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The actors and actresses in the rehearsed photos are over 18 years (see [here](#) for a list of sites from where they were extracted). The anime/hentai/cartoon/3D/CGI images depict sexual fantasies of many Adults and as strictly drawings of erotic art are harmless and (at one time) were not subject to any legal restrictions (see [here](#)). These images were created to be over 18 years old by their artists.

These short-stories do not have an "editor-in-chief". Many individuals contributed to different sections in a story. So it is possible that some questionable images "slipped through the cracks". If any image is judged to be illegal by a newer law, please contact kelli@hotlegsinlove.com and it will be removed.

All of these images were retrieved from "free" public (i.e., non-paysite) websites including Google. Some have a massive collection from fake-celebrity-sex to BDSM to incest to bestiality images [such as 8muses.com]. The assumption was that if these somewhat-realistic images were illegal, the legal authorities would have had them removed a long time ago. But they are still there and so they are being used here and saving you a lot of web-surfing time.

If you are someone who might be offended by such fiction or the prevailing Laws of your locale do not permit viewing ***“Forced Sex”***-type material --

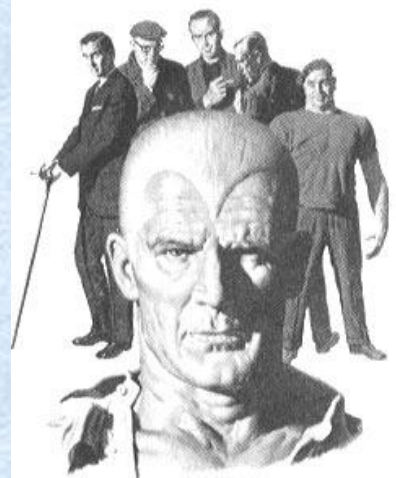
and especially if you are under 21 years of age --

DO NOT READ FURTHER .

Doc Savage #191XXX - "The *Desert Demons*"

by Will Murray ('Kenneth Robeson') July / 2011

(~~XXX~~ material added by kelli@hotlegsinlove.com)



XXXXXX Not For Viewing By Anyone Under 21 XXXXXX

*When ferocious blood-red **Things** begin dropping down from the sky, the state of California is besieged by the **Desert Demons**. A phenomenon so fierce that it triggers a modern exodus. From the Hollywood hills to the alligator-infested interior of Florida, the **Man of Bronze** wages war with cyclonic monsters that seem to possess an intelligence of their own and a murderous malevolence that smacks of the unearthly! (with **Patricia Savage** !)*



<http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/PSXXX.htm>

XXXX This is a 'X'-rated version of the original novel. XXXX

The Perils of Patricia Savage

modified by kelli@hotlegsinline.com

**** Not For Viewing By Anyone Under 21 ****



Thanks to Blackmask.com , Worldlibrary.net , Munseys.com and the other websites who previously converted these Doc Savage paperbacks into electronic format. They were used as the base for inserting the XXX material.

The Adult **images** that accompany the XXX material were from free public sites such as LuxBabes.com , Twistys , HotPornstars , Richards-Realm.com , and Celebritiesmix.com .

The fantasy XXX material was in part created by inspiration from Rebecca at RebeccaHAP.com and those wicked and talented **BDSM** erotic artists at DoFantasy.com and 8Muses.com .

note: to skip to images of **Pat Savage In Peril**, do a <Ctrl>-F (Find) on **XXXXXX** .

I – *Red Demons*

The first "*demon*" appeared in the Mojave Desert.

Out of a clear sun-heated sky, it materialized. A cloud such as man had never seen before. **Red** as blood, tumultuous, boiling, coming from none knew where, and carrying an awful and mysterious death.

It chanced that a newsreel camera crew was on hand to record the unearthly phenomenon. Coincidence may or may not have played a significant role in this. The camera men had driven out into the desert to shoot the activities of a Hopi medicine man named Chief Crazy Thunder.

Crazy Thunder was not actually a chief. And he wasn't, technically, a medicine man either.

What he was was an enterprising young buck who had devised an original idea to grab himself a slice of fame (and, incidentally, make for himself a respectable pile of dough).

The State of California had been sweltering under a prolonged drought. The orange crop was wilting. Wine grapes withered on the vine. Reservoirs shrank from their banks. Nothing could be done. It was terrible.

Reading of this, Crazy Thunder traveled from his native Arizona tricked out in his Hopi bead costume and medicine rattle with the idea of producing rain.

Among American Indians, the Hopi are famed for their ceremonial rain dance. Crazy Thunder was the nephew of a genuine Hopi rain-dancer. He had practiced for much of his young life the downpour-summoning salutations of his **copper-colored** ancestors.

That he had never generated any actual rain but only fitful heat lightning and the odd grumble of thunder gave Crazy Thunder the latter half of his name. That he was addicted to impulsive ideas provided the first part.

And so after talking a newsreel camera crew into conveying him out into the parched Mojave, he stood among the spiny Yucca cactus and twisted Joshua trees in his feather and his beads and prepared to call down a meteorological miracle.

Instead, Crazy Thunder called down something else entirely.

As the camera man started filming, the young Hopi went into his routine. He began by kneading the hot sand with his soft moccasins. He let out a long low *kyoodle* mixing mournful coyote with the high howl of a wolf. Turning slowly, Crazy Thunder commenced dancing in a circle.

He carried a carved wooden slat affixed to a length of rawhide thong which was called a "roar devil". Whirling the thing around produced a low moaning sound that gave the 'roar devil' its name. At an appropriate moment, Crazy Thunder set his bull roarer to spinning.

It was quite a performance. The camera crew ate it up. They called out encouragement. If the deluge came, they cried, he would be known from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean as the savior of California.

Young Crazy Thunder gave it everything he had. He whooped his throat raw. He danced blisters into the soles of his feet. Visions of gold dollars danced before his eyes.

So engrossed did he become that Crazy Thunder failed to take note of what began transpiring only a few yards away.

The first he knew of it was a vague silence. The camera crew had stopped egging him on. He failed to realize that they had trained their camera in another direction entirely to record something they had spied in the sky. Something that caused them to grow strangely quiet.

The second unexpected development came when he felt something *cold* and *biting* touch the back of his hand.

Precipitation had started falling from the sky. Rain is rare in the high desert. And on a hot August day, it is virtually unheard of. But still the precipitation fell.

Quite naturally, Chief Crazy Thunder stared upward. His square *copper* features elongated in amazement. For the sky above was a burning brass bowl of emptiness with nothing but a fading red haze in it.

Yet there were things dancing about him. They seemed unreal in the thin hot air of the desert. It was all very strange.

Strange too was the *sound* that beat upon the air. It might have been the low howl a cyclone makes except that the noise had a frenzied metallic quality. It seemed to be coming from the direction of the camera crew.

They were still there standing in the open bed of their pickup truck. They were not moving. The truck had been tan but it was now a different color. It was a spectral bleached-out white. So were the 3 camera men. And they were not moving.

The sun was in Crazy Thunder's dark eyes. So he mistook the weird phenomenon for a trick of the light. Flying about the tableau were particles of something. But not rain. That fell in drops and streams. This was different.

At first, he thought it was sand. Sand caught up in a whirlwind which denizens of the desert call a "dust devil". But there was no wind and thus nothing to cause the particles of sand to whirl about as they did.

One of the fugitive particles touched Crazy Thunder's medicine rattle. It resembled a black cinder. But when it touched the rattle, the latter turned bitterly *cold* to the touch.

As if stung by a scorpion, Crazy Thunder dropped the rattle. It shattered on the sand. The sound of its shattering was not normal. It was *soft*, not hard.

He looked down. The rattle lay in pieces like a broken bone. It had not been bone-white before. But it was now. Very.

Another cinder touched his moccasin. He jumped and let out a *pained* shout and then peered at his foot. It was suddenly bare. No sign of any footgear was visible anywhere.

Crazy Thunder began to run. More black precipitation descended upon the spot that he had vacated.

All the while, that awful metallic *howling* was winding down like a dying thing. Eventually I did die having only a strange absence of sound far more eerie than ordinary silence.

Now although Crazy Thunder had lived all of his life in the deserts, it did not follow that the Hopi youth had never seen snow. He had. And he had felt its cold bite upon his hands. The feel of this coal-black matter was similar.

So he made a natural mistake.

"Hail!" grunted Crazy Thunder using the English word because his branch of the Hopi tongue held no similar appellation.

He slackened his speed for he did not consider it especially remarkable that *black hail* should fall. He had been quite amazed the few times he had seen ordinary white snow, too.

The newspapers were also amazed. Not about the black hail. They did not hear about that.

The thing that amazed and puzzled the newspapers was the mystery of what could have happened to Cy Dix and his 2 cameramen who had driven a tan pickup truck out into the Mojave Desert and **vanished completely**.

Dix was a brilliant young director. A fellow whose artistic brain was largely responsible for the present state of efficiency of a rising Hollywood studio called Flash pictures. His 2 cameramen were scarcely less capable.

All three had vanished in the desert and no one knew how, why, or when. Chief Crazy Thunder did not know. He had only seen the weird dust devil that carried *black hail* and left everything it touched the color of sun-bleached bone.

After a suitable interval, Crazy Thunder sneaked back to the pickup truck to reclaim his fallen bull roarer. The truck was still there. And it was definitely white. Only the windshield and side window glass were untouched by the deathly pallor.

But of the 3 men, there was no sign.

The sand thereabouts was sprinkled with fine pale powder that reminded him of the color of the pickup truck and its missing occupants. Powder was scattering from wind-blown patches in the bed of the pickup truck. They corresponded to the approximate locations of the vanished truck crew. The young Hopi shuddered when he made the connection.

Chief Crazy Thunder also noticed that 2 spindly Joshua trees were no longer rooted where they had formerly stood. Something had carried them away, too. He did not dwell on what that might be. But he remembered that they also had turned white amid the swirling *black dust devil*.

It was a long trek back to civilization. There was a passenger train leaving for Arizona that he planned to board.

Henceforth Chief Crazy Thunder intended to leave the Hop rain dance to persons older and wiser than he. For the young Hopi had become convinced that he had inadvertently called down an angry *desert demon*.

Some thousands of persons on a Malibu beach saw the next manifestation of mad meteorological phenomenon.

It appeared as a cloud near other clouds. It was a hideous spot that might have been a drop of red **blood** in the sky. Many newspapers commented on that similarity the next day. (The similarity was to assume frightful importance later.)

A thin middle-aged man in a one-piece bathing suit was first to see an airplane flying toward the **cloud** of crimson. Possible the thin man noticed the plane because he was always interested in the sky. He was noted astronomer Dr. Paul Zimmer.

Dr. Zimmer and the other thousands on the beach saw the high-flying plane rise toward the **red pall** in the sky as if those in the ship were curious. They all saw what happened next.

The plane simply vanished in the blood-red cloud. Incredible as it seemed, that was what occurred. One moment the ship was arching through the sunlight. And the next, it was enveloped.

The cloud darkened becoming even more like **blood**. Its darkening took on a more ominous hue for very soon it turned **black**. It began to fall apart. And when the coal-black **cloud** dispersed (which it soon did as if melting in the heat), there was no trace of the plane!

Everyone distinctly heard the sound of the plane motor cease when the scarlet cloud enveloped it.

Every newspaper in the United States carried similar headlines:

RED CLOUD DEVOURS PLANE

That was typical of the scareheads. After one imaginative eyewitness described the sun-burnished cloud as possessing a **coppery** metallic tinge, a tabloid paper coined the term "Copper Cloud". The appellation soon stuck.

Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement had been a passenger on the plane which met such a mysterious fate in the crimson **cloud**. Professor Clement held the chair of advanced meteorology in one of California's most erudite universities.

The following day, Dr. Paul Zimmer went for a walk along the beach. A beachcomber saw a weird red cloud descent upon Zimmer. It appeared to gobble him up. It turned a deeper red and then abruptly black as if an unfathomable process of digestion were taking place. At least, the beachcomber claimed that it did. But there was some doubt because that particular individual was a notorious imbibor of spirits.

But Dr. Paul Zimmer disappeared completely. This made headlines for he was in charge of the new astronomical observatory at Palomar. Investigation also revealed that he was also a friend and colleague of the missing meteorologist Clarence Threlkeld Clement. The papers played up this connection. But they could not otherwise make anything of it.

Then a search party seeking Cy Dix and his 2 assistants in the Mojave Desert came upon Chief Crazy Thunder. The discouraged Hopi rain-dancer was still trudging his way out of the high desert. He told them about the **black hail**.

The search party found the white pickup truck that had been tan. But no trace of Cy Dix and his assistants. There was a lot of sand piled in the bed of the truck. It was not the color of sand, however. It more closely resembled salt.

When they attempted to climb aboard, the truck literally fell apart. It was as if some chemical action had rendered the steel and rubber as brittle as crystal. The newsreel camera also crumbled to the touch. Oddly, though, its contents had survived. The film cannister was rushed to the studios of Flash Pictures and developed.

It showed the beginning of Crazy Thunder's rain dance. Then the camera suddenly swiveled upward to record a strange cloud. The film was black&white so the color of the cloud did not register. A film expert, however, concluded that the grayish tone probably signified **red**.

At the point where the cloud filled the frame, the mad whirling thing black and the camera had ceased to operate.

Just before that unsettling transformation, the whirling of cloud seemed to suggest the gathering features of a **demon** out of the lower regions. The impression of a demonic visage might have been an optical illusion. Or it might not have been. People often see **imaginary** faces in ordinary clouds. But this particular countenance animated with a ferocity resembling hatred was hard to dismiss as a product of mere imagination.

That was good for newspaper headlines all across the Nation, too. They put Chief Crazy Thunder in the newsreels. He cut a picturesque figure with his brilliant Hopi regalia and handsome **copper** features. It made good copy.

Flash Pictures offered him a part in a Western movie about to be filmed. But his contract strictly forbade him from performing any more rain dances. The studio did not take seriously his belief that he had called down a **demon of the desert**. But the producers thought it good advance publicity to let the general public know about the clause.

4 more persons vanished that week. All were "big shots". One was a daredevil pilot. Another was the head of a Hollywood studio. The third was an oil man. And the fourth a noted investment banker who had recently retired. Two of the deaths were marked by sight of a weird crimson **cloud**.

All disappeared without a trace. Neither were traces left of the conveyances in which they were traveling. In one case it was an airplane. In 3 incidents, it was automobiles.

On the following Monday, Doris Duff vanished.

The newspapers remarked on the fact that Doris Duff was the first victim who seemed to amount to nothing in particular.

But the newspapers were wrong. Doris Duff was the biggest star of all as far as future developments were concerned.

She had registered at a Palm Springs dude ranch giving New York City as her home. She claimed to operate a health spa in Manhattan.

But it developed that no one named 'Doris Duff' owned a health spa in the city. In fact, no record of a 'Doris Duff' could be found anywhere.

This was a mysterious point about Doris Duff for which the journalists could not account. Since it was a Palm Springs resort from which she vanished, a rumor spread that 'Doris Duff' was the pseudonym of a famous Hollywood actress who was vacationing incognito. The fact that one of filmland's most popular matinee idols bore the last name of 'Duff' lent some credence to this theory.

But this rumor did not pan out, either.

After Doris Duff vanished and someone reported seeing a blood-red *dust devil* descend upon the part of the Mojave Desert where she had gone prospecting, things began to happen in earnest.

Newspapers claimed that they could see no connection between the disappearances. But they were a bit nearsighted.

There was a connection. And its significance was so bizarre that no doubt some of the journals would have hesitated to print it.

II – Man of Mystery

On the morning following the disappearance of Doris Duff, a mysterious thing happened at the Los Angeles city passenger airport.

The dawn was somewhat foggy and cool. The beam radio had been switched 'on' to guide in the plane due from the East. Persons stood about muttering comments on the changeable California climate and shivering in their topcoats.

A mechanic heard a motor mon in the sky and said "Here she comes."

The remark and the sound of the plane caused no particular excitement except a stirring among those individuals who had come out to meet relatives or friends on the westbound craft.

The incoming ship drew nearer. Its noise became a great moan and then suddenly ceased. There was a whine of air past flying wires. No one could see the ship. It was lost in the fog.

Then from the far end of the field came a series of *thumps* not unlike a rubber ball being dropped rapidly. This meant that the plane was landing.

The craft was still lost in the fog. This was unusual for the pilot should have put the passenger ship down nearer the hangars. And the motors did not accelerate and pull the plane nearer. This was even more unusual.

The motors died suddenly.

"Something's wrong!" exploded the mechanic.

He ran through the fog trailed by the manager, some pilots, and most of the persons who were expecting relatives or friends.

They found a plane. It was not the passenger ship. This one was a low-wing monoplane which seemed to be composed almost entirely of motor.

It was a strange ship. One of no ordinary design. This the pilots immediately recognized.

On closer inspection, they also perceived the somewhat surprising fact that no part in the ship – not even the carburetor or other motor sections – bore the stamp of a manufacturer.

Moreover, the craft was like no other which they had ever seen. And the pilots were familiar with almost all types of planes domestic and foreign.

The ship was unique and exquisitely constructed. The fliers agreed that it was probably as fast a racing plane as they had ever looked upon. But there was absolutely nothing to show who had built the racer or who owned it. There were no Department of Commerce identification numerals on the wings or fuselage.

There was also no sign of the person or persons who had landed the craft.

While those at the airport were still ogling the mystery ship, a messenger boy who had parked his motorcycle before a lunch car while he got coffee and doughnuts for breakfast heard his motor wheel start banging. He gave a great leap for the door. But before he got outside, his motorcycle was gone in the fog.

He began yelling for a copy. Then he saw that his raincoat which had been folded on the luggage carrier now lay flat on the curb. He ran over and picked it up. Bits of colored paper fell out. He looked at them.

He stopped yelling for a cop. The bits of colored paper were greenbacks duly endorsed by Uncle Sam. They represented much more than the value of the motorcycle. Whoever had taken it had left the bills by way of payment. The messenger was more than satisfied.

The motorcycle traveled fast ferreting out sidestreets in a manner which showed that its rider had an uncanny knowledge of Los Angeles. Such persons as glimpsed the motor wheel (and they were not many for the hour was early) saw only a figure enveloped in a black rubber hat and southwester such as fishermen and sailors wear. The rider's hands were gloved. No one saw his features.

The motorcycle eventually stopped in an alley beside the Banadina. It was one of the city's largest hotels but not the largest. The rider had picked his spot carefully. He now stood erect upon the motorcycle seat after dropping the wheel stand.

He gave a leap and grasped the platform of fire escape ... swung up ... and then mounted rapidly and silently. Making no noise, he stopped outside a window on the 7th floor and peered through the glass.

The mysterious person drew back swiftly. From inside his black raincoat he brought a slender metal tube with an elbow eyepiece at one end and a reflecting lens at the other. He used this periscope to watch the interior of the hotel room.

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There was a man with a gun inside the room. He was young and had the build of an athlete. But there was fear on his face and nervousness in his manner. He held the gun with his teeth gripping the trigger guard so that his hands might be free and the gun still convenient.

His hands were busy with a corner of the mattress. He must have tipped this open previously with a sharp knife for he was now engaged in replacing the batting and endeavoring to make the mattress appear as if it had never been tampered with.

There came a *sound* from the door.

The athletic young man straightened. His hair was rather long and gray at the temples. He stared at the door and saw that the knob was turning. He hurriedly replaced the bedsheet.

Then he took the gun out of his mouth and ran over and stood beside the door. When it opened, he shoved the muzzle of the weapon into the midriff of the man who started to come in.

The new arrival had lean shoulders and thin hips which gave him a waspish effect. He was aired in a fashion that was sartorially perfect. He had the high forehead, penetrating eyes, and the large mobile mouth of an orator. His extremely perfect morning garb of striped trousers, fawn vest, and cutaway coat was set off by a slender black cane.

The mysterious individual lurking on the fire escape outside the window could hear what was said within.

"Are you Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks?" asked the gray-haired young man.

The dapper man with the cane looked down at the gun pressing against the lap-over portion of his fawn vest.

"Correct," he said dryly. "But what ..."

"They call you 'Ham', don't they?" interrupted the other.

"Correct again," admitted the dapper man. "Now what is ..."

"And you are one of **Doc Savage's** 5 assistants, are you not?" interposed the man with the gun.

Ham demanded angrily: "What-the-devil is the meaning of this?"

"I am trying to get some information that is very important to me," said the other. "You are one of **Doc Savage's** aides. Is **Doc Savage** here in California?"

"You consider that important?" Ham countered.

"Very."

The gray-haired man nudged with his gun.

"Is Doc Savage here.?"

"No," Ham growled. "Why should he be"

"I thought he might have come down to investigate the **Copper Clouds**," the other retorted.

"The **Copper Clouds**?" Ham repeated wonderingly.

"Exactly. The **Copper Clouds**. Is **Doc Savage** in Los Angeles?"

"I do not know where he is!" Ham snapped. "He was in New York the last I heard of him."

The other jabbed with his gun.

"You are in Los Angeles. And so is Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair more commonly called 'Monk'. William Harper Littlejohn, who is known as 'Johnny', is also here. Those two are also **Doc Savage's** assistants. It looks as if **Doc Savage** were assembling his men here."

Ham shrugged. "If I told you the truth, you would not believe it."

"I would," asserted the gunman.

Ham squinted at the man. "Just who-the-devil are you, old chap?"

"I am Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement," said the gray-haired young man with the gun.

Ham nearly dropped his slender cane.

"Jove!" he exploded. "You are the one who disappeared when the airplane vanished in the **Copper Cloud**."

"On the contrary, I was not in the plane when the **Copper Cloud** got it," said Professor Clement. "I had been removed by force earlier. A remote-control radio device was flying that plane."

Ham studied the other intently while at the same time fingering his cane absently.

Finally, he shifted the cane around behind his back. He held it there, his hands clasped together after the fashion of a man thinking deeply.

"What has happened to the others who vanished in connection with this **Copper Cloud**?" he inquired. "Are they alive too?"

"They will never be seen again," said the young-looking Professor Clement. "My own case was the exception. The one single exception I might add."

Ham continued to eye him.

"You look scared. Would you mind turning that gun the other way. You make me nervous."

But Professor Clement did not shift his gun.

"None of **Doc Savage's** men are liable to become nervous so easily," he said.

Ham shifted the black cane in the hands behind his back and demanded:

"How did you learn so much about **Doc Savage**?"

"I am a meteorologist," said Professor Clement. "**Doc Savage** has done research work which has made him world-famous in the field of meteorology. He is also famous in the fields of electricity, engineering, and surgery as well as others. He is quite a remarkable man."

"Granted," said Ham. "But what I meant is this. What do you know about **Doc Savage** that makes you think he would come to California to investigate these **Copper Clouds**?"

"I have heard talk," said the other. "**Doc Savage**, as I said, is a remarkable individual. His career is probably the strangest to which any man has ever dedicated himself. It consists simply of going about helping others out of trouble and investigating mysterious things. Sometimes traveling to the ends of the Earth to do so."

Ham demanded: "Just what-the-devil is behind all your talk?"

"Is **Doc Savage** here in Lost Angeles?" the young-looking professor countered.

"No!" Ham snapped. "Not that I know of."

"Very well, then," said Professor Clements. "Send for him at once. Get him here in Los Angeles."

"Why?" Ham questioned.

"**Because Doc Savage is slated to die in a Copper Cloud** unless he can smash the thing before it gets to him," said Professor Clement.

"Jove!" Ham gasped. "I don't understand this. You'll have to make explanations."

"I'll explain when Doc Savage gets to Los Angeles," said the professor. "Insert an advertisement in the morning paper offering 2 white horses for sale and I will know that Doc Savage has arrived. I will get in touch with him."

"Damned if I do," Ham gritted.

He took his hands from behind his back. His black cane had come apart proving to be a sword-cane with a slender blade of remarkable flexibility and keenness. The tip of the blade was coated for some inches with a sticky-looking compound.

He lunged and tried to prick Clement with the tip. He did this with great speed.

Professor had lowered his gun as he talked. If he had tried to lift it, the sword tip would have reached him first.

But he did not make that mistake. He simply flexed a wrist to bring the muzzle up. The gun made a **noise** somewhat louder than a lusty handclap.

Ham squawked. He dropped his sword-cane and popped both fists into his eyes.

Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement ran out of the room leaving behind the spread sting of diphenylchlorarsine (a type of tear gas).

Waving his gun, the professor barely got into the hotel corridor before he stopped so suddenly that he slid on the smooth floor. He stared in amazement at 2 men who had popped out of the adjacent hotel room and confronted him.

The 2 newcomers were almost physical freaks. One was unnaturally tall and so thin that he seemed a walking skeleton. The other had the principal characteristics of a bull ape being hardly more than 5 feet in height, almost equally as wide, and with arms some inches longer than his legs.

For the space of a watch tick or two, everyone stood stock still. Then Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement seemed to hazard the identity of the pair.

"You are two of Doc Savage's aides known as 'Johnny' and 'Monk'," he said quietly. "Now get back, gentlemen. I did not come here to harm you."

At that point, an agonized moan came from the hotel room where Professor Clement had left Ham. The moan seemed to madden the apish individual who had been designated as 'Monk'. He bowed his back and emitted a bellow. Then he leaped!

Professor Clement fired his gun. But not at the apish Monk. He shot at the ceiling and a lead bullet ripped out a double fistful of plaster. Then he shot again this time directly into Monk's chest. The gun *popped* dully and gushed tear gas.

The acrid vapor did little to stem Monk's charge. He flailed both arms. A fist accidentally collided with Professor Clement and the latter upset. Monk pounced for him. Completely blinded by the gas, he missed his victim. Clement rolled madly to get away.

The skeleton-thin Johnny ran in and encountered the tear gas. He began <blinking> furiously. In a fractional moment, he could not see his own bony hands. His clutching fingers located a coat. He reasoned it belonged to their foe and he held on. The coat came off the wearer with a noisy tearing.

The heard footsteps. Rapid footsteps which receded down the corridor.

"He's getting' away!" howled Monk.

"Incontrovertible," agreed Johnny who never used a small word when he could think a large one.

Both stumbled blindly in pursuit of their assailant.

It was Ham – the sartorially perfect gentleman with the sword-cane – who took what should have been the most effective action.

One of the most astute lawyers that Harvard had ever turned out, Ham Brooks was noted for his wits. He called downstairs over the room telephone and had the house detective watch both the elevators and the stairway while some bellhops surveyed the fire escapes and others ran for a policeman.

But to all appearances, Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement simply vanished into thin air. He was not seen leaving the hotel. A quick search of the corridors did not uncover him.

Another hunt conducted more surreptitiously by the maids who instituted an epidemic of replacing fresh towels failed to reveal a trace of the fugitive man.

Monk and Johnny heard a sound which they believed was an elevator door closing and thought their quarry had entered an elevator. But the elevator operators all denied this and certainly no one in the lobby had glimpsed the man.

The police arrived and asked the usual questions. They showed marked interest in the reference which Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement had made to the Copper Clouds. They had even more interest in the fact that Monk, Ham, and Johnny were 3 aids of that noted personage **Doc Savage**.

"Is **Doc Savage** out West to investigate the mystery of the **Copper Cloud** disappearances?" asked a cop.

"I haven't the slightest idea where **Doc Savage** is," insisted the dapper Ham.

"He sent you ahead to Los Angeles?" asked the officer.

"The fog is clearing away," said Ham looking through the window.

"Does **Doc Savage** know what the **Copper Clouds** are?" questioned the policeman.

"The Sun is going to shine," said Ham.

"What does **Doc Savage** think became of Doris Duff and the others who have vanished in the **Copper Clouds**?" persisted the lawman.

"I think it will be a swell day," Ham murmured.

"You might as well have answered my questions," said the cop, "because I now know that **Doc Savage** is investigating the **Copper Cloud** mystery."

The officers left.

Once downstairs, the policemen had the motorcycle abandoned in the alley called to their attention. Mostly as routine, they checked back on the license and secured the name of the messenger to whom the vehicle belonged.

He was a timid soul. But the instant he discovered a policeman telephoning him, he burst out with the story of his motor wheel taken so mysteriously in the fog and more than its value in currency left behind.

This yarn, hooking up as it did with the mystery plane at the airport (of which they had already been informed), greatly interested the police. But they could not make anything intelligible out of it.

However, the officers did stand beside the abandoned motorcycle and speculate on the chance of a man leaping from its seat to the fire escape platform. But they decided that the jump was a bit beyond the capacity of human muscles. No man could leap that high.

The police eventually left the Bernadina Hotel.

The man who had given his name as Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement watched them go. His vantage point was the interior of one of the ornamental towers which jutted up on each corner of the Bernadina. He had fled to this roof refuge at the beginning. When the roof had been searched, he had escaped discovery by grace of a policeman's laxity in not looking at the outside of the tower where the fugitive had crept to cling to the decorative carvings.

The gray-haired young man wiped *perspiration* from his features. Then he reloaded his revolver, something he had not taken time to do before. He charged the cylinder with **tear gas** cartridges and lead bullets in alternate order. He stood by the main roof hatch a moment as if debating his chances of getting down the stairs without being interrupted.

There was still some fog. Perhaps that partially accounted for him not seeing a figure which *materialized* from behind a nearby chimney and crept up. *The new arrival moved with an uncanny silence.*

The man who had identified himself as Professor Clement shook his head as if deciding there was too much risk in leaving by the stairway. He turned toward the fire escape. Out of an eye corner he glimpsed the form creeping toward him. He gasped! His hands made mad clawings in search on his gun.

What followed was weird.

The victim seemed to go into slow motion. His most frantic gesture took on an aspect of infinite leisure. But that was only an optical illusion engendered by the incredible *speed* of the attacker.

The hand clawing for the gun was seized. Cloth tore as it was jerked out of the pocket. The revolver came with it. It fell but was caught before it struck the tarred roof structure.

The victim tried to strike his assailant. He missed although it seemed impossible that he should.

In the next instant, he was seized in a grip of incalculable **force**. A grip which caused him to shudder and moan.

Twisting his head, the captive got his first really full look at his captor. Recognition jerked his eyes widely open.

"Doc Savage!" he exploded.

III – Crimson Canister

Repute of **Doc Savage**, the **Man of Bronze**, *Man of Mystery* had penetrated to many a remote corner of the Earth.

Men in Shanghai, Mozambique, Cartagena, and more than a few other out-of-the-way spots felt an impulse to look behind them when his name was mentioned. And upon hearing of his presence in the vicinity, they would lose no time betaking themselves to other regions.

Doc Savage had devoted his life to the often thankless, always perilous, and seeming unending task of righting what he considered to be wrongs. Of aiding the oppressed and punishing evildoers and causing things to happen to them which not infrequently moved them to change their ways.

Legends had grown up around this man attributing to him superhuman powers, the ability to do fabulous things, to accomplish the impossible. But they were hardly superhuman.

To the laborer, the picture which a great artist puts upon a canvas may look like the work of a genius. But the laborer does not see the years of grueling study which the artist put himself through.

It was so with **Doc Savage**. Those who saw the things he did had no knowledge of the incredible exercise and study which had marked his life since childhood. Therefore they called him a "muscular marvel" and a "mental wizard". And he was, too, if measured by ordinary standards.

"**Doc Savage!**" mumbled the man who identified himself earlier as Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement. He seemed fascinated by the weird flake-gold eyes of his captor.

They were remarkable those flake-metal orbs. They seemed like pools of **gold** as fine as powder stirred intermittently by tiny winds. Perhaps it was this life which gave them their aspect of *hypnotic* power.

"Where'd you come from?" gulped the prisoner finally finding his voice.

"We will go downstairs now," said Doc Savage.

His voice was somehow suggestive of a mechanism of great power under exquisite control. It held timbre, power, and the modulation was remarkable.

"Now look here," the other began. "You can't ..."

His voice ended in a strange fading. It was as if his vocal apparatus were a loudspeaker electrically-controlled on which the volume knob had been slowly turned down.

Doc Savage had secured this surprising effect simply by grasping the back of the man's neck and making several kneading motions in the course of which his **corded** fingers sank into the other's flesh until they were almost buried. He was working on certain nerve centers to induce a state of paralysis which reduced the man to a point where he could still see and hear but could not otherwise speak or move.

The big **Bronze Man** now lifted the man and bore him toward the fire escape. That Doc Savage was a man of **giant** size now became apparent for the prisoner seemed small in his clutch.

More striking than his size, however, was his unusual **bronze** skin. It gave the impression that his huge and amazingly **muscular** frame was composed entirely of metal. His **hair** (he wore no head covering) was of a bronze hue only slightly darker than his skin. The hair was straight and its metallic skullcap aspect had not been disturbed by the recent scuffle.

Doc Savage carried his captive down the fire escape swiftly and with a minimum of noise. He reached the 7th floor window and <tapped> for admittance.

Monk, the gorilla-like individual, admitted Doc and his burden. Surprise had slacked Monk's jaw down until his mouth was a great cavity.

"Blazes!" he muttered eyeing the prisoner. "Where'd you make the collection, Doc? We didn't even know you were in Los Angeles."

When he was not in a fight, Monk had a voice which was small and meek and almost childlike.

"I arrived about an hour ago," Doc Savage explained. "I left my plane at the airport and came here secretly."

Ham, the dapper lawyer, put in: "But will your plane not be identified and the newspapers ..."

"It was one of our special planes," Doc told him. "It had no identification numbers."

"I see," said Ham. "We have been wondering when you would show up. And we have been trying to guess why you had us come out here and then wire you where we were staying. Has it got something to do with this **Copper Cloud** mystery and the people who have disappeared?"

Instead of replying, the **Bronze Man** set the prematurely gray-haired Professor Clement on a bed and began searching him with expert movements of his corded hands. Immediately he discovered something.

From a makeshift sling under one arm hung an ordinary vacuum thermos bottle. Doc yanked this free and fell to examining it. The **canister** was red and stoppered with a thick glass lid held in place by 2 steel-wire clamps.

A piece of adhesive tape was affixed to one side. Written in ink was a script legend:

DANGER -- Do Not Open
Contents Are Combustible

"Explain this," Doc Savage demanded.

Professor Clement stammered inarticulately.

Johnny Littlejohn accepted the red **canister** from Doc Savage. He was by trade an archeologist and geologist, one of the most learned living. On his lapel he wore for convenience a monocle which was actually not an eyepiece but rather a magnifying glass. Lifting the lens to one eye, Johnny scrutinized the bottle carefully.

"Ultra-unremarkable," he murmured.

His face grim, the **Bronze Man** went to work on the back of Professor Clement's neck. The strange paralysis that had plagued him lifted.

As if on springs, the gray-haired young man bounced off the bed. He tried to strike at the metallic giant who held him. The fist, however, was caught in midair and conveyed to his side as easily as if he possessed no strength at all.

Perspiration popped out on Clement's forehead. He quickly subsided. Few men lived who could stand up to the **bronze giant** in a contest of muscles.

"I observed you searching this room earlier," Doc Savage told him. "What were you after?"

There was a peculiar quality to his voice now. A firmness.

Professor Clement held his tongue. He might have been made speechless by the confident manhandling to which he had been subjected by the **big bronze Hercules**.

Doc rapped: "Answer my question!"

Professor Clement appeared to be composing himself if not his reply. He licked dry lips.

"Why did you seek me out?" Doc demanded, hot lights coming into his eerie orbs.

"I ... Well, it is for a sound reason ..."

Without warning, the man made a lunge for the red vacuum bottle on the bed.

With blurred speed, Doc Savage arrested the wrist before it got even halfway to its goal. He brought Professor Clement's hand in front of his face. He took it up in his **cabled** fingers and began exerting steady pressure.

A strangled *sound* was wrench from the man's lips. His eyes bulged. Sweat overspread his reddening features.

Helpless, he watched as the big **Bronze Man** continued exerting a terrible pressed. He watched as the tips of his own pale fingers turned purple as the **pressure** came near to forcing the fingertips to split and leak blood.

"Extraordinary!" gasped Johnny.

"Doc! What's gotten into you?" Monk squeaked.

" 'Doris Duff' is actually Pat," Doc Savage said distinctly. His golden eyes were terrible.

Then his 3 aides understood. Pat was Patricia Savage, the **Bronze Man's** cousin and only living relative. Keeping her out of harm's way was one of Doc's purposes in life.



(<http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/AnnaXXX.htm>)

"Tell me what you know about the **Copper Clouds**," Doc Savage demanded of Professor Clement.

Gasping, Clement said: "Yes. Yes. I will. Only unhand me."

Doc relented slightly. The appalling *pressure* of his corded hand eased. Normalcy began returning to the digits that were vised by bronze **fingers**.

"I am distressed to hear this news," Clement jerked out, his words halting with effort. "For if your cousin Patricia is really 'Doris Duff', then she is most assuredly deceased."

The merest flicker of expression touched Doc Savage's metallic features. His flake-gold eyes seemed to whirl more rapidly.

A strange sound came into being in the room. At first low and exotic, it swelled to fill the confines. It was a **trilling**. Tuneless yet not unmusical.

This was the sound of Doc Savage. A small fantastic thing he did in moments of stress or concentration.

In the past when they had heard this sound, his aides might have been excused for thinking it to be the product of a jungle bird or the keening of a wind through a denuded forest.

But now the sound was utterly different. It grew and swelled into a **banshee** keening. Doubt, disbelief, and horror all mingled in its eerie cadence.

Abruptly, Doc Savage choked off the sound. In the silence that followed, no one seemed to breathe.

"Tell me what you know of the **Copper Clouds**," Doc repeated.

His voice was flat, metallic but under control.

"You will scarcely credit me when I tell you ..."

Doc's golden eyes bored into the other man's. They were sharp and unnerving as an eagle eying pray. All resistance wilted.

"Meteorology is my profession," Clement began slowly.

"You were instrumental in developing a new weather forecasting system called air-mass analysis," supplied Doc. "It has proven to be a great boon to pilots flying through difficult atmospheric conditions such as a fog, certainly saving many lives."

He now relinquished the man's fingers and his terrible bronze hands withdrew.

"The fact that you know this makes what I have to tell you easier to convey," said Professor Clement.

He swallowed hard.

"You are no doubt familiar with the meteorological phenomenon peculiar to California in the summer. I refer to smog."

Doc nodded.

"A chemical haze created when industrial smoke mixes with fog to produce a hybrid atmospheric condition," he said. "It is trapped by a thermal inversion. A layer of warm air roosting over a layer of cold air."

"Exactly. Smog is the product of industrial chemicals in the air mixing and combining with other chemicals," said Clements. "Many of these combinations are potentially dangerous. No one knows what the result will be if this phenomenon continues unchecked. But I fear I have uncovered one potential effect."

"Yes?"

"The smog in some way has become malevolent."

"Jove!" exclaimed Ham.

Monk snorted fiercely.

Johnny interposed. "Do you mean ... sentient?"

Professor Clement refused tear his eyes away from Doc Savage's steady gaze. Perhaps he could not manage to do so.

He said: "I cannot credit this smog with intelligence. As yet, anyway. But it behaves as if it thinks. It seeks out prey and devours it as if ravenous. More than that, I cannot say with certainty."

Monk snorted again. He was one of the greatest living industrial chemists. If anyone present were knowledgeable enough to comment authoritatively on Professor Clement's theory, it was Monk Mayfair. With the sole exception of Doc Savage, in truth.

*For while each of the **Bronze Man's** aides were considered the top experts in their respective professions, Doc Savage exceeded all in their chosen fields. Further, he had mastered many others. Periodically he retired to his **Fortress of Solitude**. It was a mysterious retreat situated on a rocky isle in the far North. He went there to intensively study and further his already-deep knowledge of Science and Medicine. It was from this place that he had traveled so urgently to Los Angeles.*

The **Man of Bronze** searched Clement's smooth features for any indication that he was lying.

"What is the purpose of this **bottle** here?" Doc asked.

"I ... ahem ... managed to capture a small specimen of these devouring smogs. A calf, if you will. I wished to show it to you in order to obtain your scientific opinion."

But what the **Bronze Man** would have replied to this preposterous statement was never known because at that moment a <knock> came at the door. Monk leaped to answer it.

It was a messenger boy. The sight of the homely chemist's gorilla-like physique covered as it was with reddish **hairs** hardly any less thick than shingle nails caused the caller to nearly swoon.

He stuttered: "Puh... puh ... package for Duh...Doc Savage."

Ham interposed. "Evidently someone has deduced Doc's presence from the sheer fact that we all have gathered here in Los Angeles."

Doc Savage indicated silent acceptance of that conclusion.

Monk said: "Okay. I'll sign for it."

Monk came back with a simple cardboard box. There was no return address or any other sign to indicate who had sent it.

"Want me to open it, Doc?" he asked.

Perspiration began crawling down Professor Clement's features in new rivulets. Doc Savage noticed this.

"Carefully, Monk," he cautioned.

"Gotcha."

The apish chemist ambled over to a dresser. He shook the box curiously and then tore it open with his hairy fingers. He produced a red vacuum **bottle** identical to the other one that Doc Savage had confiscated from Professor Clement's person.

"What do you know about this?" Doc asked the gray-haired young man.

"Under no circumstances should you open that bottle," he said tightly.

"I get it," ham breathed. "I see the reason he was searching this room. He knew that this package was en route. It was his aim if had already arrived to switch bottles surreptitiously."

Professor Clement's should shrugged even further (if that were possible).

"I admit this," he declared. "My **bottle** was a diversion."

Ham frowned. "He's too quick to change his story."

Doc Savage said: "Monk, let me see that **bottle**."

The homely chemist tossed the second bottle in the Doc's direction. The Bronze Man caught it in both hands.

Immediately he noticed that the vacuum **bottle** was sweating. Outside it was warming up. But the interior of the hotel was air-conditioned. The bottle shouldn't sweat like this.

Also the **bottle** was very cold to the touch. And most passing strange – it *buzzed*.

At first touch, the **Bronze Man's** sensitive fingers detected the *buzzing* as a low vibration. But upon close examination, he could hear a muted sound within as of an electrical mechanism.

"Monk," Doc rapped. "Unpack our fluoroscopic device. We will examine this object."

Professor Clement urged: "Just ... whatever you intend ... Do not open it!"

His voice was thick as if abject fear clogged his voice box.

"Ham, watch him," ordered Doc.

Going to a steamer trunk, Monk Mayfair began unpacking a device marvelous in its compactness. All eyes went to him.

Professor Clement had collapsed onto the bed and was mopping his sweat-smeared features with a canary-colored handkerchief.

Dapper Ham Brooks divided his attention between the deflated captive and what Doc and Monk were doing. They set up an apparatus that resembled the fluoroscopic device common in shoe stores whereby the bones of shod feet are brought out by X-rays in order to determine a more perfect fit. But this device appeared to be far more advanced than any in use. It was an invention of Doc Savage's scientific wizardry.

Doc <snapped> a switch. The viewing port atop the cabinet began to emit a ghostly *green* glow.

At the moment when Monk was at the point of setting the cold red **bottle** beneath the fluoroscopic screen, Professor Clement once again showed his single-minded determination.

Lunging for the red thermos **bottle** on the bed, he thumbed the wire fasteners loose. There came a *pop!* A squirting sound. Once again the room became filled with a cloud of noxious fumes.

"Not again!" Ham wailed.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny Littlejohn exploded just before he fell into a fit of hacking.
"Another lachrymator!"

IV – The Uncorking

For one of the few times in his life, Doc Savage was caught flat-footed.

Perhaps concern for his missing cousin Pat Savage had distracted him. Possibly it was his intense concentration on the red **bottle** whose contents were about to be revealed. But when the **tear gas** spurted out, the *Man of Bronze* was utterly unprepared.

Professor Clement moved with nervous alacrity. He covered his face with his sweat-drenched handkerchief. Then he plunged in the direction of the fluoroscopic device and by luck more than skill found the strangely cold red vacuum **bottle** that buzzed.

Too, his nervous speed was something to see. The slamming! of the door behind him marked his nimble exit.

Doc Savage was not far behind. On his person was a gas mask of simple design. Goggles and a chemical filter. He had whipped it over his metallic features. Not in time to prevent stinging of his eyes but quickly enough to avoid becoming incapacitated.

Doc *slammed* into the door! It groaned under his giant weight held in place by stout hinges. He blocked out bronze knuckles and drove them against the panel in a blow that seemed more than sinew and bone could stand. Wood groaned, splintered, and collapsed. He wrenched and tore open an aperture that would admit his fist.

Reaching through, he tried turning the knob on the other side. It broke off in his hand. The panel still resisted stubbornly.

Clement had run away from the door. His footsteps receded hurriedly down the corridor. He slammed another door somewhere below.

Peering out, Doc quickly noted how the fleeing meteorologist had blocked the hotel room door from outside. A sawtoothed steel wedge like a door stopper had been kicked under the panel to prevent it from opening.

Removing a tiny collapsible grappling hook and line from a pocket of the special carry-all vest he wore, Doc fished for the door stopper and snagged it. He jerked it loose. The door then surrendered to his hard shoulder and he flung out into the corridor.

Sizable leaps took Doc down the stairway. Monk and the others pounded after him doing their best but moving less than half as fast. They encountered an exit door which Clement had blocked with another steel wedge. And again the **bronze giant** was forced to smash through with his incredible fists.

Piling out into the street, they saw a **green** sedan scoot away at a high rate of speed.

Doc Savage lost no time in commandeering a taxi waiting outside the hotel entrance. A \$100 bill jammed into the hackie's fist was sufficient to quiet him as Doc left him on the sidewalk.

He took the wheel. The others, still struggling with their gas masks, clambered aboard.

The taxi was a recent model. It made good time shooting up one of Los Angeles' wide palm-lined boulevards. Upon their faces fell the warm California sunshine. And ahead of them stretched a string of traffic lights that were green gems regularly becoming red gems. The morning fog had lifted so completely that it might have been a dream.

Careening around a corner, the green sedan ran a light and broke into a run.

Doc Savage wrung all the speed possible out of the taxi's engine. His concentration on his quarry was grimly determined.

"I gotta hand it to you, Doc," Monk said enthusiastically. "Once you hit town, things start popping."

He sounded almost happy. The love of excitement was what had brought Doc and his men together for the strange work they shared.

But the **Bronze Man** said nothing. Abruptly, he turned off the street and sent the cab hurtling toward another intersection. Then he made a series of wild turns that seemed certain to cost him his prey.

Soon, however, Doc was bearing down on an intersection on an unerring course to intercept the green sedan. It was as if he had divined Clement's frantic route by second sight.

But Doc's aides knew different. The intensive study in which the *Man of Bronze* had immersed himself had included memorizing maps of major cities around the World. Doc knew Los Angeles like the creases of his palm. Coupled with an educated guess as to Clement's likely course, that had allowed him to come within reach of the intersection before the fleeing green sedan.

There was no question that the **Bronze Man** would have accomplished too. Except for one thing ...

Drawing up behind them was another vehicle traveling fast. A black coupe. It soon overhauled them.

The driver was distinguished by a huge ten-gallon hat of the type often seen in cowboy motion pictures. This one was a wonder. The crown was not creased but poked upward like a mountain peak. It was jammed down so hard on the worthy's head that it swallowed his entire forehead and threatened to make him permanently lop-eared. A pair of Hollywood-style dark glasses concealed his eyes. His suit was of blue seersucker.

From an open window flew a dark object.

Despite the intensity of his focus, Doc Savage recognized the object when it landed in his lap. It was small, round, and black as an iron ingot. **A hand grenade!**

There was no ignoring it, of course. Nor was flinging it out the open car window feasible. There was too much traffic and many morning pedestrians who would suffer injury when it detonated.

Doc braked expertly. The cab rocked to a halt. Flinging the door open, he removed his helmet of hair and shucked off his coat. Then he wrapped both of them around the grenade and slammed himself on the street with his bundled coat beneath him.

The sound of the grenade letting go was muffled. But not greatly so. Fiery *streaks* spurted from beneath the prone figure of the *Man of Bronze*. Grayish-black smoke dribbled out. A deathly silence followed.

It could be discerned that Doc's form had given a slight jump when the blast came. But now he lay still. Monk, Ham, and Johnny piled out of the taxicab.

"Doc!" Monk cried. "Doc, are you hurt?"

But Doc Savage did not move.

Monk reached him first and carefully turned him over. Doc's coat was afire. Hastily, Monk flung it away. The mangled remains of the *Bronze Man's* scalp (really a sheet-steel skullcap with a realistic layering of hair over it) bounded away. When going into action, Doc wore the helmet as a protection against head blows. It had absorbed the brunt of the blast.

A black patch scorched Doc's white shirt front. His tie was a rag. *Blood* speckled his arms, his features, and even his metallic hair.

"Doc!" Monk howled.

Placing one ear to the *Bronze Man's* chest, Monk detected a heartbeat. Strong. Regular.

"He's alive!"

Indeed, the *Bronze Man* began to stir almost at once.

Monk leapt to his feet. "Doc! You okay?"

"My chain mail undergarment helped save me," Doc Savage said slowly.

His eyes were dull. Under his clothes, he habitually wore a union suit affair made of an ultra-light alloy chain mesh strong enough to stop bullets. It had been proven against grenade shrapnel but not against its concussive effects. Hence the *Bronze Man's* present deplorable condition.

"Clement's getting away!" rasped Ham.

Doc Savage did not respond.

Johnny asked: "Shall we continue to give chase?"

(He never used his customary big words on his bronze chief for some reason.)

Strangely, the *Man of Bronze* did not reply. He seemed dazed and uncomprehending.

Ham wrung his fingers. "It's the concussion. He can't hear us unless we shout?"

"Doc! Can you hear?" Monk bawled.

Doc Savage nodded.

Abruptly he got to his feet. His giant figure was a wreck.

Without another word, he strode grimly to the idling taxi and took the wheel. The others had to run to catch up. The scrambled onto the running boards and piled in as the vehicle once more lurched into motion.

Doc Savage drove in grim silence for a time.

"Anyone get the license number of that black machine?" Ham asked.

No one had. But it was not uppermost in their minds. They were after Professor Clement and the weirdly cold red thermos **bottle**.

From the direction toward which he had fled, the **Bronze Man** reasoned that the gray-haired professor had been planning to run up to coast. Doc gained the main coastal highway and headed north. It was a rank guess for there was no time to puzzle it out.

It proved to be a good one.

Pouring on speed, the **Man of Bronze** spotted the **green** sedan traveling north. The Pacific heaved off to the left stretching out for miles. Beaches and palm trees showed. The road often climbed bluffs that overlooked sheer drops. Here-and-there the seemingly-ubiquitous "rocking horse" oil pumps that dotted the California landscape toiled in their monotonous creak-and-groan rhythm.

Inexorably, Doc Savage overhauled the reeling **green** sedan. Soon he was pacing it matching its speed with a precision that went far beyond ordinary driving skill.

Noticing the taxi coming alongside, Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement gaped in open-mouthed shock when he recognized Monk Mayfair leaning out the passenger window shouting and waving him to pull over. Clarence gave his wheel a wrench to the right. Fenders gnashed. Doc held the road by main strength.

"Shall I knock out a tire?" Ham asked coolly, extracting an intricate weapon resembling an oversized automatic from a shoulder holster. He was seated in the rear.

Doc Savage did not hear him. That was unfortunate.

Ham took the **Bronze Man's** silence for assent. Removing a drum magazine filled with so-called "mercy bullets" from the machine pistol, he replaced it with one charged with solid lead. Cranking down his window, he poked the thin muzzle out. He took aim at a rear tire and pulled the trigger.

A violent *hooting* sound was promptly emitted. The muzzle briefly flickered red. The spinning tire erupted into rags of shredded rubber.

The **green** sedan began swerving uncontrollably. It nudged a highway rail and grated along spitting sparks.

Everyone witnessed what happened next.

Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement had been running with his windows up. Now he attempted to lower the driver's window. It was a foolish move. He needed both hands to control the bucking steering wheel.

Clement had barely cracked the pane when he made a grab for the red **bottle**. Evidently his intent was to fling it into the ocean. But in that aim, he failed.

Monk was in the front seat with Doc Savage.

"Take the wheel," Doc ordered slapping open his door.

His teeth bared in a ferocious grin, the apish chemist hopped into the vacated seat. He got the steering wheel under control.

Suddenly the **Bronze Man** was on the running board. One corded hand reached over toward the other vehicle. Barreling along at high speed, what he did next smacked of the impossible.

Doc Savage changed conveyances as if merely stepping off a typical California streetcar. Perched on the other running board, he started to fight the sedan door open.

Then the swerving vehicle hit something. They never determined exactly what. But suddenly it was airborne. Careening off the road, the sedan went over the guard rail.

Doc leaped free and so was unable to witness what transpired next.

Tumbling, the **green** machine plunged toward the Pacific. It was a drop that might have meant death for the driver. But the car never reached the water.

First, its windows turned **red**. It was as if the interior had suddenly filled with fog of a *scarlet* hue.

The green sedan ceased being **green** as ridiculous as it sounded. One moment it was as **green** as an unripe apple. Then it became as white as porcelain.

The interior *red fog* abruptly turned **black** as soot. Just like that.

A man bleated ... Then the sound cut off suddenly.

When the sedan hit the water, there was no splash to speak of. Hardly any sound at all. Instead there came a commotion suggestive of a great load of loose debris falling into the sea.

Monk and the others didn't witness that part. They were busy scrambling from their abruptly-braked taxi.

When they reached the shattered rail, there was a sizable patch of granular white matter spread upon the water. That was all.

Then Doc Savage's head surface.

He looked around ... saw nothing ... and then submerged again. The gas mask he had been wearing had not survived the grenade attack. But he did not need it. He had been taught the art of deep-sea diving by the pearl divers of the South Seas. Men who knew how to remain submerged for extended periods.

Doc Savage was down a very long time. He could hold his breath for a remarkable span of minutes. Occasionally a solitary air bubble broke the surface to attest to his continued existence.

When he at last reemerged, the Bronze Man dragged himself out of the surf and made his laborious way up the cliff side.

"What did you find down there?" Monk demanded.

Getting no reply, Monk switched to the sign language employed by the deaf&dumb which they all knew. He repeated his query.

"Nothing," Doc signed back.

Turning, he surveyed the sparkling Pacific. White patches of something sprinkled the ocean. It resembled salt. And like salt, it was rapidly dissolving in the blue seawater.

A thinning mist also arose. But the ocean breeze soon tore it to shreds. It gave them a chilly feeling to watch the ghostly vapor. A soul leaving the bonds of earthly existence would produce such a sensation.

Since there was nothing further they could do here, they returned to the taxi.

Doc drove the nearest filling station. He "signed" for Ham to make a telephone call.

After a few moments, the sartorially-perfect barrister returned with some information. Doc got the car back into gear.

"Where are we going?" Monk wanted to know.

Ham replied civilly: "To the address I just obtained. Professor Clement's private residence."

Johnny Littlejohn looked at them both.

"An unfathomable eventuality," he murmured.

Which translated meant that the skinny archeologist had never seen monk and Ham so subdued. Normally they were at each other's throats. For their association was a strange mixture of antagonism and deep friendship.

Mon and Ham's perpetual quarrel hied back to World War time days when Ham had taught Monk numerous insulting French words. The former advised that they were the "verbal sugar" which it was well to hand a horsey French general when seeking a Paris leave. Employing the words had earned Monk a guardhouse sojourn.

After Monk's release, someone had framed Ham on a ham-stealing charge by planting evidence. The incident had earned the debonair Theodore Marley Brooks his "Ham" nickname. And ever afterward, mere mention of pigs was enough to drive the dapper lawyer into a red rage.

Moreover, Ham believed that Monk had framed him. But his great lawyer skills had yet to prove it. Ham missed no opportunity to insult the homely chemist.

Years back Ham had acquired a pet monkey which he named "Chemistry" (after Monk). Later on, Monk had adopted a pet pig which he named "Habeas Corpus". He carried the shoat around with him continuously for the purpose of irking Ham.

Monk was one of the few who could hold their own with Ham. He had reduced insulting the sharp-tongued lawyer to a fine art.

The swift events of the last hour – Doc Savage's brush with destruction, the unknown fate of Pat Savage, and the inexplicable disappearance of the **green** sedan and its driver – had temporarily quelled Monk and Ham's feud.

Catching Doc Savage's attention, Monk "signed" a rapid inquiry. The **Bronze Man** answered in his own voice. It was strangely hushed.

"There is no question that Pat came West to look into the mystery of the **Copper Clouds**. She left me a message to that effect on my telephone robot recorder," he said. "As you know, I was away at my Fortress of Solitude when the trouble began. That is why I radioed you three to come on ahead. I imagined that your arrival in advance of my own might start something."

"It certainly did," Ham murmured.

"I flew directly here when I received the news that 'Doris Duff had' vanished," Doc concluded.

"Blazes"! Monk said. "Could that professor have been right? Could Pat be ... dead?"



The **Bronze Man** vouchsafed no reply.

"Clement seemed clear on that point," Ham allowed.

"That yarn about a hungry smog eatin' people makes no sense," Monk scoffed.

Again Doc declined to answer.

Of all persons living, only Doc Savage's knowledge of Chemistry exceed that of the homely chemist Monk Mayfair. The latter was certain of his facts. But smog was something relatively new on the Earth. Its causes were known but not its effects.

In the past, persons had been sickened by the pernicious haze. Some had even perished of lung difficulties. But there was no record of a localized smog attacking humans prior to the advent of the **Copper Clouds**.

"Leastways," Monk muttered, "I hope it don't make any sense."

They drove on in subdued silence.

"Where are Long Tom and Renny?" Ham wondered.

Monk relayed that question to Doc and then repeated back the response.

"Renny's in Montreal working on a suspension bridge and is tryin' to get away. Long Tom's off somewhere tinkering with that blamed bug killer of his. No tellin' when he'll show up. If he does."

Long Tom Roberts and Renny Renwick were the remaining members of Doc Savage's little band of adventurers who assisted the **Man of Bronze** in his strange career of going to the ends of the Earth helping those in trouble and aiding the needy. 5 more brainy and highly-trained men had never been assembled in one group.

This insect elimination invention was Long Tom's chief obsession and had been for years. Utilizing the principle of death-dealing rays, the electrical expert had been attempting to perfect a contrivance which would kill insect pests ranging from mosquitoes to boll weevils. An apparatus which would be of inestimable value to all farmers.

He was forever tinkering with it. As yet, it had not been perfected to the pale man's satisfaction. But he had been heard to predict that one day the invention would earn him a spot in the Hall of Fame.

Presently they passed a hacienda in the dunes. It was quite a place being a sprawl of stucco, extensive courtyards, and orange roof tiles.

"I believe that was it," Ham ventured.

Doc braked and exited the vehicle. He peered up-and-down the beach looking for a street sign or number. He saw none. But he seemed satisfied upon returning to the taxi.

"I'm worried about your ears," Monk said anxiously. "Can't you hear anything yet?"

"A little," Doc told him. "I do not think it is anything serious."

Getting behind the wheel, the **Bronze Man** was a gory figure. The blast of the exploding grenade had ripped open his skin in numerous places. Some of the cuts still oozed scarlet.

The car lurched around and got in motion back toward the elaborate hacienda among the dunes.

It covered only a few rods when Doc leaned forward to stare intently through the windshield into the sky. Monk and Ham followed his example.

"Look!" Doc said sharply.

"Blazes!" Monk exploded. "Did you ever see such a funny looking cloud?"

"A red cloud!" Ham echoed.

V – Vision in Vermillion

The California sun was a flamboyant brass disc only a little past meridian. It hurled down shafts of hot glittering light. Nowhere in the sky was there a sign of life. Not even a cruising bird.

The **red cloud** was like a drop of blood on the white-hot bowl of the Heavens. As they stared, it seemed to change color becoming more richly red until its **hue** was a wondrous sight.

"Blazes!" Monk shouted. "What is that thing?"

"Shut up," Ham grunted. "It's changing shape."

The rubescent ball was not swelling. But it was altering its contour, the lower surface seeming to spill downward with an effect similar to dangling moss or possibly rain coming from a storm cloud. It darkened and turned crimson.

Doc Savage stopped the car. They got out.

The **Man of Bronze** drifted a hand inside his clothing and drew out the thin tube of a device which served him previously as a periscope. He rearranged the lenses in this. He removed some of the reflecting mirrors and replaced them with a magnifying lens which had been in a receptacle clipped to the device. When he was done, he had a telescope of considerable power.

Doc studied the amazing **red thing** in the sky through this. Then he made an astounding announcement.

"Not a cloud at all."

He passed the telescope to Ham.

"Here, take a look."

Ham squinted through the lenses, altered the focus, and then squinted again.

"Jove!" he breathed. "By Jove!"

"What is it?" Monk demanded impatiently.

Ham only murmured "Jove!"

Doc Savage did not comment. He stood very straight. A strikingly statuesque figure with strange flak-gold **eyes** fixed on the darkening sky apparition.

"A rubrical ovicularity," Johnny Littlejohn muttered attempting to coin a term appropriate to the phenomenon.

Monk yanked the telescope out of Ham's clutch and stared at the brilliant red **thing** in the sky.

"It's a great mass of red **particles** that kind look like a sandstorm," he grunted wonderingly.

Suddenly at a loss for big words, Johnny snapped: "I have seen Saharan sandstorms before. They blanket the sky. That there is no sandstorm."

The sanguinary **apparition** was coming lower. It was losing its resemblance to a cloud. Even with the naked eye, they could see that it was simply a great quantity of what might have been scarlet **sand**. The particles puffed and swirled. Yet they seemed not to be swept along by any wind but were settling toward the earth.

Johnny lifted his monocle magnifier to quint at it.

"Perhaps it is a dust devil. They are common to California."

"Hell!" snorted Monk. "It can't be a dust devil. Not this close to the ocean. And anyway, there's no wind."

"It's falling on that house among the sand dunes," Ham observed.

The red whirlwind was almost upon the earth now. The lowermost portion began to touch the sand dunes. Although the strange sprawling hacienda was invisible from where they had stopped, they knew that the rubescent **phenomenon** was falling upon it.

As it fell, the apparition rapidly turned the color of **soot**.

There was audible a sound that might have been the **howling** of a dying monster from some other region. Even at this distance, it made their hair want to stand on end suggesting as it did a fierce upset beast in torment.

The face of the cloud **thing** took on the semblance of a broad utterly unhuman countenance of hollow eyes and what might have been a gaping maw. Perhaps that was an effect created in their minds by the **thing's** angry **raging**. And perhaps not. It was difficult to say.

The blackening **thing** settled rapidly. It boiled about a little in the still air glittering brightly in the sunlight.

Doc Savage and his men stood there until the **sooty** stuff disappeared completely. Silence clamped down. Wonder held them with something resembling a spell.

The taxi motor made a choking sound and died.

Monk jumped and whirled. "What ..."

Doc Savage backed to the machine. He took his eyes off the distant spot where the black **apparition** had fallen and made a brief examination.

"Out of gasoline," he said.

"Then we've got to walk?" Monk complained.

Ham fingered his sword-cane absently. He had not his eyes from the region of the distant house among the dunes.

"I didn't like the looks of that whirlwind," he muttered. "What was it? Where did it come from?"

Ham Brooks could do many things rather more than moderately well. But he was not equipped with mediumistic powers. And so he could not know that he had just voiced questions which all of the World was soon to ask.

And being no medium nor clairvoyant, Ham did not as yet realize the hideousness and magnitude which the mystery of the *Copper Clouds* was to assume. That the demonic scarlet *phenomenon* was to cause frightful and incredible occurrences, he did not dream.

Johnny Littlejohn spoke up. "Perhaps it was what Professor claimed."

"What's that?" Monk demanded.

"A smog."

Johnny pronounced the word the way a man might speak of a malicious ghoul or vampire.

The apish chemist only snorted.

Since their purloined car was now useless due to lack of gasoline, Doc Savage and his 3 aides started walking along the beach toward the distant hacienda among the dunes. It was slow. It would take them some time to reach the spot.

Long before they came near their destination, they heard cars on the road which paralleled the beach at a distance of some 200-or-300 yards (the sandy road along which they had come). Desirous of hastening their progress, they swung over and worked through thickets of palmetto and thorny scrubs. They battled savage swarms of sand fleas and gnats. At times they sank to their shins in the hot soft sand before finally reaching the miserable road.

The cars they had heard were curious persons who had seen the *Copper Cloud* and were driving out to satisfy their curiosity as to its nature. Doc attempted to "thumb" a ride. But the machines passed them by (probably because of their disheveled appearance) and the natural reluctance of American motorists to pick up hitch-hikers.

Doc and his 3 men were a strange looking trio. At best, Monk was an awesome figure who at a little distance might be mistaken for a bull ape. While Ham was a grotesque specimen with his striped morning pants torn and one tail missing from his frock coat. And it had been said of Johnny Littlejohn that the gaunt archeologist resembled an advance agent for a famine. He never appeared more forbidding than he did now.

His clothing rent and smeared with *gore*, Doc Savage looked like a fit candidate for a hospital.

A pleasant-faced young man driving a wrecker finally picked them up.

"I saw that *red thing* from my filling station down the road," he advised. "What was it?"

"I have no idea," Monk replied when it was evident that Doc with his ears still affected had not heard.

"Looked like the junk landed pretty close to old King Neptune's place down there in them sand dunes," the station operator advised.

Monk glanced at Doc to see if the latter had started watching the wrecker driver's lips. He saw that he had. Monk asked the driver a question.

"Who is King Neptune?"

"Just a dang nuisance," said the man.

Monk frowned. "Nuisance? What do you mean?"

"Oh, Amos Kling – to give him his right name – isn't exactly a nuisance," grinned the filling station man. "A guy as colorful as he couldn't very well be a nuisance. But it's the things you hear around that old hacienda in the dunes that he took over. Boy, are those sounds terrific!"

"What kind of sounds?" Monk persisted.

Their laboring wrecker moaned along the beach. They could see cars of curious individuals parked ahead with their occupants scattered over the sand dunes in the direction of the sprawling hacienda.

"Just sounds," said the driver. "You see, Old Neptune and Professor Clement and Sam Flash ..."

"Who is Sam Flash?!" Monk put in.

"Don't tell me you never heard of Sam Flash," said the informant.

Monk scratched his nubbin of a head.

"Now that you mention it," he admitted, "the name does sound kinda familiar."

"Sam Flash used to be a famous Hollywood stuntman in the silent film era. He and old Neptune Kling got together a couple of years back and started Flash Pictures which is getting to be a going concern."

Monk's pleasantly homely features gathered. "Sam Flash, the duded-up movie cowboy?"

The driver grinned. "He does dress purty, doesn't he?"

Monk had been raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma where working cowboys wore homespun flannel and denim. He jerked a thumb at Ham Brooks.

"Sam Flash makes that fashion plate look as drab as dirt.

The elegant barrister made his tone of voice thin.

"Someday I would like to see this ape in a ten-gallon hat astride a horse," Ham sniffed.

"That day may yet come, you ambulance-chaser," Monk retorted. "I done some cowboying in my young days.

"How do Professor Clement, Amos Kling, and Sam Flash tie in together," Johnny wanted to know.

The informant continued amiably.

"You see, that old place in the sand dunes was built during the boom. King Neptune bought it a couple of years ago. He got it dirt cheap and claimed it would be worth big money when the depression lifted."

"Sounds sensible," Ham commented.

The wrecker driver made a dismissive noise.

"Old Neptune sunk a lot of dough into some Florida land during the speculation back there. I don't figure he'll see a return on that until after I've gone to my 'final reward'. And I'm just half Kling's years right now."

Monk pressed. "You say that Kling's a land speculator?"

"Land. Stocks. Oil. You name it. He's got a finger in a lot of pies. No profit, though. Everyone knows he's struggling. Between the Florida land bust and the stock market crash, he lost each and every shirt he ever owned.

The man grinned. "Maybe Flash Pictures will buy him a new one."

"What has Professor Clement got to do with these two?" Ham wondered.

The driver removed one hand from his wheel to make a vague gesture indicating lack of knowledge.

"Search me," he admitted. "He keeps to himself. Nobody has talked to him much."

"But what about them *noises*?" Monk demanded.

"They're kind of hard to describe," said the driver. "Sometimes they sounded like a hive of bees. Other times, it made you think of electric machinery. They were different at different times."

The wrecker began to complain in the sand. Soon it stopped and they got out.

The other cars were all about them. They advanced following the curious persons who had come to see the *red mystery*.

They met a man coming back. A fat man who was puffing from the labor of clambering over the dunes. There was a strange expression on his rotund features.

"It was the weirdest thing," he muttered. "I pushed the fence and it fell to pieces."

Doc Savage and his 3 aides went forward. When they were out of sight of the fat man, Monk growled: "That guy must ne nuts. He pushed and it fell to piece, hah!"

They topped the dune. Pointing, Ham said: "Well, there's a hole in the fence!"

But that wasn't the strangest thing. The hacienda was once more in plain view. It had changed utterly. Where before its stucco walls had been sort of a cream color, now it had the ivory look of polished bone. The orange-tile roof also was the same skeletal hue.

In fact, every square inch of exposed surface gleamed a uniform white. Except the window glass. These were unaffected. Although the contrast between their unlighted panes and the bone-white structure brought to mind a square skull with many empty eyes as if an otherworldly skeleton had been buried in the dunes up to its bleached jawbone.

There was no sign or sound of the uncanny *red cloud*. Only silence.

They ran ahead. The sand looked perfectly solid.

But suddenly, a weird thing began to happen. They sank into the sand well over their knees.

The sand, immediately that it was disturbed, seemed to turn into the finest of white powders. It became particles far more minute than its smallest grains. This white dust puffed and eddied up around them. They began to choke.

"Blazes!" Monk exclaimed. "Did you ever see anything like this!"

They reached the wall. Anxious to get out of the strangely affected sand, Monk gave a leap for the top of the wall. The results were fantastic.

The wall collapsed!

As if it had been a fragile thing made out of incredibly dry flour, the wall went down. It seemed to turn to powder.

Sprawling down where there had apparently been solid bricks and stucco, Monk was enveloped in a cloud of dust and began to choke and gag. Doc Savage lunged in and dragged him out. They retreated.

In a nearby sand dune, a spectator laughed in a shrill silly fashion as if he were not really amused by their mishap but thought he should be.

When the 4 men were on firm sand again, Monk and Ham eyed Doc. But the *Man of Bronze* only shook his head indicating a profound puzzlement. They stood there afterwards talking in low voices over the absolute impossibility of what had happened to the big hacienda. It was impossible. And yet, the evidence was in front of their eyes.

More curious persons arrived, the vermillion wonder apparently having been seen from a considerable distance. The later arrivals tried to go near the hacienda only to sink into powdered sand or have the wall collapse when they reached it.

Someone threw a rock and it disrupted a segment of the wall. Apparently pleased, the thrower hurled another stone, this one at the house. It brought down a great section of the roof. Some of the walls followed. The entire house seemed to fall to pieces before their eyes settling downward until it was only a great clutter of dust, a somewhat shapeless mound.

A wind began picking up the dust and whirlin it away. It carried it out over the sea where it was deposited in a thick white scum upon the waves.

Doc Savage and his 3 aides stood back. They said little. The thing they were seeing was too fantastic to permit of discussion. Too unbelievable to be readily fitted into words.

But one thing was noticeable by its absence. Doc's *trilling*. Often in the past, it piped out upon such occasions. All three of the *Bronze Man's* aides kept their ears cocked for its eerie melody. But it never came.

Instead, Doc Savage said slowly: "I am baffled."

Which was something in itself.

After a time, they stopped the rock throwing and made an attempt to get into the house to see what it had held. But they failed for everything that they touched fell apart in a powder-fine cloud. The dust stifled them and they were forced to retreat.

Newspaper photographers and reporters began to arrive. A photographic plane of a newsreel camera outfit appeared overhead.

"Come on," Doc directed. "Getting ourselves smeared in the newspapers will not help us."

The *Bronze Man* dipped up a quantity of the dust and filled a flat metal case which he carried in one of the many pockets of his gadget vest. He pocketed the case.

Returning the wrecker, Doc purchased the emergency can of gas that the filling station owner happened to be carrying.

Without being recognized, they made their way back to the borrowed taxicab. They filled the tank, started it, and drove in the direction of Los Angeles.

The Bernadina Hotel was anything but quiet when they reached it an hour-or-so later.

Police milled about. Newspaper reporters, too. The latter were identifiable by their red **press cards** tucked into hatbands where they would be visible.

"We can't just walk in," Monk mumbled. "They'll recognize us."

Parked on a sidestreet, Doc exited the taxi.

"Wait here," he directed.

Moving *stealthily*, he took up a position where he could hear but not be seen. His ears seemed to be regaining their normal super-sensitivity for he caught sounds which had at first evaded him.

*"We know that **Doc Savage** is in town to look into these Copper clouds," a copy was saying. "One of his men – Ham Brooks, by name – had all but admitted it earlier this morning."*

The reporter whistled thoughtfully for a moment ... then asked:

"Say! That commotion here earlier when that Professor Clement fled the hotel room occupied by Savage's men. What do you make of it?"

The officer slowly replied. *"Well, we ain't quite figured out what that was all about. But enough damage was done to suspect a kidnapping ..."*

Not waiting for more, Doc Savage eased away. He used much caution. After he had rejoined his men, he explained what he had overheard.

"You mean we're 'in dutch' with the police here?" Monk asked.

"Exactly," Doc replied.

"But we didn't kill that guy Clement," Monk complained.

"We have no proof to the contrary," Doc pointed out. "The fact that there appeared to be no body will hardly clear us. And even if we are not charged with anything, there will be a great deal of unpleasant publicity."

"A pronouncement of inverse Brobdingnagian proportions," Johnny groaned.

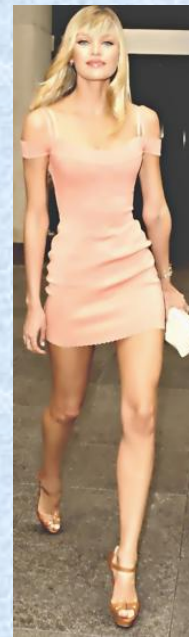
"What did he say?" Monk grunted.

"He said that Doc made an understatement," Ham snapped peevishly.

Turning, he said: "Doc, we left our pets in the hotel."

"We will attend to them later," said the **Bronze Man**. "They are safe for the time being."

"We'll have to ditch this checkered conveyance and seek Pat's whereabouts," Johnny interposed.



"We are doing that now," Doc advised getting the taxi in gear.

He intended to drive to the airport. He got 3 blocks when a long black machine pulled up and its side window rolled down.

"Grenade again!" Ham wailed. "Duck!"

"Oh, settle down," a roaring voice bellowed. "It's us."

"Us" proved to be Renny Renwick and Long Tom Roberts, the final 2 members of Doc Savage's crew of assistants. Renny was Colonel John Renwick, an engineer of International repute. Long Tom was better known as Major Thomas J. Roberts, an electrical genius who would probably be famous a century from today.

Doc eased his machine to the curb. With haste, they piled aboard the black touring car.

Renny was at the wheel with Long Tom beside him. They were as mismatched a pair as Monk and Ham.

Renny was a hulking giant who possessed a dour countenance that usually meant he was extremely pleased with things. His hands were somewhat near to a quart of bone and gristle. It was the big engineer's boast that a door panel had not been made that could withstand a blow from either of his huge **fists**.

Long Tom was by far the least physically impressive of Doc's aides. Pale and undersized, he nevertheless had never known a sick day in his entire life. The puny electrical wizard had earned his nickname as a result of a misadventure with a "long tom" cannon during the World War. It was also said that he could whip any 3 strapping men he encountered.

"Blew in an hour ago," Long Tom explained as Renny got the black machine under way. "We went to the hotel first. But there was an uproar."

"Did you see Habeas?" asked Monk.

"And my Chemistry?" added Ham.

"In the trunk where they won't chew up the upholstery," Long Tom drawled. "This is a rented machine."

"Pull over!" Monk squawled.

Renny obliged and Monk got the trunk open.

Out bounded a pig scrawnier than any pig should be and live. It possessed ears that were on the verge of resembling wings and a snout designed by nature for investigating gopher holes. It shook itself all over like a dog.

An odd tailless ape jumped into Ham's waiting arms. Its resemblance to a miniature Monk Mayfair was alarming. These were Habeas Corpus and Chemistry who got along about as well as their respective masters. Which meant that they did not get along at all.

With their pets in hand, Monk and Ham got aboard and they drove off. The *Man of Bronze* had taken the wheel from Renny. He brought his aides up to date with few wasted words.

"Doc, is it possible the Pat is ..."

Long Tom swallowed the rest.



"Holy cow!" Renny roared, his long puritanical face lengthening. "Don't even say it out loud."

But the **Bronze Man** said nothing.

He drove until they had put Los Angeles behind them. Then spying a pay telephone, he pulled over and made a series of phone calls. They took some time.

When he returned, he said: "I have just been in touch with the editors of all the major newspapers, giving interviews."

"Whew!" Monk breathed.

This was unusual. Due to the perilous life he lived, Doc Savage shunned publicity.

"I have offered a reward of \$200,000 for information leading to the present whereabouts of 'Doris Duff'," he explained.

"Did you tell the Press her real name?" asked Renny.

Doc Savage shook his head in the negative.

"What about Professor Clement?" wondered Long Tom.

"I said that we pursued Professor Clement but failed to apprehend him."

Which, technically, was the absolute truth.

They settled down for the long ride south to Palm Springs.

No one spoke a word. Grief hung over the interior of the car like a curse. Even the 2 pets Habeas and Chemistry – who would ordinarily be at each other's throats with the same wild abandon as their respective owners – behaved themselves.

VI – Frightsome Old Man

The California Press worked fast. By the time Doc Savage and his 5 men rolled into the resort area of Palm Springs, late editions were being hawked on the streets.

Monk bought several. A typical headline read:

DOC SAVAGE INVESTIGATING METEOROLOGICAL MYSTERY

But another story threatened to bump the Man of Bronze off the front page.

"Lookit this!" Monk squeaked after he rejoined them in the black touring machine.

COPPER CLOUD CONSUMES ANOTHER VICTIM

The 13th to Vanish is Hondo Stevens

Hondo W. Stevens, oil-field tool dresser, appears to be the latest victim of the phenomenon popularly called **Copper Clouds**.

Early this morning, Stevens, 33, was workin gin the Kling-Flash oil lease in Bakersfield when an unusual cloud said to resemble **blood**, **soot** or coal dust descended upon the derrick on which he had been working. The cloud, red at first, was described as turning black just before it enveloped Stevens.

No trace of the man has been found although the ground where he was last seen turned a remarkable hue of white.

Some of Stevens's fellow workers are complaining of gray hair. **Copper Clouds** have been reported in this area. But none had alighted to earth. Nor have any other oil workers vanished.

The owner of the least, Amos Kling, has not been seen in nearly a day and concern is growing for his safety.

"This getting' screwier and screwier," Monk muttered balling up the paper in frustration.

Long Tom rubbed the back of his neck in concern.

"I don't get this. A cloud is just a collection of water vapor. They don't come down to earth."

"Fog does," Renny inserted.

"Sure. But fog isn't **red**."

"What color is the smog stuff?" asked Ham. "I mean, the ordinary type."

Long Tom glowered impatiently.

"I don't know. Brown. Brownish-yellow. It's dirty-looking."

"These red **things** are hungry," Ham said worriedly.

"Maybe they are alive," Monk ventured. "But they ain't fog nor smog or anything like that."

"Then what would they be?" the dapper attorney demanded.

Monk worried the rusty bristles atop his bullet head thoughtfully.

At length, he announced: "I'd call 'em a species of howling **red wowser**."

Ham snapped: "There's no such animal!"

Monk arranged his simian features into a serious assembly.

"Sure there is. Out Texas way, they got a devil that cowboys call a 'blue norther'. This is kinda its cousin."

"Nonsense!" Ham fumed. "A 'blue norther' is a sudden cold weather front. It's entirely natural ..."

"Tell it to the judge," Monk grinned.

"Ah, bugs!" grumbled Long Tom.

They drove out to the dude ranch where Pat Savage alias 'Doris Duff' had taken up residence.

The owner of the Golden West dude ranch was only too happy to be of assistance.

Yes, Doris Duff had been his guest.

No, Doris Duff had not mentioned where was going specifically. Only that she wanted to see the Mojave Desert. Something was said about prospecting for gold. But the dude ranch owner thought that was Eastern fantasy.

"What about the **Copper Cloud**?" Doc demanded.

"My foreman claimed to have seen one settle down in the general direction that this Doris Duff rode off in. She had borrowed a horse. Eventually the horse came back. Saddle empty."

The long faces of Doc's aides grew even longer.

Doc Savage that the man and they drove off in the general direction that the **Copper Cloud** and Doris Duff were last seen.

The road run straight as a ruler for a time. Each side was lined with ranks of desert palm trees standing sentinel. Eerie giants with boles as coarse as coconut husks. Presently the palms thinned out and the road lost its direction becoming more-and-more like a carelessly dropped rope that ran into the flat **furnace** that was the Mojave Desert.

East of the San Jacinto Mountains, the sands seem to stretch into a **heat**-shimmered eternity. Low foothills resemble the dun paws of great lions. The only vegetation was Yucca and Juniper trees growing on the valley floor. It was forbidding territory, impossible to systematically search.

But they got a break.

All of Doc Savage's men carried a special chalk which glows or **fluoresces** under ultraviolet light. Pat Savage also habitually carried a stick of the handy stuff.

Renny had brought several boxes of equipment from his plane. Doc extracted a **black-light** scanner and goggles from one of these. In the **blazing** afternoon Sun, it would not work as well as one would wish. But it would function.

As they drove, Renny was at the wheel again while Doc rode the running board with goggles on. Monk was in the front passenger seat with the apparatus which resembled a folding box-camera except that the lens was a **purplish-black**. He directed it upon any surface on which chalk marks might conceivably have been written.

Patricia Savage had been raised in the wilds of British Columbia and knew her woodcraft. (read #11 - "Brand of the Werewolf") It is a fool who travels unknown trackless desert and does not provide a means of backtracking home. And Pat was no fool.

They discovered the first **mark** when Doc called out "Stop!"

He walked over to a large stone carrying the ultraviolet device.

Under application of its rays, the letter '**S**' sprang out in eerie electric blue. The letter was jagged suggesting a lightning bolt. It was the agreed-upon symbol by which Doc and Pat Savage left recognizable signs for one another.

"Only Pat could have made that mark," Long Tom decided.

Doc nodded. They pushed on.

More **marks** were discovered. It developed that they led to the foothills which so resembled the paws of crouching lions.

XX

What the marks didn't reveal to them was that Pat (alias 'Doris Duff') had been **raped**!

The disguised young woman was so consumed in her investigating efforts that she didn't notice a group of **African-American males** sneak up on her in the desolate region. What they were doing out in the middle of nowhere would never be known to her. Only their vile interest in her nubile body was.



"Well, looky-here. You look lost, baby."

Doris/Pat held her nerve and didn't respond. A slow angry look came on her face.

"Hey, **Bitch**," another said. "Betcha it's been a while since you had some nice **black dick**."

That caused all of them to giggle. All except Pat, that is.

"If she ever had," someone corrected.

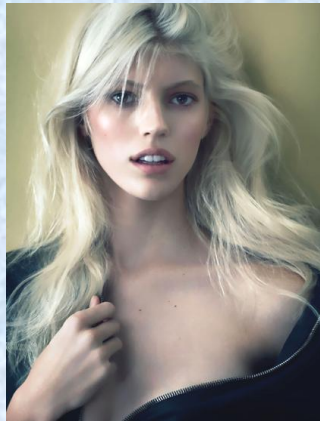
The thought that such a beautiful white girl might be a virgin to black sex caused them all to stop giggling and get quite serious.



"Leave me alone!" 'Doris' demanded. "Don'y you dare touch me, you **black bastards!**"

"Now is that anyway to talk to your new daddies, 'Ho? Git over here and give us some **luvins.**"

They encircled here and quickly started tearing off her clothes.



"Ah, look at those **titties!**" one of them said licking his lips. "Can't wait till I start suckin' on those big white juggies."

Her flimsy silk panties were ripped off as was the rest of her tight-fitting clothing. She stood there in her "birthday suit" looking scornful at their amorous advances.





Doris/Pat felt nauseated when their gross love-making finally finished. But that was just preliminary to their next act ...



"Now you git fucked, White **Slut!**"

"Don't even think about it!" Doris(Pat) warned. "I'm too good for the likes of you."

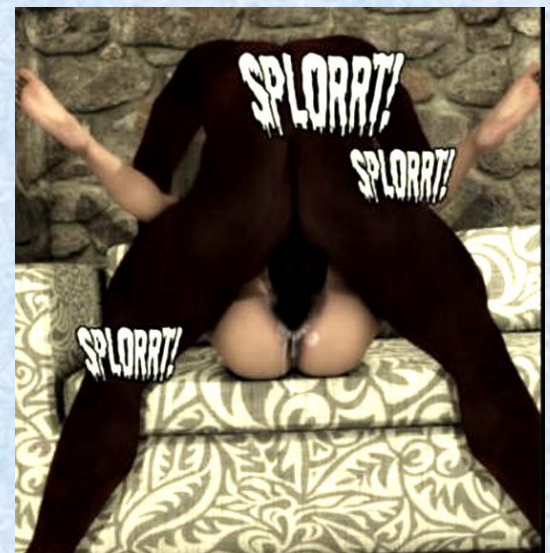
They just scowled at her threats.

"You gots lots of babies to be makin'!"





Doris(Pat) shrieked when that long black penis pierced her tight unlubricated vagina.



Her first rapist was so excited and horny that he abruptly came in 5 minutes.



But her torment was only temporarily suspended until the others had their turn.



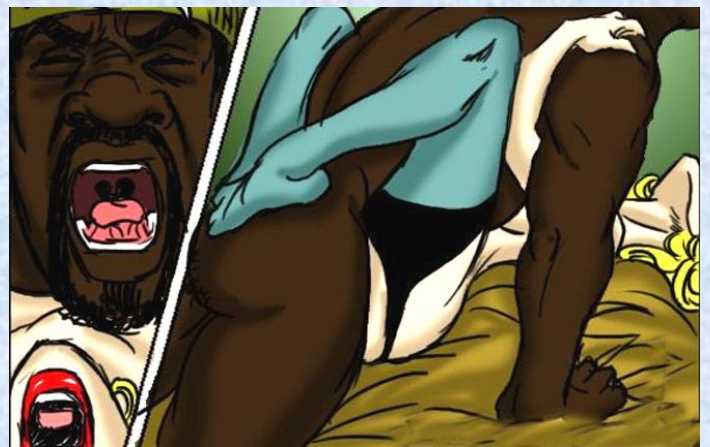


Doris(Pat) gathered her ravaged body and tried to stand up when ...





"Fight me, **Bitch!** Fight it! Here cums your big black **baby** boy!"





All of them were exhausted. The slender white woman and the ragged large black brutes. But they weren't finished with her yet

Doc Savage and Long Tom Roberts skirted what appeared to an old long-abandoned mining camp whose weathered buildings stood starkly naked under the blistering **Sun**. Only 3 structures still stood, their windows removed long ago. They were mere wood and brick shells empty of all habitation. A dusty road ran between what remained.

Eventually the procession of angular **S's** led to the timber-shored entrance of an old mine high in the hills. They climbed as a group with Monk carrying Habeas Corpus by one elongated ear and Chemistry making its own monkey way.

The first they were cognizant of coming danger, some small pebbles clattered down coming to a rest at their feet. Doc signaled a halt.

More rocks banged and jumped at them.

Then abruptly, a **boulder** no smaller than a mule rolled out of the mine entrance and came tumbling down.

His **muscular** arms convulsing into action, Doc Savage pushed the aides nearest him in opposite directions. They collided with others clearing a space.

The **Bronze Man** kept his remarkable flake-gold **eyes** on the tumbling dornick long enough to gauge its path. Then moving with a flowing ease that made it seem like child's play, he evaded the deadly hunk of stone.

The rock struck the bottom and actually split like a melon before coming to rest in 2 unequal halves.

A voice bellowed down at them.

"Don't come no farther!"

Doc motioned for silence.

"You hear me?" the bellowing voice repeated. *"Stay back! I'm a-warning you!"*

Moving with a sure-footed stealth that would shame a mountain lion, the Man of Bronze gained the mine entrance and eased inward.

The angle of the declining Sun threw the cave into gloom. But using his keenly developed sense of smell, Doc Savage closed in on the shadowy figure within.

A sizable stone was flung in his direction. But the **bronze** giant batted it aside without apparent effort. The stone rebounded off a wall creating a distracting clatter.

Lunging, Doc took the apparition by the throat and exerted pressure. A single word escaped the skulker:

"Thunderation!"

He got most of it out ... then subsided.

"Settle down," Doc told him.

His remaining aides rushed in. Monk had a flashlight out. It was one of the spring-generator types. It sprayed helpful illumination.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled after getting a good look at Doc's captive.

He was a big rangy bear of a man topping out at just over 6 feet. His long angular face was seamed and leathery, dark in a way that suggest a well-cured hide rather than just the action of sunlight on skin. He wore a brown suit that had once been very presentable but now looked as though it belonged to a hermit who dwelled in a cave (as might conceivably be the case).

The apparition sported a wonderful shock of iron-gray hair. But that was not what made him such a distinctive figure in the flashlight glow.

It was the beard. Its color was difficult to judge. Perhaps it was a faded brown smeared with gray. Or possibly it was an iron-gray clinging to its former glory. Streaks of green suggested that the owner habitually chewed tobacco. The beard hung down so far that it all but obscured the man's necktie.

"Holy cow," Renny repeated, this time amused. "Did you catch an old desert rat, Doc?"

The Man of Bronze had transferred his grip to the man's right shoulder and was slapping the bearded one's cloth with hard smacks searching for weapons. He found none.

"Your name?" Doc questioned.

"Kling's my handle. Amos is my Christian name."

"Old Neptune Kling?" Ham demanded.

The bearded personage all but puffed out his barrel chest in response.

"Heard of me, have you? My maw would be right proud. Made a name for myself in this man's world, I have."

"What are you doing here, Kling?" Doc asked.

"Hey! He exploded suddenly. "I know you now. You're **Doc Savage!**"

He became tongue-tangled with the haste of his speech and had to stop to get himself straightened out.

"I've been hid out in this cave all morning," he explained. "Where's Sam Flash? Have you seen him? Where is he?"

He seemed all but incoherent and leaped to another subject with his next question.

"Did you find Doris Duff's body? It was in the news ... you were looking for it ... Palm Springs!"

Doc Savage stepped forward and <slapped> Amos Kling with lightning speed. So quickly was it done that the other man scarcely had time to blink. Kling put up his fists fiercely.

Doc said: "Calm yourself. Give a straight story."

Kling's face became very red. But the rage seemed to counteract his nervousness and fright and he became almost calm.

"The **Copper Clouds** came last night. There was dozens of them," he sputtered. "They did not get me because I skedaddled in here. I don't what happened to my partner Sam Flash. The **copper critters** hung around after Flash ran off into town. The last one vamoosed just before happened along."

"We saw no **clouds** as we approached," Doc Savage said steadily.

"How could you? Gol-danged **things** don't become visible until they start getting' close to the ground," said Kling. "Everyone calls them '**copper**'. But before that, **they're** a bluish color. Like the sky. You can't hardly make them out until they commence to turnin' red. And when **they're** getting' ready to light on a man, that's when **they** go black as the Devil's very hoofs a-turnin' and a-twistin' somethin' terrible."

Kling shuddered the length of his bearish body.

"You seem to know a lot about these **things**," Ham interposed.

"I should! Blasted *hobgoblins* have been worryin' my oil field for nigh onto a month now. I kept it out of the papers on account of I don't want to scare off my workers. But *they've* been hauntin' my derricks like *they're* huntin' for something. Or some soul."

"Well, they finally caught one," Long Tom put in.

Kling <blinked>. "One what?"

"A man named Hondo Stevens."

Old Neptune Kling seemed slow to take the information in. He turned to Doc Savage and met the **bronze** giant's compelling flake-gold eyes.

"Is it true?" he croaked. "Hondo Stevens is no longer on this earth?"

Doc nodded. "The newspapers reported his death hours ago. A *Copper Cloud* was supposed to have consumed him."

Ham Brooks offered a newspaper. Kling accepted it, his eyes skating rapidly over the column inches detailing the grisly demise of the man Stevens.

"Poor Hondo," groaned Amos Kling. "He could wrangle fishing tools better'n any oil field roustabout I ever knew."

"All that's left of his body," Monk said, "is a mound of salt."

"Reckon I'll just have to bury that much," Kling said thickly.

"What were you and your partner doing out here?" questioned Doc Savage.

"Scoutin' locations for our next movie," Kling replied.

He seemed preoccupied.

"You see, me and Sam Flash did us a swap a while back. I own an oil lease that has yet to pay. He's got Flash Pictures which he's still tryin' to put on a profitable basis. Neither one of us was getting' anywhere. So we traded half interest in our respective concerns until we were co-owners."

"That's a peculiar way to conduct business," Ham said slowly.

Amos Kling squared his shoulders manfully.

"Peculiar, yes. But it's gonna work. Either I strike oil – in which case we can build up Flash Pictures – or Sam Flash will himself a hit in which instance he's gotta plough his profits into my wildcat wells."

While Kling was speaking, Monk Mayfair had been poking deeper into the mine interior. He gave a lusty shout and bent over.

"Doc! Lookit!"

The apish chemist returned holding a single-action six-shooter known as a "hogleg" in the days of the Old West.

"Recognize it?" he asked.

"Ain't mine," King Neptune said hastily. "Not that I wouldn't mind owning suck-like. She's a beaut."

"It belonged ..."

The **Bronze Man** caught himself.

"This belongs to Pat.

Kling grunted: "Who's 'Pat'?"

Befuddlement seized Amos Kling's features. He watched as Doc Savage broke the gun's action and inspected the cylinder.

"Been fired in the last day or so," Doc reported.

He sniffed the barrel. Then he extracted a spent shell and smelled of it.

*For a moment, his uncanny **trill**ing trickled out.*

Then realizing that he was making it, he stifled the exotic vagrant sound.

Old Neptune looked around wildly. "What-in-tarnation was that? Crickets?"

"Quiet!" Ham snapped.

Then to Doc, he asked: "What is it? What did you discover?"

But instead of replying, Doc Savage took the **ultraviolet** device from Long Tom who had possession of it. Switching it 'on', he cast its invisible rays about the cave interior. Eerie blue **lettering** sprang into life.

"Spooks!" Old Neptune exclaimed.

They ignored him. The letters were smudged. But they were unmistakably in Pat Savage's feminine hand.

Doc: If you read this ... alive ... don't ... tear ...

"Blazes!" Monk said. "Most of it is rubbed out. What do you think Pat was trying to say?"

Ham frowned. "It strikes me as a parting message."

"Whatcha mean?"

Ham swallowed hard. "She might have been saying 'Doc, if you read this, I will no longer be alive. Don't shed a tear'."

"Pat would never write that," Johnny sputtered.

He turned stricken eyes to Doc Savage.

"Would she?"

His voice brittle, Doc said: "Do you all have your superfirers on your persons?"

"Naturally," Monk said

The apish chemist produced from an underarm holster one of the weapons resembling an oversize automatic fitted with a drum cartridge magazine. Constructed and perfected by Doc Savage himself, this supermachine pistol would have been worth a fortune to most modern armies. The only examples, however, were in the hands of Doc's men.

The **Bronze Man** spoke. "Change drums. Charge them with **tear gas** cartridges."

Doc Savage's men looked perplexed. It was true that the versatile weapons were capable of firing all types of shells from solid lead to smokers. But **tear gas** was not the most practical type of bullet for a weapon that could empty its drum in less than 30 seconds. The **tear gas** tended to blow back upon the firer with discouraging consequences.

Still, they had learned long ago to heed their **bronze** chief's commands. The five began swapping drums from spares carried in their coat pockets.

The **Man of Bronze** held onto the six-shooter. He did not normally carry firearms believing that a man who did so soon became too dependent on them. But this particular firearm was a family heirloom. It belonged to Pat Savage's father (also Doc Savage's brother) and to his family before that.

Doc next began a systematic inspection of the dim mine interior. Evidently copper was excavated here at one time. He discovered a pile of whitish sand not far from where Monk had found Pat's six-gun and knelt down to inspect it.

A strange expression appeared on his composed features as he took a sample of the whitish powder and rubbed it between his **metallic** fingers and thumb. It had the granular texture of bone meal.

His squeaky voice sounding more childlike than ever, Monk muttered: "Doc! Could that ... be all that's left ... of Pat/"

Again the **Bronze Man** vouchsafed no reply. He stood up.

"We will conduct a search of the surrounding area," he said.

They did this.

Apparently consumed by gloom, Amos Kling walked off a few paces and seated himself on a rock. He seemed to take a morbid interest in Doc's operations.

Doc Savage and his aides searched the dun foothills for hours. They found nothing of interest except a disreputable-looking touring car nearly a decade old.

"Yours?" Doc asked Kling.

"I ain't very proud to admit it," King Neptune grumbled. "She flivvered out on me at last. Otherwise I could have gotten back on my own instead of bein' drygulched by my own no-account partner."

Doc posed another question.

"How did you become aware that I was searching for Doris Duff? The papers broke the story only in the last hour-or-so."

"How do you think?" Old Neptune roared. "I got a car radio!"

Doc climbed into the decrepit auto to inspect it.

When he reemerged, he commented: "It is not operating now."

"Well, what do you expect sittin' in this infernal furnace all this time? Battery finally up and expired!"

The **Bronze Man** said nothing. He seemed to accept the oil man's explanation.

Finally, Doc Savage assembled his aides near the black car which they had rented.

"We are going ahead with the search for Pat," he said.

"I'm sure in favor of it," agreed Monk.

"And I suggest we should sorta go look at that wildcat oil field also," added Long Tom. "While we're in California."

The last suggestion was in line with the unique professions which Doc Savage and his five associates followed. A career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers going to the far ends of the Earth to do so. Investigating the unknown and the unusual was part-and-parcel of that.

The **bronze** giant nodded.

"We are going to split up," he explained. "It is my idea to assign tasks to each of you now."

"How cow!" Big-**fisted** Renny Renwick used his favorite expression. "Whatach want me to do?"

"Those big hands of yours make you too easily identified for undercover work," Doc told him. "You will go to Los Angeles and go over recent news and make notes of unusual activity of any kind. The editors of the Los Angeles papers as well as the editors of oil filed publications will undoubtedly give you access to their files. And particularly look into the oil man who vanished – Olaf Ames."

Long Tom said: "What about me?"

"You," Doc Savage advised, "might go to Hollywood and disguise yourself as an out-of-work electrician. You will hang out around the backlots and strike up an acquaintance with anyone you can."

"The idea being to get a line of Sam Flash, eh?" asked the puny-looking electrical wizard.

"Join his studio if possible," Doc added.

"Just call me Gaffer," Long Tom said grimly. "That's the term movie people use for an electrician."

Doc Savage turned to tall gaunt Johnny Littlejohn, the archeologist-geologist.

"Your job probably won't require much geological skill. You are going to play detective."

"Supermalagorgeous!" Johnny exclaimed and twirled his monocle magnifier on its black ribbon.

"Go to Los Angeles. Sleuth around and see what you can learn about Professor Clement and any others who had disappeared in the so-called **Copper Clouds**. Your academic reputation should open all doors at the college where he taught."

"In other words, check on everybody concerned in this," suggested Johnny who had once chaired the natural sciences department at a prestigious Eastern university.

Doc Savage nodded.

His flake-gold **eyes** now rested on Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks. They were a peculiar pair. Just now they were exchanging fierce stares. No one – not even their most intimate friends – could recall having heard one address a civil word to the other. At times they came to blows. And yet on more than one occasion, each had risked his life to save the other.

"Blazes, Doc!" Monk groaned. "I don't wanta work with this shyster Ham."

"That goes double!" Ham snapped.

"You two," Doc Savage, "will accompany me."

Monk and Ham picked up their respective pets. They had managed to carry the homely pig and the remarkable looking monkey along through the excitement. They got in the car.

"Kling!" Doc Savage called.

King Neptune got off his rock and shuffled toward the car. He had been out of earshot the entire time.

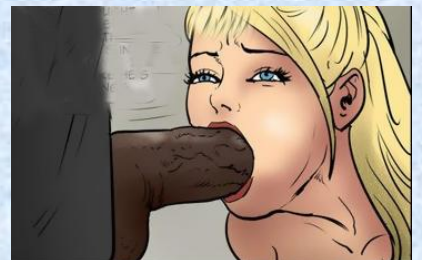
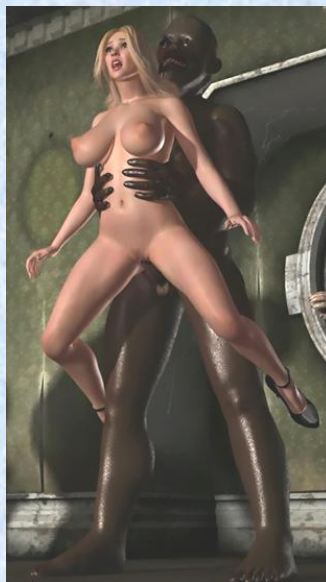
"We are heading for Los Angeles," Doc advises.

Bearded old Amos Kling chuckled.

"I hope to drown in crude oil," he mumbled, "if I won't be glad to see the last of this disreputable devil-blasted desert!"

XX

Pat's Gang-Bang continues later ...



VII – Terror in Neptune Field

It developed that the wildcat oil wells belonging to Amos "King Neptune" Kling and Sam Flash were located in the town of Bakersfield which was a considerable distance north and east of Los Angeles. Doc Savage decided that it would be best if they reclaimed their planes from the Los Angeles city airport to fly on to Bakersfield.

No one was really surprised when they rolled into the airport later that afternoon and discovered 2 uniformed California police officers standing guard at the unique racing monoplane in which Doc had lately arrived.

"Looks like they figure out that's your bus, Doc," Monk muttered giving Habeas Corpus an absentminded scratch on the throat. The poker squeezed its eyes shut like a contented dog.

Ham worried his sword-cane between nimble fingers. His handsome features frowned darkly. Chemistry sat beside him fidgeting.

"Maybe we can still snag the speed plane that Ham and I flew in one," Monk suggested. "We got it hangered at the other end of the field."

The **Bronze Man** considered this briefly.

"No doubt that it is being watched as well."

Ham Brooks offered: "If there are no official charges against us, I can get us released from custody within an hour."

"How's that?" Monk prompted innocently.

"Why with a writ of habeas corp ..."

Ham's **face** suddenly became crimson. He began sputtering inarticulately.

The simian chemist addressed his pet pig.

"Did you hear that, Habeas? That shyster fashion plate thinks you can write. Can you?"

The porker seemed to say: *"No. But I can make a monkey out of a man named Ham."*

"Ventriloquism!" Ham exploded, his face now purpling.

He took a loose swing at the shoat but missed.

"We have no time to waste," Doc rapped.

Getting the car in gear again, he sent it whining toward the waiting monoplane.

Although the *Man of Bronze* never carried firearms for fear that he might grow overly reliant on them at the expense of his wits and ingenuity, that did not mean he was not proficient in their use. Hours of practice gave him a rare mastery over weapons of all kinds. From his coat he extracted Pat Savage's enormous six-shooter.

"What's going on?" King Neptune demanded seeing trouble in the offing. "A shootin' bee?"

"You stay out of this, old-timer," warned Monk.

"Watch what you call me, you human buffalo," Kling grumbled. "I got feelin's."

Doc's men had their superfirers out.

"Smokers," Doc directed.

Quickly they removed drum magazines and snapped new ones in place. These were marked with red pain for identification purposes.

The bluecoats barring the *Bronze Man's* approaching vehicle had plenty of time to react. They reacted wrong.

One raised his hand to order a halt. The other laid a hard hand on the walnut butt of his holstered pistol.

Casually, Doc Savage set the six-shooter along the sill of the driver's side door window and began the pistol. It was a single-action requiring <cocking> before each trigger pull.

The weapon snapped and detonated 3 times in quick succession. A stream of **tear gas** was flung outward rolling toward the startled officers.

Police revolvers jerked out of holsters and came level. Doc flung the wheel to one side, thus avoiding the noisome cloud.

Then every window of the black machine sprouted gun muzzles. These erupted! The resultant din was a frenzied *hooting* remindful of many bull fiddles sawing.

The smokers struck the tarmac all around the California law officers. They released billows of blackness which quickly mushroomed and spread outward. The stuff had a **sooty** quality that might have suggested the red *apparitions* from the sky in their darker faces. Perhaps that is what caused the 2 police officers to flee the vicinity without firing a single shot.

"Run, you lawmen!" Amos Kling bellowed. "Run afore the **smog-goblin** eats you up!"

He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

The commotion had drawn others out of the hangar where Doc's men had left the speed plane. They also hastily quitted the vicinity.

Doc and his aides came out of the black auto and fought their way through the **smoke** dragging Ole Neptune along with them. The pets followed.

They gained the hangar where the sleek aircraft stood. Doc flung himself into the control bucket. He began <snapping> switches and got the 2 giant motors warmed up. Smoke and sparks spilled from the cowl bayonets.

Almost instantaneously the hangar doors collapsed open amid a whirring of roller-hinges. The churning propellers tugged the lumbering bus out of the hangar.

The floodlights of the airport were equipped with a new scientific device. This was an arrangement of sound receptors and electrical relays whereby the noise of a plane motor near the field would automatically turn on the lights.

The tarmac now lighted itself, the mechanism actuated by the bawling motors of the big speed plane.

Much more quickly than it seemed possible, the streamlined ship was barreling down the runway. It climbed rapidly ... banked east ... and put Los Angeles well behind them.

"That," suggested Ham Brooks, "will not make us any more popular with the local constabulary than before."

Doc Savage seemed unconcerned over that prospect. He concentrated on his flying, his metallic features like **bronze** plate.

"Monk," he said.

"Yeah, Doc?"

"In back of the plane you will find the material with which to whip up batches of **tear gas** shells for your mercy pistols."

"How much you want?"

"As much as you can manufacture," Doc said grimly. "Our very lives may depend on them."

Looking perplexed, the hairy chemist ambled back to accede to the **Bronze Man's** wishes.

The California sun was setting. The skies to the west took on a harsh gory tint. It made them think of the boiling blood-red **cloud** that they all had beheld and the uncanny destruction it had wrought.

Ham took a seat on the starboard side of the plane and watched the skies. A worried frown was on his handsome features.

"What's eatin' you, shyster?" Monk demanded.

Ham sniffed: "These red smog **things** have eaten one aircraft already. I don't intend to let any devour us if I can help it."

Monk snorted derisively.

"Back where I come from," he said, "we used to eat howling red wowsers for breakfast."

"A lot you know," put in grizzled old King Neptune. "Them *red demons* can't be withstood or understood."

Monk only snorted again.

"Both of you sound like victims of loco weed."

When Amos Kling got out of Doc Savage's plane after the it made a landing near the Kling-Flash lease on the Neptune oil field of California, he was a little jittery.

"I've rode the ruttiest durn oilfield in a nitroglycerine truck and thought I was scared," he gulped shakily. "But that landing you just made give me the willies like nobody ever had 'em before!"

"That was a good landing," homely Monk squeaked in an injured tone. "Doc made it."

"Yeah. But lookit where it was made," said the bearded oil man. "This open space ain't big enough for a self-respectin' hawk to eat a rabbit in!"

The parachute flare which Doc Savage had dropped so as to have light for the landing burned itself into a hot red clinker. The darkness seemed to close in like a solid block of black amber. An effect helped along by the fact that the clearing was so narrow at this point that the scrub oak trees all but touched the plane wingtips.

The **Bronze Man** removed several stout metal cases from the plane. These were suspended inside basket-like frames by springs. It was an arrangement intended to protect the contents of the metal cases from being unduly jarred. Each of the cases bore a number. They contained some of the unusual equipment which Doc always took with him.

"Out lease and that wildcat well the red *thing* scuttled into is over this way," Amos Kling grunted.

Monk and Ham let their pets Habeas and Chemistry out of the plane. They got flashlights which squirted beams so white that they almost hurt the eyes. The brush was very thick. The hard horny scrub oak boughs raked their skin. Dead leaves crackling underfoot were almost a roar. The monkey Chemistry took the treetops, his natural right.

"You might want to follow him," Ham suggested to the simian chemist Monk. "You've got the physical build."

"Someday I'm gonna wring your neck," Monk muttered. "Maybe today."

Doc Savage stopped and pointed at the outline of a spidery metal derrick visible against a rift in the clouds. It was some distance away.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Yep," replied Amos Kling. "That's the wildcat well the red *devil-thing* supposedly snuck into."

Always willing to argue, Monk said: "I don't really think there is any red *devil* on account of it's too blasted impossible. I don't give a whingo if a Hopi Indian claims to have called a demon out of the sky or not ..."

Monk stopped speaking and swallowed. It suddenly dawned on him that Doc Savage was no longer with them. *The Bronze Man had faded with the enormous silence of which he was capable into the surrounding darkness.*

"Well, may my grandchildren all have wooden legs!" exclaimed Kling. "Where'd Savage go?"

Monk said: "We'd better wait here seein' as how we're standin' still now."

"But where'd he go?" Kling persisted.

"I'm no clairvoyant!" Monk snapped.

"You're as bad as that feller Johnny for words!" retorted King Neptune. "What's that one mean?"

"I said that nobody can ever be sure he knows how Doc is working a thing," Monk elaborated. "Doc never does what you would expect. You'll go along thinkin' you got Doc all figured out and bingo! He's pulled somethin' you and me wouldn't have thought of in a year of Sundays. Now ..."

Then Doc Savage was back among them as noiselessly as he had gone.

"Where you been?" Amos Kling asked sharply.

Doc did not answer the question.

"Let us go on and take a look at the well," he suggested.

When an oil well is being drilled, the usual procedure is to keep a series of shafts (called "towers") working so that drilling pushes forward 24 hours of the day. But the Kling-Flash wildcat was silent, the boilers cold.

"We shut down on account of a broken gear," explained Amos Kling. "Now that our tool dresser, poor Hondo Stevens, has been taken by that ... that *red roarer*, Lord knows when we'll start up drillin' again."

Doc secured some of the equipment cases which Monk and Ham were carrying. He opened one and took out what looked like a paper-wrapped candle. He shucked off the cover.

Instantly the thing began to burn with a sunny glare. He stuck it in the ground by a spike attached to the bottom for that purpose.

"A thing like an ordinary railroad fusee," Monk explained. "Only it burns brighter and for longer. About 15 minutes."

"I don't see the idea of all this trouble!" snapped Kling.

Doc Savage produced instruments from cases. Powerful magnifiers, reagent chemicals of various types, and small airtight containers for samples. With this stuff he began to go over the grass, small bushes, and even the bare dirt surrounding the wildcat oil well.

Amos Kling began to realize that the **Bronze Man** was using ultra-scientific methods to search for a clue. Old Neptune offered what help he could.

"The Sun durin' the days has probably bleached out the pale spots that *thing* left. Just like them mounds in that cave," he said. "But I'll show you where they were supposed to be."

"That will help a great deal," Doc told him. "It is that spoor in which I am particular interested. And I am also very much interested in the pile of sand which was reported found near the last known location of that man Stevens before he vanished."

"It warn't sand!" declared Amos Kling. "It was ... Well, heck! I keep thinkin' of Lot's wife in the Bible who got turned into a pillar of salt for lookin' back when she shouldn't of. This stuff was maybe kinda like salt. Or talcum or something."

"Where was it found?"

"Over there. According to the newspapers."

Kling led the way to a nearby gully and pointed.

"Gimme a light and I'll throw it at the stuff."

Doc Savage passed the flashlight over. Kling threw the beam into the little crease in the earth locating a substance both pale and powdery. To a layman, the material might have seemed nothing more than discolored sand. Doc took a brief close look.

"This is not a by-product of crude oi," he said.

Amos Kling relieved and nodded.

"That's what I knew. It takes an oil refinery expert to tell, though."

Getting into the ditch, Monk Mayfair slipped, fell, and broke the only other flashlight.

They crouched around the weird whitish patch.

Then the light of the big fusee flare went out. It did not pop out suddenly but rather extinguished with a slow, loud *fizzing* noise.

Monk juttet his bullet of a head out of the gully.

"Doc!" he howled. "Some durn red *devil* of a thing is eatin' the light!"

Monk's excited proclamation was a little awry. It would be difficult for any corporeal body to actually "eat" light.

But they all saw what he meant as they bounded out of the ditch. Some hideous red *vapor* had swarmed around the flare. It buzzed feebly.

They could see the glow of the light apparently inside the creature!

The light went out suddenly. Blackness came.

"This ain't no place for old Maw Kling's son!" roared King Neptune as he began to run.

"Hey!" squawled Monk. "You got our only flashlight! Come back here, you old grasshopper!"

Amos Kling possibly ran a little faster then.

Monk and Ham charged after the old fellow. Under ordinary conditions, Kling would not have had a chance against them.

But this race was not under ordinary conditions. Kling knew the terrain somewhat. And too, he had the flashlight to illuminate his way while Monk and Ham fell over the bushes and were speared and whipped by scrub oak boughs.

Old King Neptune outran them.

"We'll catch 'im if we have to run 'im to Mexico!" Monk puffed. "Then I'm gonna hit 'im so hard he'll have to unlace his shoes to breathe!"

"What about Doc and the *red thing*?" Ham gulped.

"Doc woulda called out if he'd wanted us to stay," Monk said.

At that moment, Doc Savage was taking off his socks. When the necessity of moving about with *absolute silence* arose, he believed in reverting to nature. His bare feet could feel out twigs that might crackle and even grass that was dry and might rustle.

Doc Savage had been trained for the very career which he now followed since childhood. Each day he had taken a full 2 hours of **intense exercises**, all scientific in nature to maximize his muscles, senses, and even brain. As a result of these, he had developed in his feet a prehensility and sensitivity almost equal to the felling and flexibility of an ordinary man's hand.

He moved toward the wildcat well with a *ghostly silence*. He circled a little so as to cross between the spot where the flare had been and the well.

Then he halted. His feet had touched a white spot!

He stepped back swiftly for the salty stuff distinctly burned on touch. It was as if the bare skin had been brought in contact with a substance like dry ice. So **cold** that it burned. He eased along the trail listening.

He heard a sound. A whizzing, whining, whispery **sound** like many horny wings rasping together. Anyone once hearing that eerie agglomeration of buzzing noises coming out of the night would be a long time forgetting them.

There was also an **odor** in the air. It had been there all of the time. But it was stronger now. The Bronze Man sniffed, analyzing it as best as his olfactory organs were capable.

He drew from a pocket a pair of tiny glass bottles. He uncorked them, waved them in the air, and then put the corks back in place and the bottles into his pockets. They now held samples of the surrounding air and, automatically, a sample of whatever the **odor** was.

The noises – the *whining* and *whizzings* that were so uncannily horrible in the darkness – were over toward the drilling oil well. Doc made for that spot.

The strange smell got weaker and he made note of another fact. The **odor** had been strongest around the extinguished flare.

Doc reached the raised floor of the derrick. The spidery steel framework reared high into the night sky above his head. The crown block and its pulleys were a black mass.

His flake-gold **eyes** were fixed on the top of the casing which protruded above the derrick floor. A bailer was suspending above the casing tied a little to one side where it was out of the way. A partially assembled string of drilling tools was parked on the opposite side. The mouth of the well (steel casing only a little less than 2 feet in diameter) was plainly visible.

There was something going into the well! Not the slightest doubt! A misty flowing vaporous body.

It is almost impossible to distinguish certain colors by moonlight and **red** is one of them. The moonlight spectrum is low on red wavelengths of light. Hence there is none for **red** objects to reflect to get their color. But this **thing** seemed distinctly gory in tint.

Doc Savage did not advance on the **thing**. He waited.

After a moment, **it** disappeared into the mouth of the oil well casing.

Then Doc whipped forward to the casing. He listened. Something was undoubtedly moving in the depths of the casing!

Emanating from below was a low dying **howl** that faded as if its author were sinking deep into the Earth's bowels.

Doc struck a match, stood a little aside, and dropped it into the casing. Several things then happened so close together that it was difficult to keep track of them.

The casing was pitted! Iron pipe almost half-an-inch thick was just about consumed. It looked like the work of some incredibly strong acid. The thick metal was gone except for a shell. It smoked faintly. And it was as white as porcelain. Doc ducked back from the casing on the chance that there might be gas which the match would set off in an explosion.

It was not entirely certain that the move saved Doc Savage's life. It is very difficult to tell when a bullet snaps past just how close it came. Not many live long enough to get the experience.

The **shot** had been fired from the left. Doc changed his plan. He had intended to look into the casing to see if the match lighted the descending red **monster**. Instead he *glided* toward the source of the bullet. A rifle slug had been meant for him.

The *silence* of the **bronze** giant was spectral. He had a little difficulty in locating his quarry. Ordinarily his highly developed nostrils (a slice of the daily 2 hours of exercise routine was devoted to increasing the sensitivity of his olfactory organs) would have helped spot the rifleman in the darkness.

The man who had fired the shot must have caught the empty cartridge as it ejected from his rifle so that it would not be left around as a clue. He now dropped it in a pocket. It made a faint <click>. That guided Doc.

The man was skinny. His neck felt hard and corded in the **Bronze Man's** clutch. He was not very strong.

A wrench and Doc sent his rifle to the ground. A little noise could not be helped as the fellow threshed about. The man's struggles quickly became weaker.

Then unexpectedly, a flashlight beam bathed Doc Savage and a rifle muzzle appeared in the glow.

"Leggo my pal!" a voice ordered harshly.

XX

Pat remembers more of her Gang-Rape soon ...



VIII – Two Men in a Jam

Guns had been pointed unexpectedly at Doc Savage in the past. The fact that he was alive now had not made him disrespectful of the damaging power of a modern rifle. If anything, he was more careful than ever.

Doc released the man he had seized. He lifted his **bronze** hands. The man he had been reducing to senselessness sank to the found and floundered there.

Then he got his strength back. He arose to his feet and hauled off and hit the **bronze** giant with all of his might.

But Doc Savage gave hardly a sign of being hit. The man who had struck the blow danced around and wrung his hand.

"Ooofff!" he wailed. "The guy's made of cast iron!"

"Get back, you fool!" gritted the man with the rifle. "Lemme get a shot at the bird!"

Doc Savage knew then that they planned to shoot him down. Both were excited and on edge. But not the less dangerous for that.

He was devoting his life to the exciting and dangerous business of righting wrongs and fighting those outside the Law. He had known from childhood that he was going to follow that career. Therefore he had developed countless ways of getting himself out of just such scrapes as this one. He had many of them and it was his hope that never a day would come when all of them would fail.

The *Man of Bronze* casually brought his bare feet close together. It would have taken a close observer to see him use one foot to turn down the cuffs of the trouser on the other leg so that something spilled out.

Then he began to back away, maneuvering so that the man he had seized was between himself and the one with the rifle.

"Stop!" yelled the rifleman. "Stop or I'll shoot!"

"You were going to shoot anyway," Doc said quietly. "Go ahead. What are you waiting for? You can't miss me from that distance."

Now this was exactly the kind of talk that would keep the other from shooting until his curiosity was satisfied. The rifleman advanced swiftly yelling angry orders.

"Stand still or I'll let you have it!" he shouted. "Don't take another ..."

He reached the place where Doc had been standing. He walked over the exact spot thanks to Doc's careful maneuvering.

There was a loud **report** and a blinding *flash!*

The rifleman squawled. He seemed to be blown a yard in the air and came down on all fours. Before he could recover himself or imagine what had happened, Doc was upon him and had the rifle.

The second man then tried to run. But Doc caught him ... knocked him down ... then picked him up and slammed him down beside the rifleman.

"My feet!" screamed the rifleman. "They're blowed off!"

"Not quite," Doc corrected. "Those tiny pellets of explosive are really not larger than wheat grains. But they explode with considerable violence when crushed. However, their force was not enough to mangle your feet.

The man swore. He must have skinned mules in the old days in the oil fields before they got motor trucks and tractors in order to acquire a vocabulary like that.

"Profanity," Doc told him, "never did anyone any good.

"Hell it don't!" snarled the man. "You don't know how much good it does my soul right now!"

He fell to cursing his companion for not getting out of the way so that he could have shot the **Bronze Man**.

Finally Doc Savage asked: "Who are you two working for? And while you are answering questions, who are you?"

The man scowled at the **bronze** giant in the glow of his own flashlight which Doc had appropriated.

"I guess you know or would find out anyway," said the man. "We're Happy and Harry. I'm Harry and he's Happy.

He pointed at his companion. "The hell he is!"

"Who do you work for?"

"For Sam Flash," the man replied without hesitation.

Doc Savage searched them. They had plenty of shells for their rifles and big-bladed jackknives which might or might not have been for digging packed clay out of the crannies in drilling bits and bailers. Neither had money nor identifying papers. Both carried chewing tobacco.

Doc gave them back the tobacco. Each bit off a quid. They were cool enough rascals.

By this time there was a **crashing** of the brush which came closer accompanied by the dancing glow of a flashlight (the white-hot beams of one of Doc's special spring-generator lights) and the raised voices of Monk, Ham, and salty old Amos Kling.

"I'll kill you hombres one at a time and lick yer socks off!" Kling was yelling. *"I hope to wear a rose in my hair if I don't!"*

"If you were twins, I could still lick you both with both arms caught in a bear trap!" Monk told him.

Ham yelled: *"If you were twins – and Monk too – I could lick both of you!"*

"Ouch!" yowled King Neptune. *"Quit handlin' me so rough!"*

"If you didn't want the part of you that's next to a chair kicked," Monk told him, *"you hadn't oughta run off with the light!"*

They caught sight of Doc Savage and his 2 captives.

"Doc!" Monk yelled. "Are you all right?"

Doc was watching his 2 prisoners when they heard Monk yell his nickname. (His legal name was Clark Savage, Jr.) Both captives gave a violent start. They looked at each other vacantly.

"Whew!" gulped one prisoner. "Say! We didn't dream ... Are you **Doc Savage**?"

Doc nodded slightly.

The captives swapped looks again. They seemed on the point of fainting from embarrassment.

"We've sure pulled one!" the first croaked. "Are our faces red!"

"We didn't dream but that you were some crook snoopin' around," said the other. "We figured you was usin' some system or other to decoy that **red demon** of a thing onto this oil field."

After which proclamation, Happy and Harry did their best to look like spanked kids. They succeeded in looking like men who were not quite sure whether they would be alive an hour hence.

Amos Kling said: "They're named Happy and Harry. They work for the cultus hombre, that unhung young dingbat, my no-account partner Sam Flash."

Monk snapped: "We've quit believin' you, Kling!"

"By damn, I may be a coward who ran off with the flashlight!" Kling screamed. "But I ain't a liar!"

The man called Happy then spoke up.

"Listen! Some guys have been tryin' to kill our boss Sam Flash. Some guys and a kind of a red cloudy **thing** out of the sky. Only we think there's maybe hundreds of them **red things** loose, see!"

"What do you mean?" Doc Savage asked sharply.

"We been seein' them *red demons* a-comin' around that wildcat well," gulped Happy. "I tell you, that Hopi Indian in the newsreels called down a swarm of somethin' the World ain't never heard about before. And there's more a-comin' every day!"

An almost absolute silence followed.

The pig Habeas and the what-is-it (as Monk dubbed Ham's pet chimpanzee) Chemistry came up. The latter was traveling as if on something hot. It immediately sat down and held its feet and hands in the air.

"It's got onto one of the piles of salty powder left by a *desert demon*," offered Happy. "They sting if you touch 'em before they settle down."

There was another silence.

Harry offered a wholly different theory.

"That wildcat well is more'n a mile deep now an' it's tapped a den of some kind of *things* that live in the center of the Earth. An' *they're* comin' out and eatin' people and leavin' behind only the people's salt. They're kind of a *cloud* and they just swarm around anything they catch. *They* got somethin' in 'em that digest the victim right there immediately an' ... "

Monk said: "Unless you talk about something more cheerful, I'm gonna taste of your ears."

Again, there was an interval when no one said anything.

"Let's look at that wildcat," suggested Amos Kling finally.

"Ain't you afraid?" Monk countered.

"Hell, yes!" barked the grizzled old oil man. "And so would you be if you had sense enough."

"You certainly have Monk pegged right," Ham said admiringly.

Then Doc Savage interrupted. "Where's Sam Flash?"

"He got scared out," offered Harry.

"And went back to Hollywood," added Happy.

"Why?" Doc asked.

"Some guy came around and tried to kill 'm," said Happy.

"A very bad buy," added Harry.

Monk barked: "But I thought them *red demons* were after Sam Flash!"

"The guy is after 'im, too," Harry explained.

"He wanted to kill Mr. Flash," said Happy. "But me and Harry here scared 'im off."

"We don't know what it's all about," Harry groaned.

"Neither does Mr. Flash," added happy.

Monk snorted. "These guys are a duet! Let's go look at this wildcat."

They went over to the well and made another examination.

Before long, Doc Savage had discovered a reagent which acted upon the talcum-like deposits on the ground to produce a **brownish** color. He spread the reagent with a sprayer. One patch after another appeared.

"Blazes!" Monk exploded finally. "If you ask me, there's been more than a few of them **things** come down to look at the oil well."

It had been cloudy when they landed and it was becoming cloudier and warmer. **Thunder** goggled once-or-twice in the distance. Then there was a great **whoop** of it overhead accompanied by a **lightning** flash which distinctly sizzled.

Rain came down in big drops. Then it was suddenly as if a fire hose had been turned on. The earth became solid with it. The boiling flood arose to their knees where they stood in the boiler shed. **Lightning** cracked and howled. The **roar** of the flood was deafening.

15 minutes later, bright moonlight was all around them. The storm was whooping and grumbling like a big animal up toward Fresno.

"That," Monk said gloomily, "probably fizzles our chances of testing the remains of them **things** that were hauntin' that oil well."

And it had. The reagent refused to bring out any trace of the powdery pipes. An indication that the rain had washed the stuff away.

They threw the flashlight beam down the well. The beam was powerful enough to penetrate hundreds of feet. It showed nothing.

"Let's run the bailer and see what happens," Doc Savage suggested.

They ran the bailer, first firing up the boiler. Doc stood nearby with an eye on the calf wheel as it unreeled bailer line.

"You must've been an oil well driller in your time," Amos Kling suggested.

"Not much of a one," Doc said.

The Bronze Man did not take the time to explain that this was only one of an infinite number of professions of which he had a fairly detailed knowledge. He had developed an amazing memory and seldom forgot a thing once he saw or read of it.

The bailer brought up water and sand. Nothing else. Doc took a sample of the sand.

"I want our geologist Johnny to look it over," he said. "My opinion is that this sand formation encountered at the depth at which he ran that bailer means that you are close to an oil dome."

"That's what we been figurin'," said bearded King Neptune.

Facing Happy and Harry, Doc Savage suddenly asked: "Can you describe the man whom you say was going to kill Sam Flash?"

Happy replied. "He was a wiry chap."

"And he wore dark glasses all the time," added Harry.

"Not to mention a blue seersucker suit and a ten-gallon hat," said Happy.

Old Amos Kling snarled. "If that lad tried to scrag that young slumgullin Sam Flash, he's my pal. And I don't care what else he done."

Doc Savage said: "That describes the individual who threw a hand grenade at us earlier today."

Amos Kling turned white. He looked like a man who wished he could bit his own tongue out.

Doc Savage said quietly: "We will go to Hollywood and talk to Sam Flash and look into some other angles of this thing.:

The others started away ...

"Wait," said Doc. "First, we're going to plug this wildcat well."

"What-in-tarnation for?" King Neptune demanded.

"As a precaution," the **Bronze Man** replied.

He eyed Kling speculatively.

"Have you struck natural gas in your explorations?"

Old Neptune spat noisily. "You know we have. Dang malodorous nuisance. Not work piping out, either. But you ain't satisfied my question.

Doc said: "It is plain that drilling operations are suspended. The wildcat can be reopened when it is safe to do so."

That seemed to settle the point.

They plugged the well with molten lead poured onto a wad of waste and cloth stuffed down into the casing and topped with a layer of asbestos.

While that was being done, Doc Savage detached himself from the others and disappeared into the bushes. He went to certain box-like devices which he had arranged in the vicinity before the first excitement involving something **red** and **cloudy** disappearing down an oil well casing.

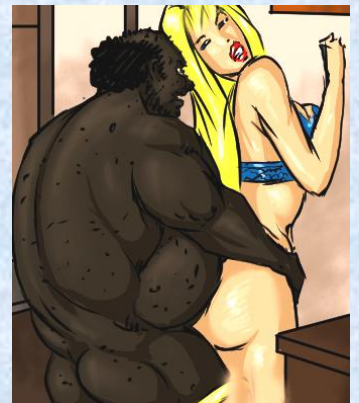
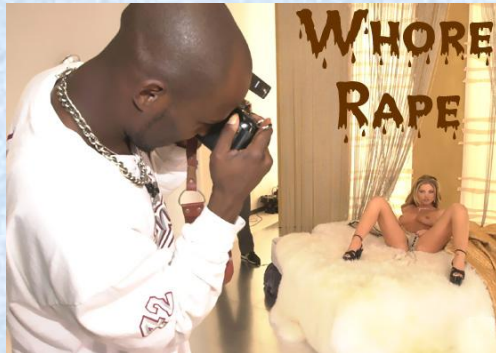
Some of the boxes were compact but powerful projectors of **ultraviolet** (so-called "black light") which was invisible to the naked eye but by which photographs could be taken providing the correct type of plate was used.

The other boxes were motion picture cameras which took pictures by the "**black light**". The cameras used a very small film and contained enough of it to run steadily for well over an hour.

Barring accidents, Doc Savage had a pictorial record of all that had occurred in the vicinity of the Kling-Flash wildcat well during the excitement.

XX

More details of Pat Savage's African-American Humiliation coming up ...



IX – Sudden Sam Flash

It was the morning of the next day. The air was dry and hot. And if the overnight rains dented the California drought any, it was not apparent in the Hollywood hills.

Doc Savage and his men had driven back from Bakersfield. They slipped into town in the hours just before dawn owing to the difficulty in landing their speed plane unchallenged. They had, however, brought along the specialized equipment that they often carried.

Amos Kling had accompanied them saying: "I'm bound and determined to have a showdown with that runaway rannihan Sam Flash! He's plum off his mental reservation."

Happy and Harry completed the collection on the plane.

A newsboy who carried his head canted to one side as if something were permanently askew was standing on the corner of Sunset and Vine yelling the news.

"Police escape Doc Savage!" he was howling. *"Man of Bronze reported fleeing south toward Mexico!"*

"Hah! 'Police escape Doc Savage!' " Monk snorted. "Somebody's got a sense of humor!"

The newsboy continued. *"Fear Bronze Man controls Copper Clouds terrorizing State!"*

"**Copper Clouds!**" grumbled old Amos Kling. "Don't I ever hear anything but **Copper Clouds!** Why don't they quit bellerin' around? Ain't one of them cops would know a real outlaw if they saw one. And if they did see one, they'd run like the old guy with the spike on his tail was them."

Ham said: "Anyone who doubts the efficiency of modern law enforcement is only kidding himself."

Happy interposed gloomily. "I hope no more of them **red smogs** get into that wildcat oil well."

Harry added: "Or out of it, whichever the case may be."

Monk said: "Listen! With the lead plug we poured into that well, there ain't nothin' can get in or out."

Doc Savage pulled over in front of the bank building at Sunset and Vine. He stopped directly in front of a white lunchroom.

A thin wizened little man came out of the lunchroom. He had been standing just inside with his hand in his hands. He put his hat on his head for the short walk across the sidewalk. Then he took it off again and gave a jerky little bow.

"Good mornin', Boss," he said. "I'm ready to go to work anytime you want."

"Get in, Sparks," Monk invited.

The little man got in. Doc drove the car on. When they were out of earshot of the loafers around the lunchroom, the runt spoke.

"Just for that 'Sparks' business, I oughta take one of your optic nerves out for examination," he told Monk. "You know I don't like that name 'Sparks'."

"I hope to be used for a cornerstone somewhere!" gasped Amos Kling. "It's **Long Tom Roberts**, the electrical whiz!"

"Don't go touching me," Long Tom warned. "This makeup on my chops comes off easily."

"You were to pick up general information," Doc said. "Why the disguise? And have you learned anything important?"

"Well, I dunno how important is," Long Tom answered. "But Sam Flash and Amos Kling here are popularly supposed to be broke – or nearly so – and desperate for money so as to continue drilling on their wildcat well until they strike oil."

"Sure we're about broke!" yelled Kling. "I suppose maybe we're the first partners ever to broke, huh? And as for that 'desperate' business, I don't like that word!"

Long Tom finished. "They lose their lease where they're drilling the wildcat unless they finish by a certain time. These oil field leases are usually made out like that."

"What about the missing tool dresser Hondo Stevens?" Doc asked.

"Well, here's a funny one about him," Long Tom said. "He had a rep as private detective. Amateur status, of course."

"Had he caught any crooks of consequence?" Doc asked.

"Heck no," grunted the pale Electrical Wizard. "He was just a nosey cuss who had taken a course from a correspondence school that wasn't so much."

"He was a gol-durn good toolie!" barked Amos Kling.

"Shut up, grandpa," Monk suggested.

"I got a limit! And you can't push me past it!" Kling yelled. "You shove me just so far and I'll cloud up and rain all over you wise hombres from the East!"

Doc Savage asked Long Tom Roberts: "What have you dug up about Sam Flash?"

"Not much. They weren't hiring at Flash Pictures. He's not liked very well in Hollywood. Considered to be something of a carpetbagger."

"He's worse'n that!" shouted Kling. "He's a yellow skunk! He left me out in the desert to be demonized!"

Long Tom cocked a paled eye. "Demonized?"

"Consumed by a dad-blasted *demon!*"

Doc Savage said nothing for some moments. He seemed to be studying Amos Kling with more than ordinary attention. But he did not speak to Kling.

"Any sign of Johnny or Renny?" he asked.

"Renny is around town somewhere digging up dope on recent developments in the California oil fields," Long Tom replied.

" 'Recent developments' ..."

Old Neptune wet his lips and looked slightly bewildered.

"Say! You don't think there's something behind this so BIG that it concerns the whole oil industry in California?"

Doc did not reply.

His wizened made-up face inscrutable, Long Tom began after a moment.

"I think Johnny is over in ..."

"Johnny can take care of himself," Doc interrupted abruptly.

Long Tom fell silent realizing that the *Man of Bronze* did not want to talk about the gaunt geologist who had been assigned the task of looking into Professor Clement's recent activities.

Doc drove the car to a hotel and got out. He took his bags inside, registered, and was assigned a room. He went up alone. The others waited downstairs in the hotel lobby.

Up in his room, the *Bronze Man* ran the films from the "*black-light*" motion picture through a quick-developer chemical bath. It was the positive type of film and was almost immediately ready for running through a small portable projector which he carried.

Doc Savage's small exotic *trilling* sound came into being and traveled up-and-down the musical scale. It was a peculiar note which he made only in moments of mental stress, extreme tension, or exuberant victory. That sound was not heard often. It always marked the advent of some important conclusion or perhaps indicated the forming of an important decision.

Doc himself sometimes did not know that he was making the sound. Now, as always, it was a note so unusual as to all but defy description. One word best designated it – unearthly!

When he went down to the others, he did not offer any explanation of what he had been doing.

As a matter of fact, not even Doc's aides knew about the concealed motion picture cameras which had photographed the turmoil in the darkness about the Kling-Flash wildcat well utilizing "black light".

Ham had a late newspaper. He was excited.

"Look, Doc!"

SAVAGE KIN REPORTED MISSING

The reward offered by Doc Savage for the whereabouts to the missing New York spa owner Doris Duff has taken an unusual turn today. This paper received a call from a person identifying herself as Betty Blaze who claims that Doris Duff is none other than Patricia Savage, cousin to the famous adventurer Clark Savage, Jr. better known as Doc Savage.

Patricia Savage, according to Betty Blaze, is alive and unharmed. However when asked to come forward with proof and claim the reward, the person calling herself Betty Blaze hung up.

Efforts to locate her have proven unsuccessful.

This report is only being credited because investigation has shown that Patricia Savage does in fact own a combination beauty salon and gymnasium in Manhattan. And that she has not been seen in several days. The staff of *Patricia, Incorporated* deny knowing the present whereabouts of their employer.

"What do you make of it, Doc?" Ham wondered.

The **Bronze Man** said nothing. But the strain that had ridden his face in the hours since he had arrived seemed to have lessened. Although this point was debatable.

Doc Savage had schooled himself to be as poker-faced as a red Indian. And it might be that his normal self-control was reasserting itself once more.

Monk slowly said: "What do you know, Doc."

"What?"

"When old Amos Kling read this, he about fainted," Monk said. "He's sure got a weak stomach."

Seeming much subdued, King Neptune snarled. "It's my biliousness!"

Doc said quietly: "We will visit Sam Flash."

Happy and Harry had accompanied them in their own vehicle on the trip from Bakersfield and promptly volunteered to lead them to the headquarters of Flash Pictures. Doc Savage nodded assent.

They followed not a great distance to a shabby section of Western Avenue where Hollywood and Los Angeles meet. They finally pulled in through a pink adobe arch in which the words FLASH PICTURES were chiseled. A pair of Texas longhorns decorated the entrance.

As they stepped from their conveyances, King Neptune gave his trousers a fierce hitch and eyed Doc Savage.

"If you still got that hogleg on you, I'd be obliged for the loan. I don't want to face that grinnin' horse thief emptyhanded."

Doc ignored him.

"Quit lambastin' our boss," Harry said.

"Yes. Don't lambaste him," echoed Happy.

"I'll lambaste both you hombres too if you stick your necks out at me!" Kling snarled.

The headquarters of Flash Pictures wasn't much. A bare lot. One sound stage that looked like it had been a warehouse constructed for that purpose. And a meager backlot that consisted of a section of old-time Western town with a dusty-looking hotel and typical frontier saloon adorned with batwing doors.

"We shoot mainly Westerns here," Happy supplied.

"Mostly exclusively shoot-'em-ups," added Harry.

The duo led them to an adobe box hung with a sign that said *Production Office* but looked to do double duty before the cameras as an old-time Western calaboose. The side windows were barred.

Harry called out: "Boss!"

Silence came back. Happy and Harry became alarmed.

"Boss!" they squawled. "It's us! Happy and Harry!"

There was no mistaking the genuine alarm in the manners of Happy and Harry.

Doc Savage took the lead and entered the office. The others boiled in after him. The office quickly filled up.

The Western motif carried through the interior. Except for a very modern desk occupied by a bank of up-to-date telephones, the office was bare. The desk was amazingly round Indian-red and surrounded by 6 red hassocks. They were like beer kegs only fatter. There was no other furniture.

Designs burned into the bare walls were made by an assortment of branding irons. Kerosene lamps were affixed to wall brackets although an overhead chandelier was operated by electricity. It had been constructed by hanging a wagon wheel on an electrical cord and stringing it with frosted light bulbs.

A hearty voice outside called out.

"Welcome to my wikiup!"

They turned. Jaws began sagging in dull surprise for the figure standing in the doorway was a vision.

Despite a stature that fell short of the Western ideal, he was a tremendous sight. From his gigantic Mexican sombrero to snakeskin boots decorated with silver rowels, he might have stepped off a motion-picture screen. He boasted movie star teeth which he showed in a brilliant smile that seemed to grow more incandescent the longer one stared at it. A black rodeo shirt emblazoned with leather cuffs and white piping set off by tiger-skin chaps completed the amazing outfit.

"You prairie peacock!" Amos Kling exploded, his horny fists balling up.

"What-the-heck is that?" muttered Monk.

"Our boss," answered Happy.

"Sam Flash," Harry said.

If it were possible for Sam Flash to smile more incandescently, he did so now. His teeth were dazzling. He looked pleased as punch to see them all.

Then like a rodeo trick-shot rider, his hands flashed to the butts of a pair of pearl-handled pistols hung in holsters from crossed leather belts. In an instant, Sam Flash had them covered.

"Claw sky, all of yuh!" he barked.

"Well, I'll be thunderstruck!" King Neptune sputtered. "Yes, I will!"

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Ham Brooks demanded angrily.

"Once I spy a clutch of owlhoots, I just naturally reach for muh shootin' irons," Sam Flash ground out. "Now grab a cloud before I ventilate you verminous varmints!"

He sounded serious. So Ham decided to do the sensible thing. Somewhat reluctantly, Monk also levitated his hairy arms.

"This is going to look right colossal in the evening papers," smiled Sam Flash. "I can see it now. 'Sudden Sam Flash gets the drop on entire Doc Savage gang!'"

Which boast was premature to say the least.

While Sam Flash was verbally counting his chickens, Doc Savage did something that would have caused old-time Western gun-wizards from Wild Bill Hickock to Wyatt Earp to whistle in admiration.

The *Man of Bronze* stood in the forefront of the group trapped in the office. Ordinarily he did not carry firearms. But he still had Pat Savage's six-shooter. It reposed in an awkward place for fast-draw purposes. Namely in the pocket of his much-rent coat.

Sam Flash then experienced a moment of pure astonishment. Perhaps he saw the gleaming gun muzzle suddenly staring at him. Or perhaps not.

One cartridge still reposed in the cylinder. With practiced ease, Doc <cocked> and fired. The cartridge exploded and a gush of oniony popped into Sam Flash's frozen-toothed face.

But even then, the Hollywood cowboy might have gotten off a shot or possibly two. But the *bronze* giant was in motion. Hurling the six-shooter ahead of him, Doc lunged forward. His *speed* was uncanny.

The heavy pistol smacked Sam Flash in the forehead knocking him backwards. He fell on the shiny seat of his butternut jeans. His boot heels threw up clouds of dust when they struck dirt.

Doc Savage managed to harvest both pistols beforehand. He was breaking them open when the others crowded around the prostrate Hollywood cowboy.

"On your feet, you two-gun tenderfoot!" Amos Kling bellowed.

"Blanks," pronounced Doc spilling the contents of both Colts onto the dirt.

"Gotta admit, that took nerve what you just did," Kling said begrudgingly. "He mighta drilled you clean through."

Doc shook his head slowly.

"The angle of the sunlight was such that I discerned that no lead bullets reposed in the cylinder."

"Still and all, that was fancy work."

Kling loomed over the fallen man.

"Now get up, Samuel Dollarhide Flash, before I do you a considerable meanness."

Sam Flash lay stunned, his sombrero crumpled under him. His hair, they saw, was as blond as a lariat that had been too long out in the sun. His perfect pearly teeth almost exactly matched his confiscated gun handles.

Monk took hold of him by a turquoise-studded bola tie and lifted. The movie mogul came to his feet with surprise in his sky-blue eyes. The apish chemist's *strength* was as simian as his physique.

"Why'd you run out on me?" King Neptune demanded.

"What're yuh jawin' about?"

"Down in the Mojave. You left me to die!"

Sam Flash lost his smile momentarily. Perplexity crawled over his broad handsome features drawing his eyebrows together like fuzzy caterpillars trying to nuzzle.

"I did not such thing!"

"Don't fabricate!" Kling exploded. "You know I can't abide prevaricators to my face."

"And if I had seen yuh a'comin'," Sam Flash continued, "I'd have shore as shootin' run yuh off on account of yore all the time agitatin' for me to move muh spread on out Florida way."

Old King Neptune rose up on his boot heels towering over the other.

"I got me some prime real estate out that way," he retorted defensively. "Why shouldn't I offer to you? They got all the sunshine you could want out there. Not to mention what yu'll save in taxes each-and-every dang year."

"I can't shoot Westerns in Florida," Sam Flash retorted. "I'll be laughed out of town!"

"Name me 3 good reasons why not!" King Neptune bellowed.

"The alligators. The mosquitoes. And the hurricanes. In that order of importance."

"That's no durn answer!"

"And not a single desert to film in. I can't shoot a cowboy picture with cypress trees and 'gators all around."

"A lot you know," said King Neptune. "Florida was a big cattle state. And still is. They got ranches and cow herds and all the Seminole Indian extras you could want. I don't see why you're bein' so all-fired stubborn ..."

Sam Flash shoved his face toward King Neptune's chest.

"There yuh go again. Hectoring me to buy yore miserable swampland."

"Swamp? That's an insult to the Everglades!"

Fist clenched. Knuckles whitened like bony tusks. They seemed on the point of blows ...

Doc Savage stepped between them.

To Sam Flash, he said: "You will answer some questions that we have.

There was nothing threatening in the **bronze** giant's tone or demeanor. And yet instantly, Doc had Sam Flash's full and undivided attention.

"Howdy," Flash said putting out his hand. "I'm plumb pleased to make yore acquaintance. Even if you are slightly under a cloud, reputationally speaking."

"Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement," Doc Savage sated ignoring the proffered hand. "What is his relationship with you?"

"Consultant. He was on muh payroll. Or to put it another way, he was just another hand on the Flash ranch."

"That's unlikely," said Ham suspiciously.

"It's the honest dang truth," Sam Flash protested. "We shoot indoors-and-outdoors here at Flash Pictures. I can't predict the weather. But a dude like Professor Clement is as good at it as anyone. I can't count up the stack of greenbacks he's saved me by warnin' in advance of rain."

"That is all?" Doc asked, studying the man.

"Ain't that sufficient? Yuh know what it costs to haul a film crew out in the desert for a week of shootin? If it rains two days out of three, I lose money."

"California has been under a drought for months," Ham pointed out.

"It wasn't just rain that bedevils us. Clouds, too. Knowing whether the Sun will smile or frown down at us means I can shift production indoors onto my sound stage. Yuh need a powerful lot of Sun in a Western movie if yuh want to pack 'em in the theaters."

Sam Flash seemed to be a keen observer of people. He stopped speaking and watched the faces of Doc Savage and the others. He was intelligent enough to realize that his words were not well received.

Placing his hand over his heart, he added: "Honest Injun."

"You ain't answered my question yet," King Neptune snarled.

Sam Flash looked blank.

"Let's start with what Happy and Harry were doing prowling around my wildcat wells," Kling pressed.

"Out wells," Sam Flash corrected.

Old Neptune roared: "Just answer me, you smilin' sidewinder!"

"We read about that *red thing* alightin' up there," Sam Flash explained. "So we moseyed over and took a look-see. Was afeared yuh might have met with a calamity."

"You don't know the meaning of the word until you see the ruction I'm liable to cause you," the crusty oil man growled.

"In the dark, I thought I spied somethin' prowlin' around," Sam Flash continued. "But when I splashed it with muh torch, it moseyed off into the great blue yonder. I guess the *things* are afraid of the light."

Monk snorted. "That's funny. Last night one of the *things* ate up one of Doc's flares. And *it* was giving off a brighter light than any flash ever made."

Sam Flash seemed to have no comment on that point. But Happy and Harry helpfully offered an explanation.

"It might only have been a patch of fog rollin' through," said Happy.

"Or maybe it was smog," chimed in Harry.

"Could have been fog at that," Sam Flash allowed.

Ham Brooks prompted. "Go on, fellow."

"So I hightailed it back here," he concluded, "leavin' Happy and Harry to look after our interests.

Flash eyed Kling.

"We're castin' today. Yuh know that."

"What about deserting me in the desert to be gobbled up?"

Again, Sam Flash looked blank. His pearly smile remained fixed.

Doc interposed. "Were you out in the Mojave yesterday morning with Kling here?"

Sam Flash hooked his thumbs into his crossed gun belts.

"Out in the Mojave, shore. But not with Kling. I was scoutin' locations for muh next quickie 'The Wrangled Dude'. But I didn't see hide nor hair of him there."

Old Neptune snorted so hard that his long beard wriggled like the tail of a particularly ragged fox.

"He's manufacturing whoppers again! How I got tied in with that lease louse I will never understand!"

"Yuh horse-trade me," said Sam Flash looking injured.

He got his sombrero out of the dirt, shook it free of dust, and set it atop his head. The effect was marvelous. He looked several feet taller and considerably more formidable than before. Even the enamel of his smile seemed to strengthen.

"Then why am I the one feelin' skinned?" spat Kling. "According to Doc Savage here, I'm about to strike black gold. As for you, you ain't made a picture that made more than a meager profit in 2 golang years. In oil field ling, they've all been 'dusters'."

Doc question: "Did Professor Clement tell you anything about the *red clouds*?"

Sam Flash scowled. "No. I haven't seen him since the first one appeared. But I got movies of one."

"Film?" asked Doc.

"Yup. My newsreel crew captured one of the boogers on film."

He swept off his sombrero and clasped it to his breast respectfully ... then quickly replaced it.

"May they rest in peace.

"I would like to view that film," Doc said.

"Foller me then, gents."

They went to a building that was not much more than a tin-sided shack. Shelves ran in rows and there was a darkroom at one end. Here, film was developed and stored. Racks of 35 millimeter film canisters sat on rough-hewn board shelves.

Sam Flash went to one shelf in particular. He started hunting. His handsome face gave a quiver. Soon he was flinging cans about wildly.

"Gone!" he gulped.

Doc stepped in. He executed a search. It produced nothing tangible.

Looking flustered, Sam Flash sputtered: "That film was here last night. We were going to release it this week. I was keepin' it a solemn secret. We had the only footage of one of the *demons*."

Doc demanded: "Who has charge of this place?"

"Happy and Harry are muh right arms."

Then Flash amended: Left and right arms."

All eyes turned to Happy and Harry.

"It was still here when we locked up," said Harry.

"Last night," added Happy.

The 2 "Men Friday" shifted their feet and looked properly crestfallen.

"That footage was shore to put Flash Pictures on the map," said Sam Flash, suddenly grim. "I was holdin' it back after first whettin' the public appetite with last week's newsreel. Folks were a-pantin' to see more."

"We're sunk!" growled Amos Kling.

"What do yuh mean by 'we', yuh tall-talkin' Texican?"

"That's it!" hollered Kling, his neck turning crimson. "I've about had with you! It's a demonstrable fact that I hail from the Lone Star State. And I'm a true Westerner. Not some backlot buckaroo that got his duds out of a mail-order catalog and his vocabulary from a cowboy-story magazine. I own half of everything you did. And right now I owe you a bust in the mouth. Here it comes ..."

Old Neptune proved as good as his word.

He let fly with a leather-knuckled punch that knocked Sam Flash clear into a corner. Shelving collapsed. Heavy film cans spilled down all but burying the fandangled wrangler.

"I owed him that," growled King Neptune blowing on his skinned knuckles proudly, "for what he done to me."

XX

Shortly, Pat Savage recalls more of her Gang-Impregnation ...



X – Dash East

When Sam Flash revived a few moments late, he sat up, shook his cornsilk-haired head, and asked:

"What hit me?"

"I hope to be tarred & feathered in Paralite," muttered King Neptune Kling, if it weren't my maw's only son Amos."

"Where's Paralite? In Texas?"

"Hell!" Kling spat. "Paralite ain't a 'where'. It's a kind of special paper they spiral wrap on oil pipe during the papering process of pipeline construction. Some 'oil man' I got for a partner!"

Sam Flash clambered to his feet and looked around for his sombrero. It was a wreck owing to the fact that he had fallen atop it again.

"I ain't no oil man," he insisted. "Except maybe by association. I'm a Californy cowboy."

"You ain't that neither," Old Neptune growled. "A grinnin' galoot is more like it."

Then Happy and Harry came running up shouting excitedly.

"What's all the whoop and holler about?" King Neptune demanded gruffly.

Sam Flash's bright beam of a smile lit up his pleasant features.

"Did you boys find that missin' film can?"

"No, Boss," said Happy.

"But we found your missin' hat," explained Harry.

Sam Flash accepted a high-crowned ten-gallon hat.

"Been lookin' for this for nigh onto a week now. Thanks, boys. Now go fetch up that film can."

"We looked everywhere," Harry said disconsolately.

"And it's not anywhere," added Happy gloomily.

"Boys, we're as good as scalped," said Sam Flash. "That footage would have made our fortune."

Amos Kling said in a loud commanding voice: "I have formed a horrible suspicion."

"What?" Happy and Harry said together.

"It is based on ..." started Kling.

"We don't give a hang on what it's based on!" snapped Sudden Sam Flash. "What'd yuh find out?"

"I ain't found out nothin', I told you!" Kling barked out. "I just got suspicions. They ain't much. But you could say that a body could hang that fool hat of yours on 'em."

"What's your hat got to do with anything?" Flash exclaimed.

Ham Brooks answered that.

"That hat strongly resembles the one worn by the assassin who tried to murder us with a hand grenade yesterday. I would even venture to say that they are identical."

Sam Flash struggled with his smile.

"This here hat's your trademark. But it ain't unique by a long shot. There must be hundreds of 'em in the state of California."

Then Doc Savage put forth a question.

"Who is trying to kill you, Flash?"

Sam Flash shook his head dazedly.

"The only one who's done violence to me lately is hidin' behind a growth of whiskers the like of which don't exit no more outside of the history books."

Old Neptune Kling said, somewhat overbearingly: "He's crazy, of course. I'm going to call the police and have him confined."

Monk Mayfair, who didn't like Kling's aggressive manner, said: "Maybe I'd sorta hold off on that if I was you."

"I hope to be hung from the neck from one of my own derrick walking beams if I ain't speaking the honest truth," King Neptune sputtered.

Doc Savage drew his men together out of earshot of Amos Kling, Sam Flash, and the worried duo of Happy and Harry.

"One of them is lying," he announced.

"Maybe they're both lyin'," Monk inserted.

"Maybe they're all lying including Happy and Harry," added Ham.

Doc said: "We do not have time to sort things out. Our present difficulties with the Law will hamper us if we stay together."

The **Bronze Man** turned to Monk and Ham.

"You two stick around for the time being. Watch Flash and Kling. Keep your eyes open. If they split up, each of you follow one man."

"Guess I belong here too," said Long Tom Roberts, "since I've established myself as a gaffer."

Doc shook his head in the negative.

He asked: "How far along are you with your new device for killing insects injurious to crops?"

"My insect eliminator?"

Long Tom rubbed his jaw and some of the wrinkles that he had carefully applied to his chin came off.

"I'd say I'm making progress. It works at short range. But it's not so hot beyond a few hundred yards."

"Where is it?"

"Back in my laboratory in New York."

Doc nodded. "We will need to collect Johnny and Renny."

Without taking time to make excuses to either Sam Flash or Amos Kling, the **bronze** giant and Long Tom reclaimed their car and took off.

Doc Savage drove south into Los Angeles.

Over the course of an adventurous career, he often devised plans designed to meet with unexpected contingencies. One of these allowed for the fact that he and his aides often found themselves in different cities and under duress (if not operating outside of the local law). This was one such time.

For that eventuality, Doc and his men had memorized the names of prominent hotels where they might rendezvous when they had no other way of communicating with one another. The Bernadina Hotel was one such rendezvous.

Doc parked 3 blocks from the establishment and turned to Long Tom.

"You are not likely to be recognized. See if Renny or Johnny have taken a room under any of their aliases."

Part of this plan required that precaution as well.

The Electrical Wizard walked the 3 blocks to the Bernadina Hotel and inquired of the desk clerk.

"Got a John Penny or a Bill Harper staying here? They're pals of mine."

The desk clerk looked at his registration ledger.

"John Penny checked in earlier today. Shall I ring him?"

"Yeah. Tell him Tom Long if in the lobby. And to shake a leg."

Big-**fisted** Renny Renwick bounded out of the elevator not 2 minutes later. His long face grew even longer at sight of the pale electrical wizard. Conversely, that meant that he was actually infinitely pleased.

They made a show of shaking hands and back slapping. Then Long Tom told Renny:

"Doc's waitin' in the car. Any word from Johnny?"

"Yeah," rumbled Renny. "He's know at this hotel. So he couldn't come here. But I know where we can dig him up."

"Let's go!"

They picked up Johnny at a lesser hostelry, the Martel. The elongated archeologist-geologist was excited and plainly desired to impart some information he had obtained. But the *Man of Bronze* signaled that any reporting must wait.

Doc pilot the machine toward the airport asking: "Which of our planes is still at the field?"

"Holy cow!" said Renny. "Long Tom and I sailed in flying your big tri-motor."

Doc nodded. "We will reclaim it."

"The cops," warned Long Tom, "are going to be laying for us and loaded for bear."

But if they were, no sign of lurking lawmen could be seen as they rolled into the airport not a half-hour later.

Doc's personal monoplane had been towed to a hangar and put under lock&key. But the big **bronze** tri-motor that had carried Renny and Long Tom to California stood in an adjoining hangar. Wearing a tan topcoat and dark felt hat that he had procured somewhere, Doc led them to the hangar.

There were 2 grimy-faced grease monkeys working on a cradled motor in one dim corner. They hardly looked up from their efforts as the big tri-motor was boarded.

XX
Unbeknownst to Doc Savage and his men, some of that dirt and grease had been recently rubbed off on a slim brunette woman who was abducted by these 2 mechanics.



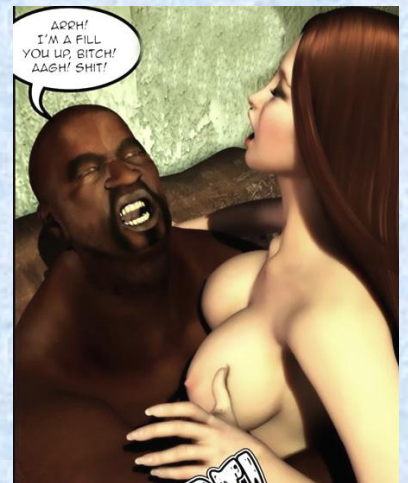
"Don't hurt me!" she pleaded.

"We ain't gonna hurt you, **Bitch**. We just want a little **pussy** ... Yours!"





"Git them goddamn clothes off, Woman!"



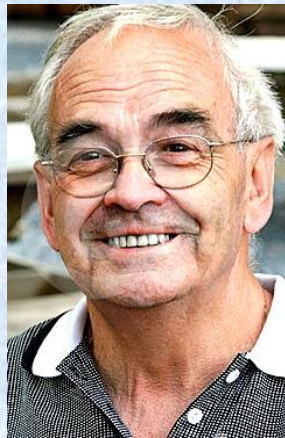
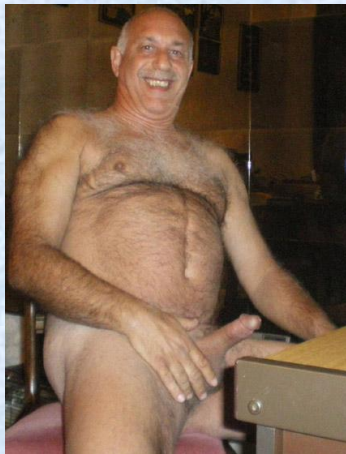
Once naked, she was promptly *slobbered* on and *felt up* all over her body.



"Now lie down and spread those long legs, **Whore!** Show us what you're good for."

"Please don't!" she begged. "Please! Not that!"

"Spread 'em! Now! Spread 'em WIDE, too!"



Her slender body trembled lying there with her legs obscenely spread out. She watched them take their thick **hard** organs and aim them for her tight vagina.





"No-o-o-o-o!!!" she groaned. "It's too BIG!!!"



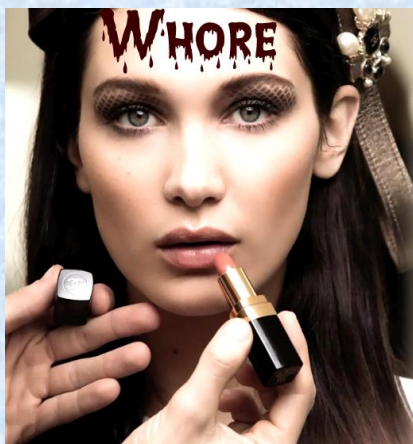
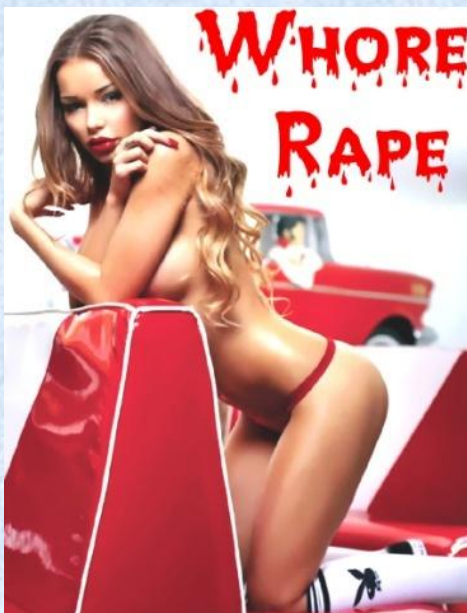
But her protests were music to their ears. They just grinned and slammed their enlarged **cocks** harder into her tender pussy.





She felt every drop of *impregnating* semen shoot deep inside her.

"Now get on your knees, **Whore!**" one commanded.



They found **lipstick** in her purse and began applying it to her luscious lips. She was confused as to their actions until ...



Every last squirt of foul-smelling **semen** was shot down her throat and splashed on to her pretty face. They had nothing left.



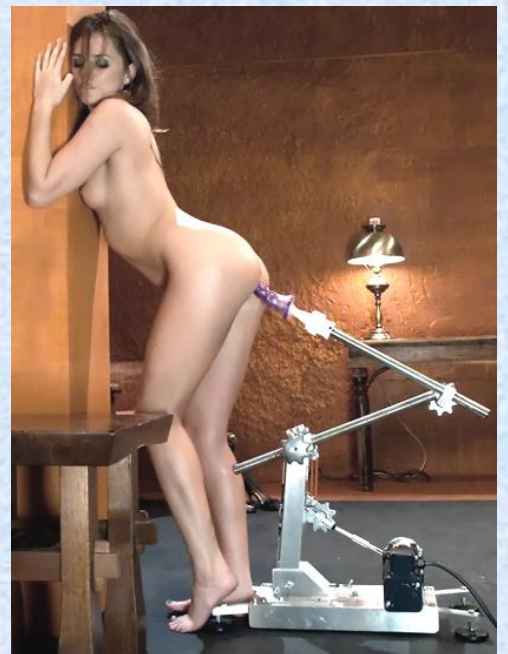
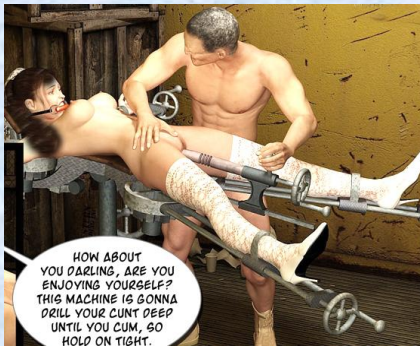
But that doesn't mean that they were totally finished with the torment of the beautiful feisty woman.

Being mechanics, they were quite adept with machinery. They had even built some devices for their own insidious purposes.

She watched in stunned horror as the **mechanical raping machines** were brought up close to her spread-eagled legs.



Then they were turned 'ON' !



Unlike the human men, the machines had unlimited endurance. She *groaned* and *moaned* and *whimpered* as they plunged and rammed away.



In a Parallel Universe ...



Finally they turned everything 'off'. They were bored and she was sore.



[She was also quite Pregnant!]

Doc started up the steps and entered ...

... then he backed up slowly with his *metallic* hands hoisted above his head.

"Keep them high," a hard voice said.

Renny and the others froze. Doc spoke. The sound was an unintelligible gobble.

Had they not suddenly held their collective breaths at sight of the riot guns menacing their big **bronze** chief, they would have done so at once. For the boggle was a clipped command in the ancient *Mayan*. It was a language rarely heard in the modern world.

Doc Savage continued backing down the steps. His face was inscrutable.

The men (three caught their number) came out of the tri-motor, their weapons menacing.

"We thought you might come back here," one gloated.

"You were spotted around town," a second one said.

"Yeah. So we ..."

The third speaker let out a gusty *sigh* and corkscrewed in place. The others soon followed his example making an untidy pile. One began snoring.

The grease monkeys in the corner had also fainted dead away.

Doc bent to examine the trio.

"Los Angeles detectives," he decided producing their gold identification badges.

The fact that he spoke freely also signified that it was all right to resume breathing. The others immediately did so.

Pulling the trio safely aside as if they were no more burdensome than sacks of corn, Doc Savage boarded the trim-motor and got busy in the control bucket.

No one remarked upon the sudden fainting spell of the representatives of the Law. Renny and the others had seen Doc pull that stunt too many times.

About his person, Doc carried in secret pockets tiny glass balls containing a chemical that vaporized when exposed to air. A potent anesthetic, it caused almost instantaneous unconsciousness in anyone unwary enough to inhale its odorless fumes. Merely by flexing his might muscles, the Bronze Man caused the thin-walled glob es to break releasing the potent stuff.

In *Mayan* , he had warned them all to hold their breaths. They had learned the exotic tongue years before during their first great adventure together in a lost valley deep in an unexplored region of Central America. [read #001 - "The Man of Bronze"] Few in the so-called civilized World spoke Mayan. So it was handy when they wished to communicate without outsiders understanding them.

Doc prudently formulated the chemical brew to become harmless after less than a minute. And that minute was now up.

The props began ticking over. The sleek **bronze** bird rumbled into life. Exhaust bayonets coughed spilling smoke and blue sparks.

The hangar doors had been obligingly left open. So it was a simple matter to send the lumbering craft out onto the field under the surging pull of the bawling propellers.

It was midday. A busy time. But Doc taxied the aircraft out onto a takeoff runway ... fed the motor cans gas ... and sent the aircraft shooting down the tarmac. The tail lifted as if pleased to be leaving the ground.

The tri-motor plane was off the runway before the men in the operations building could get organized. By then, there was nothing they could about it.

Once Doc climbed the plane to a comfortable altitude, he turned East and opened up the motors.

Renny demanded: "Holy cow! Where are we heading?"

"New York," said Doc.

Johnny <blinked>. "A regrettable retrograde."

Doc Savage did not comment.

Instead he said: "It is time for your reports. Renny, what have you learned?"

"I canvassed every newspaper and oil industry magazine like you said," the hulking engineer related. "If you read the papers, it looks like the people who got eaten by the *red things* had no connections to one another. But that's not so."

"No?" asked Doc.

"Not of them tie in together. But most do."

Renny began ticking off names on his huge fingers.

"Start with the three who died in the Mojave Desert at the beginning of this mess. They all worked for Flash Pictures."

"We've met Sam Flash," Long Tom said sourly.

"You say that like he was a buzzard," Renny rumbled.

"You got the wrong bird," Long Tom snapped. "He's more like a peacock."

The big-**fisted** engineer looked blank.

Doc Savage said: "Continue, Renny."

"Take Myer Sims, the investment banker who vanished. He loans money to Hollywood concerns and underwrites their movies. Recently he turned down a loan to Flash Pictures."

"Go on," urged Doc.

"Glide Toms, the pilot, did stunt flying all around Hollywood. You never see his name in the credits. But that's where most of his money came from."

Long Tom was wiping the last of the made-up wrinkles off his pale features.

"The others were mostly Hollywood types?" he mused.

"Right," said Renny. "Almost everybody who's been devoured by one of those *howling red demons* is connected to the movie industry."

"What-the-heck does that mean?" Long Tom muttered.

"It's got me flummoxed," said Renny. "But there it is."

"Except one," said Johnny Littlejohn addressing Doc Savage. "Clarence Threlkeld Clement. He doesn't appear to hook up with Hollywood."

"He does," said Doc, his golden *eyes* searching the sky before him.

"He's a consultant for Flash Pictures," Long Tom grumbled. "And that makes Flash look more-and-more like the chief polecat."

"How do you figure that? Old Neptune Kling is half of Flash Pictures," thumped Renny. "And here's something else. Remember that oil man who disappeared? Olaf Ames? They called him 'Oiler' Ames. He owns the lease in the Kling-Flash drilling field."

"Which practically proves my point!" Long Tom exclaimed.

"Since when?" Renny shot back. "Old Neptune Kling isn't exactly without skunk odor. He had a mighty sound reason for wanting Oiler Ames dead. His lease was about to expire!"

Doc Savage cut them off.

"Johnny, what have you learned about Professor Clement?"

"He's a weird duck," mused the bony geologist. "Nursed some strange theories about the weather out here. Was obsessed on the subject of smog. But that's not the worst of it."

"No?" inserted Renny.

"Clement somehow got the notion that the Earth is under attack by *things* from Space."

"Space?" Long Tom and Renny said together.

Johnny nodded sagely. "Ultra-indubitably. He was cracked on the subject of the upper atmosphere and talked to his colleagues about the possibility of life up there. And beyond."

"What sort of life?" asked Doc.

Johnny paused, searching his memory.

"He was vague about that. But he also fancies himself something of an amateur astronomer. Mars in particular fascinated him."

Long Tom mused. "They call Mars the 'Red Planet'. Could those red *things* ..."

"But there's more," interrupted Johnny. "Remember that astronomer who was consumed by a **Copper Cloud**? Dr. Zimmer? It develops that he was friendly with Professor Clement. Before he died, Zimmer had hinted that he had discovered something really unusual through his telescope. He referred to as the Neon Nebula."

"That's an astronomical term, isn't it?" Lon Tom ventured.

"A nebula," Johnny uttered, "is by definition a gaseous cosmological congeries."

Long Tom <blinked>. "A which?"

"He means a space cloud, I think," Renny supplied.

"Actually," Johnny corrected, "nebular clouds are believed to be formed from interstellar gas or dust."

Renny made blocks of his gargantuan **fists** and said: "Doc, what do you make of that?"

Doc Savage was silent for several seconds ...

Then a sound came into being in the soundproofed plane cabin. It might have been a product of their headlong speed as they rapidly put California behind them. But it traced out a melody that was like no natural sound.

It was the **Bronze Man's** signature *trilling*. It wandered the scale like a spider climbing a musical web.

Abruptly Doc realized that he was emitting it. The sound simply ceased.

After that, he pushed the throttles to their open-pins and concentrated on his flying.

Doc Savage did not break any speed records in crossing the continental United States. But he came close.

After midnight he dropped the big plane down on the waters of the Hudson River and gunned the craft toward a ramshackle warehouse that jutted out on the Manhattan side of the riverbank.

The tri-motor plane lunged up a huge concrete apron that sloped down into the water. A set of doors swung open mechanically actuated by a radio signal from the plane.

The old brick structure looked deserted. The sign facing the river was worn and faded:

HILDALGO TRADING COMPANY

This was a fictitious business. It was actually a combination boathouse and hangar which house the **Bronze Man's** fleet of planes and boats. They normally filled the interior. But with many of Doc's crafts back in California, the space that the tri-motor taxied into looked unusually empty.

It could be seen that a small experimental submarine lay in a cradle of its own. At the furthest end, nothing less than a scaled-down dirigible floated under the cavernous ceiling rafters.

Machinery devised to raise and lower a floor platform could be discerned. Evidently the roof was constructed so that the airship could depart via that route unlike the normal procedure of a revolving hangar which could be turned into the wind.

The general public did not know about the existence of the place. Nor did the public more than suspect that Doc Savage was an individual of fabulous wealth. And those who suspected did not dream of the fantastic nature of his wealth or its source.

Only Doc Savage and his 5 men knew of the Lost Valley in the mountain fastnesses of Central America where a clan of the ancient Mayan civilization dwelled, completely unknown to the World, living in a small Elysium of their own. Their only labor (as such) was the mining of a fabulous vein of **gold** which had been given Doc Savage in return for a great favor that he had once performed.

Perhaps a few persons had heard strange words over powerful radio transmitters on the Noon hour of certain 7th days. But they had no way of knowing of the Valley or of the radio receiving set therein or the burro train laden with **gold** which would come mysteriously out of the jungles in answer to that call.

This money (rarely did the train bring out less than 2 million dollars worth) did Doc Savage expend in various ways on projects that he considered worthy. Always was the money spent so that it would not tend to make any one individual tremendously rich. And always it was expended so that attention did not come to Doc himself.

Shutting down the engines, he began rapping out orders. If the protracted flight had tired him any, it did not show in his brisk manner.

"Renny and Johnny, assemble as much ammunition as you can for our supermachine pistols. Particularly **tear gas** shells. **Tear gas** grenades, also. Bring every one."

"We got enough stuff here to do that," Renny assented.

Johnny added in agreement: "Apex simplex."

"Long Tom, while I am preparing for our return flight, race to your laboratory and collect your insect eliminator."

"Sure, Doc. But ..."

The **Bronze Man** cut him off sharply saying: "We have no time to waste. The danger to California is very great."

Long Tom, Renny, and Johnny lost no time in hopping off the plane and going about their tasks.

For his part, Doc Savage went to a far corner of the great building and opened a hatch in a concrete blockhouse. Climbing into a padded bullet-shaped car, he closed the hatches and a series of calamitous noises filled that portion of the building.

A pneumatic car began whisking him to his headquarters on the 86th floor of a prominent New York skyscraper. It dropped down at a slight angle ... then straightened, corkscrewing as it shot along an underground tube. It traveled some considerable distance.

Doc clung to pair of straps not unlike those found on ordinary subway cars while his big body was jolted against interior padding. There were no seats. Only straps and padding. It made for quite a strenuous ride which the **bronze** giant bore stolidly.

Abruptly the bullet car lurched into a vertical position. It began climbing a shaft deep in the masonry of the skyscraper. When it came to a halt, it was hanging vertically on a level to the great experiment **Laboratory** in Doc's headquarters. He flung the hatches open.

Doc emerged in the white-walled laboratory and instantly got to work mixing chemicals in big beakers. He took the precaution of putting on a rubberized cover-all garment with an attached helmet for this work. The helmet resembled a fishbowl. It was not composed of glass but rather a far stronger substance that possessed similar transparent qualities.

Doc Savage toiled over long hours often pausing while chemicals cooked. During these pauses, he undertook his daily 2-hour routine of **exercises** which were mainly responsible for his incredible strength and mental sharpness. He went through an extremely rigorous muscular ritual. A series which in itself would have prostrated an ordinary man.

Ordinarily there were other, more scientific parts of the routine. Apparatus constructed by the **Man of Bronze** which made sounds above-and-below the audible range of a normal ear. Another device stimulated the vision by subjecting the eyes to treatment with certain colors. And there were other contrivances.

But these had been seized by the Los Angeles when they confiscated the **Bronze Man's** baggage from his special monoplane. Therefore he had to dispense with their use for the time being. He did not remove his protective garment at all during this period.

When he was finished with his work, he turned on great exhaust fans that quickly cleared the room of any injurious fumes.

Then carefully carrying the products of his labors in padded cases, Doc stowed them in the pneumatic car. After closing the hatches, he repeated the wild ride back to the combination boathouse/aircraft-hangar on the Hudson.

Less than an hour later, the roof of the hangar split open and a streamlined silver dirigible hoisted *silently* into the midnight air. Its departure was so *soundless* that the denizens of New York and New Jersey, whether sleeping or awake, passed the night without suspecting its proximity.

The dirigible pointed its nose westward. Propelled by banks of marvelously-silent Diesel motors, it began beating of the sunset.

XX

Very soon will memories of her recent raping haunt Pat Savage ...



XI – Agitation

Sam Flash proved to be the proverbial one-man band. In addition to being the owner of Flash Pictures, he functioned as chief casting agent and at times its top star.

Today he was operating in his capacity as casting agent. Flash was dressed more conservatively in a red checked shirt and moleskin trousers augmented by batwing chaps. A gold bandana neckerchief set off the outfit to good effect.

By 10:00, the backlot of Flash Pictures studios looked like an Indian pow-wow. There were stone-faced Sioux resplendent in their war bonnets; Navajo braves in colorful blankets; and Shoshones wearing cotton garments. A sprinkling of squaws from assorted Indian nations rounded out the colorful assemblage of beads and buckskin and eagle feathers.

Among them was one who stood a little apart. His beaded native regalia appeared particularly authentic looking.

"Who's is that?" wondered Ham Brooks idly.

Sam Flash glanced over at the man.

"Why, that's none other'n Chief Crazy Thunder. Only he ain't really a chief. More of a medicine man, I reckon."

The dapper lawyer looked blank.

"I guess you boys ain't had much time to watch the newsreels," the cowboy producer said expansively. "That's the young buck who called down the first **demon**. We've been keeping him close by on account of the newspaper boys won't quit pesterin' him."

"So he's the **rain dancer**!" Monk exclaimed.

"Perhaps we should question him ourselves," drawled Ham.

"Good idea for once," Monk squeaked.

The pair accosted Crazy Thunder.

"You, fellow!" Ham called out. "We wish to have a word with you."

"Yeah," chimed in Monk. "Let's hear about that **cloud** you summoned up."

Crazy Thunder looked a bit taken back by the combination of Ham's lawyerly tone and Monk's fierce mien. But he quickly got over it.

"I was out in the desert doing a rain dance," he recited, "when the **red demon** came down and attacked the newsreel camera crew."

"You actually saw **it** devour them?" Ham questioned.

"Not exactly. But after **it** went away, they had turned white. And so had the flatbed truck. Later on, everyone was gone."

"That fits in with that Professor ..." Monk started to say.

Ham nudged the apish chemist with a sharp elbow.

"Why were you yourself not attacked?" he demanded.

"I was. Something like **black hail** started falling. One bit of it stung me. Look."

The young Hopi showed them the back of his hand. A whitish pockmark pitted the sunburned flesh.

"That looks kinda like **frostbite** to me," Monk muttered.

"I never experienced **frostbite**," Crazy Thunder admitted. "But it felt **cold** and **hot** at the same time. A little like dry ice."

Ham asked many questions while Monk rubbed his wide jaw thoughtfully. His eyes twinkled in the tiny pits under his beetling brows.

Finally, the aristocratic barrister said: "Give us a demonstration, will you."

"That's ag'in his contract," Sam Flash called over.

He had been surveying the assemblage of red men and women. But all the time he had been keeping a watchful eye on the 3-way confabulation.

"It will be purely for demonstration purposes," assured Ham.

"Yeah," added Monk. "We just want to see what happens."

"What if a rip-snortin' **red demon** comes a-screamin' down?" Sam Flash asked in all earnestness.

Ham scoffed. "You are not serious in that suggestion, are you?"

Sam Flash thought it over a moment.

"Naw, I guess not. Reckon yuh can dance up some rain if'n yuh want. But don't take all dang day. I need yuh to help me pick out some likely-lookin' braves for muh movie."

Stepping back a few paces, Crazy Thunder began his routine. He shook his copper **limbs**. Then he whooped. He issued forth a kind of barking **yip** repeated many times over.

Then swinging his bull roarer overhead, the Hop commenced stamping in circles. The **moan** of the roar devil biting the air was low and threatening like thunder commencing.

Monk looked skyward. The sky was clear. Not a solitary cloud decorated it.

"If he calls down rain," the hairy chemist informed Ham, "I will feed your Chemistry bananas for a month."

Just to be contrary (and not because he believed otherwise), the lawyerly Ham sniffed: "And if he does summon a *red demon*, I will treat your Habeas Corpus to apples for a year."

"Deal," agreed Monk.

The duo resumed watching the rain dance spectacle. Others drew near, too. The bull roarer continued its **moaning** dirge.

Nearby, Happy and Harry were shouldering a long steel cylinder of some type off a truck. They carried it in novel fashion with Harry taking the nozzle in hand and setting the front part on his right shoulder while Happy got his left shoulder under the back end. Together they lifted the tank and began movin git toward a storage shed.

His seamed oil-leathered face grim, King Neptune Kling watched the operation with cautious interest.

When Crazy Thunder let out his wild Hopi *howl* that was so much like a blend of wolf and coyote, Harry registered a start. The cylinder slipped off his shoulders. It struck asphalt with a resounding *clang!*

"Watch that thing!" Sam Flash called out.

"What?" Happy and Harry said together.

"This place is getting too rackety for my nerves," growled Old Neptune. "Anyone wants me, I'll be in the office."

He stalked off.

The valve appeared to have come loose in the accident. A sudden violent *hissing* resulted. Harry and Happy scrambled to get the cylinder off the ground and fought with the valve. It took a long time to suppress the hissing.

By the time they were done, Crazy Thunder was winding up his circular kiyoodling. Applause came from the direction of the Indian conclave.

Searching the sea of stoic faces, Monk noticed an appealing form at the edge of the crowd.

It was a maiden in doeskin and glass beads. She had a nice shape and a comely face. Her skin showed only a hint of the dusky *copper* tint that characterized the native red man. Incongruous touch, war paint daubed her features in colorful patches. Her hair fell to her shoulders in 2 black braids.

"I saw her first," said Crazy Thunder with a grin, collecting his bull roarer in both fists.

"Who is she?" Monk wanted to know.

"That's Betty Blaze. Or so she calls herself."

"Betty Blaze!" Ham blurted clutching his sword-cane.

"Yup. Says she's an Apache. Must be her stage name."

"Ye-o-w-w!" howled Monk. "Get her! She knew what happened to Pat!"

Monk and Ham took off after Betty Blaze.

Apache or not, Betty Blaze showed that she possessed both reflexes and cunning. Seeing the 2 men charging her, she ducked into the crowd.

Upwards of 300 local Indians and persons of other nationalities who might pass as one for the camera had responded to the casting call. It was easy to disappear into that resplendent throng.

The regrettable quantity of buckskin-clad persons also made it difficult for Monk and Ham. Several times they grabbed what they thought was their quarry ... only to discover themselves holding a plump squaw. Or in one case, a grandmother sporting iron-gray braids.

"What's all the commotion about?" Sam Flash demanded over the din.

He never did find out.

It was sunny morning. The Sun was climbing majestically toward its zenith. Solar radiation spilled down in torrid golden streams. The conditions that had created the scorching drought had returned.

At first, all thought a stray cloud had passed before the Sun. The lot was suddenly thrown into gloomy shadow.

Then there was the sound. A kind of *hum*. Thin in the beginning, it became a **buzzing** that swelled.

The sound in its early manifestations was not much different than a chirring of cicadas on a hot summer's day. But as the shadow grew, the quality of the sound changed. It grew *shriller* and more *metallic*. Then it lifted into a frenzied *complaint* like a dying thing from another sphere.

Monk was the first to spot it.

"**Red Cloud!**" he squawled.

Ham saw it next. "**Demon!**"

"Not again!" Crazy Thunder bleated, diving for cover under a Conestoga wagon that sat nearby horseless and unhitched.

The crowd broke in all directions. Only Monk and Ham stood their ground. All thought of capturing Betty Blaze had fled their minds. They knew what the **Copper Clouds** portended.

Quick-thinking Ham Brooks reacted first. Unlimbering his supermachine pistol, he set the weapon for continuous fire and pulled back on the firing lever.

The Cloud was directly overhead boiling, angry, darkening from a bright **blood-red** to a sinister **scarlet** as it loomed closer.

Ham fired upward. **Tear gas** spurted forming a grayish haze which rose to meet the descending monster.

Monk quickly followed Ham's example. His weapon began *hooting*. Smoking brass cartridges dribbled onto the ground with a noisy clinking.

By this time, both men had their gas masks on and were pouring out **tear gas** in prodigious quantities.

The screaming of the **demon** (if the horrendous noises it was emitting could be called that) grew angry, furious.

"It's still coming down!" Monk yelled.

From a pocket, Ham pulled out a **tear gas** canister. He <armed> it and tossed it upward.

It fell far short of its target. But once it had clattered onto the ground, the spurting can added to the toxic **fumes** that rapidly billowed out over the immediate area.

Pandemonium had seized the studio lot. Painted Indians of all stripes took flight. Many surged for the adobe arch that marked the entrance to Flash Pictures. They began jamming up in the too-narrow space and started fighting and tearing at one another in a frantic effort to escape the looming reddish **monstrosity** from above.

Mixed into the chaos and confusion was old Amos Kling. His long beard whipping wildly, he dodged about seeking escape.

The threatening **red thing** was starting to turn **black** now. Its similarity to a Texas tornado grew unnerving. And it sounded like one, too.

Monk and Ham yanked out empty drums from their busy little weapons and clapped in spares. They resumed hosing tear gas in all upward directions like firemen trying to douse a raging conflagration.

A remarkable thing happened next.

Smoldering like a red-hot **coal**, the cyclonic cloud began to spread outward. Distress seemed to tinge its mad howling. It sank into a weird *whine*.

"It's retreating!" Sam Flash yelled out.

"Hurrah! Powder River!" Monk yelled harkening back to his Tulsa boyhood days. "It's a mile wide and 4 inches deep!"

But *it* wasn't exactly retreating. Whining like a frightened pup, the **red-black** thing was shifting away from the **cloud** of gas that hung motionless like a grayish pall.

"It's safer here!" Ham called over to Sam Flash.

Not being a complete fool, Flash rushed in. He had wetted his bandana neckerchief in a handy horse trough before clamping it over his mouth and nose. But it did little good. He started hacking and leaking tears from both sky-blue eyes.

"Where's that bearded muskrat?" Sam Flash coughed out.

"Dunno," answered Monk clipping yet another drum into his pistol and emptying it with a prolonged trigger pull. The intricate pistol could pour out 700 shells-a-minute. At that rate of fire, it took only seconds to empty one drum.

"Kling!" Flash burst out. "Where are yuh?"

There was no reply. And no time to look for old King Neptune.

For the angry twister of a thing was fulminating over in the direction of the backlot Western town. The air was clearer there and free of **tear gas**.

The **Cloud** descended, turbulent and black as Erebus, on the false fronts and boardwalk. Like a malevolent fog, it swallowed them whole **howling** and **growling** in an unnerving manner.

Almost as soon as it alighted on the ground, the black **Horror** began thinning and dissipating like a nightmare fading from an awakened sleeper's memory.

The Western town was still there. But an uncanny change had been wrought.

Everything had turned white. Wood. Tarpaper roofs. Even the common dirt of the ground. All were white as bone. So white they almost sparkled.

A misty exhalation also arose as if water were evaporating off every ivory surface. Only windowpane glass seemed unaffected by the stark transformation.

Happy and Harry whimpered almost in chorus.

"This is hell!" gulped Harry.

"It's Hades!" Happy echoed. "Run!"

"Yes, let's!" agreed Harry.

They suited action to words and hastily betook themselves away.

The **howling** that had been so nerve-wracking died out to a shuddersome *sizzle* that might have signified a cessation of vitality.

Then it was over. An eerie silence occupied the aftermath of it all.

Monk Mayfair walked over to a spectral Western storefront. Snapping another drum into his supermachine pistol, he began taking pot shots. The weapon had been set to fire single bullets.

The first slugs merely punched small black holes in one saloon storefront. But as they accumulated, a strange thing developed.

The storefronts began collapsing like cardboard that had been rained on.

Ham joined in, experimentally. He took aim at the hitching post. Normally the tiny lead pellets would only have penetrated the thick wooden post doing no significant damage. But with only one shot, the thick post snapped in two and fell to the ground. Upon impact, it shattered like a dry breadstick.

Ham then transferred his aim to a structure labeled LONGHORN SALOON.

Glass broke and the false fronts came falling down. The batwing doors shivered to shards like so much fragile crystalware.

After a while, the steam effect dissipated and there was nothing left except scabs of white plaster and loose planks bleached of all color. They were an unnerving sight.

Uncharacteristically silent, Monk and Ham went looking for Crazy Thunder. They found him cowering under the Conestoga wagon. Reaching down without having to stop much, Monk hauled him out and set the Hopi youth on his feet.

Crazy Thunder announced solemnly: "I am hereby retired from rain dancing now-and-forever."

Monk took the bull roarer from Thunder's copper **fist** and seemed about to set it in motion.

"Don't swing that infernal contraption again!" Ham snapped.

Monk examined the thing.

"I ain't ... yet. Just want to see what it's made of."

The homely chemist eyed the young Hopi.

"You say that you whirled this jigger and a **red cloud** came the first time?"

"And the second time," Crazy Thunder gulped.

Sam Flash came out of his office. His wide face was wet and his eyes red. He had been trying to wash the **tear gas** from his optics. While he was still suffering, he could speak without hacking too much.

"My town!" he cried. "It's a-ruined!"

"It's just false fronts anyway," Monk growled. "You can rebuild easy."

"That ain't what I mean. I know all that! But I thought I saw poor Old Neptune jump for cover in that direction."

"Are you certain?" Ham asked.

"Not with my eyes stingin' so. But that was where I saw him last. And he was shore runnin' hell-for-leather that away!"

They picked through the remnants of the Western town but found no trace of Amos Kling.

"He's plump defunct," Sam Flash said weakly. "That howlin' **calamity** surely devoured him whiskers, wishbone, warts and all."

Ham mused: "I am not so sure."

Crazy Thunder croaked out: "Human bodies turn to something like alkali dust or salt after the **red demons** are done with them. I saw that much in the desert. There should be ... something ... left of him."

A search of the ruin of the false town did not take long inasmuch as there were no interior spaces to explore. Only wreckage resembling great shards and splinters of white crystal.

Ham removed his gas mask as Monk did the same. The air was **bitter** but breathable. The wind was carrying what was left of the acrid **fumes** in the other direction.

Monk accosted Sam Flash. "Who is Betty Blaze to you?"

"Been workin' for me near to a week."

"Doin' what?"

"Jack ... I mean Jane of all trades. Secretarial girl. Script girl. And like chores. Told her if she did a good job, I'd find a part for her in muh new flicker."

"She sure was a looker," Chief Thunder said admiringly.

"Well, she hightailed it out of here with the rest of the Injuns," Sam Flash said. "No tellin' what it'll take to fetch them back. Red Injuns are pretty superstitious folk. Might be they won't ever come back."

Ham gave his sword-cane an anxious wringing.

"Where would we find Old Neptune if he's still alive?"

Sam Flash said: "If he were going to ground, you'd best try Santa Barbara first."

"That where he hangs his hat/" Monk asked.

"Nope. That's where he docks his yacht."

"Yacht?"

"Yup. That's one of the reasons he got the name 'King Neptune'. He lives on a yacht. It's one of the things he salvaged from the crash that cost him his shirt. It's cheaper to live on the old scow since he rented out his hacienda. Try the marina there."

Ham eyes Sam Flash speculatively.

"If old Neptune is dead, what happens to his half of Flash Pictures?"

"Why, it reverts to me naturally. It's in our contract."

"I see," Ham said slowly. "So you have good reason to see him dead."

"Hold your horses! It's the same way around with me and muh half. Anything befalls me and Kling controls Flash Pictures and the Neptune oil field."

"Either way," Monk growled, "we need to keep an eye on you. C'mon."

"Where to?"

"We're goin' to look up Old Neptune's hooker in Santa Barbara."

Sam Flash hitched up his magnificent trousers.

"Fine by me. Any minute now, a police posse oughta be ridin' up. And it'll be a fine how-de-do havin' to explain that muh Hopi rain-dancer called down another angry *red demon* out of the sky."

Ham looked around.

"Where are Happy and Harry?"

It turned out that the pair had also fled the lot.

"Not that I rightly blame them," Sam Flash admitted after the fact was unimpeachable. "They're 2 good hands. But I don't pay 'em 40-a-week and found to rope and wrangle *demons*."

"Let's go!" Monk said hearing sirens caterwauling in the distance.

"We'll take muh mount," Sam Flash offered. "No one will bother us none a-ridin' Ol' Paint."

XX

Coming up ...



FILTHY GANG-RAPED WHORE



XII – The Lost One Returns

Sam Flash was evidently something of a folksy humorist.

'Old Paint' conjured up images of a rattletrap flivver from a bygone day.

But when he brought his "steed" around, it proved to be a long black touring car with a generous set of Texas longhorns mounted on the grill and cowhide seat coverings. Spokes of the tires and trunk-mounted spare were fashioned to suggest stagecoach wheels. The top was down.

"Hop in," Flash grinned throwing open a door.

The powerful machine pulled out into the street and roared off.

"I named him after muh first hoss," Sam Flash supplied.

He seemed to have recovered his perennial good humor if the sparkling grin on his face was any indication.

The big open car whipped through traffic hooting its horn at nervous intervals. It rode well enough except for a slight shudder now-and-then as it crossed irregularities in the pavement.

Ham Brooks turned on the dash radio and fiddled until he got an announcer speaking. The latter was filling in the details of the **Copper Cloud** that had descended upon the studios of Flash Pictures.

"By some miracle, folks, there was no life of life."

Monk snorted. "We don't know that for a fact yet."

The announcer continued.

*"Remarkably, the infamous Hopi rain-dancer called Crazy Thunder was at the scene of this attack as well. This is fueling speculation that the **Copper Clouds** are in some way connective with the native redmen who occupied California before the advent of white Americans."*

"I ain't never heard that!" Sam Flash exploded. "What's he mean?"

"Listeners will recall that in the days of the Indian wars, one of the greatest of the Sioux warriors was a red chief called Red Cloud. He fought the only successful war against the United States. Red Cloud is said to have cursed the White Man upon his dying bed."

"That ain't even true!" Sam Flash sputtered. "I read up on Red Cloud once. He never cursed no one white or any other color. Besides, **he** died back in '09. Near to 30 years ago. If these red things are **demons** that he called down, why'd they take so long getting' here?"

Ham considered. "From the first attack in the Mojave until just now, there has been an Indian connection of sorts."

Monk Mayfair muttered: "What about the Hollywood angle? That's strong according to Doc."

"What Hollywood connection?" asked Sam Flash braking for a red traffic light.

"A lot of the victims were affiliated with the movie industry," Ham supplied.

Sam Flash looked dubious but still managed to keep his ivory smile lit.

"That old-field tool dresser Hondo Stevens wasn't tied up with Hollywood. That I do know," he said carefully.

"What do you know about him?" Ham asked.

Sam Flash lost his smile for a moment. He took off his ten-gallon hat and inspected it. He noticed a dent in the crown and carefully punched it out.

"Nothing. Just heard his name is all."

"Talk is that he had done a bit of detective-ing in his time," Monk pointed out.

Sam Flash replaced his hat at a jaunty angle.

"That so? Well, I don't know anything about that. He was one of Old Neptune's boys. He ..."

This time Sam Flash's pearly smile collapsed completely.

"What's wrong?" asked Ham.

"Poor old Neptune. What if he's truly been salivated?"

"If he is dead, you now own his wildcat wells," Ham said. "And one of them might well turn out to be a gusher."

"If it does," Sam Flash pronounced firmly, "I will use some of the proceeds to build a monument in granite to muh esteemed former pard, may Señor Dios fix him up with a fresh mount and silver Mexican saddle in the Great Beyond."

"He talked like you detest one another," Ham said pointedly.

Sam Flash frowned. "That was all show. We were businessmen. Didn't always get along. But we had a pledge. When one struck gold, the other would also."

The light turned green. 'Old Pain' lunged forward, its horns straining straight ahead.

Music had been coming over the dashboard radio. Appropriately enough, it was a particularly mournful rendition of "Blood on the Saddle" by a singing cowboy who practically sobbed out the words.

Then the announcer suddenly broke in.

*"Folks! This just in! Another **Copper Cloud** has been sighted. This time off the coast of Santa Barbara. Citizens are advised to avoid the area at all costs. More of this as it becomes known."*

"But that's where we're headed!" Sam Flash exclaimed. "What do we do?"

"Blazes!" Monk burst out. "You don't suppose the **red things** are hunting old Neptune, do you?"

Ham snapped: Don't be ridiculous, you rusty ape!"

Sam Flash made a sudden decision.

"I'm turnin' around!"

"Not a chance," growled Monk.

"Look, I wouldn't knowingly walk into a redskin ambush. And I shore ain't rushin' into an angry **red cloud** neither!"

Monk grabbed the emergency brake and wrenched the car to a halt.

He bellowed: "Give me the dag-gone wheel!"

Then the announcer broke in again.

*"The **red cloud** sighted off Santa Barbara has been reported settling on the water less than a mile offshore. The coast may be clear. But citizens are still advised to avoid the area."*

Practically a crowd had gathered at the Santa Barbara marina docks when Monk pulled up. They piled out.

Sam Flash was a ludicrous figure in his ten-gallon hat and batwing chaps. He places a pair of dark glasses over his eyes.

"I don't want muh public to recognize me," he explained.

Dockside, the harbor master was trying to settle down a gathering crowd. He was a having a tough time of it.

"It's all right!" he shouted. "The danger is over! Go home, folks!"

But the gathered rubberneckers simply crowded the docks more closely. One nearly fell in.

Dapper Ham Brooks stepped up to harbor master and asked: "What happened?"

"One of them **red demons** alighted out on the water. But it's gone now."

"Anyone hurt or missing?" Monk demanded.

"There was a boat out there. But there's no sign of it since the cloud fizzled out."

"Whose boat?"

"*Neptune's Folly*," the harbor master supplied.

Sam Flash yelled: "That's old Neptune's hooker!"

"Was anyone on board?" asked Ham.

"No one knows," replied the harbor master. "If there was, there'd be nothing left by now if past reports are worth believing."

Sam Flash bustled up and said: "The owner of that yacht was muh good friend and saddle pard. We'd be might obliged for the loan of a motorboat to go out and investigate."

"I'll take you out," the harbor master said promptly.

He led them out to a speed launch used for patrolling the area. They cast off.

The harbor master ran her out into open water, its quad motor grumbling. But all they discovered was a spreading patch of whitish scum that was fast dissolving like salt.

"Nothing left," muttered Sam Flash doffing his hat in mute respect.

"Proves nothing," scoffed Ham.

"Yeah," squeaked Monk. "But this makes twice that old muskrat up-and-vanished around one of them howling *red wowsers*."

"Stop calling them that!" Ham barked. "This is serious."

"I'll call them *things* whatever I want to," Monk returned. "We still don't know what *they* are. So any name is as good as any other!"

"Was there a crew?" Sam Flash asked the harbor master as the latter put about and headed back for land.

The man shook his head. "No. Amos Kling lived on his yacht alone."

They returned to shore in silence.

"Without a body," Sam Flash said then they were once more back on dry land, "I'm in a pretty pickle."

"What do you mean?" Ham Brooks asked.

"I mean legal-like. Without a corpse and a proper burial, how do I lay claim to muh half of the Kling-Flash spread?"

"In the absence of a corpse," Ham recited from memory, "California law allows a grace period of a year before someone may be declared dead. Or so I recall."

"This is gonna be tough on me. Waitin' that long."

"We don't know for a fact that King Neptune is dead," Monk pointed out.

"If that old reprobate survived 2 Copper Clouds," Sam Flash insisted, "it would be a right powerful miracle."

They received a surprise when they returned to the black touring car.

A snappy yellow roadster went cruising past. But that was not unusual. Despite the radio warning (or perhaps because of it), the curious were congregating around the dock area.

Behind the wheel of the approaching yellow roadster sat a young woman. She was eying them intently.

Always susceptible to feminine beauty, Monk Mayfair noticed her first.

"Hey! Ain't that ..."

Ham followed the hairy chemist's pointing finger.

"Betty Blaze!" he howled.

They broke into a run. But Betty Blaze was not slow. She stepped on the accelerator and the roadster shot away.

Monk and Ham reversed course. Sam Flash followed. They lost a little time while the dapper attorney and the simian chemist fought for possession of the wheel. The latter lost.

Ham sent the outlandish conveyance whirling into traffic. The ensuing chase was wild even by California standards. It had its comical aspects, too.

Sam Flash's horned machine resembled an angry bull trying to run down a fleeing chicken. But the "chicken" proved the speedier machine. Nimbly, it scooted in-and-out of traffic ... whipped through intersections narrowly missing cross traffic ... all the while Betty Blaze kept <pressing> her horn. It tootled musically adding to the accidental merriment of the chase.

"Faster, you overdressed shyster!" Monk yelled.

"Stop shouting in my ear, you missing link!" Ham shot back. "I'm gaining!"

Which proved to be a mirage of the dapper lawyer's pride if nothing else.

The long black machine did not take the corners as well as the smaller vehicle. Once, it skinned a fire plug and Sam Flash gave out a low groan as paint came peeling off the prow. Then one of the front-mounted longhorns was knocked askew.

"Poor O' Paint," he blubbered. "Don't make me have to shoot yuh for lame. I couldn't stand it."

"Settle down!" Ham snapped. "I need to concentrate."

They got a break. Or rather, a succession of them.

The first came when the fleeing yellow roadster charging through one of the city's broad intersections with its horn warbling sideswiped a bus. It skewed and jumped a curb. While Betty Blaze managed to get it turned around and onto the road, she lost some of her advantage.

"There she is!" Monk yelled. "Step on it!"

"I can't step any harder!" Ham insisted.

"Get alongside her!" Sam Flash urged waving his hat wildly.

"Can't you see that I'm trying to?" Ham complained.

"Well, then do it! Here, I'll show you a little trick."

Ham overhauled the flashy roadster. It was possible only because the other car was wobbling. Evidently in hurling the curb, one of its axles had gotten bent.

Sam Flash leaned out of the back and yelled out: "Hey, little moharrie! Pull over nice-like and I'll make you the star of much next picture!"

Betty Blaze gave him the merest glance. Her face was still smeared with war paint. But it was quite attractive despite all of that. She wore dark glasses, too.

"Didn't work," muttered Sam Flash. "It usually does, too. Must be losin' muh touch."

"Shall I run her off the road?" Ham asked of no one in particular.

"Don't be a dope!" Monk burst out. "If she gets injured, she won't be able to tell us what became of Pat."

"Who's Pat?" Sam Flash asked.

He received no reply. His smile was a pitiful thing.

Then showing more gumption than he had heretofore, Sam Flash pulled one of his pearl-handled six-shooters from his belt and pointed it at the driver.

"Pull over, you squaw!" he hollered.

But the threat had quite the opposite effect. Betty Blaze flung her wheel to the left causing fenders to clash briefly. Sam Flash lost his pistol. It clattered to the floorboards.

"That bluff didn't work," Ham sniffed.

"Weren't no bluff," returned Sam Flash reaching for the other six-shooter.

Taking his tongue between his teeth, he took careful aim at the rear tire. He fired once.

The Colt produced a respectable **roar** and a great quantity of powder smoke which slipstream quickly carried off. From Monk and Ham's point of view, the result was remarkable.

With a pronounced **bang!**, the tire let go and the yellow roadster began shimmying uncontrollably.

Grinning, Sam Flash burst out: "Hah! See? Nuthin' to it!"

"Where you learn to shoot like that?" Monk demanded, taken aback.

"I been a stunt man all of muh grown days. Rodeo trick shootin' is muh stock in trade. I can plink the stinger off a vinegaroon whipscorpion from horseback like nobody's business!"

The Hollywood mogul seemed immensely pleased with himself.

The rear tire was soon down to its rims. The yellow machine slowed to a ragged crawl.

Ham cut in front boxing the roadster in. He braked.

Monk and Ham jumped out of the touring car and got hold of Betty Blaze as she attempted to emerge from her wrecked auto.

Ham was carrying his ever-present sword-cane. It was gripped in one hand as he made a grab for Betty Blaze.

She had the presence of mind to seize it from the startled barrister's clutch ... unsheathe the blade ... and plant it on the tip of Ham's astonished nose.

"Don't move unless you want a taste of your own medicine!" she warned. "I know you coat this overgrown paper-spindle with a chemical that will put someone to sleep in a flat minute."

If Ham Brooks was astonished by the slick maneuver, Monk Mayfair stood dumbfounded with his cavernous jaw sagging. Because he recognized the threatening voice.

"**Pat!**" he howled.

"Pat?" sputtered Ham.

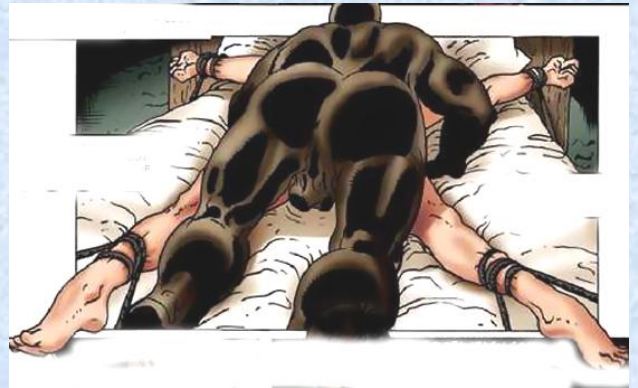
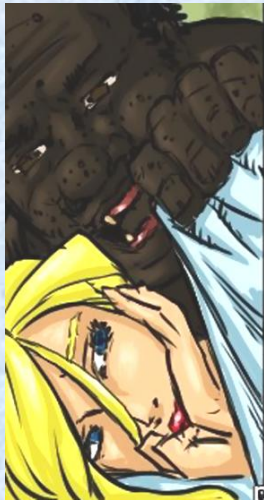
"Who's Pat?" Sam Flash repeated.

The erstwhile 'Betty Blaze' abruptly removed her braided black wig to reveal a wealth of coppery **bronze** hair. She smiled, brightening the grim lines of her painted features.

"Well, it ain't Pocahontas!" Pat Savage said cheerfully.

XX

Next ...



XIII – Rampage in Red

A newspaper reporter had once in jest nicknamed Patricia Savage "Calamity Pat".

He went on to remark that the **bronze**-haired girl who could shoot her grandfather's six-shooter with unnerving accuracy was a modern cross between calamity Jane and Annie Oakley.

Clad in doeskin, beaded moccasins, and with her natural **bronze** hair cascading down, she never more resembled that humorous cognomen than she did at the moment.

Over the years, Pat had been paid many compliments. Gorgeous, striking, entrancing, exquisite. And she had earned them all.



Standing there with her face darkened and smeared with grease paint, she was no less all of these things. And more. There was a hint of the tomboy in her ready grin. And her golden **eyes** (similar to those of her famous cousin but lacking the *hypnotic* whirling effect that was so arresting) were full of mischief.

Monk squeaked happily: "Pat! Where-the-heck have you been?"

"We were worried sick about you," Ham Brooks added.

" 'Betty Blaze' heap big tracker," Pat said in a mock-serious tone. "Hunt **Copper Clouds** that kill. Lead Big **Bronze** Chief to angry spirit which send **red demons**. Hog all the credit for a change."

Ham frowned. "What you are trying to say is that this one time, you thought you'd beat us all to the punch."

"White Eagle speak with straight tongue," Pat said, evidently referring to the white-haired lawyer's aquiline features.

"Start at the beginning," Ham suggested.

Monk added: "Yeah. Not that we ain't glad to see you, Pat. But you got a powerful lot of explainin' to do."

"We'll all have a pile of explainin' to do to the police," Sam Flash said pointedly, "if we don't pull our freight pronto!"

Police sirens were already keening in the distance.

They hastily piled into 'Old Paint' with Sam Flash taking the wheel. He refused to let anyone else run it after what had happened.

The Hollywood puncher gave the horn a smart tootle as they got going. The big car clattered and rattled during its progress. And a grabbing clutch loosened their teeth each time they had to get under way after stopping for a traffic light.

Mon Mayfair, Ham Brooks, and Pat Savage were ensconced in the rear.

Ham suggested: "Talk turkey, Pat."

She was rubbing the grease paint off her pretty features bringing out their natural **bronze** hue which, while exotic, was not quite the correct color for an Apache maiden.



"It all started," she began, "when I first read about the **red demons**. I knew this was exactly Doc's kind of meat. ... Say! Where is the Big **Bronze** showboat anyway?"

"Doc went back to New York," Monk supplied.

"Back? Why? Everything is happening out here."

"Doc's got a plan."

Perplexity troubled Pat's brows.

"What kind of a plan?"

"You know Doc," Ham inserted. "He's informed us only so far."

"Humph! Just like him, the big glory grabber. If I know my cousin, he's already got everything just about figured out and is only waiting to pounce on ..."

She stopped, at a momentary loss for a word.

"Pounce on what?" Ham demanded.

"... on whatever deserves pouncing," Pat decided, finishing her facial cleansing.

"We have no idea what's behind all this," the dapper lawyer said glumly.

"I can tell you this much, Pat said. "Everything I've learned points right back to Hollywood."

"We already figured out that much," snorted Monk.

"You did?" Pat sounded disappointed.

"Tell us somethin' we don't already know. Beginnin' with 'Doris Duff'."

"That's a name I took so that no one would know I was on the trail," Pat advised. "I went to Palm Springs because it was the closest spot to where the first *red demons* appeared. Pretending that I was related to a famous Hollywood actor, I snooped around. Learned a few things about the people who disappeared.

Ham asked: "What things?"

"What I told you. Most or all of them are connected to the movie industry. Palm Springs is popular with the Hollywood crowd. Everyone was talking about it."

"What did they think?" Monk asked amiably.

"*Red Clouds* coming down out of the sky gobbling up folks," Pat said. "What could they think? It sounds crazy."

"Then what happened?" Ham urged.

"I saddled a horse and rode out into the desert. I thought I'd have a look at the spot where the first *red demon* lighted."

The police sirens were growing faint as they put Santa Barbara behind them. For lack of a better idea, they were returning to Hollywood.

"But I never got there," Pat said morosely.

"What happened?" Ham prompted.

"Let her tell it, shyster," Monk complained.

"I am telling it!" Pat shot back. "Settle down. I'm getting there."

Monk and Ham subsided. The car was makin good time. Its headlong speed pushed them back into the cowhide cushions. From time-to-time they had to grab at the filigreed silver door handles in order to keep seated.

"I found an old mining camp in the desert," said Pat.

"I know that place!" Sam Flash said suddenly. "It's that old ghost town out in the Mojave. We film there sometimes. Matter of fact, I'm plannin' to shoot a piece of muh new picture in that dusty old dump."

Pat said: "There were 3 men there acting mysterious."

"Mysterious ... What do you mean by that?" Ham wondered.

"They were moving compressed air tanks or something into one of the shacks. I watched them."

"Describe these men," Ham directed.

"Two of them I did see clearly. But the third – the one who was directing things – was tall and wore a big Western hat and dark glasses."

Monk and Ham glanced toward the front seat. Noticing their gazes, Sam Flash looked back at them in the rear-vision mirror.

"Kinda like that hat?" Monk suggested meaningly.

"Could be," Pat allowed. "But this man wasn't tricked out like a circus cowpoke."

"I resent that unkind remark, ponder," Sam Flash snapped.

"Pipe down!" Monk shot back.

"And he boasted a long **beard**," added Pat.

"What color beard?" Ham asked sharply.

"His beard," returned Pat, "was as white as snow."

"Not brown and gray like an old muskrat pelt?" asked Monk.

"No. White. And it looked fake if you wish to know the truth."

"She could be describing the late Amos Kling," Sam Flash suggested.

"We don't know he's deceased," Ham asserted pointedly.

"And we got no proof he's alive and kicking, either," Flash returned reasonably.

"Tell us more," prompted Ham.

He rolled up his window to cut down on the rushing air which kept disturbing his expensive haircut. But with the car's top still down, this did not help much.

"This," Pat said, "is where it gets really interesting."

As it developed, Pat Savage was a little bit of an oracle. Things did begin to get interesting. But not in the way she meant.

They were barreling south along a highway when a police phaeton coming in the opposite direction abruptly swerved into their path cutting them off.

Sam Flash applied the brakes ... swerved ... and lost another horn from his grille. He groaned.

The doors of the phaeton popped open and suddenly there were 2 uniformed policemen with revolvers drawn pounding toward them.

"Put 'em up and step on out!" one barked.

Another car (not a police machine) pulled up behind them blocking their retreat. The men who emerged from that had the look of detectives. One showed a badge. But given the size of his gun, they barely noticed it.

There was not much that could be done about the situation other than to surrender.

"I guess," Sam Flash, "the jig is up for you cultus hombres."

"What are you boys wanted for?" Pat wondered amiably.

"Resisting arrest and suspicion," Ham answered.

"Suspicion of what?"

"We think it's murder. But we're not sure," Monk said morosely.

They came out carefully with hands erect. They were subjected to an expert frisking. All except Pat who was stood off away from the others. Monk and Ham allowed the police to do their jobs.

Sam Flash stuck out his chest and announced in an impressive voice: "Boys, I'm a powerful important man in this town. Best you treat me kindly."

"You're traveling with 3 fugitives," he was told.

"But I'm not a fugitive," Pat Savage said cheerfully. "As far as I know, I am not wanted for anything."

"Who are you?" a detective demanded.

"Patricia Savage."

"Any kin to Doc Savage?"

"His cousin," Pat said brightly.

"In that case, you can consider yourself under arrest also."

Pat's beautiful face fell. "On what charge?"

"Impersonating a woman named Doris Duff."

"But there is no Doris Duff!" Pat flared. "I made her up!"

"In that case, the charge will be plain impersonating."

"Don't worry, Pat," Ham said in a self-important lawyer voice. "I will have that absurd charge dismissed."

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When they reached the police station, the charge was changed to running out on her dude ranch bill. Ham was crestfallen.

They were immediately placed into a spacious hold cell. All except Sam Flash who had been quickly released after summoning his lawyer.

"I will do what I can to help you folks," he called over on his way out.

"There goes," Monk said, "a 24-karat phony if I ever met one."

"He could also be the man whom Pat saw out in the desert," Ham suggested.

"What do you mean?" Pat asked unhappily.

"Earlier, someone in a ten-gallon hat and dark glasses threw a hand grenade at us."

"Did he have a long white beard?" Pat asked.

"No. He was clean-shaven. But if you are correct that your man's beard was a fake, then it might have been Sam Flash. Let me describe the 2 men to you."

And so Ham did. From apparel to personalities, he left nothing out.

Pat considered. "That might have been them. Who are they?"

"Happy and Harry," Monk muttered disconsolately. "A pair of pussyfootin' polecats ... maybe."

"I would like to hear the rest of your account," Ham declared.

Pat sighed. "Might as well. We're stuck here until we figure out a way to spring ourselves. Back at the ghost mining town, I waited until the trio had driven away and I investigated the compressed air cylinder. I slipped into the building and looked them over."

"Any writin' on 'em?" Monk asked.

"None. So I opened the gasket on one. It started to *hiss*. I thought it was oxygen because there was no odor or taste or color. So I shut it off and walked out into the light and got back on my horse."

Pat hesitated.

"Then ... it came."

Pat's gloomy moody suddenly darkened. She wetted her luscious lips.

"I heard *it* first. *It* buzzed. Then down *it* came. I didn't have time to think about it. I was too far away from the town by that time. So I took for the hills. I had spotted a mine entrance high up there before. I made for it."

Concern came over the interested faces of Monk and Ham.

"A howling horror was chasing me," continued Pat. "I never heard a more dreadful sound. *It* seemed angry, hungry, threatening. *It* whirled and spun and stormed after me. I had my six-shooter of course. So I flung some lead behind. But *it* just ... kept ... coming ..."

Her golden *eyes* squeezed shut.

"Steady, Pat," Monk encouraged.

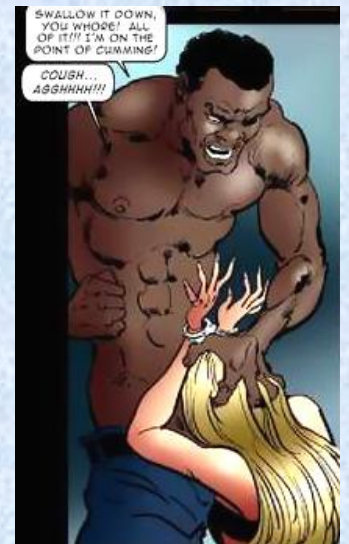
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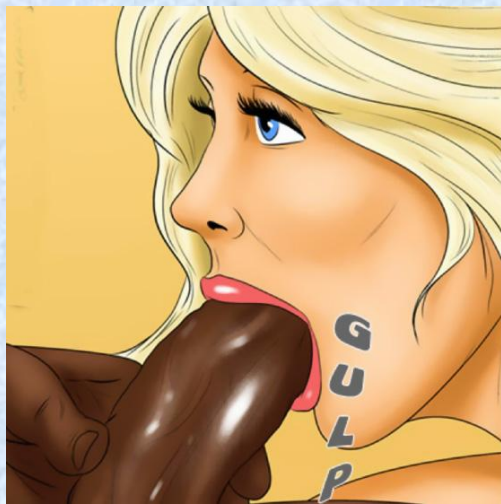
Her mind went blank as she started recalling her earlier humiliating *gang-bang* as 'Doris Duff' at the hands of the African-American male ...

"Now git down on your knees, you filthy **Whore!**" one commanded. "Time for you to put those pouty **lips** to work!"



Doris(Pat) knew what they were inferring. And it totally disgusted her!



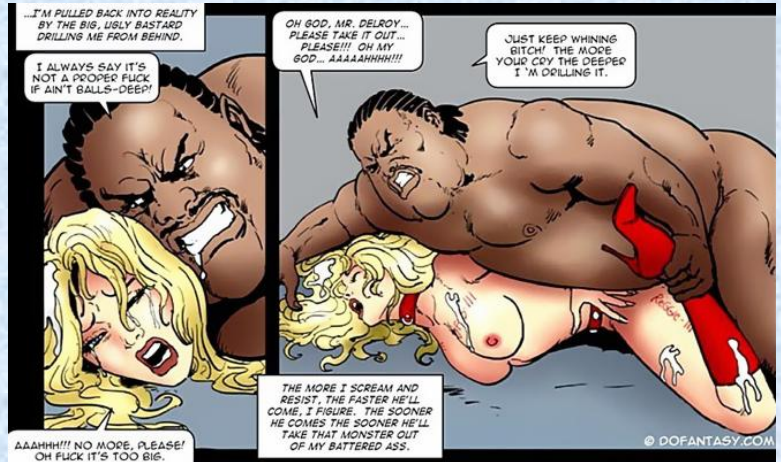


She had no choice but to gulp down their salty *semen* and wait for their next act ...

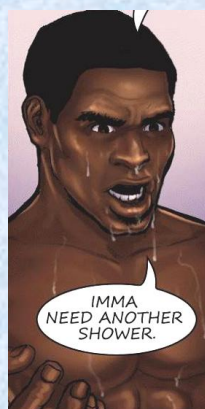


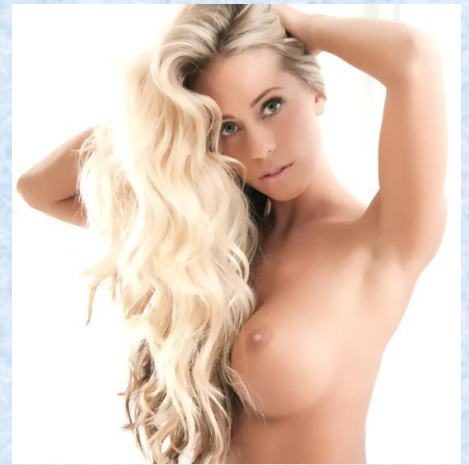
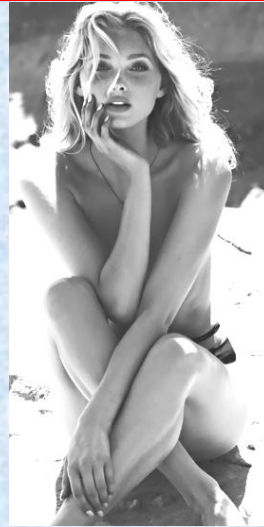


"OWWWW!!!" she screamed. "Not back there! Damn you, **black bastard**!"



"OOWWW! SHITTT ... DAMN YOU, BASTARD!"





RAPED WHORE



[another knocked-up White Whore]

The **bronze**-haired woman pushed on. "I jumped from the saddle and climbed into the cave. **It** ... **it** tried to follow me in. I shot some more. But that only seemed to make **it** more angry. **It** began turning colors, **darkening**. I had some extra ammunition. **Tear gas** shells. In desperation I used them. I fired 5 shots out of the cave mouth and ... **it** went away."

"Did you see where it went?" asked Ham.

"No. It was just gone. I heard nothing. I saw nothing. But I didn't dare come out until after nightfall. By that time, my horse was gone. I don't know what happened to it."

"It returned safely to the ranch," Ham supplied.

Pat nodded. "Thank goodness. I decided then-and-there that I'd get on the trail of what was going on. I had heard that folks filmed at the ghost town and that fit into what I already knew. So I dropped 'Doris Duff' and turned myself into 'Betty Blaze'."

"We were worried sick about you," Ham said. "We found your six-gun in that cave and thought you were dead."

"I left it there deliberately. Didn't you get my *message*?"

Monk said: "It was kinda rubbed out. We found a guy there. King Neptune ..."

"Long white beard?"

"No. It's brown and gray."

"There sure are a lot of bearded gents in this mess," Pat observed. "But my *message* was to tell you I was okay and that *tear gas* seemed to work against the *red things*."

"We already figgered out that part," said Monk.

Pat asked: "Have you found out what *they* are?"

"No," Ham admitted. "It has us stumped."

"Stumped and up a stump both," Monk added. "I wish Habeas was here."

"Where are your pets?"

"Back at the movie studio," explained Ham. "Where my Chemistry by now has taken the curl out of that porker's tail."

"If I know my hog," Monk snorted loudly, he's boxed the ears off that runt ape of yours."

Pat set her fists on her shapely hips and turned frosty golden *eyes* upon the quarreling duo.

"Calm down, you two. Feuding won't help us now."

"Doc oughta be back by daybreak if not before," Monk pondered. "When he hears of the pickle we're in, he's sure to bust us out."

"In the meantime, Pat wondered, "who's going to solve this delicious mystery?"

"If we put our heads together, maybe we can," Ham declared confidently.

Monk scoffed. "That'll be the day when your head and mine come together."

Pat inserted: "No, Ham has the right idea. I've told you my story. Now tell me yours."

Ham obliged beginning with the discovery of Professor Clarence Threlkeld Clement in their hotel suite.

"The fact that his revolver alternated lead and tear-gas shells has to me he understood that tear gas will discourage the *red demons*," decided Pat when Ham concluded his account.

"I don't think they're *demons*, or smog, or anything like that," Monk offered.

"Then what are they?" Pat demanded.

"They're ... I don't know. They look like weather, act like they're alive, and ..."

Monk stopped abruptly.

"Hey! I just thought of somethin'!"

"With what?" asked Ham unkindly.

Monk apparently missed the insult because he went on as if he hadn't been interrupted.

"Before that howling *red wowser* happened along back at the movie studio, Happy and Harry were wrestling with a tank of some kind."

"That's right," agreed Ham. "It got loose from them and gas started escaping."

"And Happy and Harry fit the descriptions of the two that I saw out in the desert with the bearded individual!" exclaimed Pat.

"More and more," Monk growled, "this is pointin' back to smilin' Sam Flash."

Pretty Pat Savage frowned.

"But what is pointing? Do you think the *desert demons* can be summoned by oxygen?"

"Oxygen is present in the air at all times," sniffed Ham. "Why would oxygen summon *them*? It doesn't make any sense."

"That's because it ain't oxygen, you dope," Monk spat. "There's other odorless colorless gasses besides oxygen. Carbon monoxide is one. It's poison."

"I don't think it's carbon monoxide," murmured Pat. "That can put you to sleep. And I didn't feel at all sleepy."

"Lemme think," Monk muttered.

His tiny eyes narrowed.

"Them *things* live awfully high up. Whatever's calling '*em* down has to rise pretty far up to attract their attention."

Ham prodded: "Well, think harder. You're supposed to be a chemist."

Monk's pleasantly homely features bunched and gathered comically. When he was cogitating, the apish chemist was a sight. He went over to the holding cell door and seized its steel bars in both hairy hands. He gave the door a preliminary testing. The stout bars groaned and noticeably separated. Hinges squeaked briefly. But the door held. This physical exertion seemed to assist the simian chemist's animated thought processes.

"I got it!" he exclaimed at last.

"What?"

"Helium!"

Pat looked puzzled.

"Helium? Like the put in balloons to make them rise?"

"Yeah," said Monk. "It's odorless and colorless. And if you release it in the atmosphere, it goes clear up into outer space."

Pat arched a skeptical eyebrow. "Really? That far?"

Monk nodded firmly. "Helium was the first element ever discovered on a planet other than Earth."

Her pretty brow puckering, Pat asked: "What planet?"

"Technically, it was the Sun," Monk corrected. "Years back, someone doing a spectrographic analysis of the Sun discovered a yellow band of color that no one could figure out. Years later when helium was first found on Earth, it matched the yellow, spectrographically-speaking."

"Where does helium come from?" Pat wanted to know.

"Underground. It's found in pockets and ore. Helium wells are sometimes dug to get it out of the ground. Other times, it's discovered mixed in natural gas deposits.

Ham <snapped> his fingers. He had been doing that a lot. The dapper lawyer was fidgety because the local constabulary had confiscated his sword-cane.

"The Neptune oil field!" he cried.

"What about it?" Pat asked.

"Don't they usually strike gas deposits before they hit oil?"

"They do," Monk said following Ham's train of thought. "And helium is sometimes found mixed in with the other gases."

"And the **Copper Clouds** have been haunting that oil field!" crowed Ham.

"This," growled Monk, "is suddenly startin' to point in the direction of that salty old King Neptune."

"Except that Happy and Harry work for Sam Flash," contradicted Ham. "And not Amos Kling."

"But they're partners. So it could be both of 'em behind all this."

"If they're both back of all this," countered Ham, "why did Happy and Harry call down that red demon on Flash Pictures this morning? Kling needs that studio to make money so he can keep on drilling."

"But he's about to hit a dag-gone gusher," Monk returned.

"Which Doc plugged with lead for the moment," Ham pointed out.

"I'm getting a headache from all this," complained Pat.

She had been pacing the cell and now dropped onto a bench bolted to one wall.

Visible through the single barred window, the Sun was sinking into a late afternoon heat gathering red and purple clouds about it like a multicolored cloak. A typical (if spectacular) California sunset impended. But the riotous hues of the low-hanging nimbostratus clouds portended menace of an almost *supernatural* type.

"I wonder," Ham said after a pause, "where Professor Clement fits into all this."

Monk brightened. "Yeah. He's hooked up with both of those two. But Clement was anxious to prevent that canister with the **red fog** in it from reaching Doc and killin' him."

"Perhaps he was in cahoots with either or both of them but stopped short of murder," Ham suggested slowly. "Do not forget that he was reported dead when a **Copper Cloud** swallowed his airplane."

"I've lost track of all the players," Pat admitted frankly. "What happened to him?"

"We chased him up the coast. Somehow the red **canister** got open and the inside of his car filled up with some kind of hellish **red haze**. Clement screamed. Then he went over the rail. There was nothing left but scum on the water. Doc was nearly killed by accident since he was clinging to the running board at the time."

"It sounds," Pat said dejectedly, "like Professor Clement just might be the master key to all of this."

"*In that case,*" a new voice intruded, "*it's doubly regrettable that he's gone.*"

The voice proved to belong to the Chief of Police of the City of Los Angeles.

He was a sturdy-boned individual with an open honest face and brown mustache. With a gesture, he motioned to a guard to open the jail cell doors.

Food was brought in. Coffee and pig sandwiches. Ham took one look at the latter and tuned up his nose at the provender. Whereupon Monk happily claimed the dapper lawyer's share as well as his own.

"We overheard every word," the Chief was saying after they were locked back in. "We are going to check out your stories. If they check out – and you all sounded sincere over the wire – we might look at releasing you in the morning. Provided that Doc Savage can immediately corroborate your account."

"This is quite decent of you," Ham said sincerely.

"It's not just me. The Governor is up in arms. While you three have been cooling your heels, the **Copper Clouds** have been storming all over the State."

Monk asked: "How bad are *they* rampaging?"

"Plenty bad. We'll bring you a paper so you can read all about it."

By this time, darkness had fallen. The Hollywood night was upon them. It was as dark and still as the interior of the death house at San Quentin at midnight. Once, the palm fronds rustled in the breeze outside their barred windows. It was a dry bones kind of sound.

The newspaper was brought. And it was as the Police Chief had said. Plenty bad.

The headline told of the death of Sterling Drew. His demise would have made headlines even if a **red demon** had not descended on his Beverly Hills mansion while he was sunbathing beside a kidney-shaped swimming pool.

Sterling Drew was nothing less than the top box office matinee idol of the last 3 years. His sincere eyes, square jaw, and pencil mustache adorned the covers of movie magazines, lobby posters, and now the newspaper front page. Everyone in America (if not the World) knew that chiseled face.

The actual account was brief. Drew had been lounging at his pool when a small **howling red cyclone** of a thing had pounced on him hungrily. The maid saw it all from behind the glass patio doors. The whirling apparition seemed interested in the maid also. But after she snapped the doors shut, it simply moaned futilely against the glass, slowly turning **black** until it melted into nothingness.

When the police arrived, there was only a pile of salt where Sterling Drew had lain. Mysterious touch, the pool water was found frozen solid. That part was new in the accounts of the desert demons.

Herod Silverspoon was another victim. At about the same time that Sterling Drew was vanishing in a **swirl** of scarlet, the head of Solar Productions (one of Hollywood's largest film companies) was holding court in his palatial Beverly Hills office.

A red funnel **Cloud** was described as coming down from the sky and consuming the office building and all of its occupants which included I. Herod Silverspoon and assorted sycophants and lackeys.

The piles of powdery white substance left behind were quite profuse. The police actually sifted through them looking for remains. But they discovered not a sliver of bone or fingernail.

One bluecoat chanced to cut himself on a pane of glass which had survived. It developed that all of the surrounding glass had survived. A fact that had been noticed before but not explained.

A third victim had no obvious Hollywood connections. Van Dearman was in real estate. He was driving to an appointment to show a house when he ran over a bunch of carpet tacks that happened to be in the road. 2 tires blew out.

After Van Dearman pulled over to change his tires, a carmine *Cloud* only a little larger than his automobile came down and ate him up.

Apparently unsatisfied with its mortal meal, the sanguineous *appetite* gobbled up the driverless coupe leaving only the windscreen and other glass behind.

A strange footnote to this account was that when his office sent someone to see about the person wanting to inspect the house that Van Dearman was to show, they had never shown up. A telephone call to the number that the prospective home buyer had given proved to be a nonexistent exchange.

Laying the newspaper aside, Monk muttered: "That makes me think he was set up."

"Yes," agreed Ham. "Lured to where he would run over those tacks and have to pull over."

"But how did the *demon* know he was there to be found?" wondered Pat.

The homely chemist had an answer to that.

"Suppose that someone planted a helium tank in the car. When it's movin', the gas wouldn't leave much more than a weak trail draggin' behind. But once the car stopped, it rises straight up and attracts the *red things*."

Ham said slowly: "A lot of these attacks could be explained that way. For example, a helium tank might have been attached to the camera truck out in the Mojave."

"Phooey!" Monk guffawed. "I knew all along that Crazy Thunder didn't call anything down with his dag-gone rain dance."

"Now you admit it," scoffed Ham.

"This is terrible," moaned Pat.

"You're tellin' me," said Monk. "Here we are stuck in hoosegow with nothing to do but read papers."

"I don't mean that," said Pat. "Whoever is summoning these *demons* is getting really active. What can their motive be?"

"Beats me," said Monk. "It don't make much sense."

"I'll bet Doc will figure it out before long if he hasn't already," insisted Ham.

Pat fumed prettily.

"That's just the thing. For once, I want to solve the mystery without Doc. I had a head start and I aim to finish the job."

Monk and Ham exchanged glances.

"Nothing doing, young lady," warned the aristocratic attorney.

"From now on," the simian chemist said, "consider Ham and me your official minders."

"Minders?"

"It's a nicer word than babysitter. Because once Doc discovers you're alive, he's gonna count on us to keep you that way."

"Hah!" scoffed Pat. "Once the police spring me, I'm a free woman. Try and stop me. You won't even see my dust!"

XX

Upcoming ...



... Pat's troubles aren't over yet!

XIV – The *Thing* in the Sky

Persons all over the western United States reported a shooting star streaking through the midnight skies on a westward course.

Their error was excusable. Doc Savage's stratosphere dirigible was making unbelievable time. A trail wind caught over Wyoming helped, certainly. But no airship – not even one that could exceed 275 mph – looks like a shooting star by night.

From an engineering standpoint, the stratosphere dirigible was decades ahead of its time. It was streamlined to the nth degree possessing no hull projections of any kind. Motor gondolas as well as the control cabin were set inside the rigid gasbag. Every rivet and girder was manufactured from an ultra-light alloy as was her silver skin. The gas that provided buoyancy was non-inflammable helium.

It was no air leviathan, however. The great ocean-crossing passenger airships would have dwarfed it. Propulsion was driven by high-speed Diesel motors turning ordinary propellers.

But attached to the dirigible's tapered tail was a ring of rocket tubes. A product of Doc Savage's inventive genius. This rocket array was in the nature of an auxiliary form of propulsion. It was impractical for most maneuvers such as take-offs. But high in the stratosphere, the rockets could be safely engaged producing stunning speeds that would have been the envy of many European fighter pilots.

Rocket tubes were providing not only propulsion but also the flare effect so suggestive of a shooting star.

Sealed within the airtight control cabin, comfortable air pressure and warmth were regulated by air-conditioning apparatus which regulated temperature and oxygen supply.

Renny Renwick was at the controls. The stratosphere dirigible was actually capable of crossing the Continent by a robot autopilot of Doc's invention. But it was a long flight and the big engineer wanted something to do.

In the rear of the cabin, Lon Tom Roberts was applying a screwdriver to a complicated hunk of apparatus that was packed with transformers, resistors, coils, and other evidence of great electrical power. He had scarcely done anything but since their departure hours before.

This was his pride and joy. The **Insect Eliminator**. Something that the puny electrical wizard had been working on for years.

Renny called back. "What do you suppose Doc wants that infernal contraption for?"

"Don't call it a contraption!" Long Tom shot back. "It operates on electro-sonic principles!"

"That wasn't my question."

"And don't you ride me, you bucket-**fisted** lug!" Long Tom snapped. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Renny fell silent. Although he was conceivably the largest man among Doc's 5 assistants and Long Tom the puniest, the reputation of the pale Electrical Wizard for temper and wildcat ferocity made the hulking engineer decide to concentrate on his flying rather than incur more wrath.

Long Tom returned to worrying his device in silence.

High atop the dirigible sat a transparent observation bubble. Doc Savage was setting up apparatus in this. Johnny Littlejohn was assisting. As usual when addressing the *Man of Bronze*, the big-worded archeologist-geologist was employing words of modest proportions.

"Doc, I fail to understand. What is the point of all this?"

Doc Savage did not reply. It was a habit of his when he did not wish to comment to withhold his counsel. Recognizing the Doc's reticence probably meant that Doc knew more than he was willing to let on regarding the happenings of horror in California, Johnny only grew more curious. He held his scholarly tongue. Long experience had shown him that to press the big *Bronze Man* would produce, if anything, even reticence.

Wordlessly, Doc accepted the **infrared** ray projector proffered by the skeletal geologist.

He had been studying the heavens with an **ultraviolet** projector and mechanical goggles which were strapped to the outside of his stratosphere helmet for easy removal. Now he was switching to an **infrared** projector. Johnny, who understood the functions of the 2 types of devices, was nonetheless perplexed.

There was nothing above their heads other than the unending blackness of stratospheric space and stars so plentiful that they resembled a field of sprinkled diamonds of various hues. Removing the thick goggles (which were of no use with **infra-rays**), Doc began playing the cumbersome projector in all directions. It was equipped with an oversized eyepiece which he placed against the diver's-style helmet.

He paid particular attention to the skin of the silver airship as well as the night sky above. Running the length of the hull were vanes, extensions of the oversized rudder and elevators controlling the marvelous craft. They gave the dirigible the semblance of a rocket ship from another world.

It was *frigid* up here even while wearing electrically-heated stratosphere suits as they did. The *Bronze Man* did not seem to mind the cold. But then, Johnny had never known him to mind much of anything. His strength and stamina verged on the *superhuman*.

The hours passed. If anything was brought to light by the **infra-ray** projector, it failed to show on Doc Savage's habitually expressionless features.

The *Man of Bronze* finally climbed down. Johnny spelled him in the observation bubble.

"Where are you going?" the boney archeologist asked.

"To make certain that we are on course for Bakersfield" came the reply.

Doc slid soundlessly down the access ladder leading back to the control cabin. The entire gasbag was honeycombed with chimney-like tunnels and longitudinal catwalks for maintenance purposes. In that, it was no different from conventional airships.

Johnny pushed his elongated frame into the bubble and switched the infra-ray device back 'on'. As he scanned the ebony heavens, he idly wondered why their destination was the Neptune oil field in Bakersfield. But he also knew that coming events would reveal the wisdom of the **Bronze Man's** strategy (as they always did).

When Doc Savage entered the control gondola, he stripped off his stratosphere suit helmet. It wasn't needed in the controlled atmosphere of the cabin.

"We're making fair time," Renny reported releasing the control wheel to the amazing *Man of Bronze*.

Doc nodded. He checked the earth induction compass that was guiding the streamlined silver ship on its predetermined course. Then he began cutting the switches that controlled the battery of rocket tubes that had been pushing the unusual dirigible along at intervals.

The dull roar that had penetrated into the soundproofed cabin instantly died. The airship gradually slowed to the cruising speed of her regular Diesel motors.

Dawn was breaking before them. Streaks of orange and red cut the blackness below. They revealed a mackerel sky with long stringy cloud formation resembling a washboard visible through non-shatter glass survey ports here-and-there about the cabin floor.

Monitoring the lighted map board, Renny called out.

"Bakersfield ahoy!"

A *luminous* spot appeared ahead. At first it went unnoticed by all but the **Bronze Man** who upon sighting it yanked a pair of binoculars out of a handy receptacle.

"What do you see, Doc?" asked Long Tom, drawing near.

Doc Savage handed him the binoculars and gave the control wheel a spin. The big rudders responded smartly and the silver ship hove toward the *patch* of blue against the dark.

"It's luminous whatever-it-is," Long Tom murmured.

Renny took a turn with the field glasses.

"Looks kinda like a big stratocumulus raincloud," he rumbled. "Except that it's *blue* and glowing to beat the band."

Consulting over the drift meter, Doc said: "We are over – or nearly over – the **Neptune oil field**."

The exact significance of that statement momentarily escaped Long Tom and Renny. But they had no time to puzzle it out for the big **Bronze Man** abruptly cut the motors. Unpowered, the silent dirigible loafed along carried forward by its own momentum.

The azure *nimbus* of light began resolving itself. *It* was cloud-like but undefined around its edges. Sometimes *it* bulged near the top. At others, *it* spread to either side as if *it* were losing its natural shape.

"Clouds don't get this far up," Renny muttered.

"I don't like the looks of that *thing*," echoed Long Tom.

Doc touched a cam that opened up a closed-circuit intercom line to the observation bubble.

"Johnny, do you use the blue *patch* dead ahead?"

"I do. And it looks like *it* is starting to move in our direction!"

The gaunt archeologist was correct.

The cloudy cobalt *patch* was thinning at the sides and somehow reaching toward them. That was the best way to describe it. It was as if *it* were a giant amoeba groping out a pseudopod for the bow of the encroaching airship.

His big jaw agape, Renny exploded: "Watch out!"

Doc threw the big Diesel motors into full reverse. Groaning and creaking, the stratosphere ship began backing up like a frightened whale.

The blue *nimbus* continued advancing toward them. *It* was not moving fast. But *it* somehow seemed inexorable like a shark approaching its prey.

"Holy cow"! boomed Renny. "It's reaching out for us."

Doc suddenly reversed the engines again throwing the ship off to starboard.

As if alive, the cerulean *thing* changed course as well. *It* seemed intent upon investigating the airship.

Through the cabin loudspeaker came Johnny Littlejohn's excited voice calling: *"I'll be superamalgamated! This ... this noctiluminescent nebulosity is alive!"*

"Can we outrun it?" Long Tom asked hoarsely.

Doc Savage said nothing. He was intent upon his piloting.

An airship is at best an ungainly conveyance. One that is not designed to change course suddenly. Doc spun a control wheel with silent urgency. Lumbering about, the dirigible seemed agonizingly slow in its aerial alterations.

The lustrous *blur* started to resolve itself. Not exactly a cloud, *it* seemed composed of tiny scintillations of luminous light as *blue* as neon. They wheeled and swirled holding together as a mass. But also apparently moving independently of one another.

"Do you suppose that *thing* is some kind of atomic phenomenon?" Renny asked suddenly. "I mean could those blue *things* be atoms?"

"Atoms are too small to be seen with the naked eye," Long Tom returned. "*They* look like ... like ..."

"Like what?" Renny prompted.

Long Tom <squinted>. He seemed at a loss for words.

"Ah, bugs!" he said disgustedly.

Down from the observation crackled Johnny's voice. It was shrill as if his nerves were keyed up.

*"Doc! King Neptune claimed that the **Copper Clouds** were *blue* at higher altitudes. Could this be one of them?"*

"What do you see?" queried Doc.

*"Through the **blacklight**, it looks like a swarm of *sparks*. Bright blue *sparks*. With the **infra-ray** projector, it's pretty much the same. But I can't tell what the thing is."*

"Things," corrected Renny. "It's not a thing. It's a clump of things."

"Well, *they* act like they're one thing," Long Tom snapped. "And *they're* still after us!"

At the wheel, Doc Savage watched the behavior of the disturbed *Cloud* as if calculating its next move.

Among the devices studded along the dirigible's ultra-streamlined skin were nodules designed to discourage thieves or saboteurs. Some of these were **tear gas** bombs that could be operated remotely from the cabin. Doc kept a steady hand near those switches.

It was clear that they were not going to outrun the azure *scintillation*. The dirigible was simply too cumbersome to change course swiftly enough.

"Brace for collision!" roared Renny grabbing a hand rail with one massive paw.

The cloudy *Entity* began spreading outward. *It* was losing not only shape but also definition. Rather like a cirrus cloud dissipating in the lower atmosphere.

As they approached, they saw that *it* was huge, titanic. Possibly *its* general circumference had been 1,000 yards before. But as *it* spread out, *it* was easily tripling in size. *It* was also growing thinner and less distinct to the eye.

Something <tapped> the windscreen with a sound like a disembodied fingernail <clicking> for attention.

They now saw that it was **bluish-green**. A tiny corpuscle of a **thing** which glowed so that its shape and appearance was indistinct.

"What is that?" Renny muttered, gawking.

Doc suddenly <flipped> the switches. Muffled reports sounded along the skin of the silver airship. Soon, billows of **tear gas** were enveloping the stratosphere dirigible.

The cyan **Cloud** returned. Doc flung the ship downward hard, revving the motors to their highest revolutions. The lighter-than-air craft shuddered in response but soon dived.

The hilly ground suddenly appeared in their windscreen. Doc was all-but-standing the streamlined gasbag on its tapered nose. It was a risky maneuver. But it was obviously imperative if the **Bronze Man's** frenzied movement was any indication.

Tumbling, Long Tom and Renny were thrown off their feet. They scrambled for handholds ... fought to stay vertical ... and ended up in ludicrous postures.

Doc rapped out: "Johnny! What is happening from your vantage point?"

*"You discouraged them. I mean **It**. ... Heck, I don't know what I mean!"* the bony archeologist sputtered. *"But whatever the darned thing is, **It's** retreating."*

Slowly, Doc brought the control vanes level to right the airship. It began stabilizing. Aerostatic equilibrium was thus restored.

Stepping back from the controls, Doc instructed: "Renny, take over."

"Right."

Restoring his helmet, Doc leaped for the hatch that led up to the observation bubble. When he got there, he all-but-hauled Johnny bodily from the pit and pointed the infra-ray device upward.

The blue **nimbus** had a scattered patchy quality. But as he watched, that seemed to shift and later. As if consolidating its very substance, the azure **phenomenon** was drawing itself together concentrating and increasing in its unearthly blue **luminosity**.

Johnny called up.

"Doc! That astronomer colleague of Professor Clement spoke of something he called the **Neon Nebula**. It is manifestly certain that we now have located it."

The **Bronze Man** nodded imperceptibly. He was too busy to otherwise reply.

Doc knew that the headlong speed of the airship would soon enough sweep away all traces of the tear gas cloud he had created. The question was what the blue *Cloud* of a thing would do next.

That became evident almost at once.

The blue *Nimbus* was dropping toward the nose of the airship where the mooring eye resided.

This time, the *Thing* moved with an *alacrity* that was breathtaking. The blackness above their heads was suddenly filled with blue-green scintillas. *They* filled the air darting and dancing in mad patterns remindful of *sparks* flying up from a campfire. Only these *sparks* were descending.

In the space of several heartbeats, the skin of the stratosphere dirigible was covered with them. *They* attached themselves to the silvery fabric as if sprinkled on a sticky surface. Doc Savage spoke into his helmet microphone.

"Long Tom, turn on your Insect Eradicator!"

Urgency was a thunder in his voice.

"It's hot!" Long Tom returned.

Silence followed. It seemed to last an eternity.

Then one-by-one, the cyan *glimmers* started to drift off. Some fell back onto the dirigible skin seeming to melt away.

Suddenly, Doc Savage was skidding down the access ladder and dropped back in the cabin. He took instant notion of the situation outside the windscreen. The glimmering blue-green *things* were in retreat.

"It's drivin' '*em* off!" Renny thumped.

"Let me have that," Doc told Long Tom reaching for his machine.

Long Tom surrendered his pet device reluctantly. Doc *flowed* up the ladder like so much russet smoke.

Crouched in the observation bubble, he adjusted dials on the eradicator. The **Bronze Man** was familiar with Long Tom's invention having grasped its operating principles. Had the puny Electrical Wizard been present, he would have understood that Doc Savage was experimenting with the range and intensity of the rays that were designed (under customary working conditions) to kill mosquitoes and other insect pests at a fair distance using a combination of short-range microwave rays and ultrasonic fields.

When he had the desired settings, Doc simply waited. The results were nothing short of miraculous.

Abruptly the glimmering *specks* floated off the top of the dirigible. It was as if a magnet had reversed polarity and caused luminous iron filings to fly away. *They* cavorted briefly ... almost playfully ... and then rejoined the blue *scintillation* whence they came.

It was over in a twinkling.

Doc scrutinized the skin of the gasbag running along the top walkway. It appeared to be undamaged.

Returning to the control cabin, he sank the dirigible further until it was floating above Bakersfield. Renny had binoculars trained on the ground below.

"I spy the Neptune field," he reported.

Doc nodded and busied himself with an instrument that the big engineer recognized as a device for collecting samples of the air. Doc filled 3 glass tubes with air from outside the airship and pocketed them.

"Where to next, Doc?" Long Tom asked.

"We will rendezvous with the others," the **Bronze Man** said quietly.

Nothing in his face showed his relief that their encounter with the neon-blue *Nimbus* had ended. But the others noticed that the controlled intensity that had animated his mighty form had at last relaxed.

XX

Coming up ...



... Pat Savage will be Degraded !

XV – Horror Over Hollywood

Dawn of the following day found Filmland nervous and jittery. Newspaper headlines were not reassuring. Of the most recent attacks (the papers still insisted upon calling them "**Copper Cloud** rampages") virtually all touched the movie-making colony.

No one knew what to make of it. Editorials in other parts of the Country castigated the sinful inhabitants of Hollywood for calling down the wrath of **Lucifer** on themselves. Some opined that these events marked the begging of the End of the World and the California was simply getting the first bitter taste.

The Governor of California was calling for calm. Throughout the state, Indian agents (California was home to numerous tribes ranging from the Cherokee to the Paiute) were reporting an exodus of inhabitants from desert towns and Indian reservations.

It seemed that the more superstitious of redmen believed that the **Copper Clouds** were *demons* sent by the Great Spirit to punish the White Man for usurping their lands so long ago.

Some Indians claimed that they were only going on vacation and after the demons had driven off the white Americans, they would be back to reclaim their ancestral lands. Among them was Chief Crazy Thunder. After solemnly burning his bull roarer, he had taken a rattler back to Arizona vowing never to return.

This was the general atmosphere that greeted the rising Sun that morning.

The Hollywood working day begins early. Before daybreak, the big film studios are bustling in preparation for the day's activities.

No studio was busier than that of the sprawling complex of sound stages called the Stellar-Worldwide Film Production company. By far the largest of Hollywood studios, it was ruled by an iron-fisted little despot named Solomon Kalfus.

\$10,000-or-\$12,000 worth of glittering limousines rolled into the Stellar-Worldwide lot at 9:00AM sharp. An indifferent gate-keeper sprang to attention and clicked off a salute when he saw Sol Kalfus ensconced in the lead limousine.

The limousine stopped before a cluster of sound stages. They were great barn-like buildings remindful of corrugated elephants.

Sol Kalfus looked nothing like a tin tyrant as the big studio limousine brought him through the Stellar-Worldwide lot that morning. He looked exactly like his press agents presented him to the public. A short roly-poly individual, he was wide in the middle and pointed at both ends. He wore a symphony of loud checked blues and blues sandals. A blue beret softened the pointedness of his close-shaven skull.

"Take me to Sound Stage Six," he told his driver. "Snappy!"

"Yes, Sir."

The limousine deposited him at a long warehouse-like structure that might have doubled as an aircraft hangar.

"How is my picture coming along/" he asked the flock of individuals who bustled out to greet him.

The flunkies all rushed to speak up at once, their words tumbling together like noisy rocks.

Sol Kalfus blew words back at them. "One at a time!"

Their replies came in perfect order like ducks swimming in a row.

"Superb, Mr. K."

"On budget, Mr. K."

"On time, Mr. K."

"I do not care for those things!" he spat. "I only wish to know about the weather."

"Weather? We are shooting indoors, Mr. K."

"I know that already. Have there been clouds?"

A half-dozen pairs of necks craned out of their collars while anxious eyes searched the skies. The latter were clear. Only a cone of vapour lay to the east.

"I see a small cloud," a producer offered.

"What color is this cloud?" asked Sol Kalfus.

"White."

"Not red? Not pink? Not salmon-colored?"

"No, Sir."

"Fine then. We will shoot today," said Sol Kalfus. "But I want men stationed at all 5 corners of the lot. At first sight of any threatening clouds, I am to be notified. Instantly at once. Do you understand?"

"At once, Mr. K," a bevy of voices chorused.

And at that, Sol Kalfus entered the great corrugated sheet steel shell that was Sound Stage Six.

The interior was stirring to life. Dim at this end, great Klieg lights were coming 'on' at the other.

Being producer-president-owner of the whole shebang, Sol Kalfus was a shrewd gambling genius and nothing like the erratic madcap which the public imagined him to be. His comedic eccentricity was

a clown suit that he wore to deceive his competitors. He showed this now as he marched over to the center of activities.

It was a Revolutionary War scene. Soldiers in retreat. Cannons booming. Cracking muskets. The soldiers rushed upon the scene where a small shabby-looking wagon circus was pitched in a valley. The tree-furred sides of the valley were painted on large canvas backdrops across the other end of the set.

"Cut!" a voice yelled.

The blaze of floodlights made the atmosphere hot. Continental soldiers stood around in their skintight white pants physically as well as mentally uncomfortable. 'George Washington' sat on a long bench. He had taken off his wig and tucked a handkerchief around his neck to keep his makeup from soiling his neckwear.

The picture was called "A Nation Born". It promised to be good box office. It was a costume drama. Historical.

History drags customers into the theaters because adults like to believe that they're getting something more than corn for their dimes. And the schools make it a point to persuade the shavers to go.

The story of the life of Benedict Arnold (the Revolutionary War traitor to the American cause), this was. Sol Kalfus had shot the works on "A Nation Born". Almost 2 million dollars expended so far and shooting had another 3 weeks yet to go. It was a lot of kale even by Hollywood's lavish standards.

Director Lew Constant came rushing over. He was in shirtsleeves and a chamois vest.

"Chief! Good to see you. Have you seen the morning papers yet?"

"I had them read to me," said Sol Kalfus.

He prided himself on the fact that he didn't read things. Rather, they were read to him by assistants.

"What do you make of this?"

"I think that we are in trouble, I think. Yes."

Lew Constant started. "How so, Chief?"

"Something is in the air. Something malevolent. I can smell it."

"I agree. But we can't shut down production ..."

"And we will not!" shrieked Sol Kalfus. "We will finish on budget and on time!"

"Good. Excellent.

"Besides, these screaming meanies do not frighten me. I am the Biggest of the Big. Let the other studios run scared. I will show them who is a Man."

It was a peculiarity of Sol Kalfus that he projected himself to others in such a way that made him seem a Giant among men. Some said it was his voice. Others credited his outsized personality. It was noted that the effect he had on his crew was to bolster confidence wherever his voice and personality penetrated.

"I will watch you direct now," he announced in a dominant voice.

He settled into a folding chair with his name printed on the canvas back.

"Yes, Sir."

The set got busy again. Actors returned to their places. Cannon were rolled back to their lines. Horses gathered up and remounted.

It was a thoroughly efficient and well-organized affair. In an amazingly short time, the scene was ready to go again.

The gaffer was yelling at his electrician using a P.A. amplifier to make his voice heard.

"Put an oil on it!" he screamed at a man on the catwalks high overhead.

And when the filter did not cut down the light sufficiently, he called: "Use a silk. And put a rifle and two Mickey Mouses on the star."

The star was a heartthrob with a perfect profile named Donald Duff who commanded \$3,000-a-week.

The not-so-dumb-or-erratic-as-he-acted producer-president-owner of Stellar-Worldwide had insisted that Donald Duff play the part of Benedict Arnold over the actor's own vociferous objections.

Other Hollywood movie moguls had spread rumors that a film glorifying a traitor was certain to bomb at the box office. When Sol Kalfus had heard that, it had only hardened his iron resolve. But the inspiring genius of Stellar-Worldwide had cagily assembled a cast who could be depended on to draw people into the theaters just to see them emote.

Sol Kalfus was a believer in star power. Not in story and script. Never before were his gambling instincts so crucial. If "A Nation Born" flopped, it might bring down Stellar-Worldwide and turn Sol Kalfus into a pauper overnight.

None of that worry showed on the producer's round countenance as he chewed on an unlit cigar (he actually did not smoke) and watched the scene about to play again.

Lew constant had an old-fashioned megaphone in one hand. He surveyed his assembled cast and noted Donald Duff astride his charger.

"Lock the doors" an assistant called out.

Men rushed to bolt the soundproofed doors. As they did so, a tremendous *clang!* could be heard.

"What was that noise?" Sol Kalfus demanded.

A man came back to report.

"2 workmen dropped a tank of gas."

"What gas?" sputtered the head of Stellar-Worldwide.

The man shrugged. "Probably carbon dioxide for making fog."

Sol Kalfus' dark eyes frowned. "Tell them to be careful. Carbon dioxide costs money.

Then to the director, he said: "Go ahead, please."

Lew Constant lifted the megaphone. "Action!" he thundered.

The scene proceeded smoothly. Soon the air was full of the acrid smell of burnt gunpowder.

Big exhaust fans kicked in and quickly cleared the interior haze. After they cut out, a kind of silence came.

A drone could be heard. In the bustle of the barn-like studio interior, no one noticed it for nearly a minute. But the soundproofed doors had been reopened for purposes of ventilation and it soon penetrated.

"What is that noise?" Sol Kalfus demanded of no one in particular.

A man came charging in. Abject *terror* ripped in his voice.

"Red Cloud! Red Cloud!"

Silence stood in the cavernous sound stage. The kind of silence that exists between the crack of a lightning bolt and the ensuing thunder, one of those moments when burned ozone can be smelled and stunned shock stupefies minds.

No one moved at first. The drone became increasingly shrill, then high and frenzied.

Everyone looked to Sol Kalfus. So much did the head of Stellar-Worldwide inspire his employees that instead of succumbing to blind panic or even the natural instinct for self-preservation that inhabits all of humankind, they sought direction from their boss.

Sol Kalfus started to turn purple, his exploding color. Then he did a strange thing. He took a pad of paper and a stubby pencil and began scribbling.

"What are you doing, Sir?" asked Lew constant nervously.

"Making out my will," he replied tightly. "And reminding myself to have all the guards fired for dereliction of duty if I survive this day."

That did it.

Crew and cast members broke for the exit doors. But it was too late.

The ceiling turned white. All lights went out. It became very **cold** as well as very very **dark**. Horses *whined* in fear. People were trampled in their blind confusion.

The furious **howling** sound seemed directly overhead. And suddenly ...

... there was no roof!

California sunshine should have flooded downward. But instead, something that felt like **black hail** fell. And whatever the uncanny **hail** touched burned with a strange **coldness**.

And whatever it touched man-or-machine turned a stark white. Running persons fell in mid-stride. They did not get up again. Instead they shattered and fell in chunks, crumbling to powder. The **black hail** seemed to melt into everything.

When the last of it had evaporated, white powder that resembled common table salt lay in disorderly heaps everywhere. That was all.

No one who had been inside Sound Stage Six survived. Indeed, nothing recognizably human was ever discovered of the roughly 100 persons who had gone to work that morning.

Another ruby-red **demon** alighted upon a Hollywood bungalow court later that morning. This particular court was favored among actors who had not yet achieved the mansion status of movie society.

The death count there was only seven. But they included severable notables of the screen including one of the most acclaimed camera operators in the business -- Regis St. Flynn.

There were other sightings. Panic began to grip the State. Talk ran the gamut from red-skinned **demons** to invaders from the red planet Mars.

Amid all this as if to make some macabre point, one of the horrible **howling things** floated down into the Hollywood hills enveloping one of Los Angeles's most famous landmarks.

After it had completed its uncanny change from **blood-red** to **sooty-black**, it vanished.

Gone also were the huge white letters that had formerly spelled out HOLLYWOODLAND.

In the middle of this confusion, a strange craft was sighted over Los Angeles.

A silvery shape was approaching the city airport. Tapered like an elongated tear drop, it was an aircraft of some new type. It arrived with an uncanny quietude and began descending.

The riot squad was called out. Every available man was sent to meet it. The Chief-of-Police of Los Angeles arrived in his official car prompted by wild rumors of an invasion from the Moon.

As his car groaned to a stop, the silver craft began landing.

"Airship!" the Police Chief decide. He was much relieved.

The operations chief of the airport took his radio earphones and said:

"That's **Doc Savage**. He wants to meet with the Governor."

"Well, he'll surrender to me first," vowed the Police Chief.

"He said he would do that too," said the operations man.

A ground crew walked the airship to a dirigible mast and the mighty craft dropped its mooring cup atop it in one try. Mechanism seized the cup and made it fast. The ship settled. It could be seen that the lower portion bulged downward in the fashion of a great pontoon float. Plainly, the airship could land on water if the pilot chose to.

Wheels cranked down from the float arrangement. The inset propellers went quiet.

In the gondola, a sliding window of Cellon glass shoved opened. Out swung the Herculean figure of **Doc Savage**.

Disdaining the customary formalities of lowering the bow gangplank and descending via the mooring-mast elevator, the **Man of Bronze** swiftly slid down a knotted rope to the tarmac descending hand-over-hand.

Such was the breathtaking manner of Doc's return to California that no one made a move to arrest him.

Instead, the big **Bronze Man** strode forward, presented himself to the chief-of-Police, and said quietly: "It would be best if we spoke privately."

XX

Next ...



*... Pat suffers the ultimate **humiliation** !*

XVI – Death in the Desert

The annihilation of Stellar-Worldwide caused newspaper *extras* to be printed. It was big news. Bigger than big. In the exaggerated terminology of film-land, it was Colossal.

The largest studio in Hollywood had been all-but-obiterated in the midst of making the biggest motion picture of the year. There was now no doubts that "A Nation Born" would never be completed.

That Stellar-Worldwide was ruined was the opinion of most informed sources I the movie-making capital. Or so the newspaper headlines proclaimed.

One *extra* landed in the holding cell in which Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, and Pat Savage had passed the night.

"Blazes!" Monk gulped. "This dang thing is getting' bigger."

A voice called into the cell.

"*You have a visitor.*"

"Who?" Ham asked.

"Yes, who?" echoed Pat.

"*Doc Savage.*"

Monk groaned. "They got Doc!"

But it turned out that the homely chemist had leapt to a hasty conclusion. It was nothing of the sort.

When the **Man of Bronze** was escorted in to see them, he was neither in shackles nor handcuffs.

A rare **bronze** smile seemed to touch his regular features as Doc's compelling flake-gold eyes fell upon his pretty cousin. They were for a moment unstirred and tranquil. That was the close the big **bronze** Hercules came to expressing his profound relief that Pat was still numbered among the living.

"hello, cousin!" Pat said enthusiastically. "Come to spring us from the jug?"

"We have been given a free hand in this matter," Dos said quietly.

"By whom?" asked Ham.

"By the Governor of California."

Monk whistled, impressed.

The door to their cell was hastily unlocked and they stepped out. Their supermachine pistols were returned with apologies.

Monk windmilled his hairy arms in anticipation on imminent action. Ham quickly accepted his sword-cane. He separated the blade from its tubular sheath, saw that the chemical coating normally smeared along the tip was still fresh, and then restored the cane's apparent innocence.

"Events are moving swiftly toward a climax," Doc told them. "Where are Sam Flash and Amos Kling?"

Using concise words, Ham Brooks informed Doc Savage of King Neptune's apparent fate aboard his missing yacht.

"As for Sam Flash," he concluded, "your guess is as good as mine."

"But Happy and Harry are in this pretty deep," added Monk. "We think they're summoning the *red devils* using helium."

Doc nodded. A faint bestirring touched his flake-gold *eyes*,.

"I suspected as much," he said. "Since the *red things* first began congregating over the Neptune oil field, it stood to reason that something was drawing *them*. Natural gas or some component of seepage gas was the most logical possibility. I took air samples over Bakersfield and discovered a high concentration of helium escaping into the atmosphere."

Pat asked: "Doc, do you know what the *red demons* are?"

"Our most immediate concern is who is controlling *them* and the motive behind these attacks," advised Doc.

Monk blew on his hirsute knuckles.

"We gotta find Happy and Harry. According to Pat, they're in cahoots with a gent with a long white beard who wears an oversized hat like you see in cowboy movies."

Doc nodded. "Come on. We will talk en route."

"En route to where?" queried Pat.

But the **Bronze Man** declined to answer.

A police phaeton was waiting for them. It turned out that Doc had wrangled the loan of it. Hitting the siren, he shot into traffic. It parted for him.

Their first stop was the studios of Flash Pictures.

There, a gateman told them that the entire company had picked up and headed out to location.

"Which location?" Doc demanded.

"I am not allowed to say. It is where the company is shooting 'The Wrangled Dude'."

Doc showed credentials signed by the Governor of California. That changed the gateman's mind.

"Down in an old ghost mining camp near Palm Springs."

"I know that place, Doc!" exclaimed Pat.

*And well she should since she was **raped** there!"*

"Monk, you and Ham go there immediately," ordered Doc. "Take this."

He handed over a boxy device profuse with electrical extensions. Monk regarded it dubiously.

"Ain't this Long Tom's bug bamboozler?"

"Right. A duplicate. I have had several duplicates constructed this morning. They have been given to certain persons to protect them from the so-called **demons** from the sky."

"What persons?" asked Ham.

"Heads of Hollywood studios."

Doc showed Monk how to operate the device with particular attention on how to adjust its operating range.

"If one of the **red things** appears," the **Bronze Man** cautioned, "employ **tear gas** to keep them at bay. Then use this device to drive them off."

Gotcha, Doc."

"What about me?" asked Pat.

Doc said firmly: "I want you clear of all trouble."

Pat smiled broadly.

"I was born traveling in the opposite direction," she said gleefully.

Doc suggested: "Take in a movie double feature until we come for you."

"Nothing doing!" Pat flared. "I either accompany or else I go with Monk and Ham here."

"Out of the question, young lady."

Doc said sharply: "Where we are going will be too dangerous for you."

Pat folded her arms and struck a posture suggesting a firm determination to stand her ground.

"You gentlemen are forgetting that I am free, white, and almost 24!" she snapped.

Doc Savage moved suddenly. It was possible that Pat never saw the flashing hand coming her way.

He seized Pat by the neck and exerted careful pressure on certain nerves there. With a fluttery *sigh*, the beautiful **bronze** girl collapsed like a rag doll in her seat.

"Whew"! Monk breathed. "I never even saw your hands move!"

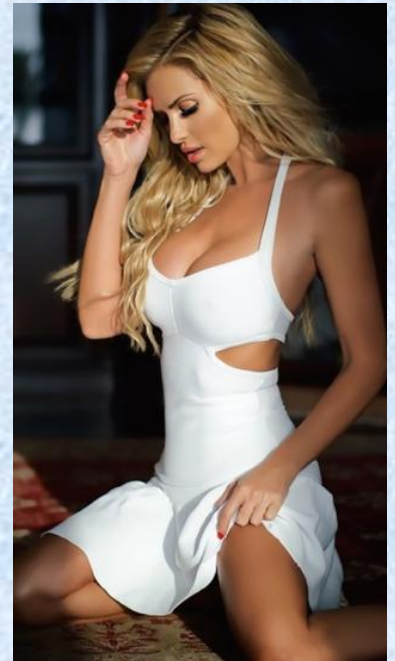
"I do not want to go through this again," the **Bronze Man** said grimly. "Park her somewhere safe. Like a hotel."

"Right-o, Doc," assented Ham.

XX

Ham and Monk rented a room in a hotel and deposited the lovely form of Pat Savage in it. Unfortunately, their actions did not go unobserved.

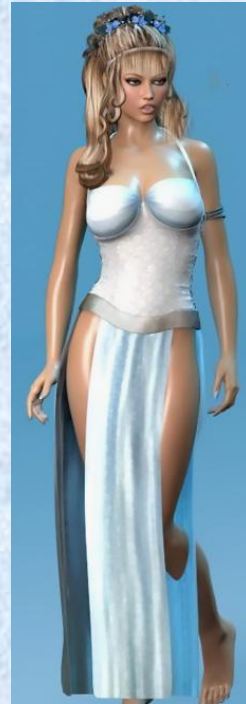
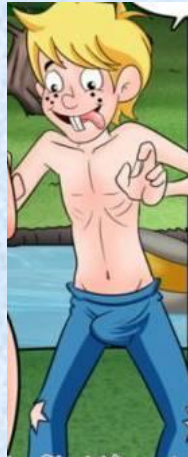
A motherly woman was watching from a half-opened doorway of another room. She looked dirty and scraggy. Her eyes seemed to *gleam* as she saw the half-conscious beautiful white woman being left unguarded.



In the woman's room were many goofy-looking **young boys**. They also saw the beautiful bronze-haired woman being carried into the empty room. Their eyes also had a strange *evil* gaze.

The woman waited for 10 minutes after Monk and Ham left. Then she and the boys entered Pat's room. (Somehow they had a key to the door.)

"There she is, boys! Your **whore** for the night," the woman said. "I've shown you enough movies. You should know by now what to do. Now go git her!"

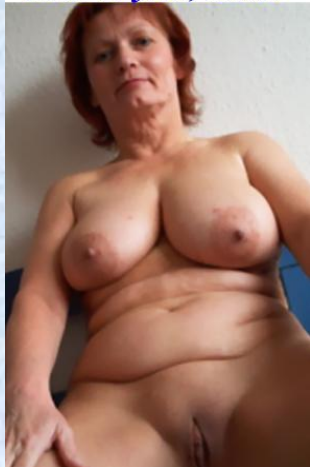


The woman started disrobing as the boys began taking off their own clothes as well as removing Pat Savage's. The young perverts already had hard erections.





"We're gonna
RAPE you, Slut!"



In her pursuit of Adventure with Doc Savage's group, Pat Savage had unfortunately been raped and gang-banged many times. So she was not technically a "virgin", her hymen having been torn when she was barely out of her teenage years (see "**Brand of the Werewolf**" #011XXX).



Still, she had some remarkable ability for her body to heal itself. In doing so, any vaginal or rectal passageways that had been brutally stretched-out had quickly returned to their original tightness. For all practical purposes as far as the pain and bleeding went, she was still a "virgin".

The matronly woman looked concerned.

"She's gonna be too tight for you little bastards. I'll have to loosen her up a bit before you can dip your pathetic little dicks in her.



Pat was regaining consciousness. But she was still quite weak and unable to resist the woman's **raping**. She could only groan and look into the woman's laughing eyes.



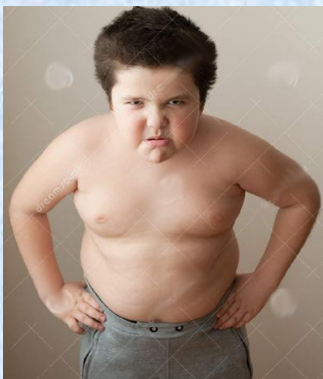
"I think she's about ready for you," she said to the boys. "I don't want to get her too loose for you. Got keep that pussy tight. Sure as hell don't want her to enjoy this, now do we?"

The boys were too *excited* and dumbfounded to say anything. There was this beautiful fully-naked woman-goddess in front of them waiting to be *impregnated!*



In her weakened condition, Pat realized that she was no match for their sheer numbers. So she offered no resistance when the woman said:

"Git over here now, you goddamn **Slut!** You gotta lot of luvin' to do tonight!"



Pat grimaced and gritted her teeth as young mouths and fingers probed all over her mature body.



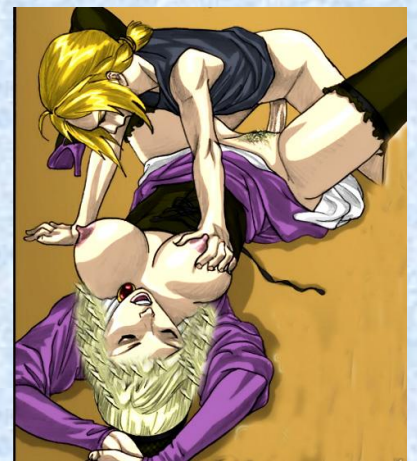
Then came the inevitable moment that she was dreading ...



"Tell her what I told you," commanded the evil woman.

"Spread your legs, you filthy **Whore!**" a little boy spat.

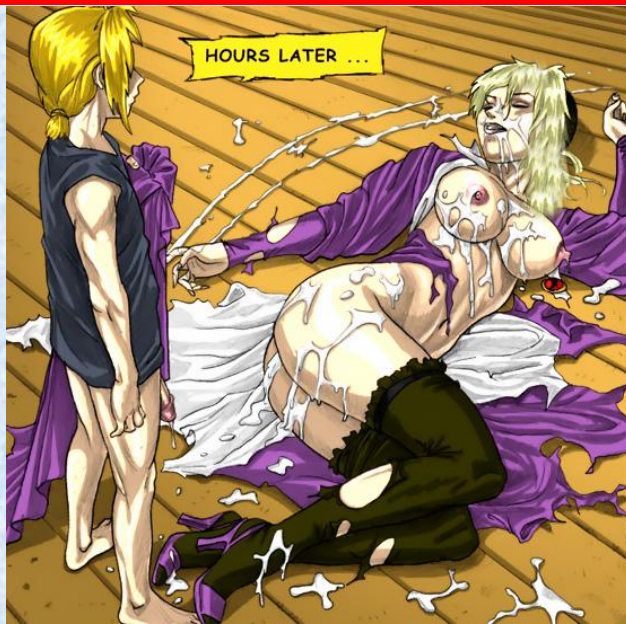
Pat was furious! To be spoken to by such a brat! But she had no choice ...



Pat emitted a suppressed *squeal* as his eager young penis penetrated the tight muscular confines of her cunt. She groaned not so much in pain as in **humiliation**.

"Oh how I **HATE** whores like you!"





She shuddered as she felt a sudden hot gush of baby-making *slime* shoot up inside her.

"Got her!" he panted.

"Way to go, my little fucker-boy!" congratulated the woman overseer.



But the **bronze**-haired woman's perils were only beginning.

"Who wants to fuck the **Whore** in her stuck-up ass?" asked the grinning woman.

Many eager hands quickly raised up.

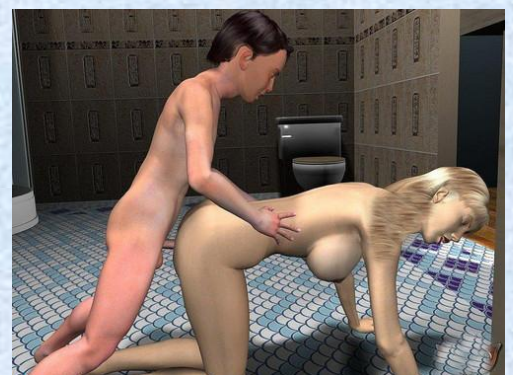


Pat couldn't believe it. She just couldn't! Wasn't anything forbidden and taboo?

But she was aslo realistic enough to know that resistance to these overwhelming number was futile. So she resigned herself to consenting and hoping that the little perverts would hurry up and get their **buggering** finished quickly.



"Get it over with, punk. Stick your little pecker in my Ass!"



The sodomy hurt her. This time her groans were of ***pain!***



But there was still more young anxious penises to empty themselves into her pussy.



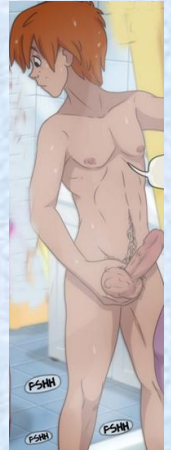
She was catching her breath watching a line of young **rapists** surround her. And during all this, the old woman's *cackling* laugh was ever-present.



"I hate you little pervert! Just stick it in and get it over with."



"Rape the hell out of her, boys!"





In a Parallel Universe ...



It seemed to last forever. But the little perverts finally finished satisfying their adolescent **lusts**. Pat was left lying on the **urine**-soaked bed with **semen** drying all over her beautiful face and seeping out of her womb and rectum.





[9 months later in the Delivery Room ...]

Monk and Ham returned later to pick up Pat. They were embarrassed (albeit delighted) to see her naked body somewhat spread out obscenely.



They redressed her as best they could while sneaking in a lusty feel-or-two.

Later, Monk and Ham collected their pets from their rented machine in which they had been safely locked during the intervening hours since the **red apparition** had descended upon the Flash Pictures studio. Doc drove to the airport where they claimed his speedy monoplane.

Johnny and Long Tom were there standing guard over the sleek dirigible which swayed in the wind as it hung tethered to the spidery mooring mast.

"Why'd you bring that?" Monk asked incredulously jerking a hairy thumb in the direction of the lighter-than-air craft.

"It is an important part of my plan to defeat the so-called **demons**," explained Doc.

"Where's Renny?" Ham wondered.

"He has gone to the Neptune oil field to do a little preparation work."

And that was all the *Man of Bronze* would say. So they went their separate ways.

Doc's personal ship was a two-seater. This presented a problem as to the disposition of Pat Savage. It was decided to stow her away in a cargo hatch. She barely fit into the small space.

The 2 pets Habeas Corpus and Chemistry squeezed into the cockpit with Monk and Ham. It was a tight fit made even tighter because Chemistry kept pulling the curl out of the pig's tail.

"Cut that out, you simian squirrel!" Monk bellowed.

Ham sniffed: "You should talk."

"One day I will make me a pair of snow boots out of that what-is-it!" Monk vowed as he warmed up the racer.

Bunning the motor, the apish chemist sent the trim craft tearing into the wind. His takeoff had all the earmarks of a reckless attempt to see how firmly anchored the wings were. Ham hung onto his hat and cane like a man expecting disaster.

But none came. The racer took to the air like an intent hornet.

After a time, the big dirigible disengaged from its mooring mast and swung up-and-away majestically. The *silence* of its going was uncanny.

Monk wagged his wings at it before heading east to Palm Springs.

"I hope," he said fervently, "that we meet up with those 2 rascals Happy and Harry before the day is out."

"I for one," rejoined Ham, "am looking forward to clashing with Sam Flash once more."

"Get in line, shyster. That backlot buckaroo is probably behind everything that's been happening."

Contrarily, Ham said: "I feel that King Neptune Kling was in cahoots with Flash."

"Well, he's dead now. So it don't matter," countered Monk.

"The Wrangled Dude" proved to be one of those celluloid confections to which modern Hollywood is addicted. Ostensibly a Western, it was set in the present day.

Thus when the posse set out after the outlaws, they started off in up-to-date automobiles and gave chase as far as the blacktop held out. After which everyone -- deputies and bandits alike -- switched to shod horses and continued the festivities.

They were filming such a scene when Monk and Ham drove up in their rented car. It had been their plan to drop off Pat Savage at a Palm Springs hotel. But the **bronze**-haired girl was dozing so soundly that they decided to lock her up in the plane's cockpit where she could sleep in relative comfort.

Sam Flash was astride an Arabian stallion such as no cowboy had ever mounted. He was even more than usual a striking sight.

A ten-gallon hat balanced on his head. His cream-colored shirt resembled the frosting on a birthday cake. His chaps were woolly sheepskin more appropriate for a Montana winter than the desert. And a sheriff's star (an incongruous touch given his ensemble) was pinned to his jutting shirt front.

"All right, boy!" he was shouting through a director's megaphone. "In this scene we ride a-fannin' and a-foggin' after the desperados and have us a good old-fashioned shootin' bee!"

The arrival of Monk Mayfair and ham Brooks stopped him cold. His toothy smile seemed to ooze into insignificance.

"Don't tell me you two finally broke jail," he said momentarily forgetting his Western accent.

"We were released," Ham imparted. "have you not heard of the latest attacks on Hollywood?"

Sam Flash recovered his smile and his accent.

"Why do yuh think I came clear down here? Figgered I'd let matter blows over a mite."

Then he suddenly noticed the box tucked under Monk's hand.

"What's that yuh got there?"

Monk said: "It's a **demon** banisher."

Sam Flash dismounted. "How's that again?"

"This device will protect us from the **red things**," Ham clarified.

"That so? Let me have a look-see."

Monk said: "Not a chance. It's too valuable to let it out of our hands. We're here on Doc's orders."

"To do what?"

"To protect everybody."

"That's right kind of you boys," Sam Flash grinned. "But who's gonna find us way out here?"

"We found you," Ham said pointedly.

"Yeah," added Monk. "And maybe you're forgettin' most of the red things have come down over desert and beach sand."

Sam Flash looked startled.

"Hadn't reckoned so," he mumbled.

He glanced up toward the sky but the broad brim of his hat seemed to get in the way. Worry melted his perpetually sunny expression.

Before he could say anything more, Ham asked coolly: "Where are Happy and Harry?"

"Wish I knew. Dang fools ain't showed their long faces since that *demon* dust devil lit upon my studio and chased off muh Injun extras."

"Kinda interesting that they both work for you and they're probably the ones calling down the *red things*," Monk said meaningly.

Sam Flash spat into the sand. "Don't mean nothin'."

"Don't it?" Monk countered.

"No."

"It points the finger of suspicion directly at you," said Ham the lawyer.

"Why would I attack muh own studio if I controlled these *demons*?" Sam Flash asked, not unreasonably.

"Maybe that was a blind," Ham suggested. "Maybe you wished to make yourself look like a victim when in fact your actual aim was to terrorize your competition out of business."

"Yeah," added Monk. "Could be that you wanted to become the biggest mogul in Hollywood."

"Not me. I got no such lofty ambitions. There's plenty of gold in the Hollywood hills for everyone. I'm just workin' muh claim is all."

Ham regarded the ludicrous cowpoke with a dubious eye.

"Suddenly Monk Mayfair moved in and harvested Sam Flash's pearl-handled pistols.

"Hey! What in blue blazes do yuh ..."

"Anybody who knew anything about the red things went around loaded for demon," Monk said. "What I mean is they carried tear gas shells.

Monk tossed one six-gun to Ham. They each broke open the action of their captured weapon.

Then Monk's mouth fell roundly open. Ham's sharp features grew slack.

"Lead!" Monk muttered. "Ordinary lead slugs."

"Give me back muh Peacemakers," Same Flash sputtered. "And clear off muh spread!"

Ham said: "Not before we have a look at those gas tanks in the old mining camp."

"Already done that. They're just tanks. Nothin' unusual about 'em."

"Did you open the valves?" Monk demanded.

"Do you take me for a consarned idiot?" Sam Flash retorted. " 'Course not. I left 'em where they lay."

Monk said to Ham: "Come on, clothes-horse. Let's mosey over and have us a look."

They discovered the tank in an abandoned dynamite shack a fair distance from the Sun-baked shells that comprised the forlorn old ghost town.

There were five of the tanks. Long heavy steel cylinders. No markings anywhere to indicate their contents. Desert dust indicated that they had lain there some interval of time.

"I'm for testin' my theory," Monk said hoisting one tank up onto its base.

Ham blanched. "Won't that summon ..."

"Not if I take a quick whiff.

The simian chemist gave the valve a twist producing a low *hissing*. He sniffed of the gas and then quickly closed the valve.

"No odor," Monk said.

But his high-pitched voice came out sounding weirdly distorted. It was not the normal squeak that made the hair chemist sometimes sound like a small boy.

Ham howled in horror. "Monk! What happened to your voice!"

But Monk laughed. The sound was comical like the sailor speaking in the movie cartoons.

"That proves it's helium," he squealed. "It gets into your windpipe and on account of it's lighter than air, causes the vocal chords to vibrate easier."

At that last syllable, his distorted tones were resuming normalcy.

"Then that part is settled," decided Ham.

Returning to Sam Flash who was trying to set up a movie shot, Monk announced: "We're stayin'."

"Suit yourself. But if yuh want to make yoreselves useful, rustle up proper outfits and mounts. I could use some extras in this scene.

Ham sniffed disdainfully. But for his part, Monk grinned widely.

"Be happy to. C'mon, fashion plate. You know Doc's orders."

Several minutes later, Monk Mayfair stepped out of a dressing tent. Ham Brooks doubled over with convulsive laughter.

Monk's apish physique made him a bit bowlegged. But attired in denim and flannels with a bright red neckerchief around his thick throat, six-gungs on his too-small hips, and a ten-gallon hat on his rust-furred bullet-of-a-head, he was the picture of a working cowhand.

"You," Ham tittered, "are a sight!"

"Smile when you say that, shyster," Monk growled.

He started forward. His spurs *jingled* as he walked.

"But you do look the part, I must admit," Ham marveled. "As bandy-legged as a bull gorilla, too!"

From the production company's string, Monk picked out a mount. It was a sturdy roan as barrel-chested as the apish chemist himself. He vaulted into the saddle and settled in as if born there. He stuffed his supermachine pistol into a saddle pouch.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "Powder River! Ye-e-o-w! I'm wild and wooly and covered in fleas! And I ain't been curried below my knees!"

Ham frowned. There were plenty of attractive young women working in the movie camp. Monk's boisterous outburst had drawn their attention. Now they began congregating about him.

And the hairy chemist was lapping it up. Strangely, young women found his pleasantly homely features irresistible. Fuming, Ham repaired to the tent to get appropriate Western togs for himself.

The dapper lawyer was climbing into them when Monk Mayfair's normally squeaky voice rose to a full roar.

"Ham! Ham!"

Half-clothed, Ham Brooks poked his well-tonsured head out of the tent flap.

"What is it, ape-wits?"

"Up on those rocks. Skulkers!"

Ham craned his neck to see. Two men with black bandanas tied over their lower faces were clambering along the rocks. They toted rifles. Their garb was Western. Dungarees and faded cotton work shirts.

"Don't be a dope," Ham sneered. "Those are extras."

"Mebbe," Monk muttered. "But the way they're movin', they kinda remind me of Happy and Harry."

Monk urged his mount around and located Sam Flash by a canteen truck drinking iced tea from a paper cup.

"Did you send extras up into those rocks?" he demanded.

Shading his eyes from the brutal sun, Sam Flash peered upward.

"Nope. We're not shootin' up yonder today."

"I got a notion," said Monk, "that Happy and Harry have wandered back home."

Sam Flash brightened. "Then let's saddle up and run 'em to ground!"

Before the apish chemist could object, Sam Flash hopped in the saddle and went tearing off. Monk wheeled his roan and dashed off in pursuit.

"Hold up, you one-man stampede!" Monk howled after him.

Sam Flash howled back: "I got me a score to settle with them mangy mavericks for disruptin' my castin' session."

Spurring their mounts, the wild-riding duo started up the hills.

Ham Brooks soon joined them. He was attired in a blue Cavalry uniform. The tunic flap was hanging loose half-buttoned.

He cried out: "Do we know it's them?"

"We don't," Monk called back. "But we will shortly."

Sam Flash made it to the top first. He pulled up short and matched Colts appeared in his hands like magic.

"Reach for a rain cloud!" he shouted. "And drop that tank!"

It proved to be an unfortunate choice of words.

Happy and Harry (if in fact these were them) whirled, sighted Sam Flash, and lifted their rifles. These were single-action Winchester carbines. They began working the levers. Bullets began to fly. Shrill and spiteful, they snapped past ears.

Sam Flash unloosed lead Hollywood-style firing each pistol in alteration. He spurred his stallion forward.

The 2 masked men had horses waiting. They mounted them and took off.

Contrary to Hollywood, it is as difficult to hit a man on the run as it is to shoot accurately from the saddle. The result of these undeniable facts was that hot lead whizzed and ricocheted but no one was hurt. A great deal of desert sand was kicked up and 2 saguaro cactus lost spiny arms.

Where bedrolls would naturally be tied behind their saddles bounced **2 steel cylinders**. Noticing them, Monk yelled: "Hey! Stop firin', blast it!"

Sam Flash perhaps heard and did not heed the hairy chemist's bellowing exhortation. Or possibly he was riled up that he just didn't care.

Flash squeezed off a few more shots.

One, inevitably, struck a tank. Other than the southern portions of the horses, they were the largest targets presented. And glinting in the Sun, they naturally attracted the eye.

One tank collected 2 holes. The abrupt *exhalation* of compressed gas could be heard even above the thunder of hoofs on sand and rock.

"Too late!" Ham wailed.

"We're in for it now!" Monk said.

He pulled up and turned to the dapper lawyer.

"Give me your machine pistol, shyster."

"Why?"

"Because you're goin' back for Long Tom's bug bamboozler."

"Don't think for a minute that I don't know what you're up to," Ham retorted hotly. "I'm not leaving you to face those things alone!"

Monk bellowed: "Now! There ain't any time to argue!"

Against his better judgment, the dapper barrister turned scowling and urged his horse down the ravine.

With a supermachine pistol gripped in each hairy fist, Monk Mayfair took the reins in his teeth and started in the direction of the fleeing trio.

He was not so much interested in them as he was in the sky.

The *apparition* did not appear for at least five minutes. Or possibly six.

Monk saw it clearly. It had an indefinite shape rather like an anvil-headed storm. It was as *red* as cranberry juice.

At first it seemed to drift down from somewhere. There was no discernable sound, either.

Then came a drone. That swelled into a **buzz** and the buzz grew testy. The vaporous *thing* began whirling.

Possibly the looming cloud might not have been noticed. But the angry sounds certainly arrested all attention.

The fleeing masked men heard them. They swapped uneasy looks and suddenly took off in opposite directions. Evidently the idea was to confuse the *Cloud* and possibly escape it.

As a stratagem, conceivably this might have worked. Except that one bandit was carrying a potted pressurized tank which continued to leak an invisible gas.

The ruby *thing* seemed to know this. Altering shape, *it* began swooping down toward the rider with the ruptured tank.

And "swooping" accurately described its motion. *It* had been drifting down. But now *it* veered and moved definitely in the unfortunate rider's direction. Too slow, he realized his peril.

Too late, he pulled up ... dismounted ... and gave his mount's flank a hardy whack with his hat.

The horse ran off. The rider lunged in the other direction. Steadily turning the color of a lump of a **coal**, the spinning red *thing* went unerringly for the man. *Its* constantly-shifting face seemed to gather up into a cloudy visage that was *demonic* in cast. *It* closed in.

The rider's *scream* was blood-curdling unnatural. It splintered out like a superheated blade of sound. Other noises followed, high and horrific.

They were soon consumed by the frenzied shrilling that the cyclonic *red thing* made as it turned pitch **black** and engulfed him.

It seemed to melt into the desert floor which turned as pale as *ice*. The pallid patch briefly smoked as dry ice does in hot weather.

Monk Mayfair had no time to watch anymore. It was too horrible. And besides, another funnel *Cloud* was coming down.

He rode forward and reached Sam Flash who sat stunned in his saddle. The latter said nothing, his wide blue eyes riveted on the heavens. Taking up a defensive position, Monk began spraying **tear gas** in all directions.

Sam Flash collapsed in his saddle choking and coughing. His Arabian stallion shook its magnificent head and snorted wildly. It began nickering in confused circles. Monk himself had clapped a gas mask on and thus remained unaffected.

Ham Brooks rode up shortly thereafter and handed Monk the insect eliminator device. Hastily the dapper lawyer yanked on his own gas mask.

The apish chemist took it. He made fierce faces while he fiddled with the controls.

No sound emerged from the device. But soon the red **Cloud** began to hesitate. **It** shifted north and then east. Then as if discouraged, **It** rose back up into the blue vault of the California sky.

They watched **it** go. It seemed disappointed as **it** lifted going from red to pink and azure. Or possibly **it** sublimed into the higher atmosphere in much the same way its brethren had melted into the hot sands.

Very rapidly, **it** was gone from view.

They searched for the missing riders. One had gotten away.

Where the other had fallen, the desert floor all around was a crystalline patch of white as if all the color had been leached out of the sand. It *smoked* faintly. Monk picked up a stone and pitched it. The stone sank from sight as if into quicksand.

"Not a trace," Ham breathed wonderingly.

"The other one got away," Sam Flash complained.

He was breathing more normally now. His toothy smile had a withered quality.

Monk said: "It's a cinch that they were after those gas tanks."

"But why?" mused Ham.

"Dunno," admitted Monk. "Maybe they're runnin' out of helium with which to do their dirty work."

"Maybe now you'll believe me when I say I'm not in cahoots with those rascallions," Sam Flash bit out.

"Why would believe that?" asked Monk.

The movie mogul hesitated.

"Why, maybe ... Just maybe old King Neptune sicced 'em on me."

"Why would he do that?" wondered Ham. "And what would his motivation be?"

"Maybe to keep an eye on muh side of our business."

Ham Brooks eyed Sam Flash suspiciously.

"You seem awfully confident on that point."

Sam Flash took off his oversized hat. He expectorated onto the ground making a moist patch on the furnace-hot dust-fine sand, patches of which fried white and dry in the space of seconds.

"I got me a little confession to make," he muttered uncomfortably.

"What's that?" Monk prodded.

"Remember that oil roughneck that had been a private detective? Hondo Stevens?"

Ham said: "What about him?"

"He was muh man. I had planted him at the Neptune field just to keep an eye on muh half of the business."

"Do you think that was why he was killed?" Monk demanded.

"I don't know it," said Sam Flash. "But darned if I shore do suspect it."

"We have only your word on that," returned Ham.

"Maybe so. But if I could plant a man at Neptune field, Amos Kling could sneak two into Flash Pictures. Take muh meaning?"

"It's vaguely possible," Ham admitted.

"Well if that's so, there's only one of 'em left now," gritted Monk. "Whoever that *demon* got, he's down in the 'hot place' even as we speak.

With that cheerful pronouncement ringing in their ears, they remounted and headed back toward the movie location.

"You're not yet out of your suspicions?" Sam Flash ventured.

"Betcher boots," admitted Monk. "We're keeping an eye on you until Doc takes care of his end."

"What 'end' is that?"

Monk and Ham declined to reply.

The truth was that they had no idea of what the **Bronze Man** intended or how he planned to go about things.

Their unbounded admiration for Doc Savage notwithstanding, future prospects looked bleak.

There seemed to be no end to the *red demons* from above.

XX

Later ...



... Pat Savage becomes an unwilling Whore !

XVII – Stratosphere Storm

Doc Savage piloted the stratosphere dirigible to the Neptune oil field in Bakersfield and prepared to land. Inasmuch as an oil field normally is no place to moor such craft, this presented some difficulties.

Fortunately, the *Man of Bronze* had designed the silver airship for emergency landings of all sorts. He promptly became busy at the controls.

Valving gas, Doc allowed the stratosphere craft to settle into position. He dropped lines and men positioned on the ground rushed to hold the dirigible steady. With one alert eye on the needle of the extremely efficient mooring eye indicator, the **bronze giant** goosed the throttles and carefully brought the nose in line with one of the might derricks.

The mooring cup could not fit over this of course. But Renny Renwick, positioned there, reached out and pulled a grappling hook affair from the airship nose and clamped it to the derrick girderwork, made it fast. There was some little wind. So the airship swung gently on its improvised mooring.

A cable line was lowered from the tail. It pulled along the ground and affixed to another derrick. The line was paid out from a reel. And when Long Tom Roberts threw a lever the other way, the reel reversed itself. The slack went taut and the silver airship stood strung between 2 derrick towers.

Doc, Long Tom, and Johnny climbed down via a rope ladder to the ground. Renny rushed up to meet them, his long face mournful.

"The trucks just arrived, Doc," he reported.

"How is the piping operation coming?"

"It took a while to organize a gang. But I spread enough money around to do the trick."

Indeed, the oil field was a beehive of activity. Men were running pipe from the wildcat wells. Even the one Doc had previously plugged with lead had been tapped.

Normally natural gas must be burnt off before oil can be pumped from a new well. Sometimes this gas is piped out for commercial purposes.

In the space of a morning and a piece of afternoon, Renny had organized a pipeline construction gang to siphon off all the excess gas they could. It was being transferred to large steel tanks and sealed. The sulfurous odor of rotten eggs testified to this activity.

Doc Savage strode over to a line of trucks. They resembled the type of tanker trucks that carry oil in the big cities in the East. Only these, however, were gas trucks. They had only lately arrived.

Signs on the trucks warned: DANGER FLAMMABLE

"We will begin operations to replace the helium gas in the dirigible with hydrogen," Doc directed.

Renny turned to the waiting truckers. "Give a listen! We're going to start the transfer as soon as we bleed the main gas compartment."

The men shifted. They looked nervous.

"It's a safe procedure," Renny added.

But that did not seem to entirely satisfy the men. One reached for a cigarette before someone slapped it out of his hands with a muted curse.

"It's not so safe you couldn't blow us all up if you took a mind to!" the other snarled.

The next few hours were very busy.

Under Doc Savage's supervision, the gasbag was drained of lifting gas. Simple petcocks made this easy. The transfer of dangerous hydrogen gas was a more difficult operation because they were not in a hangar where the skin of the airship could be accessed via catwalks.

When Doc had designed his stratosphere dirigible (this was the latest improvement in several versions), it was to make the maintenance and handling of the big airship as safe and as simple as mechanically possible. This included provisions for pumping gas in through inflation inlets situated in the keel which in turn led to conduits feeding directly into the gasbag.

Dirigibles are typically constructed to accommodate numerous gas ballonets housed within the structure. Doc Savage had bettered that design with an ingenious arrangement of compartments so that the entire gasbag functioned as a lifting body. This made for comparative ease of operation.

The biggest challenge was getting tanker truck hoses into the apertures. This was done through special adapters.

Due to the rigid construction of the airship, the skin betrayed no sign of the transfer. At times, the dirigible did sag closer to the ground however.

Great care was taken to empty and refill the main gas compartment so as not to upset the gigantic craft. This was done by draining and replacing the center of the 3 compartments first. Then the tail. And finally the nose section. The great ship was designed to remain aloft even if one segment was ruptured and devoid of all lifting agent.

By sundown, the arduous task was completed. Then and only then was the airship brought as close to the ground as possible and the spare tanks of siphoned natural gas brought into the control gondola through a hatch.

This too was done with exceeding care. Natural gas is extremely flammable, often being a devil's brew of propane, butane, and in this particular instance an unusual amount of helium. One mishap would produce a memorable conflagration.

Doc performed the last stage of the operation himself. He recharged the nodules at the sides and top of the big gasbag. This time, a **tear** agent was not used but rather another type of gas. He wore no

protective gas mask during the stage which indicated the replacement gas was odorless as well as harmless to humans.

Once he was back on the ground and the hydrogen gas tanker trucks had departed, Renny strode up to him and said: "Things have simmered down in Hollywood."

Doc nodded. "Any word of Monk and Ham?"

"No. But according to the radio, 2 *Demon Clouds* tried to attack the Flash Pictures desert location. Reports say that one was beaten off."

Doc nodded. He was donning his stratosphere suit. He attached a supermachine pistol to a lanyard so that it hung loose but handy. An object resembling a metal egg went into a zipper pocket.

Then the *Bronze Man* accepted from Long Tom the original insect eradicator device.

Doc announced: "This part of my plan will be too dangerous for any of you to come along."

Johnny Littlejohn started to protest. "Now see here ..."

Doc cut him off.

"Reclaim our speed plane which we left here the other day and then follow me up."

"Okay, Doc," rumbled Renny in a worried voice.

Climbing back aboard, Doc Savage sealed the airship hatch while the others rushed to the opposing oil derricks to release the giant craft. This was easily and expertly accomplished.

The airship shuddered ... rose ... and then one-by-one the big Diesel motors started to kick in. These could be pivoted in unison so that the propellers tilted down providing a vertical push upward. Doc engaged this ingenious feature. The silver craft rose straight up under her own power.

Renny and the others wasted no time in reclaiming their abandoned speed plane. It took some doing to get it off the ground. Doc would have managed it easily. But although he was an expert pilot, Renny still struggled to clear a copse of spruce trees.

Alone in the control gondola, Doc Savage busied himself in overseeing the dirigible's ascent. Although one man could handle simple maneuvers, close attention had to be paid to such factors as wind speed, drift, and a host of other aggravations that nettle all pilots of lighter-than-air craft.

But the dirigible encountered no difficulty as it lifted ponderously into the stratosphere. The propellers were reoriented for horizontal propulsion. Thereafter they ran smoothly.

The speed plane followed it up as far as its ceiling allowed. Then it fell to making circles under the airship's position.

Dusk was coming on. At the controls, Doc Savage looked as grim and obdurate as a statue cast in cold *bronze*.

In time, he spied the scintillating *Nimbus* of blue. It hung there patiently as if awaiting his return.

Using his binoculars, the *Bronze Man* studied it for a time. Then advancing the throttles, he sent the airship carefully inching toward the waiting *nebulousity*.

A curious phenomenon resulted ...

As he approached it, the cloudy thing seemed drawn to him. Now *it* visibly retreated.

Doc fed the engines fuel. The *Nimbus* pulled back. Its *nebular* shape began to fray at the edges becoming hazy and indistinct.

Time passed. The airship was beating toward the Pacific coast. And with each mile, the *nebular* mass of an object gave way moving backward.

Once-or-twice *it* shifted north. But Doc reset his course and pushed *it* back toward the Pacific. He might have been a fantastic cowboy driving an unearthly herd of cattle or Paul Bunyan nudging along his fabulous blue ox Babe.

At no time did any trace of expression later his *metallic* features. And yet a film of perspiration bathed them, attesting to mental strain.

Over the Pacific, the *Man of Bronze* shifted tactics.

He switched off the insect eliminator. The *Nimbus* seemed to settle down. *It* no longer retreated although *it* held its position as the airship continued droning toward *it*.

A bronze hand reached for a bank of electrical switches. In unison, Doc threw them. Detonations sounded along the airship sides. These were the nodules designed to release gas to discourage would-be thieves.

The gas that was released appeared to have the opposite effect, however.

The *Nimbus* suddenly swung into motion. *It* advanced on the approaching dirigible. *It* moved as with a will. Doc Savage seemed to expect this reaction for he had charged the nodules with helium.

He was attired in his stratosphere suit. To this was affixed a regulation Army parachute. Up here in the airless stratosphere, it would do little good for there was insufficient air to act as a break on the 'chute bell and also too cold to safely jump withal.

The glimmering blue *Thing* came on. Doc threw another row of switches. More muffled detonations came. Soon the airship was engulfed in a hazy azure *accumulation* that was attracted to the spreading cloud of released helium.

Reacting swiftly, the **Bronze Man** began to sink the airship. Normally he might have engaged the powerful rocket tubes. But with explosive hydrogen filling the gas compartments, it was too dangerous to do so.

The cobalt-colored **Halo** followed the airship down into warmer oxygen-filled air. **It** seemed to be irresistibly drawn to the dirigible the way that a night-flying moth is drawn toward light.

Doc maintained firm control over his big craft. His regular profile was set. The gold **flakes** in his eerie **eyes** were all that moved. They resembled twin aureate **gales**.

Down down the airship sank, its nose pointing earthward at a steeper-and-steeper angle. He seized handholds and braced himself.

Doc touched a microphone cam.

"Renny. Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Doc."

"Keep your distance. Watch for em."

"Watch for you where?"

But the **Bronze Man** did not reply. He was too busy

Renny's voice over the airwaves crashed.

"Doc! You're looking to hit the water! Pull up! Pull Up!!!"

Instead, the **Man of Bronze** sank the ship further and further.

Through the windscreen, all that was visible was a **Halo** of gaseous blue. **It** swirled and danced as if imbued with mischievous intelligence.

Slowly the corpuscle particles began to take on a **pinkish** hue. Individual specks could be discerned. Some began to assume the hematic hue of **gore**.

The warning color motivated him to extract a steel grenade from a pocket. It was about the size of a goose egg. Arming this by <flicking> a lever, Doc placed it beside a gas tank. The grenade was equipped with a timer. He set this.

Throwing it open, he flung himself out with the bug killer under one arm.

Doc plummeted through the churning nebulosity. There was no avoiding it. He had kept his stratosphere suit on even though it was no longer necessary.

He passed through the madly-swirling **matter** without incident.

Tumbling, the **Bronze Man** contorted his big body until he was facing downward. He cracked his 'chute. Silk spilled and blossomed as he was violently yanked up against his own web harness.

Above him the stratosphere dirigible was entirely enveloped by a nuclear **Mass** of crimson. It was darkening by the second.

A drone could be heard. It quickly took on an angry quality remindful of countless cicadas in a heat wave.

Spilling air, Doc Savage fought desperately to get out from under the falling mass. For there was no doubt about it. The airship was plummeting as if weighed down by whatever active matter had surrounded it. A few of the blue **things** followed him down pinwheeling wildly.

Doc reached out and seized one. But when he opened his gloved hand, it had turned **red**. Hastily he shook **it** off.

Another wove about his expressionless as if **it** were curious. **It** regarded him with 3 tiny white eyes set in a triangular head. Doc unlimbered his machine-pistol and let loose with a short burst.

Tear gas gushed in gray threads. The **blue** and **red** sparks fled madly, their gyrations suggesting panic.

Unexpectedly, Doc Savage hit the water. So concerned was he with protecting himself from the tiny **things** swarming all around him that he failed to quite realize how close to the heaving ocean he had fallen.

The **Bronze Man** struck feet-first. Which had not been his intention. Kicking off boots and hitting the quick release on his 'chute harness, he shook himself free of all entanglement. Thus liberated, he managed to swim for the surface.

He looked up. If **horror** ever rode Doc Savage's normally inscrutable features, it rode it now.

The ailing airship was not directly overhead. But neither had Doc cleared the descending gasbag. And the **grenade** intended to turn the hydrogen and natural gas into an **inferno** was only seconds away from detonating!

Above, a tumultuous boiling mass of scarlet **particles** were consuming the airship. Bits of silvery envelope skin actually fell away like cinders off a conflagration.

As Doc watched, the red **monster** of a thing turned darker-and-darker rapidly taking on the hue of a lump of **coal**.

A cindery substance like **black hail** began hitting the water. When **they** hit, each *hissed and spat* like water dropping on a hot skillet. Doc plunged underwater. There was nothing else for him to do if he wished to preserve his life.

A shadow blotted out the Sun. He swam deep and then toward land, keeping himself underwater the entire time. Possibly his training at the hands of the pearl divers of the South Seas saved his breath this time. For no other living man could hold his breath underwater as long as he.

But even so, Doc did not entirely escape falling under the shadow of the descending *Demon*.

From the safety of their circling speed plane, Renny and Johnny watched all this with concern etching their features.

"Here it comes!" Renny yelled.

Johnny Littlejohn gaped in awe. For once, his long words failed him.

The black *mass* touched the water ...

... and then it was gone! Just like that! There was no sound. It was eerie, uncanny. A whitish scum was left on the heaving brine.

Otherwise it was as if the huge black *monster* had consumed the stratosphere dirigible and then digested itself into nothingness.

The grenade never did detonate. It had been consumed. Timer, primer, and explosive charge.

When Doc Savage sensed no *shadow* above him and his straining lungs could take it no longer, his head broke the surface. He looked around. There was no sign that a monstrous *denizen* of the stratosphere had fallen onto the Pacific. And no trace of his stratosphere dirigible at all.

It was as if all had evaporated like so much smoke.

XX

Very soon ...



... sophisticated Pat Savage is a (Forced) Sex-Slave !

XVIII – The One Who Was Stung

Doc Savage had not survived his life of perilous adventure because he was overly reliant upon Lady Luck. Far from it.

Every eventuality that the **Bronze Man** might encounter as he walked the paths of Danger had been taken into consideration. He believed in taking precautions and of being prepared for the unexpected. And almost always, this trait had paid off.

For one, all his fleet of planes were amphibians (i.e., capable of landing on water as well as ground).

Coupled with the fact that Doc had maneuvered the destruction of his stratosphere dirigible to take place over the ocean but within swimming distance of land greatly enhanced his chances for survival.

Even as exhausted as he was, it might have been possible that he could have managed the long swim back to dry land. But that was not necessary.

Instead, he set out toward the speed plane piloted by his aides which had come slanting downward and thudded across the Pacific. It in this particular stretch fortuitously lived up to its name. A bony monstrosity of a **hand** (Renny's) reached out and assisted the **Bronze Man** into the cabin.

Doc had previously shrugged off his dripping stratosphere suit and now stood in the black silk swimming trunks which he habitually wore instead of underwear. His physical development, perfected over years of intense training, was awe inspiring. He might have been a marvelous machine of metal **muscles** brought to life by some modern sorcerer.

"Holy cow, Doc!" Renny said admiringly. "That was as close as shave as you've ever scraped through!"

"The menace may not yet be over with," Doc advised.

From the radio compartment, Long Tom called back.

"Monk just radioed in. They caught Happy and Harry pulling something down at the movie location. Sam Flash organized a posse of extras to run down the one that got away."

"What happened to the one that did not?" Doc asked.

Renny <snapped> a finger and thumb producing a **report** like a firecracker.

"**Demon** got him."

The big engineer jumped into the control bucket. Doc dropped into a seat and let the tension ooze out of his muscular **bronze** body. It could be noticed that his **metallic** hair and skin were already drying. They had the peculiar quality of shedding moisture in the fashion of a duck's back.

"The insect eliminator was lost," he told Long Tom.

The puny electrical wizard said: "I can build another one."

And that was all they ever said of it. Long Tom would have conceivably sacrificed his left arm for that device. But it had been lost in a good cause.

The big speed plane limbered up ... began knocking across the gently heaving waves ... and then got on step. Its motors howling, it vaulted into the sky and bore east toward palm Springs.

"What was that *thing*?" Johnny Littlejohn asked at length.

"Things," Doc corrected. "It was not one thing but rather a colony of creatures."

"Whence did *they* come?"

"We might never know for certain," Doc admitted. "Perhaps *they* were hitherto undiscovered inhabitants of the upper reaches of the stratosphere. Possibly they came to Earth from interstellar space attracted by helium gas that continuously escapes our atmosphere."

"From Space!" grunted Renny. "Now that's a new one!"

"An extraterrestrial enigma," said Johnny.

No one needed to translate that jawbreaker. For once, they understood the bony archeologist's comment from its context.

The speed plane traversed the distance to Palm Springs in an amazingly short period of time. Doc broke off his explanations and took the copilot seat. Renny relinquished the controls. So great was the **Bronze Man's** reservoir of strength and stamina that the short flight had restored him.

Below, the movie camp looked deserted.

"Durn clouds must have scared 'em away," Renny observed.

A worm of dust was crawling to the south deeper into the Mojave Desert. It hung in the bright air like a brownish haze

Renny dug out binoculars and trained them on the dust trail.

"Looks like a posse all right," he pronounced. "They're trackin' a lone rider. I don't see any gun smoke, thought."

Doc picked up a microphone.

"Doc Savage calling Monk Mayfair. Come in, Monk."

After a moment, the hairy chemist's squeaky voice came over the cabin loudspeaker.

"Here, Doc," Monk said. *"We're still tryin' to run Happy to ground."*

Ham's voice interjected. *"It's Harry. Not Happy."*

*"We're gainin'," Monk added. "But we don't dare shoot on account of he's carryin' a helium tank tied to his saddle. Puncturin' the other one was what brought down the **red howler** that are up Harry. If it was Harry."*

"Take whichever one is still alive," Doc ordered. "He is the key to the mystery."

"Gotcha, Doc."

The homely chemist lifted his voice in a whooping howl.

"Hurrah! Powder River!"

The rataplan of surging horse's hooves came over the air. Monk signed off.

The **Bronze Man** wrenched the speed plane back toward the movie camp where the ground was sufficiently hard to allow for a safe landing.

Doc set down beside his personal racing ship which had conveyed Monk and Ham to the location. Pat Savage was still asleep in the cockpit where she had been placed upon landing lest she awaken in the dark confines of the cargo hatch and cause a commotion.

Pat was having bad dreams ...



Emerging from the speed plan, the **Man of Bronze** saw that the location camp was all but deserted.

"We will ride out to the mining ghost town," he announced.

They commandeered mounts and started off. By this time Doc had donned fresh clothes. Whipcord trousers and a white shirt which he wore open at the collar.

As expected, the ghost town was deserted. It was a desolate place standing there exposed to the relentless Sun and desert heat. All color had been bleached from the wood of the surviving buildings. It

had the macabre quality of a bone yard. Flies buzzed about the place in a vain search for morsels of food.

"Isn't there any place on Earth free of insects?" Long Tom complained. Conceivably he was reflecting upon the loss of his valuable insect eliminator.

Doc moved from shack-to-shack until he found the cache of steel canisters.

"We will take them out into the open," he announced.

They did so with Doc and Renny managing one apiece while Long Tom and Johnny shared the burden of the third one. The canisters were quite heavy.

Once they were laid out in the sand, Doc Savage said: "One aspect of this mystery that was noteworthy early on was how many of the so-called *Copper Clouds* attacked their victims over desert or beach."

"Why is that?" asked Johnny.

"It was possible to bury one of these tanks in sand; open the valve by hand or through a timing device; and allow the helium to seep up through the loose-packed sand grains. Later the tank could be excavated and the sand groomed smooth without leaving any sign. It would be a feat impossible in ordinary soil."

Long Tom asked: "What about the autos and planes that were attacked?"

"Tanks clamped under chassis or in other locations. In those cases -- as with the plane that was thought to carry Professor Clement and the newsreel camera truck in the Mojave when the so-called *demons* consumed their victims -- the tanks were also reduced to a powdery grit that could not be distinguished from other residue."

"I still don't get what them *demon* monsters were," Renny said gloomily.

"Later," replied Doc. "Has everyone sufficient *tear-gas* shells to defend themselves?"

After their weapons were examined and found to be in good working order, Long Tom demanded:

"What are you going to do, Doc?"

From his belt, the *bronze* giant produced a machine pistol of his own. He checked its action and seemed quietly satisfied.

"We are going to call down a *demon*."

No one made any comment. They had seen too much of the *screaming desert demons* to savor the prospect.

Kneeling, Doc opened all 3 valves. Compressed gas started hissing out. Invisible odorless helium began ascending into the sky. If unchecked, they all knew that it would eventually find its way high beyond the atmosphere and into the **cold** reaches of interstellar Space.

Standing in a circle around the leaking tanks with superfirers at the ready, they waited silent and tense, prepared to fire or flee as the occasion demanded.

Time dragged past. 10 ... 15 ... 20 minutes. The reddening Sun approached the horizon. The clear blue sky remained blue and clear.

"Maybe," Renny rumbled at last, "you did for all of them?"

Doc dropped his supermachine pistol to his side.

"So it would appear."

An unusual fatigue colored his normally vibrant voice. His bronze skin displayed a pale undertone.

They let the last tank vent until it ceased *hissing*.

Nothing **red** or **angry** appeared. The only audible sound was the sifting of sand blown by a wayward breeze. To the west, the burning Sun painted everything in hues of lavender and rose.

Satisfied, they rode back to camp to await developments.

Developments were not long in coming.

A voice crackled over their pocket radios. It was Ham Brooks this time.

"Doc, we caught Harry. His horse gave out."

"We are at the location," Doc informed him, "and will ride out to meet you."

The **Bronze Man** and his men mounted up and encountered the others after a quarter-hour of riding. The returning posse was quite a feast for the eyes.

Sam Flash had insisted on riding square in front. He was grinning from ear-to-ear and looked like an advance man for a rodeo circus.

"Howdy!" he cried. "Looks like we're gonna have us a hangin'."

Harry (if it was indeed 'Harry') scowled at those words. He was riding in the middle of the procession of riders. He did not appear to have much choice in the matter. From all sides, guns were trained on him.

Everyone dismounted and hobbled their horses. Monk strode over to the prisoner and hauled him out of the saddle using the hairy beams of his arms.

"You," he said fiercely, "have some tall explaining to do."

The apish chemist grog-marched him over to Doc Savage and the others. The captive had no fight left in him. He went meekly.

"Stay back, men," Sam Flash announced. "This won't be any sight for weak stummicks. We might be havin' a necktie party."

Then for Doc Savage's benefit, he added: "It's the dramatic in my soul."

Doc addressed the prisoner. "You are Happy."

"Am not," the prisoner replied squirting out a stream of tobacco juice. "Harry's my handle."

"It is pointless to lie," Doc told him. "I recognize you. And it does not matter which one you are. The death house in San Quentin will accept either of you."

Happy looked crestfallen.

"I ain't talkin'," he mumbled thickly.

"Who do you really work for?" Doc demanded.

Happy <jerked> a sunburned thumb in the direction of Sam Flash.

"That two-reel cowpuncher there."

Sam Flash scowled. "I ain't denyin' the truth of his words. I hired him myself. Him and his sunbuster sidewinder of a compañero."

Doc pressed on. "Where is Amos Kling?"

Happy spat elaborately. "Ain't you heard? A **red cloud** got him."

Doc regarded Happy steadily.

"There is a way you can escape execution," he advised.

"Yep. A good lawyer. Which I can't afford anyhow.

I maintain an **institution**," explained the **Bronze Man**, "in which men are taught ne skills and released back into society after atoning for their crimes."

Happy suddenly rediscovered his orneriness.

"Don't kid me none," he spat. "You can't prove I done nothing except try to grab off some helium tanks which didn't belong to no one nohow!"

"We don't have to prove anything," Doc told him. "My **institute** is a secret. We will take you there and no one will ever know what happened to you."

This was no idle exaggeration.

*Some time ago Doc Savage had established in upstate New York in a wilderness region that was remote and mountainous an institution that was rather unique. The patients of this place underwent a delicate brain operation which wiped out all knowledge of their past life. There they were taught a trade and school to hate crime and criminals and to become good citizens. Then they were released, often given a job in one of the many industrial institutions which the **Man of Bronze** controlled.*

*No crook, however bad an actor he had been previously, had even gone back to criminality after being graduated from Doc Savage's unique scientific "**College**".*

Happy looked at the faces of the **Bronze Man** and his 5 aides. Something in those faces brought worry to his own. He attempted a bluff.

"If you boys don't turn me loose, the **red demons** will gitcha," he warned. "**They** like white humans on account of what they did to the Indian nations. When **they** see one, **they** get angry and tear down all of a sudden-line. And then when **they** get hold of one ..."

Doc interrupted. "You do not need to go into any gory details."

He appeared unperturbed, even quietly confident. That took the moxie out of their tobacco-masticating prisoner.

"So you already had it figured out," Happy said dispiritedly.

"Actually for some time," Doc told him.

"How?"

The **Bronze Man** said quietly: "As soon as I reached the Kling-Flash lease, I placed **infra-red** projectors and motion picture cameras where the wildcat well could be photographed.

"There ain't no light around that wildcat when the red monster came down!" the other snapped.

"Don't you understand?" Doc queried. "Not visible light. But **infra-red** light. It is not visible to the unaided eye."

"Hell," growled Happy hitching his trousers. "I ain't no scientist. And I don't give a toot about such stuff. I'm a bird who uses direct methods. And if you don't turn me loose, it'll be your damn undoing."

Doc considered for a moment.

"Let's test your threat," he said.

He strode over to Happy's horse and began untying the steel canister lashed to the saddle.

"What are you doing?" Happy asked as the **bronze** giant set the tank down so that it rested on its base in the sand.

"What does it look like I am doing?" Doc asked quietly.

"Don't! Don't turn that on! That's how my pal Harry got his!"

Sweat started leaking from Happy's long face. In the extreme heat of the day, it dried almost at once.

"If you open that valve, a hungry **red demon** will come down all angry-like and swallow us up," he gulped. "Them **things** are worse than Satan himself. **They** get all riled up when they come down into the part of the air where it's hot and there's oxygen. And when **they** get riled, **they** attack everything they see. And you know what happens when **they** do that."

Doc Savage merely said: "We will see what does happen."

A corded **bronze** hand turned the valve. The tank hissed disconsolately.

Happy started struggling between Monk and Ham. The latter-day owlhoot was so frightened that he almost pulled away.

He managed to break Ham's grip. But Monk stepped in and gathered him up. Happy found himself flat on his back with the hairy chemist's approximately 260 pounds roosting on him.

Monk seized him by the hair and slammed the back of Happy's head into the sand until all vestiges of resistance were knocked out of the hapless gun-hand.

"How do you figure until the **demon** shows up, Doc?" Monk asked while casually twisting Happy's ear into a cartilage knot.

Doc's reply appeared to be chopped off by the shrills creaming of Happy.

A strange sound started up. Weird and undulating. It had the quality of seeming to emanate from nowhere in particular and yet everywhere at once saturating the superheated surroundings.

When Harry heard it, he screamed even more loudly.

"One's a-comin'! **It's** come to eat us all! Turn me the hell loose!"

Doc Savage then stifled his **trilling** which he had pitched high and made slightly sinister in emulation of the threatening drone of an approaching **desert demon**.

Happy appeared unaware of the difference. Fright rode his angular features. His eyes bulged as if wanting to take in the last sights of his mortal existence before it was forever extinguished.

"There is still time," Doc reminded.

"King Neptune!" Happy gasped out. **"King Neptune hired us! We work for old Neptune! Always have! He had us join up with the Flash outfit to keep an eye on things!"**

Sam Flash kicked sand in the direction of Happy'[s sweaty face.

"I knew it! I part suspected it. Half the time, I couldn't find them sorry saddlebums when I needed a chore done."

"Quiet you," Monk growled.

"Is Sam Flash part of the plot?" queried Doc.

"No. He ain't. I swear. Now shut off that damn tank!"

Doc did so.

"Set him on his feet, Monk," the **Bronze Man** directed.

The hairy chemist did so by manhandling Happy off the ground. He made a show of <slapping> the white alkali dust off the latter's clothes. After he was finished <slapping>, Happy trembled all over.

"The *demons* are no more," Doc pronounced. "They have been vanquished.

Happy cursed violently.

"That ain't possible! There's millions of *them* up yonder!"

Doc asked: "Where can we find Amos Kling?"

"He hightailed it back to Florida."

"Florida?"

"Yep. He left us to conduct operations out here and keep things stirred up around town."

"What is Kling doing in Florida?" asked Doc.

"Why, he's getting' all that land of his ready to be sold."

"To whom?"

Happy shrugged carelessly. "To anyone and everyone what wants it."

Doc Savage stated: "So the purpose of all the terror was to precipitate an exodus from California during which Kling hoped to sell Florida land to those who were desperate."

"Not just anyone," Happy corrected. "Old Neptune was only interested in the Hollywood crowd. They had the money to pay the prices he was going to ask. He bought his during the Florida land boom. He needs to sell high to make his money back and get a profit to boot."

Sam Flash let out a grinding yell.

"So that's why that hammer-headed varmint kept tryin' to mulct me with his worthless land!"

"It would not have been worthless if Hollywood was panicked into relocating to Florida," Ham countered. "Which was the only other logical place for it to go. The studios need abundant sunshine to film outdoors. And Florida has plenty."

"Don't tell me what I already know!" Sam Flash spat throwing down his ten-gallon hat in the dust. "Well, what are we waitin' on? Let's go round up that mangy owlhoot!"

- - - - -

The sound of a powerful airplane warming up caused all heads to turn. They were miles from their planes. But the sound carried in the clear desert air.

"That sounds like your racer, Doc," Ham said suddenly.

After a minute, the streamlined monoplane went scooting past. It wagged its wings and then headed due East. With its sleek racing lines, unique aerofoil design, and unusual dihedral rigging, there was no mistaking it for any other ship.

"Who stole your plane?" Monk howled.

Doc sighed. "**Pat**. I recognize the headstrong way that it was flown."

"She must have woke up and figured out a way to get the plane started," Ham groaned.

"But where-the-heck is she goin'?" Monk muttered.

"IF I know Pat, she has figured out the plot and is racing to Florida."

"Don't that just beat all," Sam Flash grunted. "Who'd 'ave thought that a little slip of a do-dah gal like that would turn out to be such a fire-eatin' hellion."

Monk said: "It kinda runs in the family."

Doc Savage looked slightly embarrassed.

XX

Very soon ...



... Pat will learn that she should have stayed put !

XIX – The Elimination Process

That Patricia Savage had purloined Doc's racing monoplane was proven conclusively after they got their speed plane back into the air.

That operation took the better part of an hour during which Doc sorted out a posse. Happy was dragged onto the plane (not in the least resembling his name). Sam Flash inserted himself into the cabin as well.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" Renny demanded employing a big paw to push him back.

Sam Flash looked pained to the core of his being.

"Why, to have it out with that bewhiskered bandit! He was muh pard and I am to bring him to account for his deeds."

Monk looked to Doc Savage.

"He has not yet been cleared in that mater," the **Bronze Man** stated. "Bring him."

"Thank you kindly," said Sam Flash. "Not that I don't resent the rest of yore inference."

The speed plane finally vaulted into the air. Doc threw the throttles to the open-pins to wring all the airspeed that he could from the big radial motors. Night had finally fallen.

There were seats sufficient for everyone in the roomy soundproofed cabin. The 2 pets -- the long-eared pig Habeas Corpus and the unclassifiable monkey Chemistry -- spent a few minutes chasing one another around the floor. Then as if by mutual agreement, they elected to find separate spots to lie down upon where they promptly fell to sleep.

"My hog ran your blasted ape into exhaustion," Monk told Ham proudly. "Maybe you should exercise him more."

"On the contrary," snapped Ham, "Chemistry has more stamina than your miserable insect. It was the other way around."

"Kapp talkin' that way," the apish chemist threatened, "and I'll pound your head down into your collar so hard that your ears will look like little cherub wings sproutin' from your shoulders."

Ham lifted his sword-cane excitedly.

"I have a half-a-mind to slice those hairy ears off that thick skull of yours and serve them to Chemistry fried in lard."

"I thought you two were a pain before you happened upon those 2 animals," inserted Renny. "But now you're quadruple trouble."

Long Tim added sourly: "Remind next time to invent a pest eradicator that includes pigs and monkeys. And their owners as well."

In the control bucket, Doc Savage radioed several times for the best part of an hour saying: "Pat! Turn back!"

Frustration tinged his normally clam tones.

Finally, Pat Savage's defiant voice answered over the radio static.

"Not a chance. I got started on this mystery before any of you. And I am to be the one who wraps it all up."

Doc warned: "You do not realize what danger you are flying into."

"Sure I do. The radio and newspapers are full of advertisements saying 'Come to sunny Florida'. Every one of them is signed 'Amos Kling'."

"Which is all according to the plan," muttered Happy.

"Pat," snapped Doc, "when you land, wait for us."

"Maybe I will. And maybe I won't," Pat returned, a mischievous lift in her voice.

With a sudden <snap> of a switch, the **Bronze Man** cut out the radio. The loudspeaker went dead.

Ham wondered: "Doc, why are you giving up so quickly?"

"Because I know Pat," the **bronze** giant replied grimly.

And that settled that. All of Doc's aides were well aware of Pat's fierce streak of independence.

They flew East. Renny listened to radio reports and called out the ones he thought were interesting.

Things have calmed down in California," he reported. "There hasn't been a **red demon** attack since early morning."

Doc nodded. He seemed satisfied on that score.

"I got an address for King Neptune from our private detective agency," Renny added. "Seems he owns title to what they call a 'skeleton city' south of Orlando, Florida."

"Skeleton city?" Sam Flash grunted. "What-in-time is that? Some kinda ghost town?"

"You might say that," Renny returned. "A lot of towns were built during the big Florida land boom a few years back. When business dried up and folks moved out, they were left to go to seed."

"Well I'll be jiggered! They got modern-day ghost towns in old Florida."

"Old Neptune won't be expecting us," Ham ventured. "Perhaps this will be a simple matter."

"You forget Pat," said Doc unhappily.



They refueled in San Antonio, Texas and learned that Pat's ship had landed there ahead of them.

The situation in California seemed to have quieted down substantially if the Texas newspapers could be believed. No attacks had been reported since they left that state. The general public, although understandably nervous, had simmered down.

"Looks like you saved the day, Doc," Renny Renwick rumbled.

When they were once again in the air, Doc Savage fell into a talkative mood. This was not like him who was inclined toward reticence. But they had been through a lot and there were many points that needed elaboration.

"2 things brought us into this affair," Doc was saying as he guided the streamlined speed plane toward Florida. "First, the disappearance of Pat Savage who was then calling herself 'Doris Duff'. And secondly, the arrival of what the newspapers began referring to as the **Copper Clouds**."

"But we'd have looked into that even without Pat bein' missin'," offered Monk.

"True. But the urgency with which you all assembled in Lost Angeles before I could return from my Arctic Fortress drew the attention of Professor Clement."

Ham Brooks mused. "I still do not understand where he fits in. His behavior in the beginning of this affair was confounded puzzling. Why did he search our rooms? Why was he so anxious to contact us?"

"Professor Clement was a meteorologist on the payroll of Flash Pictures if you recall," said Doc. "But he was also living in Amos Kling's house as a tenant. It stands to reason that they were introduced through Sam Flash.

Everyone at the point regarded the toothsome Hollywood mogul for clarification.

Sam Flash put in. "Yuh got that much right. That belligerent old billygoat told me he was havin' weather problems out at the Neptune filed and ask me to hook him up with muh advisor. So I did. Nothin' more to it than that."

"What kind of weather problems?" Long Tom demanded.

"He didn't say. But he was so broke most of the time that any least little thing would set him back."

Doc Savage continued.

"We know that the *red creatures* were drawn to helium which is sometimes present in the gases released during oil-well drilling. It is reasonable to assume that King Neptune struck a pocket of helium that attracted the *things* from the stratosphere. When *they* began showing up, Kling reasoned incorrectly that it was some freakish new manifestation of weather."

"He thought it was smog," Happy said begrudgingly. "But when he found out different, he evolved a scheme."

"What was the nature of the scheme?" asked Doc.

Until now, Happy (it developed that his last name was Grimm) had been silent, perhaps contemplating his bleak fate. But the monotony of the long flight must have worked on this thinking for he now proceeded to open up. He chewed tobacco as he spoke.

"The red *smogs* came down and ate up tools and things and once an entire derrick," he related. "Old Neptune thought *they* were corrosive smog and wanted to figure out a system to chase *them* away. That's where that Clement dude came in."

"Clement recognized the true nature of the *things*?" Doc prompted.

"Reckon so," said Happy. "And when King Neptune got himself wrapped around the idea, he offered Clement free room&board in his hacienda -- which Kling wasn't using anyway -- in return for help. Clement was kind of a nut on the subject of things living high in the atmosphere and was only too glad to help capture one-or-two."

"Capture?" exploded Johnny, forgetting his long words.

Happy nodded morosely.

"Yep. We figured out that helium attracted *them* and that *they* could consume anything except glass. So they took some thermos bottles up on a mountain top somewhere and lured *some* down with helium and captured *them*."

"How did they manage that without being consumed themselves?" demanded Ham Brooks.

"By observation."

"Say again?"

Happy moved his plug of chewing tobacco from side of his mouth to the other and resumed masticating it.

"Kling and Clement observed them at different times and figured out that they were not dangerous above certain altitudes before they commenced to turning **red** and then **black**."

"That is **their** death stages?" Doc Savage inserted quietly.

Happy went a little pale.

"Exactly. When **they're** high up, they're naturally **blue** and won't hurt a body. But lower down, **they** begin interactin' with the heat and oxygen and all manner of other conditions and **they** start to die. In their dyin', **they** commence makin' all that horrible hellacious racket and attack whatever **they** see. Kinda like a nest of yellowjackets with a mad on."

Monk exclaimed. "Hey, Doc! Remember when old Neptune told us the **red demons** were **blue** when **they** were higher up? That's what he musta meant!"

Doc continued pressing Happy Grimm. It was evident that scientific curiosity as much as an interest in solving the present mystery was motivating the **Bronze Man**.

"So Kling and Clement were able to capture some in a glass-lined vacuum bottle," Doc stated.

"Yep. But there was any way to let '**em** out safely to study '**em** without 'em raisin' Cain. So they just kept 'em in a safe place."

"Go on, Doc said. His flake-gold eyes were animated.

"Well, that's when old Neptune got his big idea. He had all this land in Florida and an oil well he couldn't afford to drill. And Flash Pictures wasn't getting' anywhere fast."

"I resent that last remark, you lynch bait!" Sam Flash snapped.

Happy <winced>.

"But he knew how much money Hollywood was makin' even with the Depression. So he thought he could terrorize the big studios and stampede them into buyin' up all his worthless Florida tracts."

Doc Savage inserted: "When Monk, Ham, and Johnny arrived in Los Angeles, that tipped off Kling that I would soon be arriving. Is that true?"

"Yep. Old Neptune Kling knew your rep as a trouble-buster. He went loco. He thought you'd be mixin' in his business. So he mailed you a thermos bottle full of them *red things* figuring you'd open it and that would be the end of you."

"Where does Professor Clement fit into the scene?"

"He wanted no part of it. But old Neptune got him terrorized too. Remember when that plane disappeared? The one Clement was supposed to on?"

"Yes."

Harry absently scratched his chin with a blunt thumb.

"Old Neptune had Harry and me pull him off at the last minutes and send the plane up by radio control," he explained. "We made Clement watch as the *red demons* ate up the plane and spit nothin' out. That settled him down for a while."

The reminder caused several of Doc's aides to glance out the window and scrutinize the clouds at their altitude for signs of *redness*. Happily, there were none.

"But when Clement learned that you'd been mailed a bottle full of *demons*," Happy elaborated, "he thought you'd be just the bird to smash the plot. So he went to your hotel to switch bottles and point you in the right direction. But we were watching him. So King Neptune showed up and tried to scrag you all."

"Old Neptune was the man in the cowboy hat and dark glasses who threw an ordinary grenade at us?" asked Doc.

"Naw. That was Sam Flash here. Don't you recognize him?"

Sam Flash got out of his seat and bruised his knuckles on Happy's mouth. The rear of the latter's head bounced off the back of his seat with great violence. His wad of tobacco flew out. Monk let him get in a second punch before restraining the Hollywood wrangler.

"The truth, fellow," Ham urged.

With the back of his hand, Happy wiped *gore* off his lips.

"You sure can sock for an Ohio boy."

"I ain't ashamed to have been born in Cleveland," Sam Flash told him.

"Well, I was just funnin' you. It was King Neptune's idea to make it look like someone else was doing his dirty work. So he filched one of Flash's 10-gallon hats and put on a pair of dark cheaters as a disguise."

"Old Neptune had a long billygoat beard," Renny reminded.

"Which he shaved off when he commenced operations," Happy retorted. "We got a bunch of fake theatrical beards out of the Flash Pictures property department and some spirit gum. He'd put them on when he was being himself and take 'em off when he was skulkin' about."

"Why a white beard?" Ham wondered.

Happy shrugged. "Just to be ornery, I suppose. Old Neptune thought if he put on one of Flash's fool hats along with a fake-lookin' beard, it'd naturally throw folks off the trail. And maybe even point the finger of suspicion in your direction."

"Pretty clever," admitted Ham. "I have heard of men wearing fake beards to look like other men. But not of one of shaving so that he could disguise himself with false whiskers."

Monk scratched his head thoughtfully. "It all kinda fits."

"It's ridiculous!" Long Tom snorted.

"Ridiculous. But he was making headway," Monk pointed out. "He had the State of California all in panic and people believin' an Indian desert demon was on the warpath."

Happy offered: "That part came to him after that Hopi did his rain dance. It was a nice touch. Nobody would ever believe in *critters* from Outer Space."

Ham mused. "No doubt that is why Professor Clement originally told us that yarn about the *smog* coming alive. He understood that the truth smacked of the ridiculous and feared being dismissed as a crackpot."

Monk snorted. "I told you that *smog* story was impossible!"

"You hairy mistake of Nature!" Ham retorted. "I have a mind to whittle you down to Chemistry's size and sell both of you to the circus as twins!"

Doc interrupted.

"Did Clement or Kling ever determine where the things originated?"

Happy tugged at an ear.

"Naw. They only knew there was a swarm of *them* congregatin' in the stratosphere high over the Neptune oil field feedin' off helium tanks.

Johnny Littlejohn sudden said: "One matter still puzzles me, though. If Kling was about to strike oil, why did he hatch this infernal scheme?"

"That's right," said Monk. "One gusher would've solved all his money worries."

"I can tell you that much," said Sam Flash. "He didn't have no maxuma to drill any deeper and that Oiler Ames was goin' to take his lease back. That was one reason he kept hectoring me to buy up some of his Florida land. The ornery old owlhoot!"

Ham turned to Happy. "What about it, fellow?"

"That's about the size of it," admitted happy. "His lease was about to expire. Also them *red things* kept scaring off his roughnecks. He wasn't getting' much work done. He needed money to strike that oil and Flash Pictures wasn't payin' off as an investment."

"He should've held his hoses," said Sam Flash. " 'The Wrangled Dude' will put my studio over the top."

"You said that before the last 2 flops also," grunted Happy.

Doc inquired: "Why was Kling's yacht targeted?"

"For the insurance money naturally," snorted Happy.

Doc fell silent. He seemed to be turning over in his mind everything that he had learned.

Finally he said: "Amos Kling might well have succeeded. There were possibly millions of the *creatures* hovering over California?"

Happy grunted. " 'Were'?"

"Doc got *'em* all," Renny said with finality.

Happy looked skeptical.

"It's possible," he said slowly.

"What do you mean by that?" Renny put in.

"Clement was keepin' some demon *specimens* at Kling's beachfront hacienda. When you all barged in, old Neptune had me and poor Harry plant a leakin' helium tank in the beach sand to kinda cover up all tracks. The last of the captured *specimens* were destroyed when that place got gobbled up."

"Let us hope," added Ham Brooks who by nature was inclined toward skepticism.

There was not much to say after that. No one spoke for a long time. If Doc Savage had a specific theory as to the nature of the *things* that had dwelt in the airless stratosphere, he did not offer it.

Those who could sleep took the opportunity to do so. Presently, a chorus of unmusical snoring filled the soundproofed cabin. Monk's noisy breath was predominating.

In the rear, the sleeping Chemistry seemed to be performing a duet with the unconscious chemist. On the other hand, the pig Habeas Corpus slept soundly, its long legs twitching like a slumbering dog dreaming of food.

Unable to sleep amid the nasal cacophony, Ham Brooks sat in his seat and fumed.

Near dawn, they were crossing the Florida panhandle. After that, Doc turned the plane south and began following the Gulf coastline.

Ham had a question.

"How did they learn that **tear gas** could defeat the *red things*?"

Happy scratched his unshaven jaw.

"I don't exactly know that part. I think Clement figured that out up there in the mountain. It was a precaution he took. After that time, he took to totin' a revolver that fired **tear gas** and lead slugs by turns."

"Pat stumbled upon the same idea out in the desert," declared Ham.

"Makes sense," admitted Happy. "You couldn't beat the things with buckshot or bow-and-arrow. Gas is the only thing that would do any good."

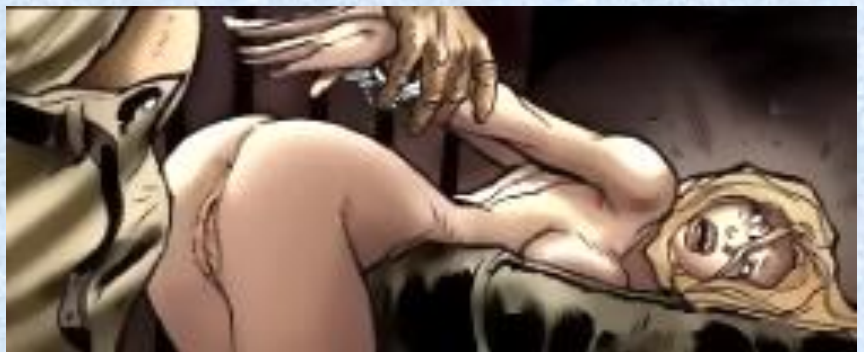
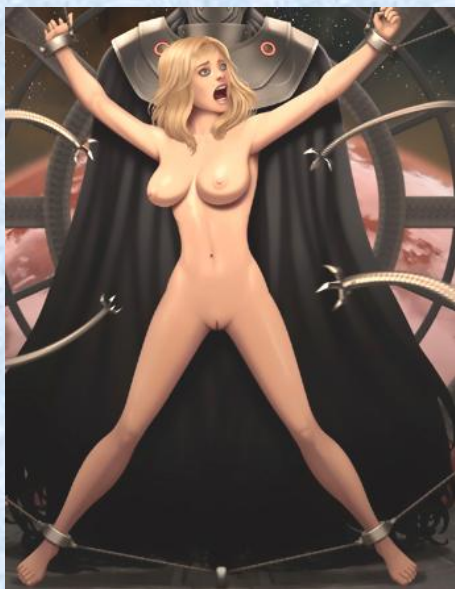
"If you're so dang smart," Monk scoffed, "how come you're lookin' at a date with the hangman?"

Happy Grimm offered no comment on that point.

He sank into a profound gloom that perfectly fit his last name while belying his first.

XX

Next ...



... Pat Savage is Old Neptune's Slut-Whore !

XX – Trickery Trap

Patricia Savage was nothing if not a confrontational girl.

From the beginning of the affair of the **Copper Clouds**, she had been determined to beat her famous cousin to the scene of the action and had in fact made credible progress in the earliest stages of the affair.

Now with events coming to a head, she was equally determined to run down the perpetrators of the California horrors.

It was a relatively simple matter once she had commandeered the special monoplane to beat the **Man of Bronze** to Florida. The little ultra-streamlined racer could approach an airspeed of 400 mph. No other aircraft could match it in this era.

But catching up with Amos Kling aka 'old King Neptune' was another matter.

Advertisements already appearing in California newspapers had ballyhooed the beautiful tracts of land in scenic Florida south of Orlando. As she overflew the area, Pat was beginning to see why that section of the state had been stagnant since the land boom went bust.

Neptune, Florida was smack in the center of inland Florida. A vast place of cypress swamps, cottonmouth snakes, mosquitoes, and an oppressive humid heat that was the opposite of the hot-yet-dry desert climate of California.

One of Doc's detailed topographical maps helped her find the exact location of the town of Neptune. It was in a patch of overgrown swamp land packed with lakes of various sizes.

Pt selected one of the larger ones and set the tiny ship down on it. She was an expert pilot having been taught her piloting skills by none other than Doc Savage himself.

The little plane slanted in and alighted like a pelican dropping down on placid water. Gunning the engine, she nosed the amphibian toward shore.

Before throwing open the hatch, Pat checked her six-shooter which she had discovered in a map pocket upon awakening in the racing plane's cockpit where no doubt Doc Savage had secreted it for safe-keeping. Taking a leaf from past experiences, she stuffed it with mercy bullets and **tear gas** shells and then filled her pockets with more taken from stores back of the cockpit.

Slanting down, Pat reconnoitered. During one refueling stop, she had exchanged her 'Betty Blaze' doeskin shift for cord breeches and a white linen blouse purchased at an airport store. The **bronze**-skinned girl began to wish that she had brought along one with long sleeves. For no sooner had she begun walking inland, the mosquitoes were a pestering cloud around her.

"Drat!" she said <slapping> one away.

Undeterred, Pat pressed on.

The Sun continued creeping up promising a lazy day. The languorous drone of insects was only beginning. Soon the heat and chirring of bugs would be oppressive.

"All the more reason to track down that old Neptune now," she told herself.

She found a red-brick road that was old and disused. Grass grew from between the cracks of the sun-broken bricks. Roads such as this one were employed in an earlier day. That this had survived meant that the road was abandoned.

Following this, Pat made her way to Neptune City which lay smack in the heart of an uninhabited zone of semi-tropical jungle where great sinkholes dotted the terrain like craters on the Moon.

Neptune City was actually more of a village that had got started and then went to seed than a proper municipality. There were houses, storefronts, and even a hotel of modest size. All were boarded-up. Moss and creepers grew everywhere.

And such moss! The stuff hung from the gnarled branches of trees as though it were a tremendous growth of fine hair. A hideous hair which seemed to suck the life blood from the trees and lianas to which it clung. The surroundings were unbelievably depressing.

Florida was dotted with many such places, Pat knew. Settlements built in the previous decade before the Great Hurricane -- and which being destroyed or partially so, and due to the ensuing collapse of land values, the travail of hard times -- had never been kept up or the land even tenanted. It had been left deteriorate. To become the abode of insects and lizards or the rendezvous of tramps and beachcombers.

A weathered sign several years old read:

FOR SALE

NEPTUNE CITY

Pop. 0

see A. Kling. Houseboat Lake Neptune

Pat murmured to herself: "Is everything around here named after old Neptune, I wonder?"

She recalled noticing a houseboat on a lake south of the one she had alighted on. Calculating its location, she started off in that direction.

The bugs got worse. Especially one near-invisible species of Florida gnat that continually pestered her.

Pat had practically smacked her bare bronze arms scarlet by the time she found the houseboat. A rickety makeshift dock led to it.

There was a car parked nearby. A jalopy of the last decade. Sitting high on wire-rimmed wheels, it was probably the perfect thing to go bouncing along the ruts and red bricks to-and-from Neptune City.

Crouching down, Pat watched the houseboat for a time. There was no sign of habitation although the auto suggested due caution be exercised regarding that possibly hasty conclusion.

After a period of consideration, the **bronze**-haired woman decided upon the direct approach. Cocking her pistol, she started down the dock. It groaned here-and-there as she had to step over a gap in the planks.

A man's seamed features poked up from the houseboat.

"Looking for Amos Kling/" he demanded loudly.

Pat saw the beardless face and decided this was a helper.

"I am," she called back.

"Well, come aboard! He's due back any minute now."

"Thank you. I will," said Pat thinking *"This is too easy."*

And it was.

She walked up to the man whom she didn't recognize.

He asked: "Looking to buy a piece of Neptune City? We're expecting to do a rushing business, what with all those California folks coming this way."

"Possibly," Pat answered dryly.

"And what's your name, little filly?"

Pat hesitated ...

"Juanna Quitt."

"You don't say! Well, I hope to perish of eating turnip greens if you don't remind me of somebody. ... Wait, now. I'll think of it in a minute ..."

Pat kept her six-gun handy. But she did not display it too obviously, keeping it behind her back.

The man reached out with one hand to help her aboard. With the other he palmed a tiny derringer. **He <cocked> it and gave her both barrels.**

Fortunately for the beautiful **bronze**-haired woman, both barrels were only charged with **tear gas**. A sizable cloud slammed into her pretty-but-unprotected face.

Momentarily stunned, she was yanked aboard and relieved of her six-shooter. Unable to see, she stumbled to her knees.

As Pat lay there coughing and choking, her eyes brimming over with unwanted tears, the man remarked: "You got kind of gold-colored **eyes**. That can only mean you're that **whore** cousin of Doc Savage.

A bucket of cold water was thrown over her. It shilled the skin. Surprisingly, it helped her get her air back also.

"Who ... who are you?" she sputtered.

"Amos Kling. Old Maw Kling's only son. Folks call me 'King Neptune'."

"Where's your beard, you murderous rascal?"

"Hereabouts." He grinned. "I got several."

Pat was pulled to her feet and set down hard on a deck chair.

"Where is that meddlin' cousin of yorn?" Old Neptune bellowed loudly enough to startle nearby flamingos into flight.

"I'll never tell," Pat returned gamely.

Horny fingers dug into her shoulder.

"He comin' this way? Tell me if he is!"

Pat composed herself. She could "see" after a fashion. Taking big gulps, she filled her lungs with hot muggy Florida air, clearing them of the last stinging remnants of **gas**.

To King Neptune, it must have seemed as if the golden-eyed girl was merely trying to get her wind back. But Pat was more canny than that.

Unexpectedly, she popped up and started throwing the big bear of a man around his houseboat applying a brand of judo that she knew well. She wrenched one of his thumbs eliciting a high *howl* of pain. Then she went to work on his shins with a kicking will.

"If you only had your beard," she snapped. "I'd happily yank your head off!"

Both of his shins barked up good, Old Neptune fell forward, his coattails spreading.

There was a mad scramble as the six-shooter went skinning along the houseboat deck. Pat got to it first. But King Neptune was wily. Belly-down on the deck only inches away, he lunged like a long snake. His big teeth clamped down on Pat's gun wrist. He had strong jaws.

Nerves afire, she was forced to let go. She *yelped* and lost the pistol. Old Neptune seized it. He doubled back, attacking. The barrel raked viciously across her temple and Pat saw stars.

The detonations of the big frontier pistol sounded as if they were in ear so close did the antique weapon discharge. But Pat never felt the **tear gas** when it squirted into her direction.

The second slug was a mercy bullet. The hollow shell got her on one forearm. It broke skin and introduced into their bloodstream the quick-acting chemical that brought unconsciousness in mere seconds. She went down, struggling.

After Pat had subsided, old Neptune threw the weapon in the direction of the dock. He dragged the insensate girl deep into the innards of the houseboat.

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He proceeded to **rape** the hell out of the beautiful **bronze**-haired woman-child!



"You git them goddamn clothes off now, you filthy **Whore**!" he spat. "We're gonna make lots of **babies**!"



He tore, ripped, grabbed, and punched her into total nakedness.



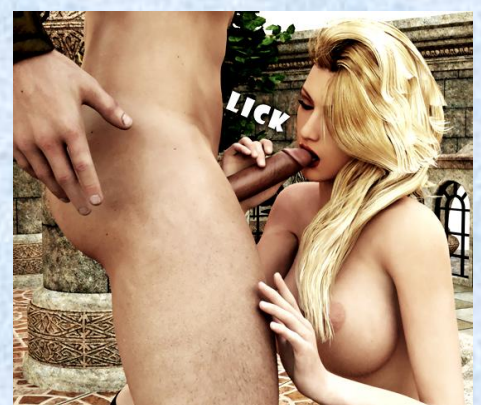
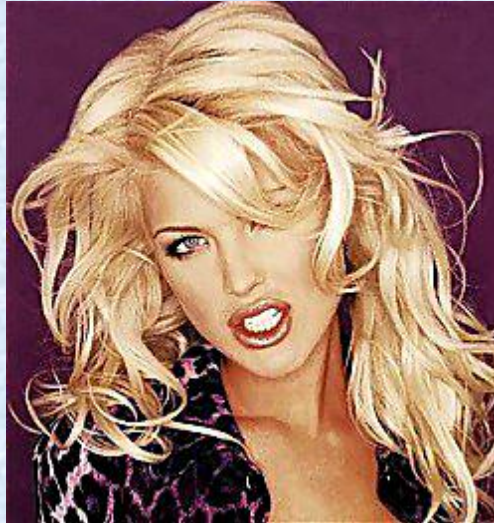
"C'mon and give your pimp-daddy some sugar, **Bitch**," old Neptune snickered.



Pat groaned in disgust at his sloppy love-making. But what came next was worse.

He pulled out a long wrinkled **penis** and waved it at her.

"You got to get this super-hard for *impregnation*, Slut."



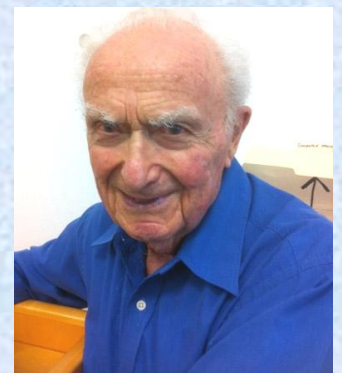
King Neptune rigorously fucked her neon-pink **lips**. But he was careful to hold back a lot of his **semen**. He was saving it for her fertile womb. But that would be later.



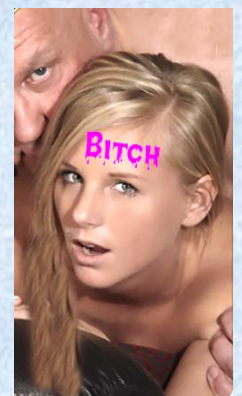
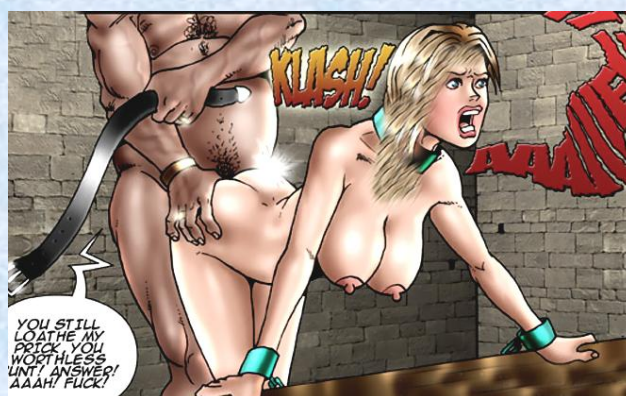
"Did anyone ever say what a nice firm ASS you have, **Bitch**?"

Pat was momentarily confused ... Then she realized what he was implying.

"Don't even think about it, Bastard!"



He laughed contemptuously. "Git down on your knees like a bitch-dog!"



And she **yelped** like a dog when he poked his hard organ into her tight rectum.



"Oh-h-h-h-h-h-h-..." she groaned.

"Arrggghh! Ummpphhhh! Ggrrrrrrr!!!" he panted with sweat coming off his forehead. "You ... fucking ... **SLUT!!!!**"



He finally extracted himself. It made a squishy **plop!** of a noise. She felt some sort of fluid running out of her butt-hole. She couldn't tell if it was **semen** or **urine**.



He flipped her over like she was a piece of meat.

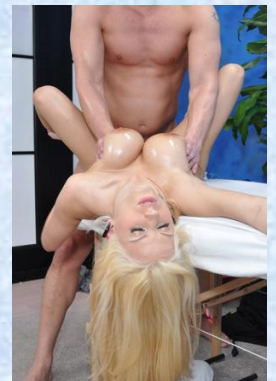
"Now you git them long legs of yours spread out wide for your daddy, **Whore!**"

Tears collected in her eyes at the thought of her succumbing to his **breeding**. But she was still in a weakened state (which was not helped at all by his previous depraved acts on her lovely body) and thus could hardly begin to resist him.



He was not gentle in the least. Growling, he *rammed* his fat ugly cock into her trim pussy with all his might!





Pat possessed such excellent muscle tone all through her body that even her womb was tight during his intrusion. It felt to him like she didn't want to let his **penis** exit.

"Ugh ... ugh ... ugh Grrrrrrrrr!!!" he panted as he let his foul **baby-making semen** erupt deep into her



He <slapped> her hard when he pulled out.

"Damn you, **Slut!** I didn't want to **cum** that quick! You fuckin' **Bitch!**"

In a Parallel Universe ...



MY GOD... WHY?
I WANT TO DIE!





[labor pains in giving birth ...]

Exhausted from her love-making ordeal, she drifted back off into unconsciousness ...

When Pat awoke (she knew not how long later), rank odors assailed her nostrils.

Her sinewy wrists were bound together and attached to something very solid. They felt agonizingly tight. Manila rope soaked in water to promote painful shrinkage, she decided.

She looked around cautiously. All was gloomy as if the air was filled with cobwebs. Her vision began slowly adjusting to the lack of good light. She decided that she was in a hold or storeroom below the waterline of the houseboat.

Movement caught her attention. Her **bronze**-haired head spun around suddenly.

Evil yellow eyes gleamed back at her from behind dim bars. Something made a weird "yonk-yonk" of a sound like a goose. Except no goose ever sounded so menacing.

Old Neptune's voice rumbled out. "Them's my watchdogs."

"Those don't look like dog's eyes," Pat said thickly.

"Of course not. For they ain't exactly dogs. Those are bull 'gators."

"Alligators?" asked Pat, suddenly very much frightened.

"Yeah. I hauled 'em down here to scare off trespassers. But you worry none. They're in cages. I let 'em out from time to time."

"Tame?" asked Pat hopefully.

"Not on your life. "If they could, they'd take hold of your arm and saw it off slicker 'n greased lightning."

"Uh, saw?" gasped Pat.

"That's how 'gators dismember folks. They grab a limb and use their teeth like a rip saw."

Kling grinned expansively showing yellow teeth.

One alligator emitted that "yonk-yonk" noise again.

"They make that racket when they're riled up," Kling explained. "It's when they get to hissin' that you should look to your limbs. If you still got any, that is."

"Oh my," said Pat, at a loss for any comment more eloquent.

Old Neptune continued conversationally. "I ain't decided what I'm gonna do with yet. But if you found me out here, that must mean that Savage ain't far behind."

"I'll never tell!" Pat snapped.

"You just being here tells me all I need to know," growled King Neptune. "You and the 'gators get acquainted. I think you all got a future together. They ain't been fed in 2 days and you look pretty tasty."

This time Pat said nothing. She was beginning to regret her impetuousness in lighting out for Florida ahead of her resourceful cousin.

Old Neptune disappeared up a companionway. A hatch closed and the weak light all but died.

Hours passed.

Pat tried to stay calm and not let the alligator odors bother her. It was not easy. It was oppressively hot down in the houseboat's dismal hold.

She lost track of time. But after the middle part of the day, the **roar** of airplane motors passed overhead.

"Doc!" she gasped. "Thank goodness!"

Old Neptune came pounding down the steps, his boot heels sounding like hammers.

"Looks like it's time for a showdown," he said with enthusiasm.

Pat put courage into her voice.

"You're outnumbered."

"How many men you figger Savage brought?"

"Even if he's all by himself," Pat declared confidently, "You're still outnumbered."

"We'll see about that. I got me something special in reserve. And I don't mean more 'gators."

Old King Neptune Kling mounted back up onto deck leaving Pat Savage to wonder exactly what he meant.

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Up next ...



... King Neptune has a beastly surprise for Pat !

XXI -- 'Gator Hell

High above Neptune City, Doc Savage spotted the houseboat from the air. He studied it for some time ... seemed to be considering possibilities ... then announced:

"We will land on that lake."

Monk, Ham, and the others started slamming drums of mercy bullets into the breeches of their superfirers, locking them in.

"No," Doc rapped. "Use **tear gas**."

"But," Long Tom objected, "the **red demons** are gone. Aren't they?"

They began filling their pockets with diminutive ammunition drums. A surprising number of shells could be fitted into the drums. But even so, the tiny weapons were capable of emptying them in much less than a minute. It was one drawback that they had.

The lake was of insufficient circumference to land the big speed plane. Yet Doc dropped one wing and dragged the placid surface for snags preparatory to landing. He was rewarded when the craft suddenly shuddered, falling off one flashing wing.

The **Bronze Man** fought to keep the ship level and succeeded. He sent the ship around in a wide bawling circle.

"That sounded like a rifle bullet," Long Tom pointed out.

"Left wing," rapped Doc.

There was a rush to port side where the bullet hole could be discerned. The exit puncture resembled a tin can lid that had exploded upward. The slug had been fired from below. But it was not sufficient to interfere with operating the craft.

"I'll be my best spurs and Spanish saddle that long-jointed old mossyhorn is on that houseboat," Sam Flash announced.

Renny suddenly bellowed. "Doc! Isn't that your racing plane on that other lake?"

Doc followed Renny's pointing finger. He nodded silently. The **bronze** coloring of his features darkened.

"We will land on the other lake instead," he decided.

Doc flung the speed plane about. He dragged the lake for debris and roots before deciding that a landing was safe.

The sleek ship dropped and settled into a glide that started ripples on the lake until the wing pontoons skimmed along the surface. Then he taxied toward the smaller craft.

Doc snubbed the hull pontoon against shore. He ran the speed plane up onto dry land just enough to wedge it there but not so much that they couldn't push off again in a hurry. This was done smoothly.

When the props stopped ticking over, all hands jumped out.

Monk was the first to reach the small plane. He waded over on his short legs making a great *splashing* because his long arms hung almost to his knees.

"Empty!" he called back.

They got themselves organized.

Pat's spoor was easy to follow. Doc led the way. He had learned jungle tracking from some of the World's experts.

Reading signs like an Apache, the *Man of Bronze* led the party to Neptune City and found the weather-beaten sign that told prospective buyers to call on the houseboat on the other lake.

"Old Neptune must have been crazy as blazes to think he could get the big film studios out here," Sam Flash spat, sizing up the overgrown terrain. "Look at this Hell-forsaken place!"

"He was crazy on general principles," Monk snorted, "thinkin' he could get away with what he done."

"Kling will be expecting us," Doc advised. But I have a plan."

"Let's hear it," Renny said blocking his gargantuan fists until the knuckles stood out like rows of white stones.

Doc gathered them together. Happy was part of the group. They didn't dare leave him behind. And he might conceivably be useful.

Happy's long face was even longer when the *Bronze Man* was done explaining his plan.

"But I'll do it anyway," he grumbled.

Monk gave him a hearty <slap> on the back by way of encouragement.

After Happy picked himself up off the ground, he carefully checked his teeth for looseness.

Several minutes later, King Neptune Kling was startled to hear a twangy voice he thought he knew.

"Hey, Boss! You in there?"

Kling poked his head out a window. He spied the familiar-but-unexpected figure of Happy Grimm standing at the landward end of the houseboat dock chewing a plug of tobacco as if he had just happened along in the course of an afternoon stall.

"What-in-tarnation are you doin' out here/" Kling bellowed. "I told you and that idiot pard of yourn to keep up the pressure on them Hollywood outfits."

"Harry's dead. A *demon* got him."

"What about you?"

"Doc Savage sent me here to talk turkey," said Happy.

Suspicion threaded old Neptune's deep voice.

"What do you mean 'turkey'?"

"He says he'll swap you."

"Swap me what?" King Neptune asked dubiously. "I got nothin' he wants."

Savage wants the secret of the *cloud devils*. He says you give him that so he can call 'em off California and you won't be turned over to the Law."

Old Neptune guffawed.

"He's gonna have to take me livin', leapin', and a-kickin' if he wants to hand me over to the authorities.

"He don't want that," Happy returned. "He wants the secret. He's squeamish about all them killin's."

"Hell and Damnation!" bellowed old Neptune. "Tell him I got his cousin down in my hold. She's keeping company with a couple of bull 'gators. He backs off and she lives. He don't and she's gator food. Savvy?"

"I'll tell him, Boss."

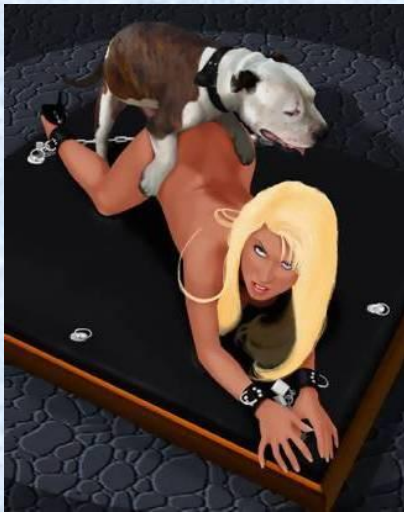
XX

King Neptune chuckled to himself.

He may have not yet sic-ed his 'gators on Pat Savage. But his large pet dogs were having a hell of a time *breeding* the long-legged *bronze* beauty!



Pat felt the dog emit a pseudo-lubricating "pre-cum" before its long **cock** became steel-hard. Then the base formed a **knot** which kept it inside her womb long after it had emptied its puppy-making **sperm** deep inside.



She was too weak and sore to resist the dogs' further abusive actions.

"What a filthy filthy **Whore**," laughed King Neptune. "A sophisticated big-city **Bitch** sucking a dog's dirty **cock**!"





But there were more dogs. All of them could smell the first dog's *semen* oozing oiut of Pat's vagina. That made them very horny. They *whimpered* and *squealed* as they formed a canine raping line ...

"Sic her! **Fuck** the hell out of your **bitch**, you mangy mutts!" commanded the senile old man.



Pat fought back the temptation to cry out loud. She didn't want to give the old bastard the satisfaction of seeing her in pain. Despite that, *tears* flowed freely down her face.





The last 4-legged beast had finished its **breeding**. The whole ordeal lasted close to 3 hours.

The old man was insane with glee as he watched Pat twitch and squirm with doggy **semen** leaking out of every one of her orifices.

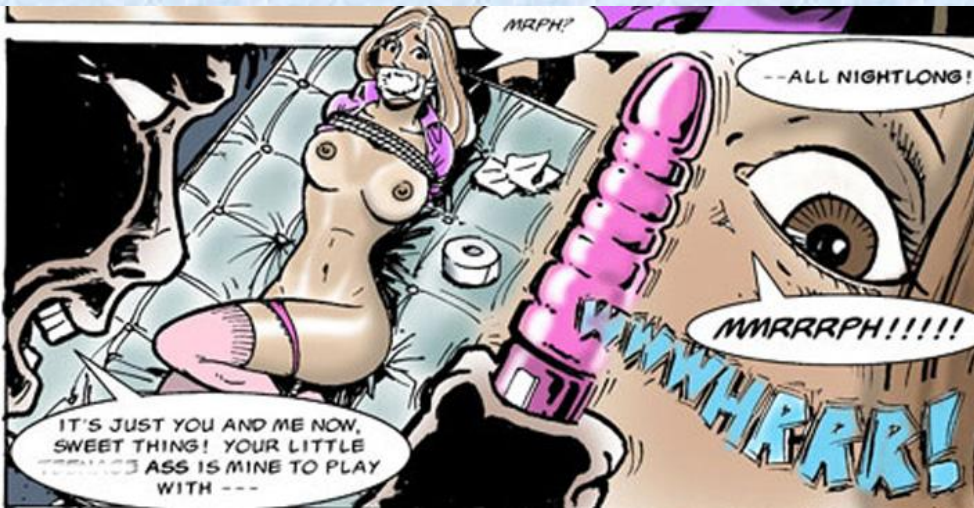


But the perverted bastard was not finished with tormenting her yet.

From seemingly out of nowhere, he produced some **mechanical fucking machines**.



"Keep those leggings spread, darlin'. We're gonna make you into a good **whore**!"



"Oh no!" Pat pleaded. "Haven't you done enough already ...!"



Any further complaint was silenced as plastic dildoes were shoved into her ...







He was laughing through the entire hour-long session while she was moaning and groaning.

In a Parallel Universe ...



Finally ... mercifully ... it was over ...



[a bellyfull of **puppies**]

*But Pat Savage would recover from her sexual abuse. She had an unexplainable remarkable ability to somehow heal herself. Maybe it was the Savage bloodline. It would only be a matter of weeks for her stretched-out vagina and rectum to return to their original firmness. She would be **virgin-tight again!** But could she escape future rapes and gang-bangs????*

Starting off, Happy noticed something laying on the deck. He picked it up. It proved to be a heavy six-shooter. Surreptitiously, he jammed it into his trouser waistband under his sun-faded flannel shirt.

When Happy Grim returned to the waiting group, Doc Savage was conspicuously absent.

"Where'd he go?" Happy wondered.

"To collect Pat," Long Tom replied.

Happy grunted. "You heard what old Neptune said."

"Don't worry. You got Doc what he wanted."

Happy looked perplexed. It was the first expression anyone had seen cross his face that did not smack of moroseness. (Therefore, it was an improvement.)

Doc Savage had by this time eased down the edge of the lake under cover of the noise and handy scrub brush.

Stripping to his black silk swimming trunks, the **bronze** giant slid into the water. Carefully he maneuvered around to the houseboat's slatternly stern ... found it ... and climbed the anchor chain. He paused briefly to let water string off his *muscular* limbs.

Then he slipped over the side as *stealthy* as a **bronze**-colored feline.

The houseboat was a hag of a craft. It had not been kept up in King Neptune's absence. Loose clutter littered the decks. Weather-warped planks protested at the slight pressure.

Doc swiftly realized that working his way toward where King Neptune crouched by the bow would be impossible without announcing his approach. So he veered toward the companionway that led below. He succeeded without betraying his presence.

But making his way down to the hold proved to be another matter.

The stair boards there were especially unkempt. Doc took them one-at-a-time, distributing his weight so as to avoid complaining wood.

The **Man of Bronze** did not fully succeed. A groaning *creak* came. It was impossible to tell if could be heard from above. But below, something heavy threshed in the dark.

Realizing that he could no longer afford *stealth*, Doc plunged into the humid hold.

"Pat," he called softly. "Pat, where are you?"

"Over here, Doc! But it's a trap!"

And it was.

By some ingenious arrangement, the opening of the hold door caused pins to be pulled from 2 cages. Bars clanged downward and a pair of 6-foot long **alligators** spilled out. Their monster jaws opened wide disclosing yellowed teeth.

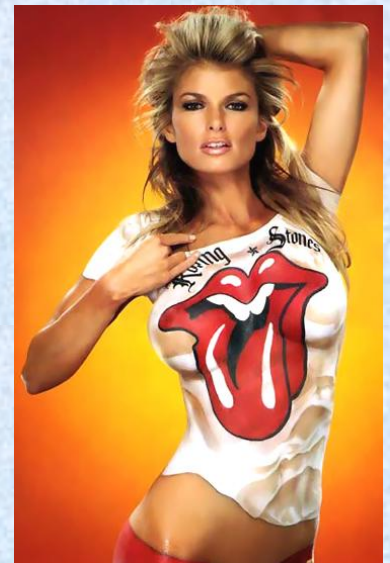
The **Bronze Man's** vision was uncanny in its acuity. He took in the tableau of Pat Savage tied to a bulkhead and the sinister oncoming cayman reptiles. He made a snap decision.

He had a spring knife in one pocket of a special kit belt that he wore. The <press> of a button opened the blade. This made short work of the ropes holding Pat tight.

She climbed to her feet and began massaging circulation back into her rope-burned wrists.

XX

She had been re-clothed and re-bound by Kling after her recent **rapes**.



Suddenly her mouth fell open and emitted a scream of warning.

"Doc! Behind you!"

The **Bronze Man** wheeled.

One 'gator started moving toward him with sinuous purpose. Its splayed legs made sandpapery scraping sounds against the wood flooring.

Another lurched out, its lemony slit eyes fastening upon the pair of humans.

There was no time to formulate a plan.

Doc Savage sprang with his knife upraised. He fell on the lead cayman ... twisted to avoid its snapping jaws ... and threw himself on its nodular back.

A piece of wood came into Doc's hand. He threw it into the 'gator's mouth. It promptly snapped in two. Another piece that was more stout replaced it. The cayman broke 3 boards before succumbing to its wounds.

He turned and faced the second alligator. It was crawling toward Pat who for once did not look anxious to meet the challenge.

"Can we distract it?" she breathed.

"Not for very long," the **Bronze Man** said grimly.

His fingers flashed to his pocketed belt. He unsnapped one pouch and removed an object resembling a pigeon egg but made of metal. This was a **grenade** of tremendous destructive power.

"Pat," he cautioned, "open your mouth and cover your ears.

"Why?"

"Concussion," he replied.

Pat obeyed. Doc did the same.

He <flipped> the tiny lever and flung the grenade as far toward the stern of the hold as was possible.

It let go. The device was very powerful for its small size. Fortunately, the main force of the blast was absorbed by the cayman cages.

Drawn by the noisy ruckus, King Neptune had started pounding down the steps just before Doc had flung the grenade.

With the blast **roar**, he gave out a *yowl* and reversed direction. It was well for him that he did so for the explosion had blown off the entire stern of the old houseboat. It began to list with alarming suddenness.

Doc grabbed up Pat and flung her into the inrushing lake water. The bronze-skinned girl was a good swimmer. But Doc was much more **powerful**. He fought debris and water until he had them both out in open water.

The surviving 'gator also had gotten clear. It was swimming toward them, its stumpy legs threshing.

Then another appeared apparently attracted by the commotion. With periscopic eyes slipping lazily toward them, it looked like a grotesquely bumpy log. It began *hissing* venomously.

Doc released Pat and gave her a shove. Then he swam out to meet the oncoming monsters.

"Doc!" Pat cried out. "What are you doing? Doc!!"

Doc Savage glided to a halt. He floated, waiting.

"Doc!" Pat repeated.

2 massive alligators converged on the **Bronze Man**. Twisting, Doc disappeared from sight. A violent commotion ensued.

A tremendous *splashing* sounded where Doc Savage had been. Then a loud *chunk* of a noise. One cayman doubled about.

There was another *chunk!* The sound possessed a grisly toothsome quality.

One of the giant lizards had snapped at him but missed and secured a mouthful of its rival instead. The other cayman resented it. They began fighting. Teeth punctured hide. Water churned **crimson**.

But mixed in was another color. A vile **green**. The weird color spread.

Pat quickly understood. The **Bronze Man** had introduced some chemical into the water. The stuff was no doubt intended to discourage the reptiles in some way.

She watched, fascinated and yet also filled with a cold horror as the 2 alligators attempted to devour one another. She noticed their eyes turning a filmy **green**. No doubt due to the staining action of the discouraging chemical.

Doc attempted to stay clear of the gruesome dragon-like creatures. But his legs received a blow from a horny tail resembling a flexible log. Miraculously, the **bronze** giant seemed to shrug it off without ill effects.

Finally, one monster succumbed to its wounds. It rolled over floating with its belly upwards. But one remained. Half-blinded, it swam madly about before finally settling on a course that aimed toward Pat. It was *hissing* like a menacing steam engine.

"her we go again," she muttered uneasily.

Abruptly, Doc Savage flung himself underwater. He quickly got under the cayman's belly. Its webbed feet were paddling with reptilian celerity.

Rising up under it, the **Man of Bronze** reached for its thick throat and took hold with both of his **metallic** hands. Simultaneously he wrapped his **muscular** legs around the 'gator's midsection.

The battle that followed was visible from the shore.

It consisted largely of a frenzied threshing. Water splashed and cascaded. That was the only sound. 'Gators do not roar. Doc silently concentrated on besting the big reptile.

At one point, both combatants submerged for nearly a minute. Fearing for her resourceful cousin, Pat began moaning inarticulately.

She executed a dive intending to pitch in and do her part if aid was not too late. But she was not underwater for very long. Pat bobbed up with relief written all over her pretty face.

Doc Savage's head next broke the surface.

The cayman also surfaced. It gave a final convulsive thresh. Then it rolled over, displaying horny feet. Before it finally submerged, Doc's knife hilt could be seen protruding from its mud-colored belly.

Pat sobbed in relief. "Oh, Doc! You did it! I was never more scared."

Doc gathered her up in his great *cabled* arms reassuringly.

Nothing more was said. Together, they struck out for shore.

XXII – Shootout in Neptune City

"Where is Kling?" Doc demanded violently.

Anger suffused his normally calm voice. The threat to Pat Savage had stirred the **bronze** giant's rare wrath once more.

"Headed toward Neptune City," Renny Renwick reported. "We charged after him. But he started flinging lead at us. He used a rifle so he had the range."

"We will hunt him down," Doc directed.

He got everyone organized. He swiftly donned his outdoor clothes.

"We will advance on Neptune City," he instructed. "Kling cannot have unlimited munitions."

"mercy bullets?" Monk asked.

"No. Use **tear gas**."

The homely chemist looked disappointed.

"Gonna be tough to get close enough to give him a taste of **tear-gas** medicine."

"He's gonna lay in wait for us too," Sam Flash warned. "The contemptuous old bushwhacker!"

Doc shook his head. "He is now on foot. He cannot go far."

They set off into the sweltering jungle. From the start, it was tough going. Humidity sucked fluid from every pore soaking their clothes. Doc had dispensed salt tablets from his belt kit. These helped somewhat. But thirst was a problem.

The hunt was punctuated by the cry of loons and the <slap> of hands on assorted voracious mosquitoes.

Abruptly, a sound cut the air. A thin high-pitched whine of a thing. It seemed to come from nowhere in particular. But their worried eyes naturally searched the heavens.

Doc Savage, whose sense were keener than the others', slanted in the direction of the sound.

A **black cloud** hovered nearby. It was no higher than their waists. That was the source of the arresting sound.

Doc strode up to the **cloud** (which was not much larger than a small dog) and pitched a stick of found cypress wood into it. The sooty **cloud** dispersed.

Soon **it** reformed and the whining **noise** returned. It now possessed an annoyed timbre. But the ebony **things** kept their distance.

"What are these **things**?" Ham demanded, relieved.

"No-see-'ums," Doc advised.

"No what?"

"They are a species of midge," the **Bronze Man** explained.

"Well, **they** bite worse than sand fleas," the dapper lawyer complained.

Doc Savage was very quiet for a moment. Then he unburned himself of something.

"In a sense, we have been fighting something like no-see-'ums all along."

"What do you mean?" Johnny Littlejohn questioned.

"The **things** in the stratosphere. The **infra-red** pictures captured at the Neptune field provided the first indications as to their true natures. But it was while escaping the stricken dirigible that one came close for examination. Too small to study for more than a moment and too dangerous to capture. It was a tiny winged thing resembling a terrestrial locust or a hornet but of distinctly non-terrestrial construction."

Long Tom exploded: "So that's why you wanted my insect eliminator!"

Doc nodded. "It was reasonable to assume that it might discourage these insects even if they were possibly of another realm."

"A cosmic conundrum!" Johnny rapped.

"What'd he say?" Monk Mayfair asked.

"He said," Ham Brooks interjected, "that the **red things** are a mystery not of this World."

Monk's simian features puckered.

"Yeah? Well for once, I agree with him."

They penetrated further keeping top the crumbling red brick road. Doc Savage continued talking.

"Air samples taken at the oil field showed traces of helium present mixed with a chemical odor that matched nothing known to Science. Possibly the **creatures** remained aloft because **they** fed off helium and it kept **them** buoyant in the stratosphere.

"It is just as likely that they produced hydrogen in their bodies and that was what allowed **them** to dwell high above. In their natural state, **they** were evidently accustomed to the **supercold** regions of Space. Apparently **they** glowed in this state an electric **blue-green** similar to the radiance of fireflies."

Monk said: "Recent discoveries explain how fireflies glow. They produce a chemical in their bodies that makes 'cold light'."

Doc nodded. "These alien-to-earth *insects* were like that. When *they* entered our atmosphere, the combination of heat and oxygen began a process of death. During this process, *they* were so frigid that anything *they* touched was afflicted by *supercold* with invariably fatal results. The *creatures* might very well have attained the temperature known as 'Absolute Zero'."

"Is that why anything they touched turned white?" Long Tom asked.

"No doubt. Possibly the result of a cessation of all atomic activity," the **Bronze Man** said. "After *they* died, *they* simply evaporated while anything-and-everything *they* came in contact with was reduced to a *brittle* state easily shattered into a salt-like consistency."

"That's why that Hollywood producer's swimming pool *froze*," said Monk.

"Yes. Exactly," Doc affirmed. "Glass, however, was not affected because glass cannot freeze."

"The final elucidation," Johnny breathed.

They were at the skeleton city of Neptune now. It was a forlorn and depressing sight, uninhabited as it appeared to be.

They entered with appropriate caution. Lizards scampered at their coming. Snakes could be heard rustling amid the trashy debris in their haste to retreat from the unexpected invaders.

In the center was an old hotel. A sign called it 'THE POMELO HOTEL'. It was in a state of disrepair that resembled that of the houseboat. Old Neptune's rattletrap jalopy stood parked before it.

Doc Savage studied the approach. The entrance door had been boarded over some time in the past. Now the boards lay scattered about showing unmistakable signs of having been broken off recently.

"Kling has entered that old hotel yonder," the **Bronze Man** said.

All eyes went to the myriad hotel windows. They were as blank as blind orbs.

"He could pick us off as he pleases," Sam Flash complained.

Doc nodded. "We will endeavor to lure him out."

Happy Grimm squared his shoulders manfully.

"I guess that'll be my job.

He started forward and got within hailing distance of the hotel.

"Hey, Boss! "It's me again! Happy!"

A steady silence was returned. It grew protracted.

Then Doc Savage moved like chain lightning! He lunged forward and yanked Happy back his collar. Unquestionably this saved the morose criminal's life.

A rifle shot cracked! And so did the forearm bones of Happy Grimm's left arm. Both unpleasant sounds echoed together.

Doc stowed him buck under cover and quickly examined his wound.

"It's a clean break," he said.

The **bronze giant** tore Happy's shirt to rags and fashioned a tourniquet.

"Remain here," he warned.

"Tha-thanks," Happy groaned through pain-clenched teeth.

Doc then addressed his aides.

"We must wrap up this matter before night falls.

"We got plenty of time for that," Monk said winding up his arms like a windlass.

Renny knobbed his maul-like fists and brought them together with a *smack* that came close to the sound of colliding bricks.

"Holy cow!" he boomed. "He's as good as captured."

"Do not underestimate him," the **Man of Bronze** warned. "Almost single-handedly, he has terrorized an entire state.

Something in Doc's manner made them all very quiet.

"So how should we proceed?" asked Ham.

The **Bronze Man** eyed the Pomelo Hotel.

"That overgrown establishment is too large to storm successfully. We will have to flush Kling out of there if feasible."

"Let's surround the joint and come at him with all sides," suggested the sometimes-bloodthirsty Monk waving his machine-pistol with enthusiasm.

"Yeah," seconded Renny. "He can't shoot in six directions at once."

"Seven," corrected Pat Savage.

"Eight," added Sam Flash. "I'm in this, too."

"You're not armed," said Long Tom sourly. "Besides, you're only a celluloid cowboy. You stay back."

Reaching down, Sam Flash produced a small .22-caliber pistol from one tooled boot. He brandished it proudly.

"I got this little jigger. And I can shoot."

A **bronze** hand drifted out and snared the pistol.

Sam Flash <blinked>. He had not seen the hand of Doc Savage strike. Then suddenly, his pistol was in the **bronze** giant's hands. Doc broke the action, dumped 6 shells into a palm, then flung them away.

"No killing," he warned.

"Yeah," added Monk. "We don't kill people except when we can't exactly help it."

"Killing's too good for that oil-soaked old scalawag," Sam Flash said in an injured tone.

He fell to counting the numb fingers on his gun hand. His face expressed relief at the final count.

Doc Savage studied the surrounding air.

"The wind is blowing to the east," he said quietly. "We will come at him from the west and lay down a cloud of **tear gas**."

"That's a capital idea!" Ham enthused. "Bally drive him out of there."

They moved around to the west. One of the vast sinkholes that dotted the terrain afforded them a kind of shelter. They clambered down into this. It was surprisingly deep. Broken limestone made a shelf that added to the sinkhole's protective qualities.

Those had had them now donned the gas masks of Doc Savage's invention.

Doc instructed: "Ready ... Set ... Fire!"

Supermachine pistols begun erupting. **Tear gas** spurted into a swirling fog. It boiled up ... was persuaded by the wind ... and started crawling along like a creeping ghost toward the decrepit old hotel.

Several drums of ammunition were expended before the **Bronze Man** called for cessation of all firing. As it rolled toward the hotel and silently enveloped it, the **gas** resembled a coiling monster dragon.

"Reminds me of one of them **cloud demons**," Monk observed.

"A vernacular veracity," Johnny added.

Nothing happened for quite a while. Insects droned. Somewhere an animal splashed in the water. A loon took to the air. Silence returned.

"Maybe he's been overcome," Ham suggested.

"Quiet," Doc directed.

He listened. His keen hearing -- sharpened by years of exercise -- failed to detect any sounds.

Cautiously, they emerged from the sinkhole's shelter and approached the *haze*-obscured hotel. Doc Savage was in the lead.

Pat, Happy, and Sam Flash had to remain behind. The *gas* was too thick for them. Also, they lacked protective masks.

Annoyed at being left behind, Sam Flash stamped impatient circles with his cowboy boots.

"I don't like this waitin' back here with the women and the wicked," he grumbled.

"Go ahead if you feel like *choking* to death," Pat flung back at him. "I had my portion for today."

The *bronze*-haired girl plainly had no taste for braving the *gas* herself. Her gold-tinted *eyes* were still rimmed in *red* as a result of her earlier experience with the disagreeable stuff.

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Not to mention all the *tears* that ran from them during all the recent events when she was being brutally *impregnated* and *sodomized* ...

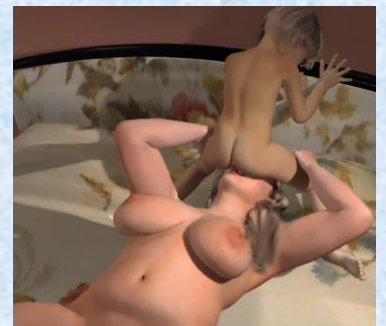


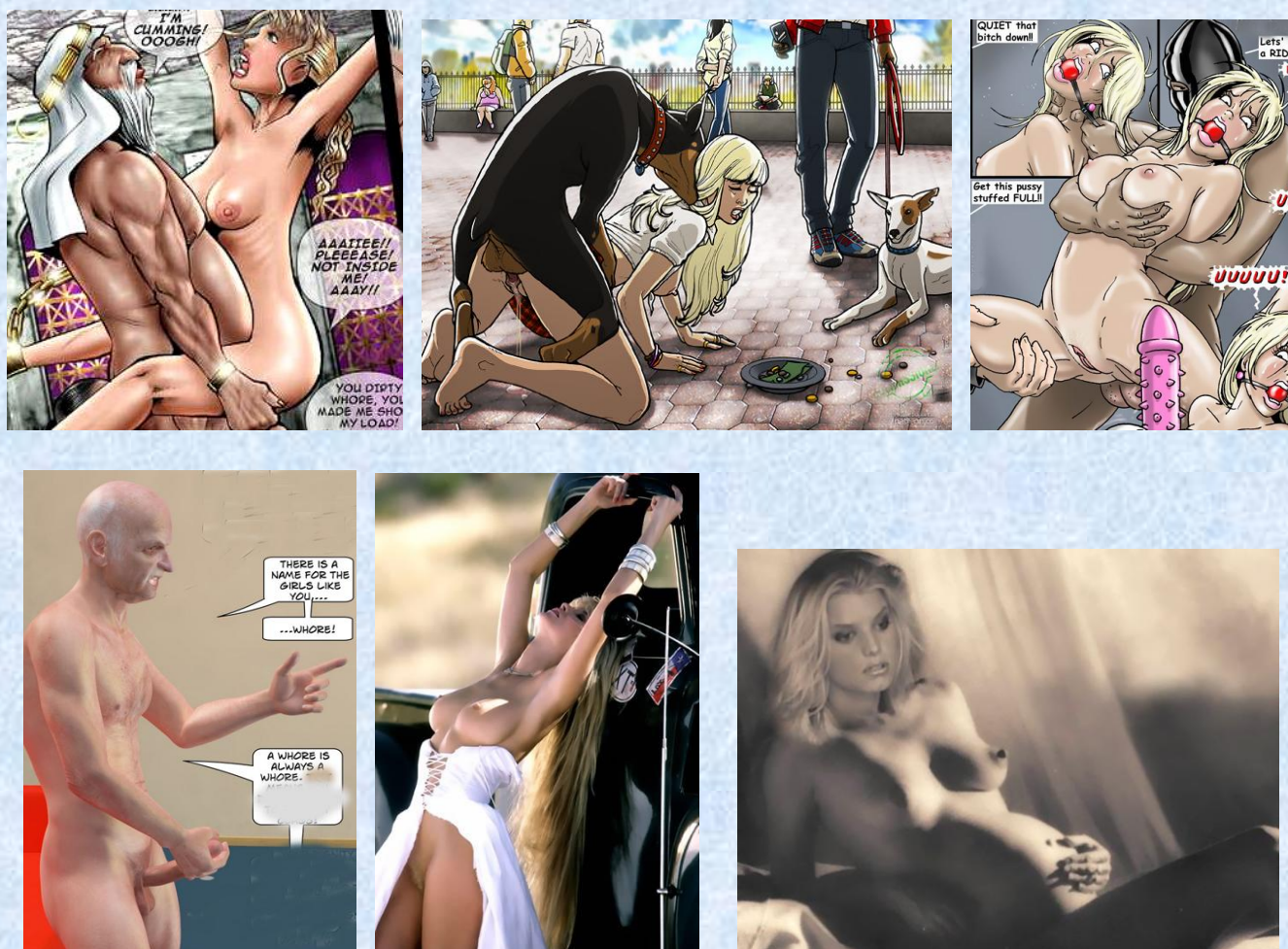


**"I'll help hold her down
while you Impregnate her!"**









Sam Flash seemed to settle down. He hunkered down beside the wounded Happy Grimm who had chosen to lie supine rather than risk catching another bullet.

They watched from a safe distance. The atmosphere grew eerie and quiet. Even the lazy buzz of insects seemed to have quieted down. The stinging **tear gas** might have accounted for that.

Old Neptune surprised them.

The front door of the decrepit hotel opened with a bang! Kling stepped right out into the open in clear view. His head was encased in a canister gas mask of the type used during the World War.

"That's far enough, **bronze** man!" he bellowed. "Stay back!"

Doc lifted a **metallic** hand. His party halted.

"What's that he's holding?" Renny rumbled uncertainly.

It was not clear in the swirling gas. Kling did have a rifle. But it was standing against one leg, the muzzle in easy grabbing range.

What Kling held in his right hand was small and cylindrical. They were able to make out only that much. Blistering sunlight gleamed off its surface.

"If I can't leave this place in one piece," King Neptune thundered, "then none of us will."

"Stand your ground," Doc told his men. "He's holding one of those red vacuum **bottles**."

Ham froze. He unjointed his sword-cane and made the blade sing in warning.

"A calamitous eventuality," breathed Johnny.

Doc lifted his voice.

"Kling! If you surrender, you will not be turned over to the California authorities."

"Says who? Like I really believe that lie," retorted Kling.

"It's no lie. There exists an institution where you can be cured of your ways."

"I like my gol-durn ways! And I am to walk away with my ways -- and my means -- intact. Or I hope to be eaten alive by my own alligators."

Monk whispered to Doc. "Doc, is that **can** of his sweatin'? Can you see?"

"It is," returned Doc.

All knew what that meant. The simple red **bottle** contained what might well be the last of the insect-like creatures from Cosmic Space.

"Kling!" Doc called out.

"Speak your piece, Savage."

"You are holding the only surviving specimens of the **red things**. The others were destroyed. Your plan has failed.

"I got other plans, don't you worry none. ... Now stand back or else I lift the lid of this little ol' bottle of **Hell**."

Doc rapped: "Everyone step back! Give him room."

Monk groaned: "But Doc! We can't let him up and get away!"

Doc reminded: "We will all die if that can is opened."

There was no doubting the **Bronze Man's** statement. In unison, they began a cautious retreat to the shelter of the sinkhole crater.

King Neptune shouted encouragement.

"That's right! Keep a-movin back!"

As they did so, the breeze pushed the tear gas around and Amos Kling's towering figure became momentarily obscured.

Old Neptune picked up his rifle. He strode confidently forward carrying the red vacuum **bottle** in his other hand. The oxygen canister hanging by his mask hose swung like the trunk of an elephant. It was oddly remindful of the beard that he had once wore.

Suddenly Kling dropped his rifle. He <thumbed> one of the 2 wire clamps off the vacuum bottle's glass lid.

"Back!" Doc called out, his voice crashing.

The **Bronze Man** started moving in, evidently intent upon intercepting the **canister** if he could. He was fast. But the bullet that came out of nowhere was faster still. The sound of the **shot** came after the red **can** jumped from King Neptune's bullet-stung hand.

Even maxed and goggled as he was, Amos Kling looked thunderstruck. He staggered back a step with his hand clutching at emptiness.

Something fell at his feet. Glass shattered.

The **buzz** swelled. This was not the insects of Florida coming back to life in the drowsy afternoon heat. It was something ominous and infinitely more sinister.

A crimson cloud bloomed at Amos Kling's feet. In the space of seconds, it enveloped him. Angry, swarming, and voracious as a plague of locusts. The **BUZZ** climbed into a ferocious screaming.

In the mad mix of sounds, Amos Kling screamed also.

It was over before they knew it. Doc had whipped around reversing his course. They were ignominiously in full flight when the sanguinary swarm began to darken to a smoldering **scarlet**. Soon it was an ebony **pall** that might well have been a howling hungry demon from the lower regions.

Abruptly the sound died. In its place was a patch of white vegetation. King Neptune Kling stood frozen at the spot where he last lived. He did not move. He might have turned to **ice**. Nothing of him was a natural color. All was an unnerving alabaster.

In the long silence that followed, **Sam Flash** was the first to speak.

"Don't know one ever call me a movie cowboy again. That was some mighty fine shootin' if I do say so myself."

No one contradicted him. He was holding Pat Savage's six-shooter. Empty cartridge loops on his crossed gun belts explained where he had found the ammunition.

"Took it off that Happy," he told them. "He found it on the dock back when he parleyed with old Neptune. Guess he was fixin' to use it 'cept he had no shells to fill 'er up with. But I did."

Gingerly, Doc Savage approached the spot where Amos Kling had made his last stand.

There was no trace of the weird *insects*, the red **canister**, or the old miscreant's rifle. All had evaporated along with the last of the cosmic creatures. Old King Neptune Kling stood there like an image made of porcelain.

Doc Savage scrutinized him for some moments. His eerie *trilling* troubled the superheated air.

After a while, the **Bronze Man** raised a *metallic* hand and gave a mighty chop. What had been the mortal remains of Amos Kling simply fell into pieces and crumbled into a pile resembling granulated salt at Doc's feet.

"It is over," he said unnecessarily.

There was nothing more to be done. So they started tramping back to their waiting planes.

"I guess I'm goin' to that place you told me about," Happy said after a time.

"You will be trained in a new line and released back into society after a time," Doc told him. "A new identity will be given to you."

"Fine by me," he grunted. "I got tired of bein' called 'Happy' a long time ago. It didn't exactly fit my disposition."

"A part of the rehabilitation process is to erase all memory of your past," Doc added.

Happy was quiet after that.

But by the time they reached the planes, he said: "I can live with that. I'd kinda like to forget that my pal Harry is no more."

And that was the last they spoke of the matter.

Doc planned to reclaim his racing ship and take Happy directly to their secret **institution** while the others took the speed plane back to New York. Before they took off, Sam Flash had a proposition.

"I would like to put the bunch of you in pictures."

His toothy grin was back. It seemed a mile wide.

"Nothing doing," said Doc.

"Forget it," Monk echoed.

"Not interested," added Pat.

"Yeah," rumbled Renny. "We don't go in for that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" asked Sam Flash. "Fame? Money? Publicity?"

"Exactly," said Doc.

Sam Flash looked at them all as if they too had lately come down from stratospheric space.

"I don't savvy you hombres," he admitted sheepishly.

"We're just plain folk," said Monk.

"Speak for yourself, you hairy ape," Ham snapped.

"That reminds me," Monk said suddenly.

"Of your ancestry?" teased Ham.

"No. It reminds me that you promised to feed my Habeas apples for a year if that Hopi rain-dancer called down a *demon*. And he did."

Ham's neck began to redden. His handsome features worked as he struggled to recall the true terms of his wager with the ape-like chemist. Confusion momentarily tied his nimble tongue.

Finally he sputtered: "He did not call down any such thing! It was not a demon that came down. It was ..."

"... a howling *red wowser*," Monk piped up.

"Stop calling it that!" Ham exploded.

"Ah, bugs to both of you!" Long Tom said sourly.

By the time the little band reached their waiting planes, they'd had quite enough of Florida's bloodthirsty insects (not to mention the Cosmic variety).

All they wanted was to return to their familiar environs where fresh clothes and cool baths would go a long way toward restoring their bedraggled souls.

But little did they dream that awaiting them back in New York was a new challenge just as baffling and deadly as the deadly Desert Demons had been.

2 men would be strolling down Seventh Avenue unknown to one another. One was of high station. The other a lowly tramp. As they passed not many feet apart, weird death would strike them down.

Thus would begin the "Horror in Gold!" (DS#192) What it was and who controlled it, no one could guess. But it would draw Doc Savage into a mad maze that would ultimately lead him to a place far hotter and infinitely more terrible than this sweltering piece of Florida real estate over which so many had perished in vain.

For in "Horror in Gold", the stakes would be astoundingly high. No less than all of that precious yellow metal existing in the entire World!

But the **Man of Bronze** and his iron band had no inkling of what lay in store as they prepared to leave Florida.

Pat Savage had the last word.

"The next time I scent a new mystery," she vowed, "I plan to keep it all to myself."

No one doubted her determination for a moment.

Least of all, Doc Savage.

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(<http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/AnnaXXX.htm>)



The next episode in **“The Perils of Patricia Savage”** is
PS197XXX.pdf ('Phantom Lagoon')

[http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/PSXXX/PS197XXX_Pantom_Lagoon.zip]

(the previous adventure was **PS189XXX_The_Whistling_Wraith.pdf**)

The images here plus video GIFs are stored online at <http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/PSXXX.htm>

Mega Porn Sites (from which the images above were taken):

<http://luxbabes.com> ; <http://www.tiava.com> , <http://www.extremeapril.com>

Rebecca's HAP (Housewives At Play) - <http://www.rebeccahap.com>

Role-Playing Costumes – [Forplaycatalog.com](http://forplaycatalog.com) LoversLane.com

T-Girl/Tranny Call-Girls at <http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/AnnaXXX.htm>, <http://barbie-boy.com> ,
<http://www.cute-shemales.com> , <http://www.trannyhardpics.com>,

Fantasy "Forced-Sex" sites at <http://www.forcefantasies.com> , <http://www.dofantasy.com> ,
<https://www.8muses.com/> , <http://www.superheroinecentral.com/~wizard/> ,
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"Forced-Sex" RolePlaying Forums – <http://savage-violation.com> , <http://ravishu.com> ,
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"Monster/Alien/Dog" sex at <http://monsterfuckgirls.com> , <http://3dcreaturesex.com/> ,
<https://beastartforum.com> , <http://3dmonster.xxx/> , <https://www.pichunter.com/tags/Monsters>

To contribute ideas for future stories (or possibly even participate in role-playing), email ...



email: kelli@hotlegsinlove.com

<http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/StartXXX.htm>