

„The second most complete laboratory in existence,“ said Ham proudly. „The most complete is undoubtedly the one which nobody but Doc has ever seen.“

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They returned to the outer office.

„Isn’t there any possible way we can get hold of Doc Savage?“ Big Eric asked desperately.

„Absolutely no way!“ declared Ham. „He will appear here. But until he does, no one can get word to him. Doc demands absolute solitude when he does his greatest work. It may be weeks before he returns. Or it may be minutes.“

„I’ve got millions of dollars,“ Big Eric muttered. „If money will...“

„It might interest you to know,“ Ham smiled dryly, „that during the past year, Doc Savage has probably spent more millions on worthy causes than you possess.“

„Where’d he get his *jack*?“ inquired Big Eric with the natural curiosity of a man who has made a success wishing to know how another man accomplished the same thing.

Ham ignored the question to make a statement.

„Doc Savage has merely to step into a radio station at a certain hour on a certain day and broadcast a few words in a language not one person in 10 million understands. Within a few days, he will receive automatically a shipment of several million dollars’ worth of pure Gold.“

Big Eric goggled.

„Golly!“ he sputtered. „Where does it come from?“

Ham shook his head. „I am not at liberty to tell anyone.“

Nor could the most agonizing tortures have forced Ham to reveal the source of Doc Savage’s fabulous and perpetual wealth. It came from a lost valley in a remote section of Central America. This limitless flow of gold came from a valley defended by descendants of the great Mayan civilization of ancient times. The wealth was supplied by the Mayans to be devoted solely to the benefiting of Mankind. And it was through Doc Savage that they knew it would be expended for that purpose.

But the source of the gold was a secret to all but Doc and his 5 aides. Of whom Ham was one.

Beautiful Edna Danielsen twined her fingers together thoughtfully. She was beginning to realize Doc Savage was a personage mighty beyond all her imaginings.

She wondered what he looked like. He’d probably be a shriveled little wart with a head like a barrel. He would wear glasses with lenses as thick as milk-bottle bottoms.

Doc’s body would be just ample enough to carry his magnificent set of brains around, Edna decided. That was always the way with geniuses. They had spent all their life studying intensively. Which in truth is what makes a genius. But as a consequence, they became pale, shriveled, bald specimens.

It wasn’t a complimentary mental picture Edna painted of what she expected Doc Savage to look like. She reflected he’d have whiskers. They’d look like he was going around with his chin buried in a bird nest.

Edna was due for a shock.

* * * * *

Suddenly Ham jumped as though stung! Into the office had penetrated a weird sound.

It was low, mellow, trilling. It might have been the alarm note of some strange feathered songster of the jungle, or the sound of an undulating breeze filtering

through a jungled forest. Beautifully melodious, it still had no tune. It was inspiring without being in the least awesome.

„Doc Savage!“ Ham said softly.

For this was the sound that was a part of Doc. A small, unconscious thing which he did in moments of intense concentration. To his friends, it was both the cry of battle and the song of triumph. It would also come from his lips in moments of stress when events of importance impended.

It had the peculiar quality of seeming to come from everywhere rather than from a definite spot. It might have been emanating from inside the office. Yet Doc Savage was certainly nowhere about.

A commotion burst in the corridor outside.

A man screamed! It was a terrified scream. A pistol exploded! It filled the corridor with deafening echoes.

A moan followed.

Then silence came.

* * * * *

The corridor door opened swiftly. An amazing picture was revealed.

In mid-air before the door, a man was suspended. Bandages which had swathed the man's features were disarranged. A yellow-haired wig hung askew revealing hair that was as black and slick as the back of a greased turtle.

It was the same man who had attempted the life of Big Eric and Edna in the passenger airliner. He must have raced to New York in a chartered plane.

But the slick-haired man was forgotten as Big Eric and Edna stared at the arm and hand which held the fellow in mid-air.

Such an arm! It was Herculean! Yet so perfectly formed that its great size was evident only in comparison to the man it held as effortlessly as it would suspend a rag.

The muscles and tendons were like bundles of piano wire. The fingers were long, yet so muscular that they had utterly paralyzed the slick-haired man by their mere grasp upon his scrawny neck.

Most remarkable of all was the unusual deep bronze color of the flesh. Indeed, the skin seemed to be simply a bronze lacquer applied to the corded steel of the tendons.

The remainder of a mighty bronze form which had been masked by the door now appeared. The slick-haired victim was carried easily, his feet twitching weakly several inches off the floor.

„Doc Savage...“ Ham said softly once more.

Pretty Edna Danielsen was stunned! Could this be the famous Doc Savage who she had pictured as a shriveled runt with whiskers and bottle-bottom glasses?

Why, this man was the most astounding physical specimen she had ever seen! The muscular development of that bronze body was little short of incredible!

And the bronze face! The beautiful Louisiana girl knew she had never gazed upon more striking features. They were perfect in their strong regularity. The hair—of a slightly darker bronze—lay back smoothly.

But it was Doc Savage's eyes that held her. They were strange, marvelous eyes. They glittered like pools of flake-gold as they caught little lights from the ceiling

chandelier. Those golden eyes seemed to have a power of conveying commands solely by their expressive quality.

Doc released the slick-haired man. So terrible had been the grip upon his neck, the fellow fell to the floor as though paralyzed.

„He was listening outside the door,“ Doc said. „He had a gun in his hand as though he were going to leap in here shooting. Fortunately, the gun missed me when it went off as I seized him.“

Doc Savage’s voice was capable of wondrous tonal changes.

„He’s one of the Gray Spider’s men!“ said Big Eric.

Big Eric’s words were little more than a whisper. He was awed by the impressive presence of this great Man of Bronze.

And it was the first time Big Eric had been awed by any man!

* * * * *

Doc Savage moved into the Laboratory. His going was so light and effortless that he seemed to flow like a quick puff of bronze smoke across the carpet.

„I’ve seen what I thought were strong men,“ Big Eric mumbled. „But I never saw anything until a minute ago!“

Beautiful Edna Danielsen added a thought which reached nobody’s ears. „I can say the same thing about his good looks!“

Doc Savage came back. He carried a small leather case.

This held on a plush bed 2 hypodermic needles. Doc applied one of the needles to the eavesdropper’s arm.

Nothing seemed to happen. The fellow merely sat there, absently rubbing the spot where the needle had pricked.

„Get up and sit in a chair!“ Doc commanded compellingly.

The man obeyed meekly.

Noting the astounded faces of the others, Doc tapped the hypodermic needles and explained.

„The first holds a drug which affects a certain portion of the brain, rendering the victim incapable of thinking. This fellow, for instance, will now do anything I tell him because he cannot think of reasons why he shouldn’t. I could tell him to go over and jump out of the window. And he would do it without being able to think that the fall meant certain death. This drug is one of my latest developments.“

Doc indicated the second hypo needle. „This contains a drug which neutralizes the first. In other words, this man will remain in his present condition for days unless he receives the second drug.“

Big Eric and Edna had listened to this in a sort of frozen wonder. Ham, however, did not seem surprised. He was accustomed to the remarkable things Doc Savage did.

Ham delivered belated introductions.

Attractive Edna Danielsen was mildly vexed when Doc Savage showed no signs of being moved by her beauty. This was something new for Edna. Most young men would have all but toppled over after an enthralling smile such as the one that seemed wasted on Doc. Strangely, she felt a desire to impress this remarkable bronze man. A desire that was unusual to Edna in whose life young men meant nothing.

But Doc wasted no time in getting down to business.

„I am sorry I was not here to receive you,“ he said.

He let it go at that, not troubling to explain that he had been for the past weeks at his „Fortress of Solitude“ whence he always retired for his experiments and study. This retreat was on a rocky island within the bleak fastness of the Arctic. No one other than Doc knew where it was.

„Tell your story,“ Doc commanded.

„I am President of Danielsen & Haas; the largest lumber concern in the South,“ explained Big Eric. „For some months past, I have noticed strange happenings in the Southern lumber industry. The first of these revolved around Worldwide Sawmills—a rather large concern.

„The president and vice-president of Worldwide Sawmills were the principal owners of the company. They dropped suddenly from sight. The word went out that they were taking an extended world cruise. But I had private detectives investigate, and no trace of their sailing on such a cruise could be found.

„Simultaneous with their disappearance, 2 strangers took charge of Worldwide Sawmills. Everything was legal. The vanished vice-president and president of Worldwide had signed over absolute control of the company to these men! There was no doubt of that.“

Big Eric paused to make an angry growling noise in his big throat.

„The 2 strangers are looting Worldwide Sawmills! I’m sure of it! They’re liquidating the company which is worth many millions. They’re selling out slowly and pocketing the proceeds.

„A few weeks later, almost the identical thing happened to Bayou Sash & Door—another large concern. The next was the Little Giant Lumber Corporation. And others followed. In each case, the owners dropped from sight and strangers took charge.“

Big Eric struck the inlaid table for emphasis!

„I tell you, a highly organized gang is stealing millions!“ he exclaimed.

* * * * *

„I became suspicious,“ Big Eric continued. „As I mentioned, I put private detectives to work. They found little of value. But they did unearth strange rumors of a sinister being known as the Gray Spider who is moving slowly-but-surely upon a gigantic plan to loot the lumber industry of the South.“

„Is that all you know of the Gray Spider?“ Doc inquired.

„Yes. Except that queer, uncanny things are told of this Gray Spider. One tale has it that his organization is a fanatic group known as the *Cult of the Moccasin* and that they give human sacrifices. Those rumors are strange things to be connected with high finance and thievery.“

„Sounds like voodoo,“ said Doc Savage. „Cults of voodooism are known to flourish right here in New York. Indeed, cases of human sacrifices have been proven. But you have not told what brings you here. Has the Gray Spider made attempts to throw his web about you?“

„Exactly!“ rumbled Big Eric. „First, an attempt was made to kidnap myself and my daughter. Evil-looking little brown men attacked our car. But I beat them off. Twice after that, we were shot at. I became worried and started for New York. The

man you just seized tried to murder us by disabling the plane and fixing our parachutes so they were worthless.“

„Who takes charge of your company in case you are put out of the way?“

„My daughter,“ said Big Eric proudly.

„What if in the case that both of you are eliminated?“

„Why, Horace Haas,“ Big Eric replied hesitatingly. „He owns a portion of the concern and is the junior partner. He’s a harmless cuss. Not even a good businessman. But he furnished the capital for my first business venture. And for that reason, I guarantee you that he will share in my fortune as long as there is such a thing.“

Doc’s strange golden eyes flickered appreciatively. Big Eric evidently was not a man who forgot his friends.

„Wait here,“ Doc directed. „I am going to search the prisoner.“

To the drugged captive, he said sharply: „Follow me!“

The man got up meekly and followed. He bumped into the inlaid table and stood pushing foolishly against it until Doc pulled him aside. The man was so under the influence of Doc’s weird drug that he was not able to reason that he could get past the table by going around it. He was like a mechanical man that somebody had wound up and turned loose.

Out-of-sight of Edna Danielsen, Doc stripped the prisoner. He examined the fellow thoroughly. Inside the man’s mouth, he found the only thing of interest.

It was a likeness of a poisonous water moccasin tattooed on the roof of the fellow’s mouth!

Chapter III

Death in the Air.

„This man is one of the *Cult of the Moccasin*,“ explained Doc Savage when he had dressed the prisoner and taken him back into the outer office.

„If that drug of yours has fixed the fellow so he can’t reason things out, maybe he’ll answer our questions truthfully,“ suggested Big Eric. „He can’t think up lies to tell us.“

Doc’s bronze head shook. „The trouble is that he can’t think up the answers, either. The drug is nothing in the nature of a *truth serum*.“

Big Eric smiled widely. „I’m dang glad you’re going to help me fight this Gray Spider. I like your style!“

Doc Savage did not reply immediately.

„I haven’t said that I would,“ he pointed out.

Big Eric blanched. He stuttered, „Why ... won’t you?“

„I will,“ Doc told him quietly, „providing we can agree on the matter of the fee you will pay.“

„Uh um!“ Big Eric swallowed. „Just what fee would you consider?“

„You have more money than you know what to do with, haven’t you?“

„Well, I'd hardly say that,“ Big Eric muttered with the caution of a rich man.

„The fee is one million dollars,“ Doc said as calmly as though he were a laborer asking 3 dollars-a-day for his services.

„Huh?“

Big Eric purpled. He all but choked. He howled: „One million! And you're the guy who goes around benefiting Humanity! It looks to me like you're trying to hold me up!“

Big Eric caught Ham's eye and hastily swallowed the rest of his outburst. He looked at Doc. The remarkable bronze face was as inscrutable as the metal it resembled.

Big Eric suddenly got the idea it would be useless to squawk about being overcharged. At the same time, he was too canny to put out such an outrageous fee without knowing that he would get his money's worth in results.

„You will turn this million over to a committee that you and I will select,“ Doc continued. „It will be used to supply food and clothing and education to the poor and destitute in Louisiana.“

„Oh,“ said Big Eric, suddenly ashamed of his outburst.

He offered a hand. „I'll do it, of course.“

Doc Savage took the hand.

Big Eric had always believed that he owned a big, hard, powerful fist. But his hand was as a soft baby's in the case-hardened grip of Doc Savage!

Big Eric drew a long breath of awe. This Bronze Man possessed a strength that was unbelievable even though one had seen the incredible sinews in his arms and hands!

„Where are Monk, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny?“ Doc asked Ham.

Doc had named the other 4 members of his group of 5 friends and aides.

„They were to arrive in about an hour,“ replied Ham.

Doc Savage now moved to the window. He drew something from his pocket—something the others could not see. The bronze hand made rapid motions on the glass of the window.

Big Eric and Edna had no idea what Doc Savage was doing. But Ham knew.

Doc was writing a message on the window with a transparent substance. His communication would remain absolutely invisible until rays from an ultraviolet machine were turned on it. Then it would appear brilliant and glowing with an uncanny light.

The secret message was:

Go to New Orleans at once and get in touch with me through the lumber company of Danielsen & Haas.

Doc did not sign it. There was no need. No other hand could have inscribed a script as minutely perfect and recognizable as his.

Monk, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny—his 4 friends—would turn the ultraviolet light on the window and get the message.

„Come on,“ Doc said as he picked up the drugged prisoner as lightly as though he were an infant. „We're heading back for New Orleans.“

* * * * *

Doc Savage stood on the running board of the taxicab which carried them away from the towering white skyscraper. His presence outside the machine had a magical effect, causing policemen to open traffic for them.

The taxi ended its journey at an airport on the outskirts of New York City. The airport flunkies showed the great Bronze Man much attention. Mechanics scurried about.

A hangar door caved open.

„Golly!“ ejaculated Big Eric, staring at the plane which was being rolled into view.

The craft was an airman’s dream! It was an all-metal job, low-wing, streamlined to the height of aeronautical engineering. In the air, the landing gear could be retracted, making the ship little more than a „flying wing“. The 3 great radial motors were equipped with the latest design speed cowling.

„This is Doc’s new ship,“ Ham told Big Eric and Edna. „He had another very like this. But it was destroyed in a terrible experience we went through in the South Seas. The present craft was delivered while Doc was away. This is the first time he has seen it.“

The slick-haired prisoner approached mechanically at Doc’s command. Doc told him to get in the plane. But the man did not have thinking ability enough to realize that he must climb the small ladder which folded out-of-sight when the plane was flying. Doc lifted him in the craft as though he were a stupid puppy.

„Wouldn’t it be quicker to take Monk, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny along with us?“ inquired Ham.

„It would,“ Doc replied. „But it is part of my plan that they should not be seen in our company in New Orleans.“

Overhearing this, Big Eric was surprised. So the big Bronze Man already had a plan of operations! He was certainly losing no time.

Each minute in Doc Savage’s presence was increasing Big Eric’s respect for the prowess of the mighty Bronze Man.

Doc took his position at the plane controls. The motors started in quick succession.

Noting the airport personnel standing around with open mouths, Big Eric wondered what so interested them. Then he understood.

The plane motors were silenced. The sibilant swish of the propellers was the only sound. As Doc opened the throttle, this note became a terrific whine like the noise of a great gale.

With a short run, the plane took the air. The landing wheels folded up. The ship sped like an arrow into the West.

Craning his neck, Big Eric got a glance at the air-speed indicator. His eyes popped. They were doing nearly 250 miles-an-hour! Yet the motors were not straining.

„It don’t take Doc long to go places,“ Ham grinned.

But even Ham would have been surprised to know Doc Savage had just finished a grueling flight of thousands-of-miles from his Fortress of Solitude far within the Arctic. For the bronze giant showed no signs of fatigue.

Attractive Edna Danielsen had been strangely quiet the last half-hour. But her eyes had followed Doc's every movement. She seemed to get a thrill out of merely watching the Bronze Man.

The big speed plane rushed through the night. Inside the soundproofed cabin, only a steady, low moan told of their terrific momentum.

The prisoner lolled back in a seat. He slept. His mouth was wide open, revealing the gruesome insignia of the »Cult of the Moccasin« tattooed inside.

* * * * *

Hardly 5 hours later, the plane sped across lower Mississippi. New Orleans was not far ahead. Not a cloud scummed the sky. The Moon slanted bright beams against the plane.

Using the plane's radio-telephone, Doc had kept in touch with various airport stations, obtaining weather information.

The remarkably bright moonlight enabled Doc to discover another plane flying some miles ahead. The craft was probably making a 150 mph. But Doc's speed plane overhauled it as though it was standing still.

He altered his course slightly. The other plane also swung over.

„What do you make of that?“ Ham growled. „Do you suppose the Gray Spider has sent that plane after us?“

„We'll soon see,“ Doc replied. „I have taken no particular pains to keep our coming secret. The Gray Spider might have heard me getting weather reports over the radio. He could use a directional radio loop and locate us.“

Doc's ship held its course. The other craft drew closer. It was a high-wing monoplane with a tube of a fuselage. As commercial jobs went, it was fast.

Suddenly the ship zoomed upward as though to let Doc pass below.

„I guess it's just some plane making a night flight...“

Ham never completed his statement.

With an abrupt dive, the other plane flashed in front of Doc's craft! At the same instant, it released a tremendous gush of vile greenish vapor. The stuff spread rapidly.

„Poison gas!“ bellowed the quick-thinking Ham.

Doc's speed plane could not swerve aside in time to avoid hitting the gas cloud. It had been released almost against the trio of flashing propellers.

Comely Edna Danielsen went white and spread her hands over her face. Big Eric—a quick thinker himself—sucked in air to fill his lungs before the poisonous fumes came. The prisoner sat still—as unconcerned as a machine for he couldn't think enough to realize there was danger.

The plane popped into the gas cloud. Then it came out.

One minute passed. Two. The gas cloud was left nearly 5 miles behind.

Nothing had happened.

Doc banked the plane swiftly. He flung it for the craft which had tried to gas them.

„Hey!“ puffed Big Eric, unable to hold his breath longer. „Ain't that gas gonna...“

„The plane cabin is airtight,“ Doc Savage pointed out. „Haven't you noticed you have experienced no difficulty in breathing during the flight although we flew

above 20,000 feet much of the time? That was because the cabin is air-conditioned—furnished with oxygen stored in a special supply tank.“

The gas plane was striving frantically for altitude after the manner of combat craft. But it was like a clumsy buzzard fleeing from a speedy hawk. Doc's great racer came alongside. He saw the other pilot was wearing radio earphones.

„Land immediately!“ Doc's powerful voice boomed into his own radio transmitter.

The excited actions of the other flier showed he was tuned in on Doc's wavelength. He had located Doc's plane by radio!

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Instead of landing, the pilot banked swiftly. A machine gun—synchronized to shoot through his propeller—mouthed nasty red tongues!

The burst stopped short for Doc's skystreak had flipped far to one side with a lightning-like maneuver.

Then the entire forward edge of the wing of Doc's ship seemed suddenly outlined in terrible little red electric bulbs.

An awesome vibration swept the craft. For there was no less than 10 Browning guns installed in the wings of the plane!

The other craft—able to fly but a little more than half-as-fast and with only one rapid-firer—was helpless before this ultra-modern sky terror. The Gray Spider pilot knew he had caught a Tartar. He shrieked and put his hands over his face as lead popped and tore and screamed about his ears!

Then the metal storm ceased.

Fearfully, the pilot peered up. He jumped as a commanding voice crashed in his radio earphones:

„You have one more chance to land!“

Such a fearsome quality did that great voice hold—even though distorted by the metal telephone diaphragms—that the vicious pilot put the nose of his plane down as though his very life depended on reaching the ground in less than nothing flat.

The fellow was such a nervous wreck that he washed out his plane in landing. Coming down too heavy, the landing gear was wiped off; the propeller beat itself into a ravel of metal; and both wings were knocked askew.

Unhurt, the pilot bounded out. He looked up. Doc's plane was flashing in like a great bat.

The would-be killer ran! The nearest brush was but a few rods distant.

But long before he reached it, a giant of bronze overhauled him. Arms that could be compared only to steel trapped him. He thought for an instant that the awful strength of the grip was going to crush his life away.

That did not happen. He was carried to the speed plane. He tried to struggle. But the sinewy bronze hands tightened and hurt him so he could only tremble and scream.

A small needle gouged the man ... and suddenly he ceased all action. He was the second victim to undergo an injection of Doc's special serum.

„Get in the plane!“ came Doc's commanding voice.

The pilot got in the plane. He couldn't think of anything else to do.

Doc Savage entered also. In a moment, the remarkable air vehicle took off.

* * * * *

Soon they circled a New Orleans airport. Concealed lids on the undersides of the wings slid back, revealing the lenses of powerful landing lights. These sprayed luminance. The ship landed.

Big Eric looked at his watch.

„Golly!“ he gasped his pet expression. „It ain't much past Midnight!“

Then Big Eric's eyes popped as a black limousine purred out on the field. The driver threw open the door and said: „The car you ordered to meet you, Sir.“

„I used the radio in the plane to summon the machine,“ Doc told the surprised lumberman.

„Things have got a habit of happening smooth and fast around Doc,“ grinned Ham, twiddling his indispensable sword cane.

Big Eric was a man who worked swiftly. He wouldn't have been a multi-millionaire otherwise. But the speed with which Doc Savage was doing things had him a little dazed.

Accompanying the mighty Bronze Man was something like going around in the middle of a whirlwind. It was hard to keep track of things. 2 of the Gray Spider's men captured. And 2 attempts on their own lives thwarted. A hop from New York to New Orleans. And the night was still young!

The limousine rushed them to Big Eric's palatial home in a swanky district.

Doc carried his 2 prisoners inside.

„Sit down!“ he told them.

They sat meekly in chairs. It was an awesome thing to see such vicious devils obey as though they were machines actuated by jabbing a button.

„I shall leave for a while,“ Doc told his three companions. „It is essential that I do certain work.“

He did not explain that this work was to leave a message in the invisible ink which could only be brought out by ultraviolet rays. This message would be written on the front door of the Danielsen & Haas lumber concern's office.

Doc knew that his other 4 men—Monk, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny—might arrive before the night was over. They were no slouches themselves when it came to fast moving.

Doc kept silent about the message for the simple reason that the 2 prisoners—although unable to think—would remember everything that had happened to them once they awakened from their strange trance. He did not want them to overhear.

Doc took his departure. The driver of the limousine was astounded when his giant bronze passenger rode outside on the running board although the tonneau was empty. But Doc Savage habitually did that when danger was afoot. He liked to see what went on about him.

From the door, Big Eric watched Doc go.

„A remarkable man,“ he declared. „You know, I already feel as though I had nothing more to fear from the Gray Spider.“

Hardly were these words off his lips when he gave a sharp start. A dazed expression came into his eyes. He fumbled at his chest.

He fell with a loud crash to the floor! His massive frame lay limply.

Beautiful Edna Danielsen shrieked. She sprang toward her father. She, too, started violently. She seemed bewildered. Then she collapsed!

Ham whirled. His sword cane was unsheathed. But he saw no enemy. He leaped wildly for a door to escape. Then he twitched ... became vacant of expression ... and himself tumbled down alongside the others.

The 3 forms were motionless.

Big Eric had spoken too soon. For the hand of the Gray Spider had stricken down every one in the room!

Chapter IV

Two Dead Men.

An ominous silence gripped the room where the 3 limp, unmoving forms lay. The slow tick-tock of a wooden clock in another part of the mansion was a sound like the bony footsteps of death. The motor of an electric refrigerator ran softly back in the kitchen regions.

From the Mississippi River in the distance came the forlorn toot of a packet boat. A radio played through an open window in the more immediate neighborhood. There was a party where the radio played. Glasses clinked. Giddy laughter cackled.

A voice said, „Me guess coast ees clear!“

2 queer-looking men stepped out of a closet.

They were undersized. Their skins had an unusual yellowish-brown color. Their features were pinched.

They looked like nothing so much as big, hairless monkeys whose tails had been cut off.

Dungaree pants bobbed above the knees. Ragged, filthy shirts comprised their only other attire. They were barefooted.

Each man carried a long, slim tube.

They bent over the unconscious forms of Big Eric, Edna, and Ham. Their clumsy, foul fingers picked from each prostrate body a tiny dart. These they replaced in small leather sacks.

It was these blowgun darts which had brought disaster to Big Eric, Edna, and Ham. They had been propelled expertly through a keyhole. The long, slim tubes were the blowguns.

The 2 men now went to the door. They made a queer, snake-like hissing note.

In answer to that signal, several more men appeared. They looked enough like the first pair to be their brothers.

It was as though the big monkeys with bobbed tails and hair singed off were having a convention.

Big Eric stirred slightly. He was reviving.

The monkey men hastily bound him as well as Edna and Ham. The fellows spoke a fair grade of English to each other at times. But on other occasions, they

lapsed into an amazing lingo. This jabber was a combination of French, English, bush African, and Spanish—all intermingled so as to be unrecognizable.

The ugly little men seemed to be as polyglot a breed as their lingo.

An expert on languages would have explained that they were a strange and little-known class of humans who have come into existence deep within the Southern swamps. For the most part, they were offsprings of criminals who had fled to the swamps for safety down through the scores of years. From such breeding, they could hardly be less than degenerates. As a class, they were shunned by the more respectable swamp dwellers.

It was among these ignorant, vicious people that the sinister and oftentimes bloodcurdling rites of voodooism were known to be practiced. Awful things were continually happening in the fastnesses of the vast swamps, grapevine rumors had it.

But officers of the Law dispatched into the labyrinths of the great morasses never came back with anything definite enough to prove the tales were aught else than the imaginings of someone who had walked past a graveyard at night.

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But it was widely known that voodooism did exist.

The leader of the monkey men strode over to the slick-haired man and the pilot of the gas plane.

„What ees wrong with yo‘?“

The 2 men made a meaningless gibberish in reply. Their words expressed no coherent thought.

„Sacre!“ rasped the monkey man. „Yo‘ answer me!“

The fellow slapped the faces of the two that he was questioning. They merely swayed in their chairs. They did not strike back. The monkey man’s little eyes began to protrude.

„Heem hexed!“ he muttered.

The ignorant fellow thought a voodoo spell had been laid upon the pair.

„Yo‘ bat!“ gulped another. „Ol‘ hex got heem both, sure!“

The evil crew stood about. They shifted from one bare foot to another. Sweat like hot paraffin came to their foreheads. They looked at the slick-haired man and the pilot as though the pair were particularly undesirable ghosts.

„What yo‘ want do?“ one asked the leader.

The man considered. Then he grinned fiercely as though pleased with the idea his weak brain had evolved.

„Bien!“ he ejaculated. „Keel heem both! That ees make heem all okay.“

But a couple of the others doubted whether the two should be murdered.

„Yo‘ reckon the Gray Spider like that?“ one inquired.

„Mebbe so... Sure!“ growled the leader. „Thees feller make beeg flop at job Gray Spider ees geeve heem. Yo‘ know what that ees always mean?“

„Death!“ muttered the other.

„Sure teeng!“

„Maybe we better take heem along anyhow.“

„Non, non!“ leered the leader. „Eet ees too much trouble. Me, I feex heem!“

With that, the evil fellow flashed a knife from inside his shirt.

He stabbed twice. Both the slick-haired man and the pilot fell out of their chairs after the blade sank into their bodies!

„That way to knockum dead, huh?“ chuckled the killer. „Both plenty feenished!“

Pretty Edna Danielsen—now recovered—brought herself to realize cold murder had really been committed before her eyes. She parted her lips and screamed as loud as she could!

The leader of the monkey men struck her cruelly, knocking her senseless.

As the foul fist fell upon his daughter, a frenzy seized Big Eric. Rage made him a maniac! It gave him a maniac's wild strength. He lunged against his bonds!

Big Eric was a product of the old lumberman's school where an employer was expected to be able to lick every man that he had working for him. The massive lumberman was very strong. The ropes snapped off his wrists!

In flash seconds, Big Eric had his feet free. He leaped up.

The leader of the monkey men flung his knife.

Seizing a chair, Big Eric caught the blade on its bottom in the same manner his ancestors had probably caught tossed spears on their war shields. He wrenched the knife out and started to slice Ham's bindings.

But there was no time. The vile little men rushed him!

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The heavy chair whistled around Big Eric's head. No whiskered Norseman fighting overwhelming hordes of Britons ever stood more staunchly.

The chair met a skull and broke it as though a baseball bat had hit an egg.

A pistol flamed! But the lead missed. Before the gun could fire again, the whirling chair downed the man who held it.

„Sacre ... hees fight lak debbil!“ wailed a monkey man.

Ham flounced to the knife Big Eric had dropped. He reached it.

But brownish-yellow men piled atop him. The little fiends were tough. Laying hold of one of them was like grabbing a weasel. They held Ham helpless.

Ham saw the odds were overwhelming.

„Beat it!“ he yelled at Big Eric. „Take Edna and high-tail it out of here!“

Much as he hated to leave Ham, Big Eric knew this was the best advice. The safety of Edna came first. And the odds were too great to hope for victory.

A monkey man—racing to the senseless form of Edna—would have slain the young woman with his knife.

„Non, non!“ shrieked the leader. „Gray Spider ees want either gal or Beeg Eric alive! Hees want 'em both alive eef can do! Eet be better eef they sign some papers!“

Big Eric digested this as he fought. It proved what he had already suspected. The Gray Spider was after the Danielsen & Haas lumber concern. Whatever hold the fiend expected to get on the company would be strengthened if he had papers signed by Big Eric and Edna to back his claims.

Reaching Edna's limp form, Big Eric scooped it up with his left arm. With his right arm, he flailed the chair.

2 men went down, neither hurt badly. Big Eric got his back to a door. He twisted the knob.

It was locked. One of the monkey men had turned the key, hoping to keep him from escaping the room.

The heavy chair swung, driven by the old lumberman's muscular arms. The door caved outward. It was as though a mule had kicked a banana crate!

Big Eric waded through the wreckage. The moist night breeze from the Gulf washed against his flushed face.

He raced down the walk. He quickly outdistanced his short-legged pursuers. He neared the street.

2 men suddenly leaped out of the high shrubbery that bordered the walk. Both held cold blue revolvers.

Big Eric still grasped what was left of the chair. He lifted it threateningly.

But he didn't strike. A loud bark of delight came from his lungs!

These men worked for him! They were „Lefty“ Shea and „Bugs“ Ballard. They were special policemen for the lumber firm of Danielsen & Haas. It was their duty to run down timber poachers and ferret out professional radicals who might be causing labor troubles in the sawmill and lumber camps.

Big Eric didn't stop to reflect that it was strange these men should be here. They were his employees. They were here. That was enough.

„The Gray Spider's men!“ Big Eric bellowed. „Lefty! Bugs! Come on! We'll make the pack of rats hard to catch!“

„Lead us to 'em!“ boomed Lefty.

Both lumber detectives were burly fellows. They had hard features and a tough manner.

Big Eric whirled to lead the way.

* * * * *

The moment Big Eric's back was turned, Lefty struck heavily with his revolver barrel. The weapon parted the lumber king's thatch of blond hair. He fell heavily with his unconscious daughter.

He had been stricken down by one of his own employees!

The vicious little monkey men ran up, greeting Lefty and Bugs as friends.

„Bien! Yo' gat heem, huh?“ ejaculated the leader of the gang.

„Yeah. An' blasted lucky for you that we did!“ sneered Lefty. „It looks like he blamed-near smeared the whole mess of you swamp snipes!“

The monkey man showed his teeth in a weasel-like snarl. He did not like the razzing that Lefty was handing him. However, he knew there was no time to argue about it.

„Stow the sass!“ he growled. „Yo' stay here. Beeg bronze man ees come back. Get heem. Me, I leeve four my boys so yo' have plenty men fo' job.“

„Take your 4 men along,“ Lefty snorted. „Me and Bugs don't need any help to croak one man!“

The leader of the monkey men leered knowingly. He had seen Doc Savage. And he was not too ignorant to know a Hercules of a fighting man when he saw one. He figured that it would be the finish of Lefty and Bugs if they jumped the bronze giant without reinforcements.

The monkey man rather fancied the thought of Lefty and Bugs meeting disaster. But should he fail to leave some of his men, he feared the wrath of the Gray Spider. And that wrath was a terrible thing!

„Me, I leeve my four boys anyhow,“ he grumbled.

„Sure,“ chuckled Lefty. „They can stand around and watch 2 good men work!“

The insult was carefully ignored. Ham, Big Eric, and Edna were picked up bodily.

The corpses of the dead men were callously left lying inside the mansion. The mouth of one gaped open widely, showing the hideous moccasin tattooed inside.

After all but 4 of the monkey men had departed with the prisoners, Lefty and Bugs took up a position in the shrubbery beside the house. The unsavory pair fell to whispering.

„As long as these 4 swamp snipes are here, why take any risk ourselves?“ Lefty inquired. „Let’s let ‘em grab the bronze guy. If they should get hurt, it ain’t no skin off us.“

„An idea, pal,“ chuckled Bugs. „We’ll do just that!“

They proceeded to maneuver the 4 monkey men inside the house where they would be in a position to drive blowgun darts at Doc Savage about the same moment he discovered the bodies.

Lefty and Bugs waited outside.

The single shot which had come during Big Eric’s valiant fight had evidently passed as an automobile backfire for it had attracted no attention. Edna’s scream had escaped notice, too, probably because the Big Eric Danielsen mansion was set in elaborately landscaped grounds that were as large as a city park.

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Before long, a car halted in front of the estate. It did not enter the grounds. After loitering a moment as though to permit a passenger to alight, it drove on.

„Here he comes, I’ll bet!“ breathed Lefty.

They waited. There was no sound. They held their breath, but they still could hear nothing. No feet slapped the walk. No leaves or branches stirred.

It was as if the car had paused only to let a ghost enter the estate. Lefty and Bugs were puzzled.

Then their hair stood on end!

A mighty Bronze Man had appeared in the room that held the bodies.

His coming had been silent as though suddenly projected there by an invisible motion-picture machine.

His golden eyes surveyed the scene. The slick-haired man and the pilot of the gas plane lay beside their chairs. They had fallen there after being stabbed and had not moved since. The one monkey man that Big Eric had slain in his fight also reposed on the floor.

The latter’s jaws were agape. The tattooed serpent was visible on his mouth roof.

Even Lefty and Bugs—crouched outside—could see the strange flickerings in the golden eyes of the bronze giant. Those weird gleamings conveyed something terrible to the 2 villains. Just looking at them seemed to suck the courage out of their stocky bodies.

They were so awed that they hardly dared breathe.

A blowgun tube was projecting from a keyhole. Lefty and Bugs could see it. They were glad it was behind the Bronze Man. If he just wouldn't turn! And he was giving no sign of wheeling.

One second ... two ... and Death would strike at Doc Savage's back!

But Doc suddenly went to the pilot of the gas plane, thus moving out-of-range of the blowgun. He bent over the man.

He had noticed the fellow breathing. The knife stroke had not been fatal!

Swiftly, Doc administered some of the compound which annulled the effects of the weird drug which the pilot had been given.

Outside the window, Bugs and Lefty were on the horns of a dilemma. They didn't want to shoot the Bronze Man for fear the shot—fired outdoors—might attract attention. Too, they were downright afraid to start trouble themselves. So they waited for the blowgun to do its grisly work.

Lefty and Bugs knew there was a poison dart in the blowgun now. It would bring instant death!

* * * * *

The pilot of the gas plane stirred feebly. Control of his faculties had returned.

„The devils!“ gritted the pilot. „The dirty, double-crossing swamp snipes!“

The fellow could remember all that had happened while he was helpless. He knew that his own gang had tried to murder him. And it might be that they would succeed. The pilot was very far gone from his stab wound.

„Where is Big Eric, Edna, and Ham?“

Doc's compelling voice filled all the room. The power of it made Lefty and Bugs shiver outside the window.

A fit of coughing seized the pilot as he tried to reply. Crimson frothed his lips.

Working rapidly, Doc gave the man some temporary relief from his wound. He did this by sinking his fingers into certain nerve centers, massaging them so as to produce a paralysis that deadened pain somewhat. It was in the realm of Surgery that Doc Savage was most proficient. Osteopathy, Chiropractic, and other similar fields were a part of his training.

When Doc finished, the pilot could speak.

„Look out!“ he choked. „Behind the door across the room. They're hiding there with a blowgun!“

He had warned Doc.

The big Bronze Man spoke softly. No one but the dying pilot—Doc knew now that the fellow could not live—heard the words.

„I knew they were there all along,“ Doc said.

The pilot couldn't understand it. „But how...“

„They're in need of a bath,“ Doc replied. „I could smell them. I also saw their blowgun project from a keyhole. I am out-of-range here.“

But Doc did not know the 2 devils—Lefty and Bugs—lurked outside with revolvers in hand and a mixture of fear-and-murder in their hearts!

The pilot had not been able to note any unusual odors in the room. It was incredible to him that the bronze giant could not only detect a foreign smell but also locate its source! And all without seeming to.

But the pilot had no way of knowing Doc exercised his olfactory senses intensively each day through his life. He knew nothing of the 2-hour routine of high-pressure exercises which this bronze man put himself through each morning. An exercise routine which had made him the superman he was!

„The *Cult of the Moccasin* got the others,“ breathed the pilot. „The devils also left me for dead!“

„Do you know where they took the prisoners?“ Doc inquired swiftly.

Outside the window, Lefty and Bugs were shivering in their excitement. Why didn't the monkey men go into action? They began to raise their own pistols.

„Yeah,“ gulped the dying pilot. „I know where the captives were to be taken. It is a spot at which they will be held for a time. Then other members of the *Cult of the Moccasin* will come and take them to the Castle of the Moccasin. Only the Gray Spider and a few others know where the Castle of the Moccasin is.“

„Where can I find them?“ Doc interrupted. „You can tell me the rest later.“

The pilot drew in breath to answer. But the answer did not come.

The monkey men leaped out of the adjoining room! They rushed to the attack. One lifted the blowgun to his lips. He discharged it.

But big bronze Doc moved so quickly that he seemed to vanish completely ... only to reappear several feet to one side.

The blowgun dart missed by a yard. It plinked into the wall and stuck by its needle-like point.

Before the 4 monkey men could realize what had happened, there towered among them a Nemesis which might have been made out of metal.

The four clutched their sharp knives. At least they were not cravens.

They would fight to the death!

* * * * *

And to the death it was! It came more swiftly than they had dreamed possible.

One monkey man launched a stab that he felt certain would end the fray. It was aimed directly for the bronze giant's heart.

But the monkey man felt a terrible paralysis seize his wrist and arm! He did not have time to realize a steel-thewed hand had grasped his darting knife fist and turned it back toward his own vitals. The blade was in his heart before he could realize that fact!

The wounded pilot of the plane put forth a terrific effort and hauled himself across the room. He took refuge in a closet, laboriously pulling the door shut after him.

Another monkey man struck at Doc with a razor-sharp stiletto. He too believed his stroke would go home.

But by some miracle, the Bronze Man moved a trifle. The blade only sheared open his coat and shirt.

„Sacre...“

The beginning of the oath was the fellow's last word. He tried to strike again. There was a hollow snap. He collapsed. Great hands had broken his neck!

Lefty and Bugs—outside the window—leaped out, fearful of throwing themselves into the fray. They hoped the swamp men would soon overpower Doc.

Suddenly the Bronze Man strode across the floor. He held the surviving 2 monkey men—one in each hand. The swamp rats squirmed. They tried feebly to knife the giant. But such was the agony of the hold upon them that they could not.

A pair of mighty arms propelled them for the window. They flew through the air. Their spinning bodies wiped the glass out of the window.

Both fell at the feet of Lefty and Bugs. This fact led the 2 crooked lumber detectives to think they had been discovered.

They were cowards. Terror seized them! Although they could have shot at the Bronze Man, they spun and fled instead. The threshing of the 2 dazed monkey men who had been hurled through the window covered the sound of their flight.

Doc Savage lunged to the side of the dying pilot. It was important that he get an answer to his question. Where had the men of the Cult of the Moccasin taken Big Eric, Edna, and Ham?

But the man was dead!

From his stiffening lips would never come word of where Big Eric, Edna, and Ham had been taken.

Chapter V

The Bronze Rescuer.

The giant bronze form of Doc Savage moved to the window. He did not see Lefty and Bugs because they were already out-of-sight.

Dropping lightly through the window, Doc searched the 2 dazed monkey men. He threw their weapons away. They seemed to grow light in his powerful grasp and sailed through the window into the house. They tumbled end-over-end across the floor—such was the momentum with which they had been tossed!

Doc did not bother to tie them. When one tried to flee, he was knocked flat on his back before he had taken a single step. They had no more chance of escaping Doc than a captured mouse has of evading the cat that caught it.

„Where are the people who were taken away?“ Doc’s compelling voice filled all the room.

„No savvy what yo‘ talk about!“ muttered one of the vile swamp denizens.

„Have you any idea of what will happen to you if you don’t talk?“

The pair were scared. But it was not a drooling, cowardly fear. They were determined not to talk.

„Yo‘ nevair geet one single word from us!“

Doc was convinced they were right. He knew men. He felt these half-savage swampers could be tortured to death without a word escaping their lips.

Standing erect, Doc strode over to the lifeless body of the pilot. Then his gaze went to a cheap ring on a finger of the dead man.

The pilot had used the upraised setting of his ring to scratch 3 letters and a number in the wall plaster—W.W.S.3.

Doc Savage's eyes ranged over the sprawling inscription. He examined the pilot's ring and made sure traces of plaster still clung in the setting. The pilot had undoubtedly scrawled the cipher.

Perhaps a minute, Doc remained motionless. Then he nodded slightly as if to himself.

He had solved the puzzle of those letters. There was a telephone in the adjacent room.

The 2 evil little swampmen found themselves batted head-over-heels into the next room. They wound up in a corner, dazed and aching. It was not pleasant treatment they were receiving.

Standing with one golden eye on the unsavory pair, Doc picked up the phone. He was connected with the leading morning newspaper in New Orleans.

„I would like to get the location of Worldwide Sawmills No. 3 plant,“ he requested.

This, Doc had decided, was the meaning of the „W.W.S.3“ scratched in the closet plaster.

In a moment, the information came rattling over the phone wire.

„Thank you.“ Doc hung up.

The 2 swamp rats squirmed uneasily, expecting the worst. Their captor seemed to have no more regard for their kind than a lion has for a jackal. And he handled them in about the same fashion.

„Come on, come on!“ Doc told them. „We're leaving here.“

Half-an-hour later, the 2 swampmen were sleeping in a hotel room. Their sleep was caused by a drug, the effects of which would not wear off for weeks. The two would not be disturbed by the hotel attendants.

In a day-or-so, a mysterious stranger would arrive. He would take the 2 men to an amazing institution in the northern part of New York State. This place was run by one of the greatest experts on psychology and criminal minds alive. This wizard made a business of curing men of their criminal tendencies, whether they wanted to be cured or not. No one released from his institution as cured had ever been known to go back to his former life of crime.

This remarkable place was supported by Doc Savage's fabulous wealth. Doc Savage never sent a villain who opposed him to a prison. The police never got them. Instead, they went to this weird establishment to be renovated into decent citizens.

Doc telegraphed the man at the institution to send for the 2 swamp natives. Then he selected a small garage that seemed to need business and bought a good used roadster for cash.

The car carried him rapidly out of New Orleans. He was headed for the No. 3 plant of Worldwide Sawmills concern.

Night wind whipped his bronze face and deeper bronze hair but with no more effect than had he been a man of metal. Tires whined on the concrete. The speedometer flirted with 70.

* * * * *

Dawn was not far off when the charging roadster neared the vicinity of Worldwide Sawmills Plant No. 3. It was in a cypress logging district. Off to the

right, the surface of a bayou shimmered in the bright moonlight. An occasional late-feeding fish leaped casting ring-after-ring of ripples.

A floating sawmill was on the bayou. It consisted of a head saw, edger, trimmer, and cut-off saws mounted on a big scow. It was shut down for the night. But a tendril of smoke strung from the boiler stack. A fireman was puttering about, preparing to get up steam for the new day's work.

Doc turned off the roadster headlights. The windshield had become splattered with night moths and he had turned it down. His eyes roved alertly. It was only a few miles more.

Great branches overhung the road. Tendrils of moss draped low enough to whip his face occasionally. It was a somber, macabre region.

Kicking the gears into neutral, Doc switched off the motor. Going 70 mph, the machine would roll a mile on this road. After the engine died, the call of night birds was audible. The tires buzzed on the pavement.

Before his momentum was gone, Doc wheeled off the road into a brushy lane. He left the car masked by a thicket of swamp maples.

Out on the bayou, a tug whistle honked stentoriously. Through the trees, Doc saw the tug was escorting a raft of logs fully half-a-mile long. Evidently they were being rushed to some mill in time for the day's work.

But they were not headed for Worldwide Sawmills No. 3. The plant was shut down!

A soundless wraith in the roadside brush, Doc reconnoitered.

Judging from appearance, the sawmill had been shut down about a month. It was an expensive plant, too. The capacity must have been nearly a hundred thousand board-feet. Storage sheds for dry lumber were large enough to hold supplies of 20 million-or-so board-feet.

It was obvious these sheds were nearly empty.

That explained it! The Gray Spider's men were selling off the lumber from the dry sheds.

The plant was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence of surprising height. The steel poles extended 20 feet above the ground.

Doc started to run lightly up the fence. Halfway to the top, he suddenly released his grip and dropped to the ground.

„A narrow squeak!“ he told himself sagely.

Finding a wet limb, he tossed it against the upper part of the fence. The twig came in contact with 2 of the barbed strands.

There was a sputtering burst of unholy green fire. Smoking, the twig fell to the ground.

The fence carried a high-voltage electric current!

Only the sharpness of Doc's eyes in noting that the wires ran through insulators at the steel posts had saved him from death by electrocution!

* * * * *

Around the fence, the bronze giant worked. He found a tree. It had one branch that extended beyond the electrified fence.

A great leap launched Doc's powerful form several feet up the tree. He ran on up as easily as a squirrel. He worked out on the branch, balancing like a tightrope walker.

It was a full 30 feet to the ground. Yet great muscles cushioned his drop until it seemed he had hardly more than stepped off a chair.

Doc's golden eyes were alert. He knew this was the most dangerous moment of his entrance. If there was a guard, it was likely the fellow would see him.

He was right.

An eye of flame batted from behind a dry kiln! It licked so rapidly it was an ugly glow. Bullets passing Doc's head made a ringing sound like a nail tapping against a bottle! Then came the tumbling gobble of a machine-gun.

Doc flattened against the ground. He moved with a bewildering speed. His bronze skin and dark clothing blended surprisingly with the earth.

The gunner stopped firing. He had completely lost track of his target. He stepped out into the moonlight He held his weapon ready. It was not one of the submachine or „Tommy“ guns firing .45-caliber pistol cartridges but a regulation aircraft-type gun shooting the big cartridges. It was harnessed to a wide leather belt about the guard's middle so he could handle the powerful recoil.

„Eet's de bronze guy!“ bellowed the fellow. „Hee's over de fence!“

„Non, non!“ called another monkey-like member of the *Cult of the Moccasin*. „Hees could nevair find dis place!“

„Mebbe so. But he done be in here right now!“

The second man came running. He vaulted a row of live rollers—a conveyor formerly used to move sawed lumber to the kilns.

A mighty bronze arm flashed up from the shadowy side of the conveyor. It pulled the man down. A piercing scream tore from his lips!

The gunner—hearing that scream but not seeing what had happened because he was looking elsewhere at the instant—ran over. He took one look on the other side of the conveyor.

Then he turned pale as though his heart had started pumping whitewash!

His companion lay there with crimson spilling slowly from the corners of his open mouth. The man was only unconscious. But the gunner took it for granted that he was dead.

He let out a howl that rivaled the one he had just heard. He tore full-speed for one of the storage sheds which still held dry lumber. He considered it impossible that anything of flesh & blood could have moved from the spot under the tree to the conveyor with such swiftness. And without being seen!

He couldn't fight a bronze ghost !

* * * * *

He dived into the great shed. The interior was rather dark. Rough, dry lumber was here. The piles were fully 16 feet high. Back into the labyrinth, the scared swampman worked.

He thought he heard a noise behind. He whirled wildly with his gun. But he saw nothing to alarm.

„Vat's wrong weeth yo'?“ came a harsh whisper.

The gunner gulped his relief. This was the voice of one of his own evil kind.

„A debbil!“ he gulped. „A bronze debbil man! Heem move like cloud that ees tie to rabbit's tail!“

„A debbil?“ The other voice was muffled.

„Yo' bat!“ The gunner shuddered.

It was darker than the inside of an owl here in the rough dry shed.

„Me, I don' hear nottin'!“ declared the other man.

The gunner licked his lips. He couldn't hear anything either.

„Yo' don' nevair hear dat debbil man!“ he muttered. „Say, vat yo' out here for? Boss ees say fo' ever'body stay outta sight except for us two on guard!“

„Me, I come out get drink,“ said the other shortly. „I'm dang if I can find way back.“

„Ho, yo' lost?“

„Oui! I tell yo' I'm dang if I can find way back, ain't I?“

The gunner gave a harsh snort.

„Ho, de place ees in middle of de pile right yere!“

„De one yo' leanin' on?“

„Oui! Dat ees right!“

The next instant, a lumber pile seemed to fall on the gunner. Except that it was bronze in hue and delivered paralyzing blows with great, powerful fists!

Just before the gunner went down senseless, he realized what had befallen him.

He had not been talking to one of his fellows. He had been conversing with the bronze „debbil“!

Doc had simply imitated the swampman's dialect in order to learn where the kidnapped victims were being held. The spot was inside one of the great lumber piles!

* * * * *

Doc Savage now did a peculiar thing.

He depressed the firing lever of the aircraft-type machine-gun belted to the monkey man's middle. The weapon spewed flame, fumes, and copro-nickel slugs.

The terrific din made in the narrow space between the lumber piles was like 2 bolts of thunder fighting!

Then Doc released the firing lever.

„Got heem!“ he yelled, imitating the polyglot of the swamp speech.

A soaring leap took him up some feet on the sheer side of a lumber stack. He clung there to a board that projected hardly more than a quarter-of-an-inch.

Below him, the apparently solid side of the lumber pile opened outward. Sounds told him what had happened. It was too dark to see anything.

„Vat ees eet?“ called a voice. „Who ees yo' got?“

It was right under Doc! The speaker had thrust his head out of the lumber pile.

One of Doc's mighty hands floated down. It fished. It found a head.

The victim emitted one faint, low sound like a chicken that had been stepped on. Then his head collided with the side of the lumber pile and he hung loose and unconscious.

Doc let him fall. He whipped inside the lumber pile.

A flashing from within spiked a narrow beam. The glare found Doc. It lost him as he moved swiftly.

The man with the light fired a revolver. Then gritted curses because he had missed the mark.

There seemed to be a large room inside the lumber pile. The walls were built like those of a refrigerator with an air space between inner and outer planking. No doubt the secret chamber was virtually soundproof.

A blood-curdling shriek rang inside the room! A body threshed. A gun exploded! Then silence followed.

The man with the flashlight had felt the mighty hand of Doc Savage! He was now senseless on the floor.

The interior of the lumber pile held the quiet of a tomb of ancient Egypt. But a watch ticked somewhere in the black abyss. It ran rapidly. It sounded like a woman's watch.

„Doc!“ called Ham's voice softly. „There was only 4 of them here.“

„Then the roost is cleaned,“ chuckled Doc. He lit a match.

Big Eric, Edna, Ham—all three were safe on the floor. Their arms were a bit purple because of the tight ropes that bound them. But such trifles could be soon forgotten.

„I thought we were as good as dead!“ Big Eric muttered. „They were going to send us to their chief hide-out—the place they called the Castle of the Moccasin. There the Gray Spider would have tried to force us to sign papers declaring we had suddenly decided to take a long vacation. Then we would have been killed, I suspect.“

„The Castle of the Moccasin,“ Doc said dryly. „The thing for us to do is to persuade our prisoners to tell us where the place is. We may be able to get the Gray Spider there.“

„I hate to hang crepe, Doc,“ Ham offered. „But you're out of luck.“

„Eh?“

„Unless I'm mistaken, none of these fellows know where the Castle of the Moccasin is. From their talk, I gathered that it is sort of sacred *high temple* of their voodoo cult. Only the high *muck-amucks* are permitted to visit it. Regular barbarian taboo stuff.“

„Why are you so sure, Ham?“ Doc asked.

„Because I overheard a talk they were having. They didn't think we'd ever escape. There was no reason for them to deceive us.“

„Then we'll have to fall back on my original plan,“ Doc said steadily.

He departed to turn the deadly high-voltage current *off* the barbed-wire fence and to get his roadster.

He walked swiftly for he was in a hurry to get back to New Orleans and place his 4 additional prisoners with the 2 in a drugged sleep in the hotel room. There would be 6 of them to go to his amazing criminal-reforming institution in upstate New York.

No doubt more than 6 would be resting in the room before this affair was settled.

For Doc Savage had as yet hardly started to fight the Gray Spider!

Chapter VI

Death-End Trail.

A glorious dawn had seized upon New Orleans. Crowds hurried to work.

In Canal Street, traffic boiled. The Walnut Street, Jackson Avenue, and Canal Street ferries carried a full load every time they crossed the Mississippi. The business day was starting.

Doc Savage had brought his friends and prisoners to town. Leaving the prisoners in the hotel room with the previously-captured men, Doc was back again in his roadster.

Wheeling the car along St. Charles Avenue and then turning right shortly after Julia Street, Doc stopped before the Danielsen & Haas building and all got out.

The Danielsen & Haas building was one of great beauty. The masonry was gleaming white with a modernistic scheme of ornamentation carried out in black stone. It looked like the conception that some artist had formed of how buildings of the future would appear. It was not a skyscraper—reaching upward only 10 stories. A large number of people hurried in-and-out.

„You seem to work quite a force,“ Ham suggested.

„More on the payroll than we ever had!“ Big Eric replied proudly. „And I’m one lumberman who has not taken advantage of conditions to cut salaries.“

They entered the lumber concern’s offices.

„A note for Doc Savage,“ said the reception clerk. „The watchman claimed it was shoved under the front door sometime during the night.“

Doc took the note and opened it. Inside was a sheet of plain white paper.

The paper was perfectly blank except for a thumbprint. The thumbprint was enormous! It looked big as a baby track.

Doc smiled slightly. He recognized the print easily. Its very size was enough. Doc doubted another man on Earth had a hand as big as the one which had made the print.

It belonged to Colonel John Renwick—the one of his 5 aides who was called „Renny“. A man noted all over the World for his feats of engineering, that was Renny. He was also famed as the man who had a playful habit of knocking panels out of the heaviest doors with his vast fists.

The strange message told Doc that his 4 men—Renny, Monk, Long Tom, and Johnny—had arrived in New Orleans during the night. No doubt, they had flown by a slightly slower plane.

Big Eric now led the way to his private office. In striking contrast to the palatial air of the rest of the building, Big Eric’s sanctum was no more ornate than that of a sawmill foreman. The rug was full of holes so that one had to step high to keep from tripping. The desk was old with the edges pitted where cigars had carelessly burned.

„I can’t work in a joint where they put on a lot of *dog*,“ Big Eric apologized. „This is the equipment I started out with 30 years ago.“

Adjoining was an office the exact opposite of Big Eric's in fittings. It had the finest Oriental rugs on the floor. The desk must have cost more than a sawmill jacket-feeder would make in a year. A bar complete with refrigerating and mixing machines occupied a corner. Pictures of young women—obviously chorus cuties—were about.

„The office of Horace Haas, my junior partner,“ explained Big Eric.

Then—realizing the place hardly looked like a business office—he added defensively: „Horace Haas may not be a crack business man. But he furnished the capital for my start in life!“

At this point, a shrill whanging voice said, „Could I have a word with you, Mr. Danielsen?“

Big Eric turned. „Oh, it's Silas Bunnywell—one of the bookkeepers.“

* * * * *

Silas Bunneywell was a typical movie bookkeeper. He was tall. But his upper body was hunched as though he had sat on a stool all his life. His face was shrunken. He had a little potbelly. But the rest of him was too thin. His hair was white as a cottontail rabbit's tail.

He wore a shiny blue suit. His glasses were the sort that Edna Danielsen had expected Doc Savage to be wearing. The lenses were like bottle bottoms.

„What is it, Bunnywell?“ inquired Big Eric.

Old Bunnywell kneaded his hands together nervously. He seemed reluctant to talk.

„It is rather private,“ he muttered. „If I could see you alone...“

„Shoot!“ Big Eric commanded. He waved an arm at Doc, Ham, and Edna. „Ain't nothin' too private for these folks to hear.“

„I'd rather only you...“

„C'mon, c'mon, Bunnywell!“ rumbled the massive lumberman. „Talk up!“

„It's about Horace Haas,“ Bunnywell whined. „I loaned him \$500 some time ago. He promised to pay it back within 10 days. But when I ask him for it, he just laughs me off. I wonder... I wonder if you would speak to him. \$500 may not seem to you like much. But it is a large sum to me. I worked very hard to save it.“

Big Eric cleared his throat noisily. He scowled! It was plain that he was disgusted with his business partner. He drew a large wallet from his pocket and extracted several bills.

„Here's your 500!“ he boomed. „I'll collect it myself from Horace Haas!“

Old Bunnywell seemed about to sob. „Oh, thank you!“

„Forget it,“ thumped Big Eric. „I want my employees to make a complaint against an executive of the company just as soon as they would against an office boy. Or quicker!“

Silas Bunnywell shuffled out all-but-hugging his money.

„It's about time for me to hand Horace Haas another trimming with my fists,“ growled Big Eric. „I have to knock him into line about once-a-year.“

„Here he comes now, Dad,“ interposed Edna.

Horace Haas came in. First, one noticed the light-yellow, double-breasted tea vest he wore. Second in prominence was an enormous diamond ring. Morning

coat, striped pants, shoes that were too shiny, and spats were noteworthy as well as a flashy cravat.

The least striking thing in all this flamboyance was Horace Haas the man. He was just a weak-chinned, florid, watery-eyed, and roly-poly fat man. His hair was very dark.

He was excited. He flourished a sheet of paper.

„Big Eric!“ he barked loudly. „I got something important! Lookit! A letter come through the mail this morning from Topper Beed—the man who has been helping us against the Gray Spider!“

Big Eric took the letter. He gave it a glance.

„Read this!“ he boomed and thrust it to Doc.

Doc’s golden eyes translated:

If you want to seize the Gray Spider, I can tell you where to get him.

Topper Beed

„Give me Topper Beed’s address,“ Doc commanded.

„He has a large sawmill equipment repair shop and second-hand store over beyond Canal Street,“ replied Horace Haas.

He gave the exact address.

Haas stared at the mighty Bronze Man. His weak jaw fell slowly. His shifty eyes seemed to swell in their watery sockets. He was awed by the giant metallic figure before him.

„So this is the *Doc Savage* you told me you was goin’ after!“ he muttered to Big Eric.

Doc Savage moved silently for the door.

„I am going to interview Topper Beed,“ he said grimly.

* * * * *

Topper Beed’s sawmill repair shop and second-hand store was not located far from the old French quarter. Beside the place—and easily accessible to a wharf on the Mississippi—lay what looked like a junk lot of the parts of scores of sawmills. Some of the stuff was in good shape.

No sign of life was apparent around the ramshackle sheet-iron building which housed the shop. The door was secured with a heavy chain and a padlock.

Doc Savage’s sinewy bronze fingers worked for a moment with the padlock. They manipulated a steel tool that looked much like a darning needle with a crook on the end.

The padlock opened. Doc entered the shop.

The place was built like an airplane hangar although not quite as large. A sizable drill stood in one corner and an enormous forge and anvil in another. Grease and metal chips made a gum underfoot.

In one spot, water shone glassily on the greasy floor. It had been splashed there not many hours ago. Near the water stood a wooden tank. This had evidently been made by sawing in half a very large barrel.

The tub-like tank was full to the brim with water. A coat of oil floated on the surface. Evidently it was the water used to temper metal after it had been worked with on the forge and anvil.

Doc stuck a pair of long-handled blacksmith's tongs into the tub...

...and brought up the body of a man!

The form was stocky and muscular with the rough red skin and calloused palms of one who has long worked with heat and metal. The man had been stunned by a blow on the head and held in the tank until he drowned.

Several letters reposed in an inner pocket. The addresses were still legible. They bore the name of „Topper Beed“.

The man had surfeited his life for his activities against the Gray Spider!

* * * * *

Doc Savage soon quitted the shop. The killers had been either clever or lucky for they had left no clue to their identity.

As Doc came out of the shop, 2 men down the street hastily settled low in the car they were driving.

„We gotta look out for that guy, Lefty!“ one said.

„And how!“ breathed the other. „Don't go staring at him like he was Santa Claus! He might notice!“

The pair were Lefty and Bugs—the 2 lumber company detectives who were in the Gray Spider's gang. The same pair who had treacherously struck down Big Eric.

Only a few minutes ago, they had received rush orders from the Gray Spider to come here and pick up the trail of the Bronze Man.

„We're to croak 'im if we get the chance,“ muttered Lefty. „We might cut down on him right now.“

„Too risky!“ Bugs hastily protested. „There's a cop in the next block.“

They watched Doc Savage enter his roadster.

Lefty glanced about uneasily as if to make sure no one was near, then growled: „I wonder if the bronze guy found anything to show that we scragged old Topper Beed?“

„We didn't leave no clues!“ snarled Bugs.

Doc Savage was unaware of the 2 murderers of Topper Beed crouched in their car. The morning Sun shone on the windshield of their machine in such a manner that the reflection made it impossible to see inside.

Doc's roadster carried him over to Canal Street, thence southward. It halted shortly before a concern which sold dictaphones. Following discreetly far to the rear, Lefty and Bugs saw Doc enter the establishment.

„I wish to purchase several dictaphone recording cylinders,“ Doc informed a clerk. „I also wish to use a dictaphone for several minutes.“

It was an unusual request. But the clerk complied.

Seating himself at a machine used for demonstration purposes, Doc clipped on one of his new records and proceeded to dictate a long message.

No one heard his voice. The machine recorded smoothly. Doc gave order-after-order together with detailed instructions on how they were to be carried out.

He was delivering commands to his men for he intended to dispatch the records to them by messenger.

„Keep in mind,“ he finished, „that should one word of these instructions reach the Gray Spider, it might easily mean immediate death and destruction to us all.“

Doc made his records into a small package. Down the street a few doors, he entered a telegraph office and engaged a messenger.

On a paper, he wrote the name of a hotel and a room number. It was the hotel to which he had directed his 4 pals—the directions having been on the message that he had left in invisible ink at the Danielsen & Haas offices. Monk, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny would be waiting there.

The messenger stood on the curb and watched the giant Bronze Man enter his roadster and drive toward the Danielsen & Haas building.

* * * * *

When Doc Savage was out-of-sight, the messenger got astride his bicycle. He carried his package carefully. He had been instructed to take pains not to drop it.

He eyed the address of the hotel, then tucked the paper in his tunic pocket. He pedaled on his errand.

Traffic was heavy on Canal Street. The messenger decided his shortest route was a left turn on Claiborne Avenue. He veered over.

Suddenly an automobile whipped in front of his bike. He trod his coaster brake.

No use. He hit the car head-on! His front wheel crumpled. He took a dive over the handlebars and banged his head against the car. Limp and unconscious, he dropped to the pavement.

By a miracle, the package he carried did not fall heavily enough to shatter the well-padded records inside.

„Nifty work, Bugs!“ chuckled one of the men in the car.

„Hold everything, Lefty!“ rasped the other. „I’ll grab the package the kid was carryin’.“

„Get the paper that we saw him put in his coat pocket, too!“

The pair of crooked detectives had welcomed the chance to shift their shadowing activities from Doc Savage to the defenseless messenger boy. All too well, they remembered what the bronze giant had done to the 4 swampmen who had tried to slay him.

They did not like the shadowing job. So they had taken a chance that whatever the messenger was carrying would be important enough to point to a reason for losing Doc Savage. They would have to show the Gray Spider a good excuse!

Bugs got the package and the paper from the messenger’s pocket. He sprang into the car. The machine raced away.

„Hey, lookit!“ exclaimed Bugs, opening the package. „Dictaphone records!“

„They got anything on ‘em?“

„Guess so.“

Lefty quickly turned their car to the curb as he caught sight of another office-supply concern.

„The bronze guy must’ve rented a machine to make ‘em,“ he declared. „What’s to keep us from rentin’ one to hear ‘em?“

„That’s usin’ the old think box!“ complimented Bugs.

They entered the office-supply establishment, drew a clerk aside, and made their needs known. A moment later, they were bending over a transcribing machine. A record was fitted on the cylinder.

The headset consisted of 2 receivers. They divided it between them. Lefty started the machine. They held their breath. The rotating record—not yet to the message—made a low hiss-hiss in their ears. Then it began to talk to them.

A dazed expression seized their faces. It was as though somebody had suddenly hit them in the head with a hammer.

They couldn't understand a word they were hearing!

Doc Savage had dictated in a language not one person in a hundred million knew—the tongue of the ancient Mayan civilization! Doc and his men had learned this language from pure-blooded descendants of the ancient race of Maya—from the folk who resided in the lost valley in Central America and who kept Doc supplied with gold.

„What're we gonna do now?“ Bugs growled.

„Get these to the Gray Spider,“ Lefty decided.

The unsavory pair hurried toward the old French quarter with the bundle of records tucked under Lefty's arm.

* * * * *

The French quarter is the most ancient section of New Orleans. Although only a short distance from the new business district of skyscrapers, the French quarter is probably one of the most unique features of any American city. It is more remarkable even than the Chinatown of San Francisco.

Stepping into the French quarter is like stepping into an ancient part of Paris. Old buildings and quaint streets characterize the place. Overhanging balconies were plentiful.

Lefty and Bugs sidled furtively into one of the shabbiest of the buildings. They clumped down a shadowy passage. A door opened after they had mumbled their identity.

The shoddy, ill-smelling room in which they found themselves was fitted with tables, rickety metal chairs, and a bar. Perhaps a dozen slovenly individuals were present—all men.

One of the yellowish-brown monkeylike men sat at a table. Lefty and Bugs gave him their package and the paper bearing the name of the hotel.

„Get this to the Gray Spider,“ Lefty directed. „Tell him we think it's important. Tell him we quit trailin' the bronze guy to grab it. And ask him what he wants us to do now.“

Without a word, the monkey man departed with package and paper.

„I'd kinda like to follow that swamp snipe and see where the Gray Spider's got his hangout here in New Orleans,“ leered Lefty.

„If you ask me, it wouldn't be healthy,“ mumbled Bugs. „You saw what old Topper Beed got for knowin' too much!“

„You mean what we gave him!“ Lefty chuckled coldly. „But he got his'n because he was spillin' what he knew.“

„How'd Topper Beed happen to get wise to the Gray Spider?“ questioned Bugs. „How'd he learn who the Gray Spider is?“

„Topper Beed was buyin' the stolen sawmills the Gray Spider's men were sellin'. But he got suspicious about the deals. He began to snoop around. He went to Danielsens & Haas with what he knew. And he finally found out too much.“

„I'll say he did!“ Bugs leered.

Several cigarettes were smoked by the pair in the wait that followed. The yellowish-brown monkey man reappeared in the vile den.

„Gray Spider plentee much mad!“ he growled. „Vat yo' send in de package vas no good to heem. Hees say yo' one pair plentee fools!“

Lefty and Bugs took this silently. They were getting off easy for they had openly disobeyed the Gray Spider's orders in not at least trying to kill the mighty Bronze Man.

They gathered that the Gray Spider had not been able to understand the mysterious lingo inscribed on the dictaphone records.

Another of the monkey-like swamp men shuffled in. He carried a cheap, new-looking black handbag. This he placed on the table.

„What's that?“ Lefty demanded.

„Don't ask so many questions!“ growled the swamp denizen. „Yo' ees to do mo' work, oui? And yo' bettair not fall down on dis next job!“

He continued to speak. At times, his gibberish was so rapid that Lefty and Bugs had to swear at him to slow him down understandably.

The 2 crooked lumber detectives began to get pale at the gills as the significance of the Gray Spider's orders dawned. They perspired freely.

„Jimminy!“ Bugs whined. „I don't like this!“

„Me either!“ grunted Lefty.

„Gray Spider order yo' do dese t'ings!“ snapped the monkey man. „Yo' want me tell heem yo' say hees can go jump een river?“

„Nix, nix!“ Lefty said hastily. „We'll go through with it.“

„Git at it, den!“ ordered the monkey man.

* * * * *

Lefty and Bugs slunk out into the picturesque, ancient street. They carried the handbag. It looked very new against the age of their surroundings.

„There's one thing I don't like about workin' for this Gray Spider!“ Lefty growled when they were out of earshot. „All of our orders come from them ignorant swamp snipes. Imagine us takin' orders from the likes of them!“

With the supreme egoism of a cheap criminal, Lefty was ignoring the fact that he was a more vile specimen than the illiterate swamp men.

Lefty and Bugs had a certain amount of education whereas the little monkey men were so ignorant as to hardly know *right* from *wrong*. In contrast to the 2 crooked detectives, they were men who might easily come under the superstitious sway of the Gray Spider.

„The snipes are only the Gray Spider's messengers,“ Bugs said resignedly. „Anyway, it's payin' us to take the Gray Spider's orders. Ain't we makin' more money than we ever got in the lousy lumber detective business? Even with all the graft we could knock off lettin' timber poachers bribe us?“

„Yeah! That's right!“

Chapter VII

Killers at Work.

In the course of a little time, Lefty and Bugs turned up before the modernistic Danielsen & Haas building. They entered carrying the cheap, new handbag.

An elevator lifted them to the top floor. Both men now had a spray of cold sweat on their evil faces.

„This is what I call walkin' into a lion's den!“ shivered Bugs.

It was on this floor that Big Eric Danielsen had his office. If the fire-eating lumberman should see them, it would be too bad. And well they knew it!

Danielsen & Haas employees hurried about in the corridor. No one paid the 2 villainous lumber detectives particular attention. Although Big Eric knew the pair were the Gray Spider's men, he had not yet spread the word.

„The Gray Spider said that we'd be tipped off if the cops started lookin' for us,“ Bugs muttered. „He said it'd be safe to walk in here as long as Big Eric, Edna, Ham Brooks, or the bronze guy didn't see us. I hope he was right!“

„Forget it,“ sneered Lefty. „The dope we get from the Gray Spider is always right. He's one guy who don't make mistakes!“

They scuttled swiftly past the door of Big Eric's office. The next door bore the inscription:

HORACE HAAS

Lefty and Bugs exchanged uneasy glances. Then Lefty knocked on the door of Horace Haas's office.

Nothing happened.

„I wonder if whoever answers this door is the Gray Spider?“ Bugs muttered.

„I was just wonderin' the same thing,“ whispered Lefty. „I'm gonna get a look at his face when he opens the door.“

The panel marked with the name of Horace Haas suddenly opened about 6 inches.

Lefty and Bugs hastily moved to stare into the crack. They were disappointed. They could see only the head of the man inside. And that head was muffled in a mask made out of a very large and brightly colored silk handkerchief.

„Give me the hand bag!“ rasped the man in a tone so muffled Lefty and Bugs could not tell whether they had ever heard it before.

The cheap, new bag was passed into the room.

„You understand clearly what you are to do next?“ demanded the masked man.

„You mean about goin' to the hotel named on the slip of paper we took from the messenger boy?“ Lefty faltered.

„Exactly! You are to go there. You will find some of my swamp men waiting. You are to kill any and all men who registered at that hotel last night and this morning!“

Lefty and Bugs were bewildered. They didn't understand the purpose for the wholesale murder.

„But why...“

„It is obvious that the dictaphone records you intercepted were orders from Doc Savage to his men!“ snarled the masked one. „Since Savage only arrived in New Orleans last night, it is certain his men got here later. By wiping out all late-comers to the hotel, we will be certain to get them!“

„What do Doc Savage's men look like?“ quizzed Bugs. „How many are there?“

„I do not know that!“ hissed the masked man. „I have exhausted my resources in an effort to learn. But it is no use. Whether he has one man or a hundred, I do not know. His aides might even be women.“

„...And that is an idea! Kill all women who have registered lately at the hotel. Wipe them out along with the men!“

Lefty and Bugs swapped knowing glances. The conversation had shown them something.

The masked man was the Gray Spider!

The master villain was taking the slaying of mighty bronze Doc Savage into his own hands.

„Go!“ rasped the Gray Spider.

The unsavory pair turned away. They almost ran to the elevators. It was as if the Devil himself stood in the door of Horace Haas's office at their backs. They had met the Gray Spider. And they were more afraid of the fiend than ever!

„The fools!“ hissed the Gray Spider into his silken mask. „Their haste could easily attract suspicion. Their very clumsiness makes them dangerous men to have around. I shall have to add them to my *playthings* at the Castle of the Moccasin as soon as they finish these murders for me.“

The Gray Spider closed the door of Horace Haas's office.

* * * * *

Carrying the new cheap handbag, the Gray Spider crossed the office. He did not remove his mask. He walked with his body drawn into a hunched bundle. He had a pronounced limp.

However, all these physical quirks were assumed. Should someone enter the office unexpectedly, he did not want to be recognized. He kept a big automatic pistol in his hand against just such a contingency.

An eyehole of the Gray Spider's silken mask pushed close to the keyhole of the door that connected with Big Eric's office. A faint gritting came from behind the silk mask as though the wearer were grinding his teeth in hate at what he saw.

Doc Savage—striking as a mighty bronze statue—occupied a chair near the window. Sunlight slanted against his remarkable features. An unending play of tiny flickerings came from his eyes as though they were pools of flake-gold being continually stirred.

Big Eric, Edna, and Ham lounged in chairs. None of the three were more than an arm's length from the bronze giant. Ham had recovered his sword cane from where he had lost it during the attack of the swamp men at Big Eric's mansion. He twiddled it idly in his fingers.

The group talked in low voices. Big Eric and Edna were giving Doc details about the Gray Spider—details which there had been no time to deliver before. They were also discussing peculiar phases of the situation.

„Horace Haas has not been attacked by the Gray Spider as I understand it,“ Doc suggested.

„Not a single time,“ admitted Big Eric.

„If you and your daughter should meet death, control of the company would fall into the hands of Horace Haas. Is that right?“

Big Eric looked like he had been slapped. His vast face purpled.

„Now listen here!“ he grumbled: „Horace Haas may be a fop and a spendthrift. But I’ll stake my life he wouldn’t lay a finger on Edna or me! He’s not the Gray Spider!“

„You’re jumping to conclusions,“ Doc said dryly. „What I was getting at is this: The Gray Spider may be trying to kill you two so that control of your concern will go to Horace Haas. The Gray Spider could then terrorize Haas into doing his bidding. I think you will agree with me that Haas does not seem to be a man of particularly strong character. The Gray Spider could control him, I’m afraid.“

Big Eric was thoughtful. Then he muttered, „I’ll bet that’s it!“

Again the gritting sound of gnashed teeth came from the silk-masked man hunkering at the keyhole in the adjacent office.

The Gray Spider swiftly opened the new, cheap handbag. He wore pale-gray gloves for this work.

The bag contents consisted of a strong-but-small steel tank to which was attached several feet of tough hose somewhat smaller than a lead pencil.

„Poison gas!“ gritted the Gray Spider, stroking the steel tank. „The same kind they managed to escape when my plane released it ahead of their craft. But they will not evade it this time. The slightest breath of it is death! Even its touch brings a terrible fate.“

He inserted the hose end in the keyhole. He turned on a valve at the tank.

With a shrill squeal, gas began escaping! The stuff was under high pressure.

The Gray Spider scuttled out of Horace Haas’s office.

* * * * *

The squeal of the liberating gas seemed to increase its note. So great was the velocity with which it left the hose that it was thrown completely across the office in which the 4 intended victims sat.

Luckily, the gas cloud did not blow directly against Doc and his friends. But it made a barrage between them and the other door. A barrage which it would be death to penetrate.

The only other means of exit was the window. And below that was a death-fall of 10 stories!

Doc Savage’s amazing muscular development gave him the ability to ascend-or-descend the average brick wall as easily and rapidly as a lesser man would dash up a flight of stairs.

But the Danielsen & Haas building had been constructed of white marble blocks polished to a glassy luster and fitted together with joints that were hardly visible to the naked eye. Even Doc could find no handhold on that sheer wall!

Nevertheless, the window was the only escape.

Sinewy bronze arms wrenched up the window a chip part of a second after the gas began to whistle.

„Outside!“ Doc’s powerful voice crashed. „Stand on the sill!“

Big Eric and Edna hastily scrambled out. Ham followed. The windowsill was hardly 6 inches wide. They were forced to grasp every handhold that offered to their fingertips.

„No use!“ Big Eric wailed. „That infernal gas will seep around the window edges and get us! These sashes don’t fit tight. I’ve often felt a draft when they’re closed.“

It was Doc Savage’s keen brain that solved the problem.

A small pot of ordinary white paste stood on Big Eric’s shabby desk. Doc scooped this up. He joined the others outside on the windowsill. He closed the window.

With quick strokes, Doc strung the gummy white paste around the window, effectively sealing all cracks.

„That’s what I call quick work!“ Big Eric said admiringly. „But why couldn’t we have dashed through the gas cloud to the door?“

„The stuff is not only deadly if inhaled but also fatal if it touches the skin unless I am mistaken,“ Doc explained. „I believe it is closely akin to the terrible mustard gas used in the World War.“

Doc sidled swiftly to one end of the windowsill. The next window was half-a-dozen feet distant. The wall between was every bit as smooth as glass.

But Doc Savage—employing the springy tendons of his legs and the balancing effect of his strong arms—leaped sidewise from the windowsill! It seemed an impossible feat to accomplish without falling outward from the sheer building.

His great bronze frame appeared to skid a rising arc along the wall.

He reached the next window. His powerful fingers grasped and held.

He was safe! It had happened before the others could as much as emit a gasp of amazement.

„Stay where you are!“ Doc commanded them.

* * * * *

A freckled stenographer strangled on the gum she was chewing as the big Bronze Man appeared like magic in the window beside her desk.

She was still coughing when Doc crossed the room and entered the corridor. She had received the shock of her gum-chewing career!

Doc watched the building entrance several minutes. He saw no one leave in a suspicious manner.

Returning upstairs, he noted that old Silas Bunnywell the bookkeeper occupied a tiny cubicle from the door of which the entrance of Horace Haas’s office could be seen. Old Bunnywell was stooped over his ledgers.

„Have you noticed Horace Haas leave his office recently?“ Doc inquired.

The old man took off his glasses and rubbed his reddened eyes. „No, Sir. I’m quite sure I haven’t. Mr. Haas must be in his office now. Only a few minutes ago, I saw 2 men hand a bag through his door.“

„Describe them,“ Doc commanded.

Elderly Silas Bunnywell gave an accurate description of Lefty and Bugs. Doc recognized the pair from what Big Eric had told him of them.

„And Horace Haas is in his office now?“ Doc said grimly.

„I am not sure. But he must have been there a few minutes ago. I am not able to observe all who enter because of my work.“

Doc swung to the door of Haas's office. He opened it. He was cautious, not knowing what form of death might lurk within for him. But he need not have been careful.

The office was empty. But Doc saw the gas contrivance.

He turned off the petcock on the tank of gas in the handbag. Then he got a rope ... went to the roof ... and rescued Big Eric, Edna, and Ham from the windowsill.

They held a serious council in Haas's office.

„It looks bad for friend Horace,“ Ham said, tight-lipped.

„You mean you think Horace Haas turned that gas on us?“ Big Eric muttered.

„What do you think?“

„I ... don't ... know,“ Big Eric replied, a long hesitation between each word. „I hate to think he'd do such a thing. But there's no reason why he should go out.“

At this juncture, Horace Haas came into the room. His step was not as jaunty as usual. He looked like a fat, overfed pup somebody had just kicked. He gave a distinct start at sight of Doc and the others.

„I ... er ... hello,“ he said uncertainly.

Big Eric got to the point without delay.

„Where-in-thunder have you been?“ he roared.

Horace Haas reddened angrily.

„Since when was I tied to your apron strings? None of your business where I've been!“

„It might interest you, wiseguy,“ Ham put in, „to know that an attempt was just made on our lives from your office. And to be very frank, YOU are under suspicion!“

* * * * *

This blunt declaration had a marked effect on Horace Haas.

He reddened even more ... then suddenly went quite pallid. He fumbled for a chair with a jeweled hand and sat down heavily.

Doc Savage watched the man. Either Horace Haas was a finished actor. Or he was genuinely shocked at the accusation.

„I ... er ... suppose I had better tell where I was.“

Horace Haas pulled a large silk handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his forehead. The piece of silk was brightly colored.

„I received a telephone call from a ... er, young lady,“ Haas began.

„A chorus stepper?“ rumbled Big Eric.

Horace Haas flinched. „Ah ... yes, a young lady of the chorus. At least, that is who she said she was. She asked me to meet her at a soda fountain near here. So I went...“

„An old goat of your age!“ Big Eric snorted. „I oughta get up and kick the seat of your pants.“

„But I didn't find the young lady!“ Horace Haas finished desperately. „She did not appear. I waited some time, decided I was being stood up, and came back.“

Big Eric rumbled a noisy laugh. „Somebody played you for a sap to get you out of your office so an attempt could be made on our lives!“

He whirled to Doc. „Don't you think that was it?“

Doc Savage had formed no definite opinion. He had no proof against Horace Haas. But he had no real proof that he was innocent, either. He gave a noncommittal answer.

„Possibly.“

Swinging over to the telephone, Doc called the number of the telegraph company branch office from which he had engaged his messenger. He was merely checking up on whether the dictaphone records had been delivered to his fellow scrappers.

He received the bad news.

„What?“ he demanded. „The messenger was waylaid and robbed en route?“

Hanging up, Doc let his golden eyes range over his companions.

„It seems,“ he said slowly, „that the Gray Spider is setting out to carry the warfare to us.“

„The boys may be in danger,“ Ham clipped.

Doc nodded. „Exactly. You stay here, Ham. Take every precaution to guard against the Gray Spider. I'm going to see if our 4 brothers are in any kind of a mess.“

He left the building swiftly.

Chapter VIII

Doc Plans.

The hotel to which Doc Savage had directed his 5 men was the Antelope. It was neither the largest nor most luxurious in New Orleans. Conservative businessmen and drummers patronized it for the most part.

Doc parked his roadster a block from the hotel and on the opposite side of the street. He mingled with the pedestrians. These turned—practically without exception—to stare at the amazing Bronze Man. He was far more striking in appearance than the pictures that accompany the strongman advertisements in magazines. The fact that Doc wore no hat added to his prominence.

Before the Antelope Hotel stood a van-like delivery truck. This was marked with the name of a prominent baking concern.

On the truck seat sat the burly, hard-featured crook of a lumber detective—Lefty!

A monkey-like swamp man occupied the seat beside him.

Their actions betrayed nervousness. They glanced repeatedly upward. It seemed they momentarily expected something to happen in one of the upper-floor hotel rooms.

Lefty and his monkey-like companion discovered Doc Savage's great bronze form about simultaneously.

„Get 'im!“ Lefty gulped and turned loose with his revolver. The monkey man followed suit with a sawed-off shotgun. Their shooting started thunder bumping about in the street. But that was about all it did.

Doc Savage had seen the pair before they started their fireworks. By the time the first shot crashed, he was sheltered behind a parked limousine. Glass from the limousine windows sprayed his back. Bullets hit the car body with tinny noises.

A bronze blur, Doc scuttled 50 feet down the walk and calmly seated himself behind a fire hydrant. He had no gun. Indeed, he so rarely found necessity for a weapon that he seldom carried one. He waited.

Shrieking pedestrians were darting about like chickens-in-a-pen into which a hawk had suddenly dived. From the volume and terror of the yelling, one might judge half of them were suffering mortal wounds. As a matter-of-fact, a foppish youth who had a foot-long cigarette holder blown out of his mouth by a shotgun burst was the only casualty.

Lefty and the monkey man—both shooting wildly—emptied their respective weapons. They didn't take time to reload.

„We're gettin' outta here!“ Lefty gulped.

The delivery truck rear wheels gave a spasmodic spin, caught the pavement, and propelled the vehicle away like an explosive.

„Yo' leavin' de others!“ wailed the monkey man.

„Nothin' else to do!“ rapped the cowardly Lefty. „The jig is up with you and me!“

The truck sideswiped a car, careened half across the street, took a corner on 2 screaming wheels ... and was gone.

An instant later, there was a terrific explosion inside the hotel.

* * * * *

Doc Savage's golden eyes lifted, seeking the source of the blast. It was a window far above the street. This window was just flying outward. Torn wood and a shower of bricks followed.

Metal shieked across the street to knock puffs of masonry off the building there. A piece of this metal fell near Doc. It was a common steel ball bearing.

Shrapnel! A blast of shrapnel had been set off in the room registered for by his men!

Doc's big bronze figure flashed across the street and into the hotel. He seized the register. He saw his men had signed for Room 720.

It must be the room in which the shrapnel had been exploded.

Doc sprang for the elevators.

10 feet from them, he halted. One of the cages had just come down. But the door didn't open immediately. Instead, there was a terrific uproar in the cage. It sounded like a gigantic cat-and-dog fight. Loud bangings arose as though a sizable sledge was beating the metal sides of the lift!

Men screeched. They moaned. They sobbed, cursed, blubbered. And through all the bedlam ran a fierce rumbling and roaring as of some big beast in action.

Then silence fell.

The cage doors opened.

Out of the lift walked an individual who should have been the wild man in a circus. He was a bare 5-and-a-half feet in height, but almost equally as wide. He would tip the scales at 260 pounds. He was covered all over with coarse red hair like hog bristles. His eyes were so surrounded by gristle as to resemble little stars twinkling in pits. The rest of his face was incredibly homely.

He carried 5 battered and unconscious men in his arms much as a bellboy carries several suitcases.

„Monk!“ Doc’s great voice seemed to fill all the hotel lobby with a glad ring.

For this remarkable individual was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, one of Doc’s 5 aides. He was called by the only nickname that could possibly fit him—*Monk*. Despite his gorilla-like looks, he was one of the greatest living chemists.

„Hy’ah, Doc!“ Monk grinned from ear-to-ear. He shook his armload of captives. „I been collectin’ rats!“

„You escaped the blast?“ Doc demanded.

„Sure, thanks to your advice. Like we was directed in that message you left on the Danielsen & Haas front door, we registered for one room but got the hotel to give us another one and not put it on the register.“

Monk chuckled. He had a surprisingly mild voice for so huge and homely a man. „We kept a sharp lookout. We saw these rats skulkin’ around and closed in on ‘em right after the blast.“

* * * * *

Doc entered the elevator. Monk turned and followed him inside like a big dog, still carrying his 5 victims under his arms.

The elevator operator was prone on the floor of the cage. There was not a mark on him. He had simply fainted from fright during Monk’s terrific fight.

„Where are the others?“ Doc questioned.

„Reckon they’ve got the rest of them upstairs,“ Monk laughed. „Anyhow, they was goin’ strong when I chased these five into the elevator.“

„What floor they on?“

„The 5th.“

Doc halted the cage at the 5th floor. He got out. Monk trailed him, pausing only to butt the head of one of his captives against the wall when the fellow seemed about to revive. Monk did this without even shifting the prisoner under his arm.

Stifled screeches and moans were coming from a room down the corridor. Doc and Monk approached the sounds.

But they had only taken a few steps when the panel flew out of the door, a torn mess of splinters! Approximately a gallon of reddish, iron-hard knuckles appeared.

„Renny is celebratin’!“ Monk chuckled. „The big lout is gonna haul off and hit a block of iron by mistake someday.“

The fist belonged to Colonel John Renwick. He was honored throughout the World for his feats in Civil Engineering and for his ability to pop the panel out of the stoutest door with his fist. He had a habit of doing this when he felt good. Evidently his spirits were high now.

It was the print of Renny’s gigantic thumb which had signed the blank sheet of paper they had left at the Danielsen & Haas office to show Doc they were in town.

They caught sight of Renny's features through the hole his big fist had made. The face would have surprised a stranger who would naturally have expected to see a wide grin.

It was instead forbidding and solemn. Indeed, it looked as if the owner had just gone to a funeral.

But that was another peculiarity about Renny who was 6'4" and weighed 250. The more joyful the occasion, the more sour he looked.

Another burst of screeches and moans came out of the room.

Doc and Monk entered.

* * * * *

„Glory be!“ grinned Monk. „What're you doin' to that poor feller, Long Tom?“

Long Tom—Major Thomas J. Roberts on the military records—was the weakling of the crowd, judging by appearances. He was undersized, slender, and only fairly set-up. He had pale hair and pale eyes and a somewhat sallow complexion as though he might have spent a lot of his life in a cellar.

His ears were big and thin and pale. And since they were between Doc and Monk and the light, it was almost possible to see through them.

Long Tom sat on a beaten-up swamp man. He was busily engaged with the ends of an electric cord he had torn from a floor lamp. He was tying them to the wrists of the man on whom he sat.

„This monkey don't know what electricity is,“ he snorted. „I'm gonna give a couple of shocks. It might persuade him to tell who the Gray Spider is and where we can get him.“

It was natural that Long Tom's thoughts should turn to Electricity. That was his profession. His reputation in the electrical field had few equals. He was often called in for consultations by the great electrical experts.

A loud moan of agony drew their eyes to the window.

„Another experimenter!“ Monk snorted.

The last member of Doc's group of friends and aids was near the window. He, too, sat on a prisoner. He was tall and gaunt with a half-starved look. His hair was thin and gray at the temples. He had the appearance of a studious scientist rather than an adventurer.

This was *Johnny*—or William Harper Littlejohn to the great men of Archaeology and Geology. Johnny possibly knew more about the structure of the Earth and the habits of Mankind—ancient and modern—than 99-out-of-100 so-called „experts“ on the subjects.

With one hand, Johnny was holding his glasses in the sunlight. The left lens of these spectacles was in reality a very powerful magnifying glass.

Johnny didn't need a left lens since he had practically lost the use of that eye in the Great War. So he carried in its place a magnifier which he could use in his business.

A curl of smoke came from the coat of the man Johnny sat on. The Sun—concentrated by the magnifying lens—was burning the coat.

„Talk!“ Johnny directed his prisoner. „Or I'll put this glass to work on your eyes! It'll burn 'em out in about a minute!“

The captive only glared hate.

A moment later, Long Tom's victim gave a squawk as the electric current tingled through him. Although harmless, the voltage was highly uncomfortable. The man kept a tight lip.

„I hate to discourage you,“ Doc chuckled, „but I'm afraid you won't get anything out of these men. You would have just about as much success trying to scare an Apache Indian into talking.“

„They're peculiar beings, these swamp dwellers,“ Johnny agreed. „Being the offspring of criminals who have fled to the swamps for safety, they have had one rule of existence drummed into them all their lives. That rule is to tell nothing to an outsider no matter what the cost.“

„That's the idea,“ Doc agreed. „Did any of them get away?“

Johnny counted Monk's armload of captives. „Five! And these two make seven. That's are all we saw.“

„That's right,“ Renny agreed.

„Then we'll take them to the hotel where I have some of their friends sleeping,“ Doc replied. „Afterward, we'll find a new hang-out for you fellows. And I'll outline the part you are to play in the festivities.“

They left, bearing the prisoners.

* * * * *

A moment after Doc and his friends vanished, a man sidled out of a room down the corridor.

„What I mean, I was lucky!“ he muttered.

The man was Bugs—the other half of the crooked lumber detective pair. At the start of the fight which had resulted in the downfall of the swamp men, Bugs had had the good fortune to dodge into an empty room without being seen. There he had crouched, preserving his own hide and callous to what happened to his assistants.

He scurried down successive flights of stairs, reached the lobby, and worked across it. Excitement raged in the lobby. Wiremen were arriving, although there was no need of them. Bellboys and guests charged about, adding to the general confusion. Bugs walked outside.

He saw Doc Savage and his friends putting the prisoners into 2 taxicabs. Instantly, he concealed himself behind a fire truck.

Bugs thought fast. He abhorred the idea of following Doc. He feared the big Bronze Man more than the Devil himself! The Devil wasn't „real“ to Bugs but only somebody the preachers shouted about.

But the giant bronze man was real. And entirely too much so!

But if he trailed Doc and his men to their new rendezvous, Bugs knew that he would have something with which to curry the Gray Spider's favor. He decided to take a chance.

He engaged a cab to follow the pair Doc and his men had taken.

The cavalcade led to the little hotel where Doc was storing his drugged prisoners to await transportation to the New York state institution where their criminal tendencies would be cured.

„Huh?“ grunted Bugs, watching the captives being taken inside. „That beats me! I thought they'd be handed to the cops. Oh, well! I'll remember this address and the Gray Spider can come here and turn his swamp snipes loose.“

In one taxicab now, Doc and his men betook themselves to a neat little inn in the French district. Watching from the street, Bugs saw them engage quarters. He trailed inside after they mounted steps to the upper regions.

With revolver in hand, Bugs climbed the stairs. He heard the innkeeper returning. The fellow had installed Doc and his men in their room. Bugs scuffled behind a handy drape with his revolver ready, hoping the gloominess of the hallway would aid in preventing his discovery.

The innkeeper went below without dreaming Bugs was inside.

Bugs crept down the hall. He heard voices. One boomed like a large rock rolling around in a huge drum. He remembered that tone. It belonged to the human leviathan who knocked panels out of doors with his fists.

The corridor was carpeted. On tiptoes, Bugs approached the door.

Something crunched faintly underfoot. He paid no attention. It might be a bit of a cracker or a portion of a breadcrumb. Bending over, Bugs put his ear to the keyhole.

He could hear everything being said in the room!

* * * * *

„This fiend who calls himself the Gray Spider is clever,“ Doc Savage was saying. „I am convinced that to get him, we will have to go after him with a deeply laid plan.“

„Shoot the works!“ Monk chuckled. „I'm r'arin' to go! I could scrap guys like them that tackled us a while ago all day and it wouldn't be more trouble than fighting mosquitoes.“

„You don't *lick* anyone this time,“ Doc told him. „Instead, you use that brain that nobody would suspect you've got. Starting immediately, you are a famous German chemist. You specialized on poison gas. You sold a secret gas formula to an unfriendly country and as a result, you're taking it on the lam. You're hiding out for fear secret agents will kill you. Got it straight?“

„You bet!“ Monk's little eyes glittered.

„All right,“ Doc smiled. „You will strike out into the swamps like a man who is hunting a hiding place. Your purpose, of course, is to let the Gray Spider add you to his organization. In this way—if you don't die of snakebite, the alligators don't eat you, the swamp natives fill you full of lead, or the Gray Spider get suspicious and order you killed—you should learn something.“

Monk's wide grin never budged. „Ain't you the cheerful guy, Doc!“

„Renny“, Doc continued, facing the big fisted engineer, „you will visit the Governor of Louisiana, flying to Baton Rouge this afternoon. He will commission you as a special Forest Ranger. I will telephone him long-distance and see to that. Your engineering training fits you for the forest ranger job. You will go into the swamps and—like Monk—try to learn something definite about the Gray Spider.“

„Want me to pretend to be a crooked Ranger, eh?“ Renny grinned.

„I imagine it would get better results.“

Doc's golden eyes now roved to Long Tom, the electrical wizard.

„You are to tap the phone lines of the large lumber companies of Louisiana and arrange to listen in on any conversation of importance. This will entail hiring a force of expert stenographers, of course, since no man could listen in to 20-or-30 phones simultaneously.“

Long Tom nodded. „I presume it would be best to first tap the lines to the companies we know are in the power of the Gray Spider. Worldwide Sawmills, Bayou Sash & Door, and so on.“

„That’s the idea.“

It was to Johnny that Doc’s gaze now came. The gaunt, half-starved geologist-archaeologist grinned boyishly.

„What is my part in this quest of the Gray Spider?“ he asked.

„It’s the toughest job of all, Johnny,“ Doc told him seriously. „I’d tackle it myself except that the Gray Spider has my description. You are the only other man fitted for the job, thanks to your knowledge of savage peoples and their religious beliefs and superstitions.“

„Meaning?“ Johnny inquired.

„That you are to enter the swamps as a high priest of Voodoo!“ Doc replied.

* * * * *

Johnny nodded eagerly. „That is right up my alley! I made an extensive study of voodooism in the southern United States, Haiti, and Africa.“

„This is highly dangerous,“ Doc warned.

Johnny sobered instantly. „I know it. But I can handle the job!“

„How is your command of the gibberish that these swamp men speak?“

„Only fair,“ Johnny admitted. „But it will get by. I speak the French patois of Haiti fluently. I will pretend to be a high priest of voodoo from some other country.“

„Okay.“ Doc got to his feet. He stepped swiftly to the door. He opened the panel.

A man lay outside in the hall. He was curled up and breathing regularly as though asleep.

„Well for cryin’ out loud!“ Monk gulped. „Who’s he?“

„He is called *Bugs*,“ Doc replied. „He’s one of that pair of crooked lumber detectives.“

„But what’s happened to ‘im?“

„He crept up to the keyhole to listen,“ Doc said dryly. „And he went to sleep on the job.“

Monk snorted. „Quit running around the bush, Doc! What put him to sleep like that?“

Doc Savage indicated several small glass bulbs on the floor. These were thin-walled, about the size of grapes, and held a colorless fluid.

„A very powerful anesthetic,“ he explained. „I spread them here as a matter of precaution before we started talking. Bugs simply had the misfortune to step on one.“

It was this which Bugs had mistaken for a bit of cracker or a crumb of dry bread crushing underfoot ... although he never did discover that fact.

Chapter IX

The Swamp Encounter.

Monk departed to become an outlaw chemist fleeing from spies of a foreign country. Renny left to get his commission as special forest ranger. Long Tom ambled out full of his plans for a phone-tapping campaign such as had probably never been equaled for widespread scope.

Doc and Johnny added Bugs to the growing collection of sleepers in the hotel room. In fact, so extensive was his conquest becoming that Doc engaged an additional room. He made sure each of the villains was properly under the influence of the drug which kept them slumbering and out of mischief.

„12 ... 13 ... 14,“ Johnny counted them. „If this keeps up, you’ll have to hire a special train to upstate New York! They’ll be a lot of bother and expense.“

„But they’ll be 14 upright citizens when they’re turned loose from that institution,“ Doc replied.

„I don’t understand how it’s done,“ Johnny chuckled. „I mean, how one of these rats can be taken and made into an honest man. And that whether he wants to be made an honest man or not!“

„It’s too complex to go into now,“ Doc told him. „It is done by many methods. Most undergo intricate brain operations that wipe out all memory of their past. Then they are taught a trade—by which to make a living—as well as upright citizenship.

„In other words, we merely reduce their minds to a *blank* and give them the sort of training they should have had. When they’re released, crime does not occur to them simply because they don’t know they’ve ever been criminals.“

They left the hotel where the prisoners slept. Going to his plane at the airport, Doc secured a metal case about the size of an old-fashioned telescope bag such as granddad used to carry. They retired to a room they engaged at a private residence.

„Strip,“ Doc commanded.

Johnny obeyed. Doc opened the case. It proved to be a most complete makeup box.

With ingredients from the box, Doc proceeded to dye Johnny’s hide a muddy yellow from head-to-foot. He clipped Johnny’s somewhat thin hair, dyed it an intense black, and gave it a permanent curl.

„None of this stuff will wash off,“ Doc reminded.

„Holy smokes!“ Johnny ejaculated. „You mean I gotta go around lookin’ like this until my coloring wears off?“

„Sure,“ Doc chuckled. „That’ll only be 6 months-or-so!“

* * * * *

Doc Savage continued to work over Johnny. He stood back at last.

„From now on, you’re in blackface,“ he smiled.

Where Johnny had sat, there now sprawled a lanky, scrawny-looking yellowish-brown man. He had thick lips. His nose looked as if it had been stepped on during his youth. Several realistic scars gave his eyes a mean cast.

„Bien!“ ejaculated Johnny, imitating the conglomerate dialect of the swamp men. „Yo‘ haf feenished, non?“

„And how!“ Doc declared. „You‘ll do. What’s your name, swamp boy?“

„Name ees plain *Pete*. Mees swell name, *Pete* ees. Oui?“

„The name will do,“ Doc replied, judiciously. „But you’re about a foot-and-a-half taller than the rest of the swamp dwellers. Hopefully they will overlook that.“

The 2 men now separated.

Doc Savage returned to the Danielsen & Haas building to keep watch over Big Eric and his daughter and to await reports from his men.

Johnny swaggered down into the foreign quarter. Doc had supplied him with a number of voodoo charms. These Johnny exhibited quite often, toying with them when he saw he was under the scrutiny of any one who looked as if he might belong to the voodoo *Cult of the Moccasin*.

The net result was that he wasted an afternoon. From the look of things, New Orleans might never have heard of any kind of a voodoo cult, much less the *Cult of the Moccasin* with the fiendish mastermind Gray Spider at its head.

„I‘ll have to tackle the swamp,“ Johnny muttered.

Then realizing he had slipped out of his dialect, he added: „Me, I do not t‘ink much of de swamp! Whew! I gotta even do my thinkin‘ in this crazy lingo to play safe!“

Johnny now stuck himself in a telephone booth and called Doc Savage.

„My results so far are what the little boy shot at,“ he reported. „Thought I‘d tell you I probably won‘t communicate with you again for a while.“

„Go to the Lake Ponchartrain waterfront near the old Spanish fort,“ Doc directed.

„Huh?“ grunted Johnny, much surprised.

„Be there shortly after dark,“ Doc added.

„Okay,“ Johnny grinned. „I‘ll be there.“

* * * * *

Dusk had dropped a steamy, clammy grasp upon New Orleans and environs. A faint, hot fog lent the moonlight pallor. The Gulf breeze—stirring the fog—made it seem as though the air were full of fine ashes. On the horizon in all directions, heat lightning flickered luridly.

A scrawny and sinister-looking gentleman of a pale-brown color, Johnny lurked in City Park near the old Spanish fort. Long, narrow Bayou St. John emptied into placid Lake Ponchartrain nearby.

Johnny settled behind an aromatic magnolia shrub and listened. He could hear cars honking occasionally on distant Gentilly Road and on nearer park drives. Behind him to the South, the lights of the New Orleans business district made a vast glow in the steaming night.

Suddenly there reached Johnny’s ears a series of droning noises. It was as if someone was holding a bumblebee nearby and letting it buzz its wings at intervals of a half-minute or so.

The sound came closer. Johnny recognized it.

„A seaplane taxiing along the lake edge,“ he decided aloud.

Soon the buzzing quality left the motor spurts. They became violent hisses. The exhaust had been cut into mufflers.

„Doc’s speed job!“ Johnny concluded. „It’s the only craft I know of fitted with silencers.“

He grinned. Doc was going to get him into the swamp by plane. That would simplify things.

Johnny knew that Doc must have had floats installed on the big speed ship during the afternoon. The craft was equipped for quick installation of a type of float commonly carried in stock by large plane-supply concerns.

Boldly, Johnny advanced for the lake edge. He did not expect danger. He knew positively he had not been trailed here. So he took no pains to muffle his footsteps or keep to the shadows.

That was a mistake.

Swi-s-s-h-h-h!

Something sailed out of the blackness beneath a nearby tree. It settled on Johnny’s neck. It tightened. It jerked him from his feet.

Johnny clawed at the thing that had him. It was a lasso of thin piano wire. It yanked again, digging into the flesh of his throat.

3 scrawny swamp men pitched from the murk beneath the tree. One flashed an ordinary cane knife which was honed like a razor.

„Non!“ gritted one of his fellows. „Gray Spider ees want talk to dis scamp!“ He knocked the knife aside.

Johnny kicked a man in the middle. He booted so hard that he distinctly felt his heel push a stomach in and jar against a backbone. The fellow sailed ungracefully away.

A club rapped Johnny’s head, causing a burst of colored lights and lances of flame. That—and the wire drawing steadily tighter around his neck—sapped his strength. His struggles weakened. They became slower. He was like a clockwork toy that was running down.

„Bien!“ puffed one of the Gray Spider’s swamp men. „Eet ees about over.“

It was ... but not like the swamp man expected.

There suddenly wafted over the scene of strife an uncanny trilling note. It was a whistle ... and yet not a whistle. It had a low and mellow quality that might be likened to the song of some rare bird of the jungle. Or the melodious but untuned note of a wayward breeze filtering among the pipes of a great organ.

It seemed to come from everywhere. Although but half-conscious, Johnny heard it.

The sound of Doc Savage!

* * * * *

The sound had a remarkable effect on Johnny. Renewed energy flowed into his faltering muscles. He struck and flailed fiercely.

Out of the night came flashing a mighty bronze form! The charge of a lion would hardly have been more disastrous to the Gray Spider’s two men.

Only 2 blows—coming so close together that they sounded like 2 men clapping hands simultaneously—and the pair went tumbling like rabbits shot on the run! It was doubtful if either had seen what caused their downfall.

The 3rd man—disabled by Johnny—writhed and moaned nearby, entirely helpless.

Doc freed Johnny's neck from the wire noose.

„You're a handy guy to have around, Doc,“ Johnny laughed shakily.

Then he noticed that the seaplane still taxied out on the lake. It was nowhere near shore.

„Huh? I thought you were in the plane.“

„Ham is flying the bus,“ Doc explained. „It occurred to me after you called that the Gray Spider might be doing some wire-tapping himself. In that case, he might have heard us make the appointment to meet here. So I dropped around merely to play safe. And here we are.“

„Yeah, thanks to you!“ Johnny said wryly, feeling his sore neck. „One thing that is fortunate. On my call to you, I didn't say a thing which would give the Gray Spider a clue to my identity or purpose.“

„Sure. There's no harm done,“ Doc agreed. „In fact, we've added 3 more prisoners to our menagerie. Every little bit helps.“

The plane now taxied close in. Slender and waspish, Ham waded ashore. He held his sword cane high over his head and said some uncomplimentary things about the mud underfoot.

„You are to take the plane into the swamp,“ Doc told Johnny. „Park it at some spot where nobody will find it. Use the radio to get in touch with me. Long Tom has installed a receiving and transmitting station in it. You will, of course, use the Mayan language so that no one will understand our talk.“

„Right-o,“ Johnny agreed.

„There's some stuff in the ship that you might need,“ Doc added.

Johnny now waded out to the plane, hauled himself up on one of the newly installed metal floats, and sprang into the cabin. The silenced motors sped up. The propellers churned the air shrilly. Out across Lake Ponchartrain the craft streaked, then leaped into the air.

Johnny banked for the swamp country. He was an expert pilot thanks to the teaching of Doc Savage. The remarkable bronze man seemed gifted with the ability to impart much of his own vast knowledge and skill to those whom he taught. It was this strange quality which had turned his 5 friends into accomplished airmen, second only to Doc himself.

* * * * *

The foggy area proved to be only in the vicinity of New Orleans. Johnny soon left it behind. He kept the silencers on the motors, made the cabin airtight, turned on the apparatus which supplied artificial air, and flew very high—about 25,000 feet. He used powerful binoculars to observe the terrain below.

A narrow bayou wound like a frayed silver ribbon through the marshy jungle which looked from that height like so much green velvet. Johnny observed a few tow steamers escorting long, flexible log rafts.

An occasional sawmill town made a spotty patch of lights. These sawmill towns differed from other settlements in that they were always scattered about a group of mill buildings—sawing structure, kilns, rough-dry and finish storing sheds, planing mill, machine shops, and other shacks.

The sawmill towns became scarcer. River-like bayous—the only avenue of transportation in the swamp—ceased to gleam in the Moonlight. Tall trees suitable for timber also became scattered.

Johnny knew he was over the wildest portion of the great swamps. He cut the ignition switches of the 3 motors. He threw a lever. This changed the characteristics of the plane wings, giving the remarkable craft a less steep gliding angle and a much slower landing speed.

The great ship settled upon the swamp like a monster bat with wings outstretched and paralyzed.

Johnny selected a tiny bayou. It resembled a spot where a huge finger had scraped away the festering layers of swamp vegetation, revealing the shining surface of a mirror. The mirror, of course, was water.

Lightly, the plane dunked its floats in the water. It coasted ahead. The wake it left fanned outward, seeming to throw the bayou into shimmering convulsions.

„If I just don't hit the bank too hard...“ Johnny muttered.

He didn't. The ship grounded with a slight jar after sloughing through tall cane and under heavy overhanging branches.

Johnny clambered out. Walking along the wing, he pulled down armloads of the clammy aerial moss from the vines and drooping branches overhead.

This moss was the variety called „Old Man's Beard“ by the natives. Johnny used it to cover the wings and fuselage of the plane so that there would exist less likelihood of its being seen.

That job completed, he extracted a large leather pouch from the plane. It was this which contained the stuff Doc had told Johnny that he might need. After one look at the pouch contents, Johnny chuckled.

„Doc foresees just about everything!“ he declared.

Johnny thrust a rather unusual pistol inside his shirt. This weapon was in reality a wonderfully compact machine-gun—undoubtedly the smallest and most efficient killing mechanism in existence.

The unique weapon was the invention of Doc Savage. They were manufactured secretly for him. Only his 5 aides were supplied with them.

Johnny left the plane.

* * * * *

The swamp was an indescribable tangle. Vines and creepers made a more impenetrable mass than any barbed-wire entanglement Johnny had encountered in the War. The gray, scaly moss hung so thick at times that it seemed he was entirely bundled up in the horsehair-like stuff.

In the next hour, Johnny made less than a mile.

„I can see why a criminal fleeing into this district would be safe!“ he muttered. „Nobody could get in to grab him!“

Johnny was aware, however, that there must be secret trails through the morass. Trails known only to the evil ignorant colony, the offspring of criminals who had spent their lives here—the little monkey men!

It was dark. Although moonlight pressed brightly upon the top of the jungle mat, few of the beams penetrated to the treacherous mess of foul water, mud, roots, and creepers that formed the earth.

Johnny came to higher ground. He listened. Owls were making quite a racket. Somewhere near, a hideous bawling arose. Johnny knew what it was. Alligators!

He wet his lips. The 'gators had a grisly way of grabbing a man's leg, then whirling over-and-over until the leg was torn completely off.

Then—in the neighborhood—Johnny heard a sound which gave him a distinct start.

Apparently it was a child sobbing. He strained his ears. It was a child sobbing!

Puzzled, wary, Johnny made for the sound. The ground became higher. He reached a small glade.

Huddled in the middle of the glade—as if seeking the moonlight—was a small boy. The tot could not be more than 4 yrs old. He was scared. An owl hooted stentoriously at the glade edge and the little boy emitted a series of squawls. He could not have made a bigger racket were he being devoured alive!

There seemed to be no one else near. Johnny advanced.

The little boy saw him. His sobbing stopped. He raced for Johnny, his stubby legs churning through the rank weeds.

„Ise losted!“ he proclaimed in a small and trembling voice.

„That's tough, skipper!“ Johnny chuckled. „What'd you do? Go rabbit huntin' and follow the rabbit off?“

„How did oo know?“ the tot inquired blankly.

Johnny grinned widely. „That's the way little boys usually get lost.“

However, Johnny was wishing heartily the little boy had never heard of a rabbit hunt. Finding him complicated things. Johnny, of course, would have to see his charge home.

Racking his brain, Johnny recalled having noted the light of a house a mile-or-two distant just before he landed his plane. He decided to take the shaver there.

He set out with the small boy riding his shoulder. They had covered most of a mile when affairs took a surprising turn.

A flashlight sprayed against Johnny and the tot.

„There he is!“ bellowed a coarse voice. „It's what I told you! That dirty, voodoo-worshippin' swamp man kidnapped him! Lucky we happened onto him before he got away with the kid!“

„Daddy!“ cried the tot at the coarse voice.

„Put the kid down!“ snarled a second man behind the flashlight.

Johnny lowered the child. The shaver ran for his father.

Johnny started to explain. But he was not given time.

„Teach 'im to go kidnappin' kids!“ bellowed the coarse voice. „Kill 'im! Blow his head off!“

A shotgun loosened a terrific gush of flame almost in Johnny's face.

Chapter X

Voodoo's Domain.

Johnny thought faster than the man with the gun...

...by about 18 inches! The shotgun charge missed him that much. With a bound, he was out of the flashlight glare.

The flash stabbed wildly in pursuit of him. In his excitement, the man who held it let his finger slip off the button. Darkness clapped down.

It was the rush of sepia blackness that gave Johnny his big idea. He was thinking.

Why was this father so enraged and so certain his small son had been kidnapped? What had caused him to leap to the conclusion so swiftly? Why had he been determined to slay Johnny without waiting for an explanation? What made the enraged man act as if Johnny was a foul rat to be scotched without mercy?

The wrathful father had mistaken Johnny for one of the villainous swamp denizens. A voodoo worshiper! Certain obscene rites of the voodoo fiends usually involved the blood from a human sacrifice—a child!

The father thought his tot was being seized for a hideous voodoo ceremony.

Johnny's keen brain raced. He saw suddenly that this situation was made to his order!

He darted forward. He scooped up the small boy. He sprang into the brush. The father dared not shoot—even should he have had the chance—for fear of hitting his offspring.

The shaver was quiet. He seemed to be enjoying the excitement. This was not to Johnny's liking.

„Bellow for your dad, skipper!“ he commanded. „Make him think I'm eating your ears off!“

Obediently, the boy let out a piercing howl for „Daddy!“

„He's over there!“ shouted the frenzied father. „Follow him! Don't let the voodoo devil get away with my son!“

Johnny put on speed.

„Kinda onery to fool your old man like this,“ he told the shaver. „But maybe it'll teach him not to be so sudden on the trigger. If I had jumped a little less quick, the World would have lost its second best geologist.“

Johnny was careful to make considerable racket and not go so swiftly that his pursuers would lose track of him. Abruptly sighting the lights of several houses, he swung to one side. Evidently what he had seen was a trading post where the swamp dwellers bartered muskrat skins, moss, fish, and crabs for their few necessities.

A few minutes later, he stopped his dawdling. He put every ounce of effort into racing through the swamp with the small boy.

For bloodhounds were now on his trail! Evidently they had been secured from the trading post. His trailers gained rapidly!

„This isn't quite so funny now!“ Johnny muttered. If those enraged pursuers caught him, he was certain to be shot-or-hanged without delay. Johnny looked exactly like one of the fiendish swamp denizens and as such would be considered lower than a rat.

Mile-after-mile, Johnny plunged ahead. His legs ached. Each breath felt as if a mowing machine-sickle was being sawed up-and-down his throat. A lesser man than Johnny would have collapsed long ago, for Johnny's remarkable physical quality was his endurance. Ordinarily, he was tireless. But carrying the shaver and outrunning the bloodhound pack was taxing even his abilities.

He reached a break in the jungle where moonlight poured down like transparent silver.

Suddenly a man appeared before him. The fellow jabbed out a long-barreled squirrel rifle.

„Who yo' be?“ he rumbled.

* * * * *

Johnny carefully kept his face expressionless. This was exactly what he had been hoping for! The man was one of the yellowish-brown, monkey-like swamp clan!

True, the fellow was the largest of the tribe Johnny had seen. And he had a somewhat more intelligent face than usual. A good muscular development showed under the torn sleeves of his shirt.

„Bien!“ ejaculated Johnny, lapsing into the conglomerate swamp dialect. „Yo' show me way to lose de bloodhounds! Me, I pay yo' to do dat! Oui?“

„Vat yo' do?“ inquired the swamp man suspiciously. „Why dey want yo?“

Johnny indicated the small boy who was peering with mingled interest and fear at the sinister-looking swamp man.

„Me, I grab dis white pickaninny,“ Johnny explained.

„Dam'! Why yo' do dat?“

Here Johnny drew on his knowledge of voodoo. He explained—with many a hocus-pocus gesture—that he was no less than a high priest of voodoo!

The swamp man was impressed. He furtively produced a charm which looked suspiciously like it was carved out of a human arm bone.

„Yo' want white pickaninny to make beeg voodoo sacrifice?“ he muttered.

He was a voodoo believer. As such, he would help Johnny.

„Yo' got de idea!“ said Johnny.

Meantime, the bloodhounds were rapidly drawing nearer. The beasts set up a fearsome baying and yipping. Frightened owls and other birds flashed over the clearing in flight, resembling darksome, big, wind-blown leaves.

„Sacre!“ the swamp man swore softly. „Yo' have to leave white pickaninny. No can take heem!“

„Non!“ growled Johnny, pretending great reluctance. He added that the voodoo dieties demanded a sacrifice of the blood of a white child in the good old-fashioned manner.

„Yo' gotta leave heem!“ insisted the swamp man.

„Non!“ Johnny retorted stubbornly. „Eef we can escape, we can take white brat along.“

The real reason for leaving the little boy behind now came out—not that Johnny had the slightest idea from the first of letting him fall into the hands of the voodoo men.

The Gray Spider did not want the attention of the Law drawn to his clan of swamp devils. To kidnap the white boy would do just that. Therefore, either Johnny had to leave his prize behind or take his chances with the bloodhounds and the shotguns.

Johnny feigned vast disappointment. He boosted the small boy to a branch, strapped him there with his belt, and followed the swamp man.

Covering only a couple of rods, Johnny's guide waded into a cluster of canes. He bent the tall, rush-like stems aside. A small pirogue—dug out of a single log—was concealed there. The 2 men entered. Both dipped crude paddles.

The little craft handled almost as easily as a birch-bark canoe even if it was hollowed out of a log. They shot away. Behind them, they heard shouts.

„Here he is!“ the father called, finding his son safe. „The voodoo devil had to leave him!“

Johnny smiled slightly. No harm had been done. The father had been punished with a little additional worry for his too hasty attempt to shoot Johnny. The shaver had put in an exciting hour-or-two in the swamp with no danger to himself.

And Johnny was in a fair way to be welcomed with open arms by the voodoo-sacrificing swamp denizens. They would look on him with admiring eyes. Hadn't he tried to get a white child for the human sacrifice!

* * * * *

Johnny was amazed at the speed they were making. On other occasions, he had seen natives go swiftly through a jungle that seemed impenetrable. But never anything quite like this!

At times his escort propelled the pirogue straight for a seemingly solid bank. But water always „materialized“ under the keel. Sometimes the watery trail was completely concealed by cane and reeds growing out of it.

„Yo' sure know de way!“ he flattered his guide.

„Oui! I oughta! Me, I live all my life here.“

„What yo' name?“

„Buck Boontown,“ replied the swamp man.

Buck Boontown, Johnny reflected, seemed to be of a somewhat higher mentality than the other swamp dwellers just as he was a better physical specimen.

Nevertheless, the fellow was a vicious character. His belonging to the voodoo cult showed that.

„Where yo' come from?“ demanded Buck Boontown.

Johnny now spun an elaborate story. He had been all over World studying the fine points of voodoo sorcery. And now he was visiting this region where he had heard the art had attained a high degree of perfection. Or so he said.

This vaguely missed being an outright fib. But Buck Boontown ate it up. Johnny—or plain „Pete“ as Johnny introduced himself—made an instant hit with Buck!

„We got plenty big voodoo man in dese swamps,“ Buck Boontown said impressively. „Yo' ever hear of de Gray Spider?“

„Me, I t'ink so,“ Johnny said vaguely. „Nothin' but talk, though.“

„Bien!“ ejaculated Buck Boontown. „Maybe Gray Spider take yo' into his Inner Circle.“

Johnny put forth a distinct effort to keep his face blank. This was getting hot!

„Ees yo' in de Inner Circle?“ he questioned.

„I sure is!“

Here was luck!

„Right out of the hat, I picked a guy who is on the inside of the *Cult of the Moccasin!*“ Johnny complimented himself silently. „And what I mean, I believe he's on the inside!“

„Can yo' guide to where Gray Spider ees hang out, non?“ he asked aloud.

„Hees hangout at Castle of de Moccasin,“ retorted Buck Boontown. „Me, I can sure guide yo' dere. But first, I gotta find out if de Gray Spider want yo'.“

Buck Boontown was on the inside, Johnny knew now. He settled to his paddling, elated that he was meeting with such good fortune. He felt he was drawing the net of Doc Savage's vengeance tighter about the sinister Gray Spider.

* * * * *

The night was about gone before they reached their destination. In the meantime, Johnny learned that Buck Boontown had been en route into the swamp when he chanced to hear the bloodhounds. Knowing they were after some criminal, he had stopped. It was the law of the swamp dwellers that all criminals were to be aided to escape.

As a matter-of-fact, Johnny had been aware of this far-from-honorable creed. That was why he had deliberately made himself a „fugitive“.

Their journey ended at a small hill in the swamp. This was populated by hordes of dogs, only a few less children, and a number of evil-looking men and women. There was an even dozen ramshackle huts.

A long shed held crudely baled moss. Evidently it awaited transport to a trade boat. Muskrat traps, seines, and fish lines festooned from the shack eaves.

Johnny stepped from the dugout canoe to what he thought was a log. He got the start of his life when the „log“ walked out of the water with him.

It was a giant gator! The big reptile was picketed with a rope like a cow. It was apparently a pet for it made no effort to annex Johnny's leg.

„Yo' can sleep in de moss shed,“ suggested Buck Boontown.

And there Johnny spent the rest of the night. He slept soundly although subconsciously alert for the slightest hostile sound.

A tremendous dog fight—punctuated with the howls of pickaninnies trying to break up the fray—awakened him. This seemed to be a usual morning occurrence since none of the grown-ups paid particular attention.

Soon after this, a series of piercing shrieks came from one of the largest shacks. The sounds were inhuman, terrible! They gave Johnny a crawling sensation along his spine. They set him to fingering his gun uneasily.

„What is de racket?“ he asked a swamp man.

„Eet is Sill Boontown,“ explained the fellow. He tapped his head, then made a corkscrew movement in the air with his finger. „Hees got bats in de head.“

Investigating, Johnny discovered Buck Boontown was married. The swamp man's wife was slightly better looking than the other females of the settlement. Although that was not saying much.

The couple had one child—a son about 18—named Sill. He was mentally unbalanced, crazy. He had been that way, Johnny learned, since a blow on the head suffered from a falling tree 2 years ago.

It was a hideous, squalid colony here in the swamp. The people were an admixture of many races. They retained the bad qualities of them all and the good points of none.

The moment he judged the time propitious, Johnny began to exhibit his voodoo hocus-pocus. To the usual repellent rites and incantations of a voodoo man, Johnny added a few masterly touches of his own.

First, he „hypnotized“ the pet alligator. He did this by secretly breaking one of Doc's glass balls of anesthetic under the reptile's snout. The trick created quite a furor. Johnny's stock as a man of magic went soaring.

Using simple acids, Johnny made a bucket of water change color at his command.

His crowning feat was to drive a long, thin rod of steel through his own brain. This he accomplished by having a tubing in his hat. The steel rod was flexible. It was guided around his head by the tubing, although the impression was that it passed directly through his skull.

This made the eyes of his audience stand out until they could almost have been knocked off with a stick!

* * * * *

The next day, Johnny's performance paid dividends. Buck Boontown had disappeared. Now he returned.

„Man here who want talk wit' yo“, he muttered to Johnny.

„Ees he from de Gray Spider?“ Johnny demanded.

Buck Boontown replied sharply: „Me, I don' know nothin' about nobody by name of Gray Spider!“

Obviously someone had put the „bee in Buck's bonnet“ and warned him not to talk. Johnny silently berated himself for a lummoX. Why hadn't he trailed Buck Boontown when he disappeared? The swamp man had apparently gotten in touch with the Gray Spider.

„Bien!“ said Johnny. „Vare ees de man who want to talk wit' me?“

„Here I am, buddy!“ said a harsh voice.

Whirling, Johnny eyed the speaker.

The man was wide and thick of limb. He wore muck-caked overalls. Underneath these, he was attired in something the true swamp man never saw—a collar and necktie.

A brilliant silk mask obscured his face. It was even tied at the back of his head so as to hide the color of his hair. And he wore all-concealing cheap cotton gloves. It was impossible to as much as glimpse the hue of his skin.

Johnny, however, knew by the sound of his words that he was a white man.

„Buck Boontown tells me you're quite a voodoo guy,“ growled the man.

„Oui!“ said Johnny. „That ees right.“

„And he says you want to join the Gray Spider’s outfit?“

„Eet pay good?“

„I’ll say it’ll pay you good!“

„Bien! Then I join.“

The other man laughed shortly. „I’m not so sure that I’ll let you join. I must know more about you before we start talking that over.“

In his best dialect, Johnny repeated substantially the same story that he had told Buck Boontown. He told it as earnestly as he could. A great deal might come from this, for Johnny thought he was under the scrutiny of the Gray Spider himself!

„Ees yo’ de Gray Spider?“ he asked boldly.

The masked man tensed visibly. He put a hand in a pocket that bulged as if it might hold a gun.

„Listen! Don’t go asking silly questions!“ he snarled.

„Oui!“ said Johnny, shrugging.

The other man did not renew the talk immediately.

Finally he said, „I’m gonna do some thinkin’ about you. Hang around here for a few days. A man who knows voodoo like you would come in handy. But there can’t be no chances taken, see!“

Johnny saw. He also thought he saw that this man was the Gray Spider. If he could just get a look at the fellow’s face...

But that was too dangerous.

Johnny was suddenly seized with an idea.

* * * * *

„Be yo’ goin’ to New O’leans?“ he questioned.

„What’s it to you?“ snarled the masked man.

Johnny replied with the declaration that he had left New Orleans in a hurry. As a consequence, a considerable sum of his money had remained behind. He was careful to lend the impression difficulties with the police had led to his sudden departure.

He gave the masked man the address of the room where Doc Savage’s skilled bronzed fingers had applied the makeup. This room was in a private residence in New Orleans.

„Could yo’ bring me my money?“ Johnny finished. „Yo’ bein“ de Gray Spider, yo’ ees to be trusted.“

„Who said anything about me being the Gray Spider?“ rapped the other.

„Non, non ... nobody!“ Johnny said hastily. „Weel yo’ bring my money?“

„I’ll bring it,“ replied the man.

A subtle „something“ in his tone told Johnny that the man intended to do nothing of the sort. This didn’t bother Johnny greatly because there was no money. The important thing was to get the man to go to the private residence in New Orleans.

Johnny thought the fellow would do that for the dishonest purpose of seizing the money and keeping it himself. Johnny had purposefully named the sum as amounting to nearly \$20,000. Even the Gray Spider would hardly pass up as juicy a steal as that.

The masked man now departed.

Evading the attention of Buck Boontown and the other inhabitants of the scrawny settlement, Johnny trailed the masked man. He could hear the fellow crashing along ahead but did not catch sight of him.

Johnny soon turned to the left. He found his hidden plane in the morass. Pawing the draping moss aside, he entered the cabin. In a minute, he was in radio-telephone communication with Doc Savage.

„I sent this guy to that room where you put on my makeup,“ he told Doc, after explaining the situation. „You can grab him there.“

„Do you think he is the Gray Spider?“ Doc’s voice came back clear as a fine bell. They spoke in the language of ancient Maya, of course.

„I cannot tell for sure,“ Johnny replied. „My guess would be that he is.“

„I’ll hold a reception for him,“ Doc said grimly. „Good work, Johnny! Go back and continue as you were.“

„Okay,“ said Johnny. He *clicked* off the radio-telephone apparatus and left the plane.

Climbing a nearby tree, he glanced about over the steaming, festering swamp. It seemed to extend to the horizon in all directions.

For an instant, Johnny caught sight of the masked man and discovered that the fellow had now removed his mask. But he was too far away for Johnny to discern details about his face.

The fellow flushed up a cloud of blackbirds, then trudged out-of-sight in the morass.

Johnny slid back down his tree and moved toward Buck Boontown’s settlement. His work for Doc Savage here in the voodoo swamps was progressing nicely.

Chapter XI

The Well-Known Egg.

The man who had worn the mask swore at the cloud of blackbirds Johnny had seen him flush up. His profanity had a happy note. He seemed highly satisfied with the World.

„That voodoo man is a dumb one!“ he chuckled. „Thinks I will bring him his money! Nearly 20,000 bucks. Imagine that!“

He shied a clod at the little lizards racing up a palmetto.

„That money goes in my own pocket and stays there!“ he declared aloud. „It’s just so much gravy!“

In the course of a couple of hours, he reached a bayou where lay a small motorboat. This sped him a number of miles, finally depositing him near a highway. A powerful coupe raced him into New Orleans.

„Now to get the money,“ he grinned.

The fellow had certainly swallowed Johnny’s bait, hook, line, and sinker.

It was late afternoon. Canal Street seethed with office workers going home. Newspaper delivery boys dashed along the residential streets flinging folded papers onto porches. A popcorn man was doing a big business with school children.

The man who had worn the mask parked his car near the address Johnny had given him. He got out. Carefully, he surveyed the scene.

A man was digging a ditch in front of the house. There was no one else in sight.

The man who had worn the mask swung up the walk to the house.

As he passed the ditch, the man in it knocked the dirt off his shovel by banging it loudly on the cement walk.

The visitor noticed this but thought nothing peculiar about it. He strode across the porch and rang the bell.

A thin, piping voice—it sounded like the tone of an old man on his last legs—invited, „Come in!“

„Fine!“ thought the man. „If there’s nobody here but an old duffer, it will be simpler in case it comes to rough stuff.“

He opened the door. He didn’t even trouble to have his hand in his pocket with his revolver. He stepped in boldly.

His jaw promptly fell! His hands whipped spasmodically for the weapon in his pocket. But they never reached it.

Bronze lacquered talons of tempered steel seized them!

A moment later, the lightning seemed to strike his jaw. He went suddenly to sleep.

The fellow’s slack form lifted and came to rest under Doc Savage’s mighty bronze arm.

Doc strode outside. It was he who had imitated the piping tones of an old man and invited his victim indoors.

The man was climbing out of his ditch. He scratched about in the soft dirt he had dug up and produced a black, innocent-looking cane that was in reality a sword cane. It was Ham.

Ham stared at Doc’s limp burden.

For the love of mud!“ he exclaimed. „Is that what our elaborate trap netted us?“

„The scheme did sort of lay the well-known egg,“ Doc admitted wryly.

Ham twirled his sword cane and scowled at the face of the captive.

The man was Lefty—the survivor of the crooked lumber-detective pair.

* * * * *

„It wasn’t Johnny’s fault we didn’t get the Gray Spider,“ Doc explained as they rode downtown. „He had never seen Lefty. And anyway, the man was wearing a mask when he talked to Johnny.“

„Any chance of this endangering Johnny?“ Ham pondered.

„Probably not,“ Doc replied. „This man undoubtedly came to get that money and keep it for himself. Hence, he would not report its existence to the Gray Spider. So the mastermind has no way of knowing Johnny sent him into a trap.“

They added Lefty to the ever-growing collection of sleepers waiting transportation to the upstate New York criminal-curing institution.

„We’ll pay Long Tom a visit,“ Doc decided.

They found the pale blond electrical wizard in a long, narrow room in an office building off Canal Street. Hugging each wall of this room was a row of small tables.

Competent-looking young women sat at the tables. They wore telephone headsets. Their fingers grasped pointed pencils. Stenographic notebooks lay before them, open and ready.

At one end of the room stood a radio-telephone transmitter-receiver.

Each young lady was a highly skilled stenographer. They were making records of every word of conversation to go over the phone lines of the leading lumber companies of the South.

Long Tom had done a miraculous piece of work considering the short time he had been at it.

„Got anything?“ Doc inquired.

„Only one thing of real importance,“ Long Tom replied. „That is the tip that an important conversation should take place soon between one of the Gray Spider’s chief lieutenants and the subordinate who has taken control of Worldwide Sawmills.“

„Any idea what the talk will be about?“

„Nope. All I know is that the man at Worldwide Sawmills has been tipped that one of the big boys will give him a ring soon.“ Long Tom waved at a loudspeaker at the end of the room. „I’ve arranged to cut the conversation into that loudspeaker when it comes in so we can all listen.“

„Fine,“ smiled Doc.

He said nothing more but waited. Apparently he was entirely unaware of the panic of feminine hearts that he was causing among the battery of stenographers.

It was to be suspected that Long Tom had exercised an eye for pulchritude as well as efficiency when he hired his working force. He had picked a number of peaches! And the glances they threw in Doc’s direction would have put life into a stone man. They had, however, exactly no effect on the mighty Man of Bronze. The stenographers didn’t know it, but Doc was absolutely woman-proof.

„I’m gonna have to kick Doc out of here before these girls will go back to work!“ Long Tom grumbled.

At this point, one young lady held up a hand.

„The call you have been waiting for!“ she said.

Long Tom sprang to a panel. He threw switches. Out of the loudspeaker at the end of the room came a humming note that showed it was cut in on a telephone line through an amplifier.

* * * * *

The hum persisted for some seconds.

„Hello, you at Worldwide!“ said a harsh voice.

„Hello yourself!“ growled the other man.

„How much you got on hand?“

„Quarter-of-a-million dollars. We sold that No. 3 plant for cash today.“

Doc saw clearly what was going on. The Gray Spider’s man in charge of Worldwide Sawmills had disposed of another part of the company. They were

continuing their looting. The last unit they had sold chanced to be the No. 3 sawmill where Big Eric, Edna, and Ham had been rescued.

„The Gr... Well, you-know-who will take personal delivery on this gob of cash,“ the man at Worldwide was told. „You’re to meet him and hand over the *jack* tonight.“

„Meet him where?“

„You know where Buck Boontown’s village is in the big swamp?“

„Yeah.“

„Meet him there. Be on hand at 10 o’clock sharp!“

„Aw, what does he think I am? It’s a terrible trip into that swamp at night!“

„I can’t help that, buddy. You got your orders.“

„Ar-r-r!“ growled the man at Worldwide. „I’ll be there.“

„You better!“

This ominous warning terminated the conversation. Sharp *clicks* denoted receivers being hung up.

Doc, Long Tom, and Ham exchanged knowing looks.

„He’s going to meet the Gray Spider at Buck Boontown’s swamp settlement with a quarter-of-a-million dollars in cash,“ Ham clipped.

He made a fighting stroke with his sword cane. „I presume we will be on hand?“

„With bells on!“ Doc assured him.

„How about me?“ Long Tom barked. „I’m in on this. Just try to keep me out!“

„Can your wire-tapping establishment here get along without you?“ Doc inquired.

„Sure it can.“

„Come on, then.“

* * * * *

They hurried outside. Doc hailed a cab and directed, „The Danielsen & Haas building.“

„What’s there?“ Long Tom wanted to know.

„Big Eric and Edna,“ Doc replied. „We will tell them what we’re headed for and make sure they are safe.“

Their taxi rooted its way through traffic. Here-and-there, stores were turning on the lights in their show windows, proof that dusk was near.

„Have you heard from Renny and Monk?“ Long Tom asked Doc.

„Not a word,“ Doc admitted. „As you know, Monk is pretending to be a chemist fleeing from the vengeance of a country he turned traitor to. Renny is taking the part of a dishonest special forest ranger. Both hope to get into the Gray Spider’s gang. But they have no radio to keep in touch with me. That’s why we haven’t heard from them.“

At the Danielsen & Haas building, Doc and his men left their taxi waiting.

In the lobby, they encountered pretty Edna Danielsen. She was alone. She looked worried.

Doc said seriously, „It is dangerous for you to be chasing around alone without...“

„Wait!“ she interrupted. „I am afraid something terrible has happened!“

„What do you mean?“ Doc questioned sharply.

„Horace Haas has disappeared,“ Edna Danielsen explained. „And poor old Silas Bunnywell is also gone. Worse still, I made a horrible discovery in Silas Bunnywell’s little office.“

„What sort of discovery?“

„Come! I’ll show you.“

An elevator rushed them up to the top floor. Edna Danielsen led the way to old Silas Bunnywell’s cubby-hole.

„Look!“ she gasped and pointed.

* * * * *

Silas Bunneywell’s accounting table was overturned. So was a wastebasket. Red and black had spilled together in a lurid puddle. There had been a fierce struggle in the little cubicle.

To one side lay an inkwell. It was a heavy fistful of glass. Red ink from it was splashed high on the walls.

„Obviously somebody was clubbed over the head with this,“ Doc murmured.

He picked up the inkwell. His golden eyes appraised it.

Several dark hairs clung to the bottom.

„Poor old Silas Bunnywell!“ choked Edna Danielson.

„Not Silas Bunnywell,“ Doc corrected thoughtfully. „He had almost snow-white hair. These hairs are dark. Unless I’m mistaken, they came from the head of Horace Haas. You’re sure that Silas Bunnywell and Horace Haas are both missing?“

„Absolutely!“ declared the attractive young woman. „Dad and I have looked everywhere for them.“

„Where is your father?“

„In his office.“

They retired to Big Eric Danielsen’s office. Big Eric was treading circles on the worn carpet. The office was fogged with smoke from the cigar he was puffing.

„Where-in-the-devil do you reckon Horace Haas and Silas Bunnywell have disappeared to?“ he demanded.

„Frankly, I’m puzzled,“ Doc admitted.

Big Eric shivered. It did not add to his cheerfulness to hear this mighty bronze man admit that he was puzzled even though the bafflement might be only temporary.

„What are you going to do now?“ he questioned.

„Unfortunately, we only have time for one bold stroke,“ Doc replied. „One of the men the Gray Spider has installed as a looter at the head of Worldwide Sawmills is to meet his master tonight at Buck Boontown’s swamp settlement. He is to deliver a quarter-of-a-million dollars of their loot to the Gray Spider in person. Ham, Long Tom, and myself have barely time to get there. We’ll rush out there and try to grab the Gray Spider.“

„I’d like to help you,“ Big Eric declared.

„Nothing doing!“ refused Doc. „You will stay here in New Orleans and guard the life of your daughter. We will escort you home immediately. We will also leave machine-guns and hand grenades so you can defend yourself against any attack by the Gray Spider’s men.“

They left this office. Almost running, they made for the elevators. The cage ferried them down.

Perhaps 40 seconds after the elevator door clanked shut, one corner of the carpet in Big Eric's office lifted slowly. It flipped back. This disclosed that a section of the floor had been cunningly contrived into a trapdoor. Below it was a coffin-like cavity a few inches deep.

A man had been occupying this ... listening!

* * * * *

The eavesdropper stood up from his coffin-like skulking place. He wore a gaudily-colored silk mask—much like a gay silk handkerchief.

The fellow looked somewhat ludicrous because he wore a woolly overcoat. And the Summer evening was rather hot!

From his standpoint, there was cunning in the wearing of the coat. It had no exposed buttons which might have scraped on the sides of his hiding place and betrayed him. He had even pulled big wool socks over his toes so there would be no squeal of leather against wood.

This sinister person scooped up the telephone. He asked for a number and got it. He listened intently and recognized the voice which spoke to him.

„This is the Gray Spider!“ he said in hoarse, fierce tones. „Assemble the most trusted men of the Cult of the Moccasin!“

„It will be done,“ replied an awed whisper.

„Tonight we wipe out the bronze devil! He cannot evade us!“

With an ugly, guttering laugh, the Gray Spider hung up. He glided into the corridor. He had not removed his silk mask, nor his foolish overcoat, nor the big wool socks from over his shoes.

He found a window in the front of the building. Craning his neck, he managed to see down to the street. He made a snarling noise at what he saw.

Doc Savage was installing Big Eric, Edna, Ham, and Long Tom in the taxi.

Doc himself rode on the running board as was his custom. The cab rolled away from the curb.

Doc's golden eyes roved everywhere, missing nothing. They scrutinized the windows of the Danielsen & Haas building casually. There was now no masked face at a top-floor window, however.

Big Eric and Edna were left at the Danielsen mansion. Doc handed over a pair of his wonderfully compact, extremely rapid-firing machine-guns—the weapons of his own invention. He also produced gas masks and violent little hand grenades.

He made a quick, thorough search of the elaborate dwelling. Finishing, he was certain none of the Gray Spider's men were concealed about.

„Have you floodlights that will illuminate the grounds?“ he questioned Big Eric.

„I sure have.“

„Keep them on all night. One of you be on guard every minute! We will try to be back by morning. But it is impossible to guarantee that.“

„We'll be all right,“ Big Eric declared.

„And you must be careful!“ ravishing Edna Danielsen told Doc in a strange, tight voice—the significance of which was quite lost on him.

Ham and Long Tom exchanged knowing looks when they were outside.

„The Queen has tumbled for Doc!“ Ham grinned.
„Don't they all?“ chuckled Long Tom.

* * * * *

Their next move was a quick return to Long Tom's „central“ which he had established for all his tapped phone lines. There, Doc made an effort to get in touch with Johnny. But his rapid radio calling elicited no answer from the plane in the swamp.

„No way we can let Johnny know we're coming,“ Doc decided. „We'll leave the radio apparatus turned *on* and if he calls, one of the stenographers can slip him the news.“

Once more, they entered a car. But it was Doc's roadster this time instead of the taxi. The rumble seat and the baggage compartments already held such equipment as Doc thought they would need for just such a jaunt as this.

Doc wheeled the car into traffic. One of his bronze fingers clicked a newly installed switch. Under the hood, a police siren began to wail. The speedometer climbed past 40 ... 50 ... 60 with 10 mph jumps.

Ham and Long Tom sat tight and held their hat to keep them from being blown off by the terrific rush of air. Doc wore no hat. No goggles protected his golden eyes. The windshield was down. Yet the roaring wind seemed to have absolutely no effect on his bronze immaculateness.

„Hadn't we better pick up a boat somewhere?“ Ham inquired.

„We've got it,“ Doc replied.

„Huh?“

„In the rumble seat is a collapsible silk boat you can almost put in your coat pocket. Also, there's an outboard motor that hardly weighs more than a portable typewriter. Other things, too.“

Ham pinched his eyes shut against the slapping, tearing wind. The uncanny way his big bronze leader had of preparing for every emergency was a continuous source of wonder to Ham. He—carrying in his head the keenest thinking machine of the adventurous group excepting only Doc—could pick out many possible emergencies that could arise. But mighty Doc Savage saw ahead to dangers of which Ham did not dream of. And Doc always seemed to have a defense against them!

The miles streaked under the panting roadster. Darkness had fallen. The Moon was out, brilliant.

Into the swamps dived the road. Great cypress towered like clouds of green over the thoroughfare. On higher ground, yellow pines stood slender and tall like arrayed sentinels.

„Great lumber country,“ Ham offered to break the silence.

„Second only to the State of Washington in the value of lumber produced,“ Doc replied.

Long Tom chuckled. „And I sort of had the idea sugar cane and cotton was all they grew down here!“

The smokestack of a sawmill spouted sparks on their left. Steam labored. A head saw bit into a log with a sound like silk cloth being torn. The mill was ablaze with lights. More electric bulbs hung out on a cableway system used to lift logs out

of the storage yard and drop them on the log dogs in the bull chain that fed the sawing carriages.

Doc's roadster whipped on and the night-working sawmill was left behind. The road seemed to sink. It became a tortuous groove in a spongy mat of steaming, ominous swamp. The moonlight did not reach it often.

The headlights danced like fat white chalk sticks juggled on the snout of the roadster.

„Is this the only road into Buck Boontown's part of the Morass?“ Ham asked.

„It is,“ Doc assured him.

* * * * *

The monotony of their swamp trip was soon shattered. The road lifted suddenly. It narrowed until there was room for only one car. The road was crossing a deep bayou on a high levee.

To either side, moonbeams shimmered up from the listless surface of the bayou. Higher and higher, the car swept. It was half across the grade.

At this point, Doc's uncanny keenness of eye was demonstrated. The others saw nothing portentous of danger. No obstruction barred the way.

But Doc's golden eyes noted a disquieting object. A small stick—smaller even than a lead pencil—projected upward from the road middle. It had been set there recently. The disturbed condition of the road showed that.

Doc trod the brake. The suspicious stick was only a few yards away. The roadster was doing 60 mph. It skewered. It careened from side-to-side, skidding. All 4 tires—frozen immobile by the brakes—squealed like hungry pigs.

The stick came nearer. Doc saw the roadster wasn't going to stop in time. The road was too narrow to steer to either side.

Suddenly several men ran into view at the end of the levee. They were wizened. They looked like big, hairless, bob-tailed monkeys.

Harnessed to his middle, every man had an aircraft-type machine-gun!

Doc's bronze head flashed around. Behind them, more of the swamp men had appeared.

„A trap!“ Ham rapped.

The exclamation was hardly off Ham's lips when a powerful bronze arm grasped him and flung him bodily out of the roadster! Ham's form cleared the levee. He sailed for the water.

Despite the suddenness of what had occurred, Ham still retained a clutch on his sword cane.

Even as he saw Ham clear the levee, Long Tom found he was also spinning through space. Turning over in the air, he got a glimpse of Doc Savage's powerful frame cleaving down after him.

Both Ham and Long Tom felt as though they had been half-jerked apart by the titanic sinews of the bronze giant! They were as dazed as though a stunning electric current had unexpectedly caroused through their bodies.

There had been no time for Doc to be gentle. He had hurled both his men clear of the levee and followed himself—all in an instant so fractional only a finely calibrated stopwatch could have caught it!

The roadster had not yet hit the upraised stick.

But now the car skewered into it. There was a terrific ROAR! A hideous tongue of flame leaped magically into being and tore the levee apart. The burst mangled the entire front off the roadster. It spouted smoke, sparks, dirt and rent fragments of the car.

Had the roadster been moving a little faster, it would have been completely annihilated. As it was, only the fore part met destruction.

Chapter XII

Human Sacrifice.

Ham and Long Tom plunked into the water in one-two succession. They collided as they kicked in the depths. Together, they stroked to the top.

Doc's bronze head was not in evidence!

Debris from the dynamited levee still rained. The stuff ranged from steel splinters to clods as large as pork barrels. The rear half of the roadster dived beneath the surface with a loud gurgling.

Ham and Long Tom sank hastily to keep from being brained by dropping wreckage. They realized now that in hitting the raised stick, the roadster had closed an electrical contact which released the blast.

Swimming underwater, Ham and Long Tom reached the concealment of canes which grew along the levee edge.

„Where's Doc?“ Ham groaned. „He should have come to the top before now!“

„Maybe...“

Long Tom shivered and didn't finish. Maybe a flying missile—driven by the explosive—had pierced Doc's giant bronze form. It was possible.

Racing feet spat the levee. Hoarse commands were gobbled in the jargon the swamp men spoke. A machine-gun vomited a string of concussions.

Long Tom and Ham sank wildly as copro-nickel bullets scored the water about their heads. They arose deeper in the gloom beneath the canes.

Over where the blast had occurred, great bubbles were arising. They made gruesome glub-glub sounds. Air escaping from the submerged roadster caused them. One arose now that seemed large as a tub.

„Ugh!“ shuddered Ham. „Why don't Doc come up?“

Long Tom gave a hoarse gasp. „Look! As if the devils above us weren't enough!“

Perhaps 60 feet distant, 2 knots had projected from the bayou surface. They resembled a pair of black fists held close together.

„Gator!“ Ham muttered. „The infernal things feed at night, too!“

The eyes of the alligator sank.

„Yo' come on out!“ rasped one of the swamp men from the levee.

Ham and Long Tom made no answer. They fingered their compact little machine-guns.

Suddenly a storm of slugs from the aircraft-type weapons above them poured downward. The rank canes were chewed-and-split as by the fangs of an invisible, wood-devouring monster.

Ham and Long Tom saw that they were at a hopeless disadvantage. They held their fire, not wishing to start a fight to the finish.

„Yo‘ no be keeled if yo‘ come out!“ called the swamp man. „Gray Spider ees want to talk to yo‘!“

The speaker swore at the machine-gunners, silencing them. Then he waited to see what Ham and Long Tom would do.

„Doc!“ Ham croaked. „He hasn‘t shown up yet.“

„We‘ve got to do somethin‘!“ Long Tom hissed.

Desperate, he called up to the swamp men. „We will surrender if you‘ll let us dive a few times in search of our leader.“

The answer came promptly. „Go ahead an‘ dive!“

„You promise you won‘t shoot us?“ Long Tom asked.

„Yo‘ won‘t be shot. Me, I geeve yo‘ de word of Buck Boontown on eet!“

The straw boss of their attackers was Buck Boontown!

Swiftly, Ham and Long Tom swam out and dived. They groped repeatedly in the depths seeking the giant bronze form of Doc Savage. Horror closed swiftly upon their hearts as they found no trace of Doc. Only mud and foul water plants lay on the bayou bottom, perhaps a dozen feet down.

A loathsome gurgling of bubbles still came from the sunken roadster. It was as though the car was a living thing and life was slowly departing from it.

Long Tom and Ham searched around the machine several times. With their spirits weighted like lead, they stroked listlessly to the surface.

„Maybe he swam away,“ Long Tom mumbled hopefully. „He can stay underwater for many minutes.“

„I hope so,“ Ham agreed.

But a horrible sight was soon to drive even this faint hope from them.

„Yo‘ climb up here!“ commanded Buck Boontown harshly.

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There was nothing else to do.

Long Tom and Ham crawled up the steep side of the levee. The swamp men seized upon them. Their arms were taken. Many an admiring gasp went up at sight of the tiny, super-efficient machine-guns. A monkey man appropriated Ham’s sword cane.

„We should’ve fought it out!“ Ham gritted.

„They’d have gotten us!“ Long Tom assured him. „They must have at least 20 of those aircraft machine-guns. And with that metal-reinforced leather harness they wear, I’ll bet they can hold the weapons on a target without trouble.“

Now came the ghastly incident they were to witness. It was by far the most shocking thing their eyes had ever beheld! Seeing it turned their very blood to water and left them despondent and crushed.

„Sacre... Look!“ shouted a swamp man.

All eyes went to a point a few score of feet out on the bayou. At this spot, the water was boiling. A great, hideous form was thrashing only a foot-or-so down. A tapering, ridged tail squirmed into view for an instant.

„Gator!“ croaked Ham. „The infernal thing has got something!“

The jaws of the alligator abruptly appeared. Moonlight glistened on the repulsive, sand-colored teeth.

Affixed in the teeth was a mighty bronze human arm!

The ‘gator seemed to be worrying the limp body to which the arm was attached.

It sank from sight, leaving nothing but a turmoil of water to show where it had been.

Ham shrieked like a madman! He clutched at one of the swamp men’s machine-guns. He was driven to madness by the awful thing he had just seen. He wanted the rapid firer to slay the alligator!

But he didn’t get the gun. A swamp man nearly shot him. Buck Boontown’s angry roar was all that saved Ham’s life.

Long Tom also put forth a short struggle. A machine-gun barrel swept against his head and stunned him. When he revived, his wrists were lashed.

Ham was also bound.

„Walk!“ commanded Buck Boontown.

The cavalcade moved down the road. Soon they turned into the swamp. A labyrinth of palmettos, swamp maples, tupelo gums, cane, vines and creepers, and loathsome aerial moss closed in upon them.

At times, they sank to their waists in mire that had a sickening stench. They trod rotting logs over what appeared to be bottomless abysses of slime. Once they took entirely to an aerial thoroughfare of branches and lianas for some hundreds-of-yards.

The devilish little swamp men showed an amazing agility at getting through what would have seemed an impenetrable barrier of vegetation. But at frequent intervals even they were almost baffled by the steaming, festering tangle of the swamp.

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Long Tom and Ham paid no attention to the passage of time. They even took no particular pains to avoid the treacherous vines and slime pools in their path. As a consequence, they were frequently kicked.

The resultant pain they hardly felt. For nothing could be greater than the ache that came from the knowledge that they had lost their friend—the man to whom they owed their lives many times over. Doc Savage!

They held no hope of ever seeing the mighty Bronze Man again. The hoo-hoo-hooing of swamp owls made a sort of awful dirge to accompany their grief.

But as they floundered deeper into the vast swamp, another and scarcely less ominous sound joined the macabre tooting of the owls.

„Listen!“ muttered Ham.

Faintly, there reached their ears a monotonous drumming note. This rose and fell. One moment it would roll across the vast, foul-quagmire like syncopated thunder. The next, it fell to a muted mutter like fingers softly slapping a sponge.

It was as though the great swamp were a panting beast!

Periodically there lifted over this unending sound a shrill caterwauling as of a cat with its tail stepped on. Hoarser barks and howls were commingled.

The noise was altogether hideous!

„Ugh!“ muttered Long Tom. „I can guess what that is!“

„So can I,“ Ham replied listlessly. „A voodoo ritual!“

„Notice how it’s affecting our captors,“ said Long Tom.

Subtle excitement was pervading the ugly little swamp men. They clucked to each other in a language so degenerate that Ham and Long Tom could hardly understand it.

Later—when they came for a moment into a moonlight glade—Long Tom and Ham observed that their captors were doing a sort of revolting muscle dance in time with the throbbing. It was as though the measured beats of the tom-toms inflicted muscular convulsions upon their bodies.

Even Ham and Long Tom found themselves unpleasantly affected by the barbaric cadence. Indeed, Long Tom—discovering his shoulders jerking to the savage tune—swore violently, something he rarely did.

„I’ve heard the music at these rituals has a sort of crazing effect,“ Ham muttered. „I can believe it after listening to this. It’s more than I’ve ever expected in all my life!“

Long Tom shuddered. „One might expect something like this in a country of savages. But right here in the United States? Ugh!“

They came soon to a circular hill. It was no more than 40 feet above the swamp. In the center was a bowl-shaped hollow—a natural amphitheater.

Standing on the rim of this, Long Tom and Ham surveyed such a tableau of barbarism as they had never expected to see within the confines of the United States.

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A string of small fires burned in the bottom of the hollow. These were greenish. And from the nauseating odor they cast off, they evidently were kindled from wood which had been treated with sulfur. No doubt the string of blazes was intended to represent a serpent for snake deities have a prominent place in most voodoo cults.

Numerous masked figures were near the fires. Some of them leaped and spun like hideous dervishes. Others merely sat and jerked their muscles in tune with the tom-toms. All wore masks.

The beaters of the tom-toms sat farther back. From time-to-time, they emitted a loud howl. They were unmasked.

It was upon the masks of the men in the center of the hollow that Long Tom and Ham rested their gaze. These were of gaudy silk!

„Remember that flashy silk handkerchief Horace Haas carried in his coat pocket?“ Ham inquired.

„Yes,“ replied Long Tom. „Why?“

„I was just thinking...“ Ham muttered.

But he didn’t elaborate on his thoughts.

Around the edges of the hollow huddled row after row of the vicious, monkey-like swamp dwellers. Long Tom and Ham were astounded at seeing so many present. Their number must run into the hundreds!

The whole ceremony had the air of something that would last for many hours, perhaps days. Gourds filled with a greenish liquor that was dipped from a trough-like container made of a hollow log, passed among the assembled voodooists quite often.

„Some kind of a vile dope the Gray Spider has fixed up for them, I'll bet,“ Ham declared. „Brings them under his sway easier.“

„Yo' keep goin'!“ rasped Buck Boontown at their backs. „Yo' don' stop here!“

Buck Boontown was alone among their captors in seeming not to take much stock in the voodoo ritual. He twitched a time-or-two in sympathy with the hideous rhythm. But no more often than Long Tom and Ham did the same thing involuntarily.

Around the edge of the natural theater, they were herded. They were led down to the group of masked men about the string of greenish fires.

It dawned on Ham and Long Tom that these men were the Inner Circle of the Cult of the Moccasin.

Before one of the masked men, they were halted.

In addition to the brilliant silk handkerchief that hid his face, the man wore a long and gaudy gown embroidered with countless coiled serpents, probably intended to represent the deadly water moccasin. It concealed him from head-to-foot. Nothing could be told of his looks except that he was a white man.

„I am the Gray Spider!“ he informed Ham and Long Tom in a voice that sounded like it was coming out of a tomb. Obviously, the tone was disguised.

He held one claw-like hand before them. The veins on the back of the talon looked revolting as purple worms. Slowly ... dramatically ... the hand opened.

A hideous gray spider of a thing crawled about in the repulsive palm. A tarantula!

Somehow, the ordinarily poisonous thing had been changed to a gray hue and its venomous quality eliminated. At least, it made no effort to injure the hand that held it.

The bit of dramatics was highly impressive.

But it was on the hand that the eyes of Ham and Long Tom rested. The vile skin bore smears of red ink!

Ham and Long Tom both recalled the red ink smeared over old Silas Bunnywell's office in the Danielsen & Haas building. They remembered the ink-well that had been employed to beat down someone about the time Horace Haas and Silas Bunnywell vanished.

* * * * *

Suddenly both Ham and Long Tom made a concerted lunge at the master devil! They hoped to take their guards by surprise. But they failed.

Buck Boontown was alert. He whipped out a pistol. With lightening-like blows, he knocked Ham and Long Tom backward. They were seized anew.

Buck Boontown now told his Master of the outcome of the bridge ambush. As he was informed that his men had seen with their own eyes an alligator devouring Doc Savage's mighty bronze form, a fiendish cackle of delight rattled back of the silken mask.

„Take these 2 prisoners to the usual place!“ he commanded. „I have told you earlier what you are to do with them. Do you understand fully? It is very important that my little experiment works out properly!“

„I savvy,“ mumbled Buck Boontown.

Ham and Long Tom were hustled from the natural bowl and down the opposite side of the hill. Buck Boontown’s settlement appeared unexpectedly.

They were hurled into an open shed of a building. Ropes were added to their ankles and their wrists tied afresh. Armed guards took up a position near.

The 2 prisoners were absolutely helpless. Through a gaping hole that passed for a door, they could see a tall, overly thin swamp man. He was but a boy, hardly 18. His only garment was a meal sack with holes cut in it for his legs.

This was Sill Boontown, the son of Buck Boontown. The boy who had been feeble-minded since a blow on the head a few years ago.

Ham and Long Tom were sickened to discover Sill Boontown was leading a monster alligator around with a rope! The half-wit lad was playing with the tame reptile as though it were a dog.

This ‘gator was the same one which had given Johnny such a start on his arrival at this sinister spot.

The sight of the ‘gator brought to Ham and Long Tom a morbid rush of memory—the ghastly glimpse they had caught of a monster reptile worrying a bronze human arm in its hideous jaws!

Their own dire peril was submerged in their grief. Not only had they lost the friend and benefactor they admired above all else in life. But the World had also lost one of its greatest forces for Right as well as prolific source of things humanitarian!

They were indeed glad when Sill Boontown disappeared into the moonlighted jungle with his pet ‘gator.

About a quarter-of-an-hour ticked away. Then a man came into their prison shack.

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The newcomer was lanky, scrawny-looking, yellowish-brown. He had thick lips and a nose that some one might have jumped on years ago. Several scars gave his eyes a mean cast.

Crouching over them, this unsavory individual began to make meaningless hocus-pocus gestures and mumble meaningless incantations.

„Ugh!“ snarled Long Tom. „Ain’t he the meanest-looking bat you ever saw?“

„And how he stinks!“ Ham growled.

„Probably he’s come to cut our throats,“ muttered Long Tom.

„I oughta cut your throats after a crack like that!“ chuckled the sinister-looking voodoo man.

Ham and Long Tom started violently.

„Johnny!“ Ham gulped, finally penetrating the clever disguise.

„Not so loud!“ hissed Johnny.

„But how...“

„I’ve been hanging around here,“ Johnny explained. „I’ve pulled a lot of voodoo junk. But it don’t seem to get me anywhere. At least, I haven’t seen the real Gray

Spider yet. The fellow I sent to you wasn't the mastermind, was he? Buck Boontown told me—quite a bit later—that he was only a minor member of the gang who liked to pretend he amounted to something.“

„It was one of the 2 crooked lumber police,“ Ham explained. „We got him, though. His name is *Lefty*.“

„How are we gonna get out of here?“ Long Tom put in.

Johnny glanced at their guards ... saw they were looking in another direction ... and produced a knife.

„It's the best I can do,“ he whispered. „I was surprised when they invited me in here to put a voodoo spell over you 2 guys. I looked for my gun but it had disappeared. I can't understand that, either.“

„We'll make a break for it all together!“ breathed Ham.

„Okay. I'll grab a machine-gun from one of the guards if I can. We might as well try it right now.“

Johnny advanced on the door.

Instantly, one of the guards emitted a loud cry! In answer to the signal, scores of monkey-like swamp men poured out of the surrounding jungle. They attacked Doc's men.

Johnny went down fighting under an avalanche of the yellowish-brown fiends. He was tied securely.

The knife had done Ham and Long Tom no good. Ham did get free ... only to be pinned quickly.

They were all tied securely.

Soon there approached a figure attired in a long, brilliant gown which was embroidered with countless snake designs. A hideous gray tarantula clung to one of the fellow's hands.

The Gray Spider still wore his silken mask.

„I have been suspicious of you,“ he told Johnny. „I let you talk to these men as a test. You were observed closely all the time. We saw you pass them a knife.“

Johnny replied nothing.

„You are one of the bronze devil's helpers!“ snarled the Gray Spider. „The bronze man is dead. You 3 men shall die also. I will watch my swamp friends offer you in a voodoo sacrifice. In a few hours, they will be worked up to the proper pitch for the human offering!“

He fell silent. Into the ramshackle hut throbbed-and-boomed the disquieting note of the tom-toms. It seemed to set the very brain cells of the listeners vibrating in sympathy to its barbaric cadence.

„In a few hours, they will be ready!“ repeated the Gray Spider.

He wheeled away.

Chapter XIII

A Kidnapping Gone Wrong.

The Gray Spider shuffled back up the hill, the hollowed-out top of which was the scene of the voodoo ritual. He stepped along swiftly as though he had important work to do. He seated himself in the middle of his sinister Inner Circle.

Machine-gunners were much in evidence.

„Bring in the 2 new recruits,“ he ordered.

There was a commotion in the jungle near by. 2 men came out.

One was built like a gorilla. He looked big enough and tough enough to even whip one in a fight. His face was scarred and unbelievably homely. His hide was covered with coarse red bristles.

The second man was so huge as to seem like a small hill in motion. His face was long, somber. His lips were pinched together as though he had just finished a disapproving „tsk, tsk!“ The outstanding thing about the giant, though, was his hands for each was composed of about a gallon-of-knuckles that looked like rusted iron.

Monk and Renny in person!

Without seeming to, Monk and Renny noted the number of machine-guns in evidence.

„The first time we've seen the Gray Spider,“ Renny growled. „And we don't dare make a funny move because of those machine-guns!“

„I got a notion to tackle 'im, anyway!“ rasped Monk.

Monk was nothing if not reckless. „The bigger the odds, the bigger the fight“ Monk seemed to reason. And he did love a fight! Several times during the World War, he had started out single-handed to mop up on the enemy army. From the results, a suspicion was harbored that he might have succeeded had the opposition not been scattered from the Channel to Switzerland. They had too much room to dodge in.

„Lay off, you missing link!“ Renny grunted. „You ain't got no brains! Lemme do the thinkin'!“

This was not strictly the truth. Monk was rated one of the half-dozen greatest chemists ever to live.

They confronted the Gray Spider. Naturally, both tried to penetrate the puzzle of the serpent-embroidered gown and the brightly colored silk mask. But they had no success.

Again they cocked an eye on the array of machine-guns nearby and saw a hostile move would be unwise. Indeed, it would be suicide.

„I have been told of you men,“ said the Gray Spider.

Monk and Renny were disappointed when they failed to recognize the voice. It was thoroughly disguised. It had an unreal note. They made no answer because none seemed needed.

„One of you is a chemist experienced in poison gas,“ continued the cavernous tones of the Gray Spider. „That man fled to this swamp to evade agents of the country he turned traitor to. The other man is not averse to making a dollar-or-two on the side.“

An impressive pause now followed.

„Neither of you men had met before you were introduced by my aides?“

„Nope. We never saw each other before.“ Monk chuckled and opened-and-closed his furry paws. „But we're what you'd call a *natural*. He knocks 'em down. An' I tear 'em apart!“

Monk was not bad as an actor. His attitude was fierce and bloodthirsty. To say nothing of his looks.

„You wish to join my organization, I understand,“ said the Gray Spider.

Renny watched the hideous gray tarantula crawl around on the Master Fiend's hand. He stifled an impulse to lean over and swat the repulsive thing with one huge paw.

„You got it right!“ he rumbled.

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In the wait which followed, Monk and Renny noted a minor incident up on the side of the saucer-like depression.

An enormous alligator appeared. It crawled around the edge of the hollow.

„Shoot dat 'gator!“ somebody called over the monotonous throbbing of the tom-toms.

„Eet ees Sill Boontown's pet,“ someone else objected. „No wild 'gator would go crawlin' around dis crowd.“

„T'row a stick at heem!“ directed the first speaker. „Eef hees don' go away, shoot heem! Sacre! We no want to be bothered weeth durn 'gator!“

A stick whacked the crawling alligator soundly. The reptile straightaway slithered out-of-sight into the night-blackened jungle. It displayed an intelligence that seemed human.

The Gray Spider resumed—his words coming as from a tomb, the repulsive tarantula never still on his hand.

„I have decided to take you into my organization,“ he told Monk and Renny. „Your first job will be assigned you immediately. It is to be done tonight. It will pay \$10,000—5,000 for each of you.“

„That's a lot of *jack*,“ Renny growled. „What's the job?“

„You are a forest ranger. You should know by sight the famous lumberman Big Eric Danielsen. Perhaps you even know his daughter?“

Renny made the only answer he could.

„Yeah. I know 'em.“

„Good!“ hissed the Gray Spider. „Tonight, you are to kidnap them!“

Renny covered his surprise with a loud snort! „You don't want much, do you?“

„What do you expect to do for \$10,000?“

„Yeah ... that's the other way of lookin' at it,“ Renny admitted. „You got it planned how we're to get them?“

„Again, what do you expect for \$10,000?“ intoned the Gray Spider. „You are to make your own plans. You will find Big Eric Danielsen and his daughter at their home. They are heavily-armed and equipped with gas masks. The grounds are brilliantly lighted. You will get them...“

„It oughta be simple!“ Monk said sarcastically.

„...you will get them,“ continued the Gray Spider as though there had been no interruption. „Then you will bring them to me.“

He now gave an address on Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans.

„I will meet you personally at that spot. I will be there all night. Or at least from the moment I arrive in town. And I shall leave soon after you do. You, of course, will depart immediately. That is, if you want to try the job.“

Monk and Renny swapped glances. They saw their chance to trap the Gray Spider away from his guard of machine-gunners. They could get hold of Doc, tell him where the Gray Spider would be waiting, and it would be all over but the shooting.

Or so they reasoned. For they had no way of knowing of the awful incident at the bayou levee when Long Tom and Ham had seen the alligator floundering in the water with a bronze arm between its jaws.

Nor did they dream Long Tom, Ham, and Johnny were prisoners in Buck Boontown's settlement not a quarter of a mile away.

„We'll do it,“ said Renny.

„You mean we'll try it!“ chuckled Monk, playing his part.

A heavily-armed escort immediately conveyed Monk and Renny through the swamp to a bayou where a speed boat lay. This rushed them to a paved highway. There they found a powerful touring car waiting.

The point where they reached the car was beyond the blasted levee.

Monk and Renny were given no inkling that Doc Savage was not in New Orleans.

* * * * *

The hour was well past Midnight when the touring car flung into New Orleans. The engine was throwing off waves of heat. The radiator was boiling. At the wheel, Renny had latched the hand throttle clear out and let it stay. He had taken many a corner at 60 mph.

„If I ever ride with you again, I want my head examined!“ Monk complained. „Such crazy driving I never saw!“

„We got here, didn't we?“

„Yeah! And in spite of you!“ Monk jerked a thumb. „There's a boulevard that leads to Big Eric's home. Take it. We'll probably find Doc at Big Eric's joint.“

„Okay.“

Renny yanked the car about, purposefully all-but-spilling Monk over the side.

„When this is over,“ Monk promised, still rankling from the wild ride the solemn-faced Renny had given him, „I'm gonna twist one of them big fists off you!“

A few minutes saw them before Big Eric Danielsen's mansion.

The grounds were brilliant with floodlights as the Gray Spider had said they would be. The massive iron gates at the entrance were locked.

Monk got out of their touring car boldly. He strode to the gates. He gave the lock a mighty yank.

Pin-n-n-g-g!

A bullet left a shiny spot on the wrought iron of the gate not a foot from his head. It had been fired from the mansion.

Monk did not bat an eye. That in itself was proof that he had pretended great terror at the recklessness of Renny's driving merely to have something to quarrel about good-naturedly.

Monk was never satisfied unless picking on somebody. Or being picked on in turn. Usually it was the waspish Ham who insulted him and promised at intervals to see Monk skewered on the sword cane. But Ham and Monk had not been thrown together much in this adventure.

„Hey!“ Monk’s small voice sounded injured. „You wouldn’t shoot a guy, would you, Doc?“

From the mansion, Big Eric’s bellow rolled.

„Who’re you? Come a yard closer and by golly, I’ll put windows in your skull!“

Monk was surprised. This must be Big Eric Danielsen. And Big Eric had never met either Monk or Renny.

„Where’s Doc Savage?“ Monk called eagerly.

„What business is it of your’n?“ Big Eric was canny.

Monk explained who he was. But Big Eric was not easily convinced. Not even when Renny added his solemn-faced assertions.

„Aw, where’s Doc?“ Monk demanded. „We gotta see him. And we ain’t got all night!“

„Doc Savage went into the swamp with Long Tom and Ham to seize the Gray Spider,“ Big Eric admitted grudgingly.

„What?“

Without waiting for an answer, Monk leaped easily upward. He caught the bars of the gate. In a surprisingly short time, he had surmounted the barrier, monkey-like. He threw the gate lock and Renny drove the car inside.

Big Eric was growling and holding one of Doc’s compact machine-guns at ready. But he did not fire. As Monk and Renny approached, he concluded that they were actually Doc’s men.

Pretty Edna Danielsen added the only word needed to allay Big Eric’s suspicions.

„These men are *Monk* and *Renny*,“ she said. „They answer Mr. Savage’s description.“

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For a moment, Monk and Renny were held quite speechless by Edna Danielsen’s superb beauty. Especially Monk! He was something of a connoisseur of feminine pulchritude, homely soul though he might be himself. The secretary who presided over his correspondence in the penthouse laboratory that Monk maintained near Wall Street in New York was conceded to be the prettiest in town. But she couldn’t hold the well-known „candle“ to Edna Danielsen, though!

„But the Gray Spider has left the swamp by now!“ Renny declared. „He was to wait for us here in New Orleans.“

„When did you last see the Gray Spider?“ inquired Big Eric.

„It was nearly Midnight.“

Big Eric’s massive face tensed. „That does not sound so good. The appointment at which Doc Savage intended to seize the Gray Spider was set for 10 o’clock. Something went wrong!“

Worried expressions came over the features of Monk and Renny. They exchanged glances.

„What do you reckon?“

„Hard to tell,“ Monk growled. „The thing for us to do is set a trap of our own for the Gray Spider.“

„Shall we call in the police?“ asked Big Eric.

„And spend the rest of the night explaining and wading around in red tape?“ Monk snorted. „Nix!“

„Yeah,“ Renny couldn't resist razzing Monk. „The cops would take one look at you and swear there'd been a break at the zoo!“

Monk grinned widely. Strangely enough, any-and-all nasty cracks about his looks tickled Monk. He was one of those rare individuals. A homely man who was genuinely proud of the fact that his features were something to stop a clock.

„Renny and me will take care of this Gray Spider!“ he declared.

„Renny and you and I!“ corrected Big Eric. „I'm in on this. We'll drop by the police station and leave Edna in safety.“

„You will not!“ Edna snapped. „I'm going to drive the car!“

„Glory be!“ grinned Monk. „I was afraid I'd have to ride with *Barney Oldfield* here again!“

He gave Renny an amiable leer.

Big Eric ran into the house ... was gone a minute ... and came out stuffing little hand grenades into his pockets as though they were apples. He leaped into the car. The machine whipped around expertly with Edna Danielsen's slenderly capable hand on the wheel.

Big Eric flexed an arm which was muscled like a mule's leg.

„I crave action!“ he declared.

* * * * *

He got it a lot sooner than he expected.

The powerful touring car swerved into the street. Instantly, 2 other machines approached from opposite directions.

They were big vehicles but old and dilapidated. They literally bristled with little swamp men. Almost a dozen to each vehicle!

Both old cars banged headlong into the car occupied by Big Eric, Monk, Renny, and Edna! As though splashed by the impact, wiry vicious swamp men covered the machine.

With a bellow, Renny reared upright. He performed the well-nigh incredible feat of grasping a man by the middle of the body with each hand! Only his gigantic fists made this possible. He banged them down among the other swamp men!

Monk's arms—longer by 6 inches than his own legs—gathered a bundle of the attackers. He fell out of the car with them, contriving so his 260 pounds of gristle and stiff red hair landed atop them. As one man, they screeched in agony!

One of the efficient light machine-guns Doc had perfected turned loose in Big Eric's fist. It seemed to melt the man in front of the muzzle. A second swamp man died before the ripping weapon.

Then a car jack swung. Big Eric collapsed. He kicked weakly on the floorboards trying to rise. A hard little fist pounded his temple until he no longer squirmed.

Monk emitted a series of deep bellowings, hisses, and gruntings—the sounds he always made when he fought. Men rushed him in clouds. They flew away from his driving arms like sparrows tackling a windmill!

Suddenly Monk seized a yellowish-brown fiend. With seeming ease, he threw the fellow fully 20 feet! The man's hurtling body knocked down another swamp man who was on the point of knifing Renny in the back.

3 of the attackers were holding Edna Danielsen. She kept them busy dodging her kicks and bites.

Renny abruptly went down, stumbling over a man he had slammed into unconsciousness with his great fists. Then half-a-dozen swamp denizens piled atop him.

The man with the car jack ran up. He clanked his weapon off Renny's head! Renny weaved. He seemed to get sleepy on his feet.

Lunging, Monk reached Renny's side. He tore the assailants away. In a moment, both giants were on their feet fighting side-by-side.

A gun-or-two cracked! But in the gloom, it was as easy to hit friend as foe.

Somewhere in the distance, a police siren started wailing. The shots had been heard. Somebody had put in a riot call.

„We got ... 'em goin'!“ Monk puffed. He tore the car jack out of the hands of the wielder and with one pull all-but-ripped the man's arm from his body!

Pretty Edna Danielsen screamed piercingly! Monk and Renny looked in her direction.

A vicious-faced swamp man was holding a revolver to her head.

„Geeve up, damn yo'!“ he screeched at Renny and Monk. „Yo' want me to keel gal?“

The attackers had picked their one chance of stopping Renny and Monk. The 2 giants hesitated ... and were suddenly down and secured. Stout ropes were lashed about their ankles and wrists.

A large bakery delivery truck now ran up. Monk remembered that Doc had mentioned the fact the Gray Spider used such trucks to transport his men in New Orleans. At least, such a truck had been waiting outside the Antelope Hotel with Lefty at the wheel when the swamp men had turned the shrapnel burst loose in the room they thought was occupied by Doc's men.

Such a truck would not attract attention at this hour. Bakeries often made early-morning deliveries.

Everyone—prisoners and attackers alike—jammed into the truck. The vehicle rumbled away, spurred by the nearing wail of the police siren.

* * * * *

The spokesman of the swamp men sneered into Monk's face.

„Yo' ain't so smart,“ he grated.

„You're tellin' me!“ Monk snarled. He was smarting under the defeat.

„Gray Spider ees send yo' to keednap Beeg Eric as test,“ growled the swamp man. „Hees want to see if yo' talk to Beeg Eric as friend. Yo' did. Bien! Dat prove yo' work fo' bronze man!“

Monk *blinked* slowly a few times. Then—just as slowly—he lifted what was left of his coat tails.

„Kick me!“ he invited. „Hard!“

He saw now that he and Renny had been tricked into revealing their true colors. But how had the Gray Spider gotten word into town so quickly? No one could have equaled that terrific drive of Renny's.

„The Gray Spider tipped you by radio to set a trap for us at Big Eric's place. That right?“ he asked.

„Oui! Yo' guess eet!“

Monk gave Renny a downcast look. These swamp men were part of the force the Gray Spider kept in New Orleans to do his bidding. No doubt Monk could understand how it would have been simple for the master villain to set his trap.

„What a pair of busts we turned out to be!“ he growled.

The worst fact was that they had caused Big Eric and Edna to fall into the Gray Spider's clutches. And a moment later, the already gloomy outlook was enormously blackened.

For with great glee, the spokesman of the swamp men told of the capture of Long Tom, Ham, and Johnny. He recited in detail about his fellows glimpsing an alligator in the act of devouring the giant bronze form of Doc Savage. He had evidently received this news by radio from his comrades in the swamp.

The word of Doc Savage's demise had a terrible effect on pretty Edna Danielsen. She had been holding up splendidly under the difficulties, betraying little nervousness. But now she gave a single low, wretched cry and fainted.

She was still unconscious when her form was lifted from the delivery truck a short distance outside New Orleans. Big Eric was also forced out.

As the truck drove on, Monk caught a glimpse of a plane in a field near where Big Eric and Edna had been unloaded. It was apparent they were to be taken somewhere by air.

„To the Castle of the Moccasin!“ Monk guessed.

He fell to wondering about that mysterious rendezvous. The Castle of the Moccasin! They had so far learned nothing of its whereabouts. They did not have even a wisp of information concerning the nature of the place.

The delivery truck—it soon developed—had a high-powered engine. And on the straightaway, Monk would have been willing to bet it was making 80 mph.

The very speed of their going made time drag.

Chapter XIV

The Big Surprise.

Dawn had not yet arrived when Renny and Monk were hauled into the presence of Long Tom, Ham, and Johnny who lay bound hand & foot in the shack in the depths of the great swamp.

Long Tom moaned aloud. „Good night! And you fellows were our last hope!“

Monk caught sight of Ham. The faintest of amused gleams came into Monk's little eyes. If it had not been for his grief over learning of Doc Savage's demise, Monk would have burst into roars of laughter.

Any sort of misfortune Ham met with tickled Monk although the next instant, Monk might risk his very life to rescue Ham. These two had been good-natured enemies since the War.

It was Monk who had framed the ham-stealing charge which had been the cause of Ham getting his nickname. Ham had never been able to prove it—a point that still rankled his lawyer soul.

Too, Monk was one man who could hold his own against Ham's sharp tongue. He had an infallible system of getting Ham's goat. He would merely make some reference to Ham's stealing anything connected with a *porker* from pig's knuckles to the pig's way of squealing. This always burned Ham up.

There was no laughter or razzing now, though.

But it was not their own danger that stilled their tongues. It was the overpowering grief brought by the knowledge that they had lost their friend and benefactor—Doc Savage!

The sinister throbbing of the tom-toms still flung its disquieting influence over the huge morass. The cadence was faster. It tore at their nerves. It seemed to destroy the very regularity of their heartbeats. It beat like invisible waves against their brains.

„That infernal racket is driving us nuts!“ Johnny muttered.

„And a big alligator keeps crawling up in front of the door!“ Long Tom groaned. „The guards chased it away a time-or-two. But lately, they've been letting it hang around just because it makes us sweat. Seeing the infernal thing reminds us of ... of...“

The electrical wizard shuddered violently and could not finish. The thought of Doc's fate choked him.

Once more, they sat and listened to the thump din of the voodoo ceremony in the hollow at the top of the hill. The caterwauling yells still came. If anything, they were louder and even more fanatic.

„They're working up to the point where the human sacrifice will be offered,“ Johnny said in a thick voice. „I studied their infernal rites enough to be able to tell.“

„Use your brain on somethin' useful!“ Monk groaned. „Gettin' us out of here, for instance!“

Long Tom suddenly gave voice to a horror-stricken gasp. He shut his eyes tightly. The others looked to see what had affected him.

The giant alligator had returned! It crawled slowly through the steaming moonlight for the door.

It was like some hideous thing from Hades!

* * * * *

Chuckling loudly, the guards looked inside. The horror the presence of the reptile inflicted upon the prisoners seemed to give them great glee. They clucked at the 'gator, calling „Sic 'em!“ and other pleasantries.

One guard departed. A chicken's frightened squawl arose. The man came back with the fowl. Using the live bait, he proceeded to decoy the giant alligator through the door.

The reptile entered like a pet dog.

Playfully, the guard tried to persuade it to take a bite out of Monk's leg. But he had no success. Disgusted, he kicked the 'gator in the side.

The big saurian now became quite motionless. It might have been hearing something.

Sure enough, a sound came!

And it was by far the most welcome note that ever impinged upon the ears of the 5 men lying bound and sentenced to death upon the filthy floor!

The sound that meant Doc!

More than ever was the ventriloquist quality evident in the wondrous note. Mellow, trilling, soft—it seemed to waft forth from every part of the ramshackle building. It filtered through the awful throb of the tom-toms. And—tiny, small thing though it was—it reduced the savage rhythm to something unimportant and no longer dangerous.

Courage flowed into the 5 men. Utter joy washed their bodies like some hot, exquisite bath.

Doc Savage was alive!

They didn't know how it could be. But Doc was here somewhere.

Furtively, they tried to locate him. It was fruitless. His trilling sound seemed to emanate from the molecules of the air itself.

The guards were puzzled and not a little awed.

„Sacre! Vat ees dat noise?“

The swamp man who had kicked the 'gator stepped back.

The next instant, the reptile gave an expert flounce! The guard sprawled flat on his back. He lost his machine-gun from his hands.

The alligator now did what no commonplace saurian ever did. It got up on its rear legs!

The repulsive stomach of the thing was closed with—of all things—
...a zipper fastener!

With a s-s-wick! of a noise, the zipper came open.

The mighty bronze form of Doc Savage flashed forth!

* * * * *

For a moment, the superstitious guards must have thought the big reptile had actually „turned into“ the bronze giant that they believed one of its kind had devoured. Astonishment held them paralyzed.

Doc hurled his 'gator masquerade at them. It was but the hide of one of the reptiles, cleverly mounted.

It was heavy, though. And it flew true. One guard went over backward.

Another guard emitted a howl of alarm!. His aircraft-type machine-gun cut loose. The recoil of the powerful weapon shook the strange harness about his middle, threatening to tear him to pieces. Empty cartridges chased each other over the floor like brassy mice.

In his haste, the man forgot to exert the proper science in holding his weapon down. It got away from him. The stream of slugs cut through the plank walls like a slasher saw.

The fellow saw the bronze giant whip toward him. He sought to retreat. But a terrific blow felled him!

A knife glinted in the pale light over the roped forms of the 5 prisoners. It slashed with the nice precision of a machine. Ropes fell away.

„Yeo-o-ow!“ bellowed Monk. He reared to his feet, roaring and snorting!

Outside the shack, a swamp man was creeping along the wall. His wizened figure could be seen through the inch-wide cracks between the up-and-down wall planks.

Monk took 2 quick steps. His 260 pounds of gristle, bone, and stiff red hair sailed upward. Feet-first, Monk hit the wall. Planks split, crashed, caved! He went through the wall like a ball from a muzzle-loading cannon. The swamp man met destruction in the wreckage.

The swamp men possessed an animal-like bravery. Whereas beings with more brains would have fled, they stood and fought...

...and quickly found their „Waterloo“.

Renny's big fist took one amidship. All the starch left the fellow. He draped loose as a dirty shirt over the gallon-of-knuckles which had hit him.

The bronze flash that was Doc Savage in action accounted for the others.

Ham found his sword cane. One of the unlucky guards had been carrying it. Ham unsheathed the razor-sharp, flexible blade. It sang like a big tuning fork in his hand.

„Yeo-o-ow!“ bawled Monk. „I ain't even warmed up!“

You will be!“ clipped Ham. „You'll probably be on fire before this is over. There's only a few hundred of the voodoo devils left!“

* * * * *

Bedlam had broken out on the hill above the settlement. The greenish snake of fire burning within the hollow cast a lurid glow on the jungle immediately adjacent. The hilltop might have been the gullet of some bloated dragon.

Against the emerald luminance, ugly figures were silhouetted. Barbaric, savage forms these were except for the fearsome killing machines many wore harnessed to their bodies.

They had heard the prisoners escaping. They poured down the hill.

„Come!“ Doc's single word was low, calm. But it had the effect of an explosive!

He glided away into the night.

His 5 men followed. They knew Doc had some plan. But they couldn't imagine what it was.

They were hopelessly outnumbered. Should they take to the swamp, Doc alone stood a chance of escaping. The swamp men—knowing the intricacies of the vast and entangled morass—would overhaul anyone of lesser physical ability.

But Doc would never desert his men. Hence they knew he must have some other scheme for coping with their immediate peril.

Machine-guns searched the festering growth with whistling, popping streams of lead. The slugs sickled off branches and leaves. Violent rolls of rapid echoes gamboled over the low hill.

Amid all that discord, Doc and his men could talk without attracting attention.

„How did you do it, Doc?“ Ham questioned. „I mean when the car went into the bayou? I'd have sworn we saw a 'gator making a meal out of you.“

„What you saw was merely a trick to make the swamp men think I was done for,“ Doc replied. „I thrust an arm into the jaws of that stuffed alligator, then pushed the head out of the water and shook it. Naturally, it looked as if one of the huge reptiles had me.“

„What I want to know is where the stuffed ‘gator came from?“ Long Tom put in.

„What is the best masquerade a man could don to move about in this swamp?“ Doc countered.

„That’s easy!“ Long Tom chuckled. „Pass himself off as an alligator!“

„Exactly,“ said Doc. „That stuffed ‘gator was in the rumble seat of the roadster. It was one of the things I brought along into the swamp on the chance we might need it. I simply dived and got it after the car went into the water. The thing could be folded up in a fairly small space for all its large size. And it looked natural enough to fool the swamp men—especially when seen only by moonlight. In the daytime, they might not have been deceived so easily.“

„Maybe,“ replied Long Tom. „But the way it was, it sure ran a whizzer on everybody concerned!“

A note of regret now came into Doc’s powerful, expressive voice.

„I am sorry I had to deceive you along with the swamp men,“ he said. „But it could not be helped. And there was also nothing else to do but let you fall into the hands of the Gray Spider’s men. To have attempted to spirit you away underwater would only have meant you would be drowned.“

Doc and his 5 men were working around the hill as they conversed.

„Where we goin’?“ Monk inquired.

„Wet your finger and hold it up,“ Doc suggested.

Monk complied. „Huh? You mean that now we’re gettin’ the wind at our backs?“

„That’s the idea. As you may have noticed, I did some scouting around in the course of the night. In fact, I’ll venture to assure you, brothers, that there is scarcely a square yard of this hill over which Doc *Alligator* Savage did not crawl! Among other things, I made a find which—unless I’m far mistaken—will be our salvation.“

Ham thought of something.

„Say... There was a real alligator, wasn’t there? I saw that half-wit kid playing with one like it was a dog.“

„There was,“ Doc agreed. „I have both the boy and his unusual pet tied up in the nearby swamp. Neither have been harmed. Nor will they be. Unknowingly, they did us a good turn. Things would not have been nearly so simple had the swamp men not been accustomed to seeing this alligator around.“

Loud yells denoted the voodoo men were taking the trail of Doc and his friends. Pine-knot torches flamed. They cast fitful, dancing shadows. The hot white rods of modern flashlights mingled with them.

Random bursts were loosened frequently from machine-guns. But these never did anything more annoying than shower Doc and his 5 men with bark, twigs, and leaves.

„Kinda reminds me of the big scrap in France,“ Monk’s mild voice was more than ever a surprising contrast. It hardly seemed possible the boisterous, animal-like bellowings he emitted while in action could come from the same source as the sleepy, soft words.

„Well, the wind is at our backs,“ Renny announced. „So what?“

„So this!“ Doc pointed.

Before them reared the white, ghostly stub of a dead tree. Lightning had apparently shattered it long ago. The bark was gone. Cracks gaped in the pale wood. Patches of foul green fungus spotted it.

Doc quickly wrenched away a section of the lifeless trunk. A cavity was revealed. The trunk was hollow.

The cache held a number of boxes about the size of apple crates. One of these had been opened.

„I investigated,“ Doc explained. „2 of those boxes hold ordinary hand grenades. The others contain a supply of poison-gas grenades. It’s the same kind of deadly gas that the Gray Spider has twice sought to use on us. The wind will carry it over our foes.“

„Glory be!“ enthused Monk. „And that ain’t the half of it! There’s gas masks along with the stuff!“

The masks were swiftly hauled out. Monk, Renny, Long Tom, Ham, and Johnny donned them. But Doc Savage delayed.

„We will use the gas only as a last resort,“ he pointed out. „After all, the fiendishness of these swamp men is largely due to one man—the Gray Spider. If we can get the master devil and the group of his important lieutenants—which he calls the Inner Circle of his *Cult of the Moccasin*—it will be unnecessary to do any wholesale killing. The other swamp men—freed from the Gray Spider’s sinister influence—can be reformed.“

Doc now advanced a few yards. He carried a hand grenade—one which did not contain gas. He plucked out the firing pin and lobbed the metal egg into the morass.

It exploded with an ear-splitting roar!

The blast caused silence to seize momentarily upon the low hill. The voodoo men were surprised, uneasy.

Into the void of quiet rolled Doc Savage’s words. Now—more than ever—was the amazing quality of penetration apparent in the bronze man’s voice. It seemed to gather some of the elusive nature of Doc’s strange trilling sound for—without being in the least loud or blaring—it filtered to every part of the hill.

„We have the gas and the masks!“ Doc told the voodoo men. „To attack us will mean death for you! The wind will sweep the gas to you!“

* * * * *

At this threatening declaration, the silence deepened. It became an uneasy pall.

Suddenly, an order crashed among the voodoo men.

„He’s right! We can’t rush them. Draw back into the swamp! We’ll get them if they try to leave the hill!“

It was the Gray Spider speaking! Doc’s men exchanged puzzled looks.

„Glory be!“ gulped Monk. „Did you notice...“

In giving the command to his voodoo followers, the Gray Spider had been forced to lift his tone to a yell.

He had forgotten to disguise his voice!

„I’ll say I noticed it!“ Renny snapped. „That voice is familiar. I’ve heard it somewhere!“

„So have I,“ Monk said mildly. „But I can’t place it.“

Renny offered, „Maybe Doc can.“

With a start, Renny bit off his words. Doc Savage had vanished!

There had been no sound. They had noticed no stir in the pale moonlight that splattered through the canopy of swamp vegetation. Yet the mighty bronze form was no longer in their midst. He had slipped away as if on a moonbeam.

„Doc has gone after the Gray Spider alone!“ Ham clipped.

Ham had made a good guess. At the precise moment he spoke, Doc was 40 yards away. The russet metal hue of his skin and the dark color of his garments rendered him nearly invisible even when he crossed patches of moonlight.

At the foot of the hill, the swamp tangle reared like a wall. A great leap sent the Bronze Man upward. His case-hardened fingers found a limb. The branch bent some under his great weight. But it made little noise.

A voodoo man nearby saw the foliage sway. He got the most fleeting glimpse of a figure that might have been a metallic bat. There had been no noise. The swamp man *blinked* thinking a dark, night-flying moth was before his eyes. When he looked again, the strange vision was gone.

He galloped off, muttering of voodoo curses and evil spirits. He couldn’t understand what he had seen.

Nor would he have believed his eyes had he observed the flashing speed with which a Herculean bronze man traversed the aerial lanes of the interlaced swamp vegetation. No squirrel or anthropoid jungle dweller could have shown more uncanny ability.

Sometimes creepers draped in treetops parted under the weight of the bronze giant. But he never fell far before his sure fingers found fresh grip. Nor did these breath-taking drops seem to bother him in the least.

Deep in the morass, the voodoo man had stopped to catch his breath.

Suddenly a voice came out of the murk beside him.

„Sacre! Vare ees de Gray Spider?“ it asked. „Me, I got plentee important message fo’ heem!“

The voodoo man thought it was one of his fellows. „Dunno vare Gray Spider ees. Him go away. Not tell anybody vare to!“

The silence of a tomb followed. The voodoo man got curious. He investigated. He found no trace of whoever had spoken.

Several other swamp men had almost identical experiences. No one discovered who had addressed them in the debased jargon of their kind. Not one dreamed that it was the mighty Bronze Man they feared.

For Doc Savage was seeking the Gray Spider. Seeking with all his great resource of muscle and brain.

And seeking in vain!

Chapter XV

The Buzzing Death.

Dawn!

Periodic, vicious little storms were sweeping the voodoo hill in the great swamp. The „storms“ were lead driven by the machine-guns of the voodoo men. The little devils completely ringed the hill around.

Trees sheltered them; lineage concealed them. An army of 40,000 men would have had trouble stamping them out. When danger threatened one particular group, they had but to fire and lose themselves in the steaming, cankerous morass.

Doc and his 5 men were in a state of siege upon the hill. They had ripped planks off the shacks of Buck Boontown's settlement and used them to scoop out gun pits. In these, they had installed the machine-guns which they had taken from their erstwhile swamp guards.

Employing the same planks, they had rigged substantial dugouts—a precaution that proved highly worthwhile.

„Listen!“ Monk barked. „There's a plane coming!“

The craft soon swept into view. It dived on the hill. Crude bombs with fizzing fuses attached dropped overside.

Exploding, these threw up great fountains of mud and vegetation. Thanks to the dugouts, no harm was inflicted upon Doc and his men.

„Get that crate!“ Doc directed. „It may come back with more efficient bombs.“

The rapid-firers snarled in chorus. Ragged patches appeared in the wings of the plane. The craft banked away. Apparently it was not seriously damaged. Now it was lost to view, flying very low.

But a few minutes later, the sound of the engine suddenly ceased. A short silence ... a gruesome whistling of wind through flying wires ... and a resounding crash!

„Motor conked!“ Monk grinned. „From the sound of it, he made a landing he won't walk away from.“

„I think we riddled his gas tank,“ Doc offered. Only his keen golden eyes had discerned the leakage of gasoline from the plane as it departed.

„We're all set here,“ Monk chuckled. „A regular little war! And we could fight for a year without anybody in the outside world being the wiser.“

„Can you go without eating for a year?“ Ham asked sarcastically.

„Huh?“

„Maybe you haven't noticed our lack of grub?“

„Yeah, I knowed there was somethin' I had missed,“ Monk grinned. „It was my breakfast ham. The 6 slices I eat daily in your *honor!*“

Ham scowled threateningly at the big, homely Monk. Any reference to a porker that Monk made was always sure to get Ham's goat.

Ham racked his keen brain for some verbal thorn he could stick into Monk ... couldn't find any ... and held his tongue.

* * * * *

Doc Savage now launched into his daily 2-hour routine of exercises. This was a ritual he did each day of his life without fail. Not once since childhood had he skipped that intensive 120 minutes spent conditioning his marvelous bronze body and his remarkable brain.

The routine included every possible form of muscular exercise. In addition, he had an apparatus which emitted sound waves above-and-below the audible range. And so keen had his ears become through long practice that he could hear many of these sounds which would have escaped an ordinary person.

He identified scores of vague odors contained in small bottles, afterward inspecting the bottle labels to be sure he was right. He performed intricate problems in high calculus, entirely within his head.

The apparatus for these exercises was contained in a tiny, waterproof metal case Doc carried always with him.

Doc went through his ritual at a terrific pace—often doing a number of things at once! 5 minutes of it would have left an ordinary man panting and exhausted—granting the unlikely chance that such a man could muster the enormous degree of concentration necessary to do the exercises as furiously as Doc did them.

Watching this routine, it was no mystery to his 5 friends and aids where Doc Savage got his incredible physique and brain. Monk, Renny, Ham, Long Tom, and Johnny—themselves far above the average in mentality and brawn—knew to a surety that they would never have maintained such a grueling ritual from childhood. It took a man of steel willpower to do that!

The exercises completed, Doc moved over to speak with Sill Boontown. The half-wit boy crouched in the dugout.

„He is safer here,“ Doc had explained. „If he wanders around in the swamp, he might get shot or injured.“

Doc exchanged many words with Sill Boontown. He examined the youth, concentrating on the spot where Sill Boontown had been struck on the head a couple of years before.

Suddenly Doc joined his friends.

„I’m going to leave you for a while,“ he declared.

They were thunderstruck! They did not see how even Doc could escape safely from their makeshift fortress on the cleared knoll.

Working swiftly, Doc kindled a fire. He used wood which the voodoo men had been employing in their snake-like ceremonial blazes. The sulfur-treated stuff gagged them and nearly made their dugouts untenable.

The blaze mounted high, however. Doc heaped on a pile of soggy green grass and bushes.

Smoke now rolled. It poured across the open slope of the hill and into the matted swamp growth.

„Build a fire like this when you hear me come back,“ Doc directed.

A streaking blur of bronze, he raced through the smoke for the encircling jungle. The smudge smokescreen hid him partially.

A swamp man saw him. A machine-gun guttered fiercely.

But the bronze flash was gone. The verdant mat of the morass had swallowed Doc Savage!

* * * * *

A great deal of excitement followed the cunning escape. Voodoo men dashed about, pushing a wild search.

However, Doc Savage was half-a-mile distant before they had operations under way. He did not linger in the vicinity. Clearing bottomless quagmires of slime with gigantic springs, running along draped vines with his hands, and swinging from limb-to-limb, he made good time.

His journey brought him to the spot where Johnny had hidden the low-wing, tri-motored speed plane. Sinewy bronze fingers parted the moss that curtained the craft. Doc entered the cabin.

It required less than 5 minutes to get what he needed. When he reappeared, a bundle about the size of a bushel basket was lashed to his back with stout cord.

He now returned to the spot where his friends were besieged. Circling, he took a position upwind from the mound. But he kept fully 200 yards distant.

His weird, mellow trilling sound now filtered through the tangled vegetation of the morass. Although it seemed no louder than ever, it carried clearly to his 5 friends.

„That means we're to light a fire!“ Monk grunted.

The blaze was forthwith kindled. Flames leaped high. Wet grass and branches were thrown on. Dense smoke rolled.

The voodoo men were wily. They knew the giant Bronze Man had escaped through such a smudge. They reasoned he would come back by the same means. So they turned every available machine-gun loose into the smoke.

The smoke all-but-assumed the color of lead so thickly did the bullets fly. Slugs tore the ground until it looked like it had been gone over with a disc cultivator.

All of which merely made it simpler for Doc to reach his friends. He came not through the smoke but from the opposite direction. He ran silently and like the wind.

A lone pistol popped its magazine empty in his direction. The marksman might have been shooting at one of the pale clouds 10,000 feet overhead for all the result his bullets produced.

Doc dropped lightly into one of the dugouts.

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The bundle brought by the big Bronze Man was now opened.

First, there came to light some concentrated foods. Next, Long Tom was handed a package of apparatus.

„What's this?“ questioned the electrical wizard.

„All you need to make a supersensitive microphonic *ear*,“ Doc explained. „Set it up in the center of our fortress. When night comes, the voodoo men will no doubt try to creep up close enough to hurl bombs into our dugouts. But with your apparatus, you can hear them.“

Long Tom nodded, then fell to examining his apparatus. He became elated. With this stuff, he could make a microphonic listening-and-amplifying device that would pick up the buzz of a fly at the distance of half-a-mile. Scant chance would skulkers stand of creeping upon them now!

Doc Savage busied himself with poor, half-witted Sill Boontown. A kit which he had brought from the plane proved to be a compact set of surgical instruments. It even included hypodermic needles for administering a form of local anesthetic—a pain-deadener which affected only the part being worked upon.

„He’s gonna operate on the kid!“ Monk grunted.

„2 bits says the kid is normal as you or me when Doc finishes,“ Ham offered.

„You would want to bet on a sure thing!“ Monk snorted.

Both Ham and Monk were fully aware of Doc’s magical skill in Surgery. For it was at this above all else that the mighty Bronze Man excelled.

Surgery had been Doc’s first training in life. It had also been his most intensive. Although his ability at other lines of endeavor might seem uncanny, his accomplishments with Surgery and Medicine were far more marvelous.

It was an interested group that watched the delicate operation. Sinewy bronze fingers—steady as steel on a foundation of bedrock—laid back the scalp. A small aperture was opened in the skull.

As Doc had expected, a fragment of bone was pressing upon the brain and paralyzing certain of its functions. The blow on the head 2 years before had caused the trouble.

The bone fragment was removed. Swiftly, Doc completed the delicate operation. With catgut—which would dissolve of itself about the time the wound was healed—he stitched the scalp in place.

The effects of the anesthetic wore off.

„How do you feel, sonny?“ Doc inquired.

„I got one whopper of de headache!“ replied the boy.

His tone showed that he was perfectly sane!

It was magic! Monk, Ham, Renny, Long Tom, Johnny—they all exchanged strange glances. Accustomed as they were to the marvelous things Doc Savage did—and knowing that such a brain operation was not unique in surgery—they were nevertheless awed!

Lost from the Outside World—besieged here in the steaming, festering swamp with volleys of machine-gun slugs storming over them every minute-or-so—the feat could not but impress them as uncanny.

They scattered to their gun emplacements, wriggling through the shallow trenches they had dug.

Time now dragged. Long Tom finished his microphonic listening device. It was something like the apparatus used by the defenders of London during the Great War to listen for Zeppelins and planes, although far more perfected.

It was well after Noon when Doc Savage caught sight of Buck Boontown. The man was directing the siege.

Doc signaled Buck Boontown. It was his intention to inform the swamp man that his son would join him shortly. There was no longer necessity for keeping Sill Boontown here. The lad would not bungle into danger now that his mental powers were normal. And even had the boy wanted to assist the besieged man, Doc would not have permitted the lad to oppose his father.

Buck Boontown was suspicious. He thought Doc’s wig-wagging was a trick.

So he blazed away with a machine-gun! His accurate fire caused Doc to duck swiftly.

* * * * *

Buck Boontown chortled gleefully at the results of his rapid-fire blast.

„Bien! Me, I almo‘ got heem that time!“

He watched the mole-like mounds and tiny ridges of dirt the defenders of the hill had thrown up. His blasphemous pleadings to his hideous voodoo deity for another shot went unanswered.

Soon one of the other swamp men wriggled up with a message.

„Gray Spider ees want yo!“ he told Buck Boontown. „He‘ s send message. Yo‘ ees to go to Castle of the Moccasin!“

„Oui!“ smirked Buck Boontown. „Me, I go plantee queeck.“

The swamp man was flattered. Although by far the most intelligent of the debased clan of humans who had resided in this great morass so many generations they had reverted to a state of near savagery, Buck Boontown was nevertheless far from a smart man.

He fawned like a big dog under the attentions of the Gray Spider. „Sacre! Now there was a man for you!“

Or so Buck Boontown thought. The money that the Gray Spider paid his swamp men minions was not a minor inducement, either. A city gunman would have sneered at the smallness of the sums. But to these swamp dwellers, each pittance was a little fortune.

As he plowed through the tangled morass, Buck Boontown treated himself to flights of imagination. He was saving his money. Already he had quite a sum hidden in a fruit jar in the swamp. He would hoard more. He might even get enough to go to the great and marvelous city of New Orleans and spend the rest of his days. He had heard of the wonders of that metropolis but had never been there.

Indeed, he had never been out of this great swamp in his lifetime! And the swamp was but a few hours‘ drive by speedy car from New Orleans.

Mile-after-mile, Buck Boontown covered. He kept a straight course, weaving aside only for pools and slime which he could not leap.

He was entering the most remote section of the swamp. Even the folk who lived in the great morass seldom came here. The region was forbidden to all but the Inner Circle of the Cult of the Moccasin. It held the Castle of the Moccasin—the headquarters of the King of the voodoo cult.

The lair of the Gray Spider!

Buck Boontown climbed a cypress to make sure of his bearings.

Not a mile distant lay the Castle of the Moccasin!

* * * * *

No doubt airplane pilots flying over the vast swamp and bayou district had noted the peculiar knot of trees and shrubs projecting over the surrounding territory. Probably they mistook it for a tiny clump of very tall trees.

Should they have chanced to fly low, they would have seen that these trees—strangely enough—were growing out of a great, box-like knob which was covered completely by vines.

It had never occurred to any one that the knob was in reality a huge stone building, the roof and walls of which were cunningly camouflaged with growing vegetation.

Buck Boontown neared the strange, concealed castle of a structure.

He was challenged by a heavily-armed guard and then permitted to pass. Soon he met a second guard.

It was well nigh impenetrable to the casual wayfarer, this Castle of the Moccasin. Years had been spent in its building. Labor had been furnished by the members of the voodoo cult.

The Gray Spider's campaign of wholesale looting of the great lumber companies of the South was no snap-of-the-finger scheme. It had been years in the conceiving and preparation!

Buck Boontown was admitted to the Castle of the Moccasin through a secret door.

The passage into which he came was stone-walled. Electric bulbs lighted the way. The air inside—contrasting greatly with the malodorous and steaming vapor of the swamp — was clean and pure.

Buck Boontown knew nothing of such things as air-conditioning machines. So he attributed the sweetness of the atmosphere to some magic about the presence of the Gray Spider.

He entered a large room. The color scheme looked like it had been conceived by a futuristic artist who had gone crazy among his paint pots. Streaks and spots and daubs of green, red, blue, yellow, white, aluminum, gold. It all made neither sense nor beauty. Concealed colored lights dancing off-and-on added to the garish effect.

The whole thing was deliberately conceived to impress the near-barbaric minds of the swamp dwellers who worshiped the heathen deities of voodoo.

In the center sat a throne of gold. It was actually gold paint on a wooden foundation, although Buck Boontown didn't know it. To him, the throne alone represented limitless wealth.

The Gray Spider occupied the throne. He wore robe and mask. The repulsive, ash-colored tarantula crawled continually over one of his hands.

„Vat yo' want?“ asked Buck Boontown in an awed whisper.

The Gray Spider mouthed a few low, meaningless sounds before he answered. This was merely to add to the supernatural atmosphere created by his weird surroundings.

„You are becoming one of my most trusted and efficient servants,“ he told Buck Boontown.

„Oui!“ mumbled the swamp man, highly pleased. „Tank yo'!“

„I now have a most important task for you to perform.“

„Oui! I do heem fo' yo'!“

At the moment, ignorant Buck Boontown was so impressed that he would have laid down his life at a mere word from the sinister devil who held sway over him.

The Gray Spider now produced a chamois poke of the type used by stores to deliver their cash to the banks. This was weighty with silver coin.

It held exactly \$100.

Buck Boontown clutched the poke eagerly. In common with most barbaric folk, a pile of silver coins gave him a bigger kick than 10 times the sum in crisp bank notes.

„This is your reward,“ said the Gray Spider. „It is your pay for what you are to do. Later, if you serve me properly this time, there will be other tasks for you. And more rewards such as this!“

Buck Boontown could only mumble his gratitude.

The Gray Spider held up the hand on which the hideous tarantula constantly crawled.

In answer to the signal, 2 swamp men now carried in a box the size of a small trunk.

„Do you know what these are?“ asked the Gray Spider.

Buck Boontown stared at the box contents. He seemed puzzled and disappointed.

„Flies,“ he muttered. „Dey ees plain beeg o‘ flies!“

* * * * *

The swamp man’s disappointment gave the Gray Spider great delight. An explosive chuckle fluttered the silk folds of his mask.

„They look perfectly harmless, eh?“

„Oui! Dey like a bite a man. But dey no do heem any harm.“

A fresh gust of hideous mirth emanated from the Gray Spider.

„There’s where you’re wrong, swamp boy!“ he declared. „These are very special flies. If one of them should bite you, it’d kill you instantly!“

Buck Boontown looked as if he found this hard to believe.

„These look like ordinary swamp flies because they were just that before I got hold of them,“ the Gray Spider explained. „I have sprayed a very powerful poison upon them. The bodies of the flies have absorbed this poison, which has no effect on them. But their bites are now highly venomous. They will bring instant death to a man.“

„Sacre!“ Buck Boontown gulped.

The Gray Spider leered. „Making these flies poisonous is a very special secret of mine. It took me a long time to figure out a way of doing it. But I’m telling you, it works!

„Furthermore, I have starved these flies until they’re famished. They live by sucking blood. They’ll go after any living thing that’s handy when they’re let out of that box. And whatever they bite will die!

„You are to release them near the bronze devil and his 5 men.“

Buck Boontown wrinkled his forehead. „Oui! But won’t de flies bite and keel me, too?“

„You’ll set a clockwork so it’ll open the lid,“ explained the master fiend. „You merely take the box near the bronze man’s trenches and dugouts and set the clockwork to open the box at dawn. Then you have all the swamp men clear of the vicinity. The poison flies will do the job for us. You savvy?“

„Oui!“ Buck Boontown agreed.

He received detailed instructions on how to operate the clockwork. Then he departed from the Castle of the Moccasin, carrying the box of venomous flies on his back.

The journey back to where Doc Savage and his 5 men were besieged was a tedious one. It took Buck Boontown until long past Midnight.

He exchanged a word with his men, telling them to quit the vicinity.

„Yo‘ keed Sill, ees come back!“ offered the one to whom he talked. „Hees wit‘ yo‘ wife.“

Buck Boontown was overjoyed at this news.

He quickly placed the box of deadly flies. He set the clockwork. At the hour of Dawn, the venomous insects would be freed.

Doc Savage and his men would not suspect the innocent swamp flies of being poisoned. They would be bitten by the famished horrors. And Death would come!

Buck Boontown hurried away to meet his wife. He wanted to see his son Sill whom he loved deeply. Poor, unfortunate Sill! Perhaps someday—when they went to the wondrous New Orleans to live—a great doctor could do something for Sill.

The swamp man did not know that he had just sentenced to death the man who had already—by his magical skill—made Sill a normal youth.

Chapter XVI

The Pay-Off.

Buck Boontown paused several times to question such retreating swamp men as he encountered. He made sure all were getting away. None had been missed in spreading the word to quit the vicinity.

Doc Savage and his 5 men—Buck Boontown was assured—did not suspect a general exodus was under way.

„At Dawn, dey weel die!“ the swamp man leered.

He went on. The women and children of the voodoo clan had been moved to a spot a mile distant. He reached the place.

Every one was gone.

He spent 20 minutes learning the women and children had moved on a couple of miles. He tramped after them.

Somewhere in the distance, a rooster was crowing in a swamp henhouse. The hooting of owls had died. The Eastern sky was showing ruddy color. Already, the higher clouds were being tinted like patches of gore by the first rays of the Sun. Dawn was not far off.

Buck Boontown joined his wife and son.

„How ees de keed?“ he asked his wife.

„I‘m all right, Dad,“ said Sill Boontown.

Something in the lad’s tone gave the swamp man an inkling of the truth. A great elation came into his wizened face! The shining happiness in his wife’s features convinced him that what he had hoped for had come to pass.

The story quickly came out. Sill Boontown told of the operation which had worked such a miraculous cure.

Finishing, the youth produced several folded bank notes.

„De bronze man geeve me dese,“ he explained.

„What fo’?“

„Hees say fo’ me to pay my way t’rough school een New Orleans with de money,“ replied the boy.

Buck Boontown looked at the denominations of the bills. He totaled their sum laboriously. The amount his son held exceeded by many times the pittance the Gray Spider had handed out for having murder done!

Remorse then seized Buck Boontown.

This mighty Bronze Man who pursued the Gray Spider was not the devil that he had been portrayed! He did not mean to slay all the worshippers of voodoo.

It was a bloodcurdling LIE that the Gray Spider had spread!

The Bronze Man had given Buck Boontown back his son, magically returned to normalcy.

Moreover, he had furnished the boy with money to educate himself and to visit the wondrous city of New Orleans. He had given a sum greater than Buck Boontown had ever expected to save!

These thoughts formed a dizzying maelstrom in the swamp man’s head. And towering black and ghastly over it all was the knowledge that his hand was sending death to the giant Bronze Man.

Buck Boontown was not rotten at heart. His surroundings had made him ignorant and cruel. Raised in a civilized community, he would unquestionably have been respectable.

With a loud moan, Buck Boontown whirled and ran! He knew what he must do!

He made directly for the mound where Doc Savage and his 5 men were besieged.

The swamp man hoped to get there in time to stop the escape of the flies—the bite of which would be fatal.

His was indeed a race with Death!

* * * * *

Buck Boontown threw away his machine-gun. He also discarded a revolver. He was getting rid of all excess weight.

He sloughed through lakes of slime that he would ordinarily have gone around. Jabbing, scratching thorn thickets failed to turn him. He took perilous chances with a muddy bayou infested by ‘gators.

The Sun was nearly in view. Light of a beginning day seeped into the clammy, moist jungle.

It was almost the exact hour set for the opening of the box which held the poisonous insects.

Buck Boontown sought in vain to put on more speed! He rolled from side-to-side with exhaustion. Each tremendous, explosive breath blew a spray of crimson off his lips for he had bitten through his tongue.

The mound where Doc and his 5 men were besieged came into view.

Buck Boontown veered to the right. He saw the box which held the venomous flies. Horror gripped him anew!

He was too late! The box lid was opening!

But the swamp man did not slacken his headlong pace. Indeed, he even managed to go a little faster!

He pounced upon the box. A scant dozen of the poisoned flies had as yet escaped.

Buck Boontown knew the price that he was going to pay for what he was doing. But he did not hesitate. His was a man's code for all the fact that he had fallen under the hideous spell of voodoo.

Doc Savage had returned sanity to his son. Therefore he would save the giant Bronze Man from this death trap!

One of the venomous flies bit him even as he closed the box lid. He hardly faltered. He secured the lid. Then he sat down on the box.

Deliberately, he let the famished, deadly flies settle upon him and begin drawing his blood.

Then he mashed them one-at-a-time!

After the destruction of the last devilish insect which had escaped, Buck Boontown got off the box.

Doc and his 5 men watched the swamp man's staggering approach.

„What ails the guy?“ Monk muttered.

They soon learned the answer to that. Gasping, Buck Boontown explained. His words got weaker, incoherent. His face purpled. The deadly poison was working like cobra venom.

„Where is this Castle of the Moccasin?“ Doc demanded.

Buck Boontown knew he was dying. Perhaps he saw the hideous falsity of the deities of voodoo. Perhaps he realized at last that the Gray Spider was a fiend lower than the water moccasins, the likeness of which he tattooed on the mouth roofs of his slaves. Whatever moved the swamp man, it was a force for the good of Humanity.

In 2 strangled gasps, he told where the Castle of the Moccasin was.

Then he fell dead. Buck Boontown had paid off.

A heavy silence held the little group of adventurers for a time. They couldn't think of anything to say.

Finally, Monk voiced a thought as good as any.

„That guy,“ said Monk, „was a hero!“

Chapter XVII

„The Gray Spider is...“

Sultry midday heat pressed upon the Castle of the Moccasin. Living steam poured up from the soggy jungle of the great morass. Even the mocking birds, the blackbird, and the cardinals hung listlessly in the festering vegetation, emitting

cries that were only croaks. The little lizards that usually darted up the palmettos so swiftly now set a pace that barely crawled or hovered panting under a spiked frond.

It was as though the odious presence of the great, sinister, hidden castle of stone had contaminated and sickened the surrounding swamp.

But inside the Castle of the Moccasin, there was an air of evil jubilation, awaiting good tidings.

The Gray Spider himself paced circles around his gilded throne in the room of crazy coloring. He tossed his lead-colored tarantula playfully in the air and caught the repulsive thing as it came down. He still wore his mask of silk and the snake-embroidered gown.

„What’s keepin’ them slowpoke swamp snipes!“ he growled impatiently. „They should’ve had a messenger here before now, tellin’ me the bronze devil and his 5 nosey pals have kicked the pail.“

Up sailed the awful tarantula, its many legs kicking. The man in the robe and mask caught it with a flourish.

„Probably the swamp snipes were afraid to go near enough to see if they were dead,“ he decided. „I’ll get the news before long.“

He strode jauntily to the outer door.

„Go tell the guards to rush any messengers right inside,“ he ordered the watchman who stood at the portal.

„Oui!“ said the watchman.

The Gray Spider went back inside.

The watchman started off on his errand. He entered the tangled swamp growth.

Suddenly he stopped. Something had hit his chest. It made a dull, mushy sound.

He looked down. He saw fragments of glass clinging to his shirt front. They looked like parts of a thin-walled glass ball. It had contained some kind of liquid. He smelled a faint, strange, rather pleasant odor.

Then he went to sleep.

„Them anesthetic balls sure work like a charm!“ chuckled Monk, stepping out of the nearby jungle. He disarmed the man.

„This seems to be the last of the guards,“ clipped Ham.

He came into view, gave his sword cane a flourish, and added: „The other three were no more trouble than this one was. Aren’t we going to get the satisfaction of a fight out of this?“

„What do you know about *fighting*?“ Monk leered pleasantly.

„Pipe down, you guys!“ suggested Doc.

Renny, Johnny, and Long Tom stood behind Doc. They looked like a giant and 2 skinny dwarfs back of a big bronze statue. Not that Johnny and Long Tom were runts when compared to men of ordinary stature. They were simply in BIG company!

„Let us see what the future holds, brothers,“ Doc suggested mildly.

They came out of the jungle. Before them towered the Castle of the Moccasin.

„I wonder how you get in?“ Ham puzzled.

„I’ll get you in!“ Monk said grimly.

He drew a hand grenade, plucked the pin, and threw it. The metal egg sailed against the vine-clad walls of masonry.

It hatched a devilish red sheet of flame! Solid stone turned magically into dust, smoke, and a shower of fragments. The roar of the exploding nitro bumped in deep salvos across the matted swamp!

A great hole gaped in the wall of the Castle of the Moccasin.

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Doc and his men charged the breach. They vaulted tumbling blocks of rocks. They doubled low and bored through acrid smoke and blinding dust.

A vast room lay before them. The color scheme was repellant. It consisted of daubs and streaks and splotches of every imaginable hue. It was an ugly room—garish and cheap. Colored lights *blinked* like evil eyes.

A big and flashy throne occupied the middle of the floor.

Across the room, a man in a silken mask and a robe embroidered with snakes was just dodging through a door. The panel slammed! It locked.

„There he goes!“ Renny bawled in a voice that was like thunder in a barrel.

Doc and his men pursued the Gray Spider.

Halfway across the room, Monk stopped to jump with both feet on the Gray Spider’s repulsive, lead-colored tarantula! The thing had been dropped by the Master Fiend in flight and was scuttling circles on the floor.

„I hope that’s an omen!“ Monk grinned as his big feet squashed the vile thing.

They hit the door. It was of wood. Renny’s machine-gun made a noise like a steam riveter gone wild.

Renny was a good machine-gunner. He could not have cut the lock out of the door more neatly with a keyhole saw and an hour in which to work.

The door whipped open.

„This way,“ breathed Doc. His sensitive ears had picked up the Gray Spider’s shuffling feet.

They went down a corridor. Stairs sloped into the innards of the Earth.

Doc took the stairs with incredible leaps that covered 15 steps at-a-time! He placed his feet in the mathematical center of the treads upon which he landed as though he had been stepping down one at a time.

Monk sought to imitate Doc’s feat. He met disaster. Head-over-heels he flopped down the stairs, only to gain his feet no more damaged than had he been a man of rubber.

„Graceful as usual!“ sneered Ham.

„Yeah, yeah!“

The deafening cackle of a machine-gun drowned Monk’s comeback. Bullets chiseled rock chips off the corridor sides.

Renny’s rapid-firer snapped spitefully! Twice. The passage went silent except for the bang of racing feet and the snorty breath gusts of men in action.

The Gray Spider was proving fleet now that Death was blowing frosty breath down his neck!

The stairs leveled out in another passage. This one had steel-grilled doors on either side. It resembled the corridor in a penitentiary cell house.

Faces were pressed to the bars!

Doc caught a glimpse of the attractive features of Edna Danielsen. A moment later, he saw Big Eric.

Fat Horace Haas was also there with his flashy clothes sadly bedraggled.

This was the Gray Spider's prison! Here he held the owners of the great lumber companies of the South and tortured them into doing his bidding—doing such things as signing control of their concerns over to men who were tools of the Gray Spider.

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The chase led into another room. This was fitted with a desk, calculating machines, and many big sheet-metal filing cabinets.

The cloaked-and-masked Gray Spider was tearing at a door across the chamber. He had grasped up a handful of notebooks and papers in his flight.

He dropped the documents in his wild haste. He got through the door barely ahead of Doc's flashing bronze form. The door slammed. This one was of heavy steel. The lock tumblers rapped over.

Doc Savage scooped up the papers the Gray Spider had dropped. He ran backward.

„Lay an egg!“ he clipped at Monk.

Monk hauled a hand grenade out of his capacious pockets.

„Holy cow!“ choked Ham, remembering Monk's headlong fall down the stone stairs. „And your pockets were full of them things!“

Doc Savage eyed the documents he had seized. They were a find indeed!

They seemed to be a complete record of the Gray Spider's crooked transactions as well as the roster of his organization. There was proof enough here to send every man of his vile gang fleeing from Justice.

Monk's hand grenade exploded! The steel door caved like a tin can hit by a shinny stick. It appeared to float off its hinges.

Doc and his men barged through. Then unexpected resistance met them.

In a vast room, 30-or-so yellowish-brown men milled. They were members of the Inner Circle of the Cult of the Moccasin. And every man was armed.

It was evident they had been holding some kind of a conclave. In the center of the chamber stood a box. It had large holes for ventilation. These were covered with a fine screen.

A box of the poisonous flies! Evidently the Gray Spider had more of the things on hand in case his first batch didn't work. The members of the Inner Circle must have been examining them.

A pistol rapped! The bullet stirred Doc's bronze hair which—remarkably enough—was thus far no more ruffled than it would have been by a Waldorf banquet.

Renny's deadly machine-gun burred loudly! The pistol wielder gave an imitation of a sack emptying itself.

But the fight was not going to be won with a shot-or-two. Several of the voodoo men were lifting machine guns. The Gray Spider had taken shelter behind them.

Suddenly his purple-veined talon whipped up. It flung a hand grenade! The deadly blow of metal flew straight.

Doc and his men seemed doomed. The sportiest gambler wouldn't have bet a slot-machine slug on their chances. They had no time to retreat. One couldn't hurl back this type of grenade. They exploded the instant they reached you. And there was enough nitro in it to reduce all 5 men to mangled fragments!

As on countless other occasions, it was the giant Bronze Man who saved the situation.

With a speed no eye could have caught, Doc's hand swept over. It plucked Renny's machine-gun from his big hands. The weapon flashed through the air!

It was a perfect throw! The hurtling machine-gun met the grenade.

The grenade exploded near the box which held the poisonous flies. That box was ruptured.

The deadly insects swarmed out!

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„Back!“ Doc's powerful voice throbbed. „Get out of here!“

He and his men turned heel and fled from the buzzing death flies. Behind them, men screamed! The famished insects were settling upon them. They were falling victim to their own murderous tool.

Of all the fiends left behind in the room of death, only the Gray Spider had the presence of mind to try to flee by the same route Doc and his men had taken.

He pounded after Doc 20 feet to the rear.

The Evil Master knew the fly stings meant his finish. He screamed as the small creatures bit into his flesh! He tried to beat them off his face, tearing off the gaudy silk covering that served for a mask.

It was then that Doc and his men saw the features of this man who called himself the Gray Spider. They had reached the end of the passage and were going through the door which closed off the barred cells.

Just as they were about to step through, the screaming maniac behind them tripped on his own long robe and fell head-foremost on the floor. The bloodthirsty, poisonous flies swarmed about his distorted features, inflicting death with every thrust.

Only a moment did Doc and his men look at that agonized face. Only a moment was needed to recognize the features of this Master Devil who plotted so skillfully with such dire cruelty.

In that moment, Doc and his companions in adventure saw the one person whom few would suspect.

It was the face of Silas Bunnywell!

And the screams were the voice of Silas Bunnywell—the voice which a short while ago they recognized as having heard before.

Silas Bunnywell—the old and decrepit bookkeeper for Big Eric's concern—was the Gray Spider!

With a mighty slam, Doc shut the door upon the leader and the ringleaders of the Cult of the Moccasin. The death they had planned for others would be fit punishment for themselves!

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It took but short minutes to unlock the barred cell doors. They found a ring of keys on a peg near the corridor end.

Pitiful indeed was the array of prisoners who stumbled forth. Some had been there for years, their sobbed testimonials of delight and gratitude disclosed.

The Gray Spider, it seemed, had been operating a long time. And it was only of late that he had become bold enough to throw his insidious web about the largest lumber companies of the South for the grand cleanup.

Most moving of all, perhaps, was the simple statement of thanks which beautiful Edna Danielsen gave Doc Savage as the bedraggled cavalcade quitted the Castle of the Moccasin. The gripping part of her expression was not the commonplace words but the depths of feeling that went into them. There was a sort of joy and hopelessness intermingled as though she finally understood that she must keep hidden forever the emotions her heart held for the mighty Man of Bronze.

Monk expressed it. He usually had a description for everything.

„It's tough for her to fall like that,“ said Monk. „For the woman isn't made who can get a rise out of Doc.“

Outside in the steaming sunlight of the swamp, tension fell from the adventurers. Their work here was done.

Standing a little apart, the giant Bronze Man looked thoughtfully into the North.

He was thinking of the face of the Gray Spider—the face of the old bookkeeper Silas Bunnywell—as he lay on the floor, victim of his own evil!

