

FEAR CAY

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter 1. THE POCKETBOOK GAG

ONE OF two pedestrians walking on a New York street turned, pointed at the big bronze man they had just passed, and said earnestly, "I wouldn't trade places with that bird for a million bucks!" The pedestrian's companion also looked at the bronze man.

"You said it," he agreed. "I wouldn't last a day in his shoes, if half of what I've heard is true."

If the bronze man was aware of their attention, he gave no sign. Many persons turned to stare at him; newsboys stopped shouting abruptly when they saw him; but the bronze man merely went on with long, elastic strides.

"He's not often seen in public," some one breathed.

"And no wonder!" another exclaimed. "The newspapers say his enemies have made countless attempts to kill him."

The heads of the tallest individuals on the New York street did not top the bronze man's shoulders. He was a giant. Yet it was only the manner in which he towered above the throng that made him seem as huge as he really was, so symmetrically perfect was his great frame developed.

"They say he can take a piece of building brick in one hand and squeeze it to dust," offered a man.

Huge cables of sinew enwrapped the bronze man's neck, and enormous thews stood up as hard as bone on the backs of his hands. There was a liquid smoothness about the way they flowed.

Persons who saw the metallic man's eyes made haste in getting out of his path. Not that the eyes were threatening, but there was something about them that compelled. They were like pools of flake-gold, those eyes, and the gold flakes were very fine and always in movement, as if stirred by diminutive, invisible whirlwinds.

Strange eyes! They held power, and the promise of an ability to do weird things.

Two policemen on a corner saluted the bronze giant enthusiastically.

"Hello, Doc Savage," they chorused.

The mighty man who looked as if he were made of metal acknowledged the greeting with a nod and went on. His features were strikingly regular, unusually handsome in an emphatic, muscular way. More than one attractive young stenographer or clerk felt herself inexplicably moved to attempt a mild flirtation the instant she saw the big bronze fellow. But the amazing giant had a manner of not seeming to see such incidents.

The bronze man came to a section where the sidewalk was almost deserted. He stopped.

On the walk before him lay a small object of leather. Stooping, he picked it up.

The article was a pocketbook of good quality, and its plumpness hinted at a plentiful content.

The sinewy cables on the bronze man's hands flowed easily as he opened the purse.

There was a popping sound, such a noise as might have been made by a stubborn cork being pulled from a bottle. Instantly after that, the bronze man dropped the wallet, and it slithered along the sidewalk for a few feet before coining to a rest.

The man's arms became slack, his strikingly handsome head slumped forward, and he began to weave slightly from side to side. Suddenly, as if a master nerve controlling all of the muscles in his mighty frame had been severed, he collapsed upon the street.

NUMEROUS INDIVIDUALS saw the bronze giant drop, but one was nearer than the others. This man was a bulky fellow with an extremely long nose, a round puncture of a mouth, and a skin which was flushed redly, as if the fellow were very warm. One thing particularly outstanding about the man's appearance was the manner in which he always seemed to be perspiring a little.

The man carried a small, plain black leather case.

He ran toward the prone form of Doc Savage, swooping enroute to pick up the pocketbook which the bronze man had been examining an instant before he collapsed. This went into a pocket.

Reaching Doc Savage, the perspiring man sank to a knee. As he placed his black leather case on the sidewalk, it came open -- and those curious persons who ran up, saw that it held a doctor's equipment.

"This man has been stricken by heart failure!" the man said loudly, after a brief examination.

A taxicab swerved to the curb and the driver craned his neck. The perspiring man stood erect and beckoned sharply at the hackman.

"Give me a hand!" he shouted. "We've got to rush this big fellow to an emergency hospital to save his life!"

The taxi driver tumbled from his machine, ran over and lent his aid to moving the recumbent Doc Savage. The hackman was burly, but the two of them grunted and strained, so heavy was the giant bronze form they were carrying to the cab.

A cop pounded up, puffing, "Begorra, what's goin' on here?"

"Heart trouble," he was told. "The big bronze fellow had an overworked heart, and it caved on him."

They managed to haul Doc Savage into the cab. The long nosed man, perspiring somewhat more freely, dashed back, got his bag of instruments, and piled into the taxi.

"Begorra, I'm goin' along," said the cop.

"Is that necessary?" snapped the sweating man.

"This bronze lad be Doc Savage, no less," declared the officer. "The finest ain't half good enough for him, and I'm gonna see that he gets it!"

The cop leaped into the machine.

Behind the wheel, the driver made a pass at the shift lever and the cab lunged forward. The horn blared, pedestrians dived aside, and the cab volleyed down the street.

"Ride your horn and tromp on it!" called the cop.

Tires howled as they took a corner; skyscrapers shoved up close walls that shut out the sunlight, so that the cab pitched through gloom. On the sidewalks not many people could be seen.

The perspiring man dipped a hand into a coat pocket, brought out a heavy blue automatic pistol and lifted it. The policeman was occupied in examining Doc Savage and never saw the gun whip toward his own head.

There was the sound as of a football being kicked hard. The officer let air out of his lungs and slumped, head lolling.

The rear door of the cab opened and the cop toppled out, driven by a lusty shove. Momentum of the car caused him to roll end over end and slam into a parked machine, where he lay, not seriously damaged.

THE HACK driver looked around. He had freckles, a loose lower lip and cigarette-stained fingers.

"When that cop piled in I figured we was sunk, Leaking," he chuckled.

"Watch your driving!" growled "Leaking," and dabbed at the perspiration on his forehead.

Leaking now produced the billfold which had lain on the sidewalk. Once he had opened it, there was disclosed a small flat metal phial, the cork of which was yanked when the folding halves of the purse were separated.

"Neat!" the sinister, long-nosed man chuckled. "He never smelled a rat-and when he opened it, the gas in the metal phial got him before he knew what it was all about."

He passed the ingenious wallet forward to the freckled, slack-lipped driver. "Stick this away somewhere."

"Sure." The hacknian had been watching his rear-view mirror to make sure there was no pursuit.

The cab swung west and streets became shabby.

A robe hung on the rack in the rear, and Leaking drew this over the slack form of Doc Savage to prevent casual observers from sighting the giant bronze man.

"Sure his nibs is alive?" asked the driver.

"I don't care a hell of a lot," said Leaking. "But he's still breathing."

"Hallet wanted him alive, didn't he?"

"Sure."

"Any idea what that shyster has up his sleeve?"

"No," said Leaking. "Shut Lip and drive."

"Whose idea was that pocketbook trick?"

"Mine," Leaking snapped. "And will you shut up and drive!"

The cab passed a play street where grimy kids howled, skirted tall gas tanks and a solid vast cube of bricks wherein generators wailed like banshees, and from which high-tension wires stretched in profusion.

Streets became even more decrepit, and the hack ran more swiftly, a carbon knock tinkling under the hood. They were going downtown toward the financial section now, using streets which were almost deserted. The machine slackened speed and turned into more populous streets after a time.

"This is the joint," said Leaking.

The "joint" was a towering skyscraper of white brick, modernistic, impressive, one of scores, all resembling each other closely, which shot up like cold thorns around Wall Street.

Between the structure and the one adjacent was a narrow alleyway intended as a freight entrance. The cab popped into this and dragged its tires to a halt.

The driver alighted and entered the skyscraper. Probably he engaged the attendant on the freight elevator in conversation, for that worthy did not appear to interfere with Leaking as he unloaded Doc Savage's great frame from the hack and, not without some laboring, conveyed the bronze man into the lift.

At the twentieth floor, Leaking unloaded his cargo and employed a large janitors' closet for temporary storage while he returned the freight elevator to the ground level without any one being aware that he had taken it.

Then the man rode up on a passenger lift to the twentieth floor, swabbing at perspiration, waited in the corridor until no one was in sight, then picked Doc Savage up and staggered out of the janitors' closet with him.

Gold-lettered on a frosted glass door was:

N. BECKELL HALLET ATTORNEY-AT-LAW

Leaking shoved this door open and walked in with his burden. He dumped Doc's great frame in a swivel chair, and the chair squeaked loudly.

Across the office, the side wooden door of an inner sanctum flew open.

"I knew it!" wailed the man who looked out. "I knew it!"

LEAKING SCOWLED and snapped, "You knew what, Hallet'?"

"Knew what Doc Savage would damage you or one of your men seriously," groaned the other.

Leaking's scowl turned into a laugh as he realized that Hallet was not standing where he could see Doc's features and had mistaken the identity of the bronze man.

"Hell!" chuckled Leaking. "This is Doc Savage."

"What?" Hallet gulped incredulously, then advanced gingerly to eye the bronze giant.

Hallet was a fat man with the manners of a bird. He was round and sleek and plump, but there was a mincing daintiness to his movements. His Suit was sparrow-colored and added to his birdlike aspect, as did his sharp beak of a nose.

"It is Doc Savage!" Hallet wrung his plump hands.

"Well, you wanted him, didn't you?" Leaking growled.

"Yes, but --" Hallet slumped into a chair, pulled a foaming square of silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed it at his neck. "How did you do it?"

"Fake pocketbook with a doo-dad in it that threw gas into his face when he opened it," grinned Leaking.

"I never thought you would secure him that easily," Hallet murmured, restoring the handkerchief.

"They say this bronze man is incredibly clever. Wrongdoers all over the world fear him."

"Does he look like something to be scared of now?" Leaking jeered.

"His name is synonymous for fear in the far corners of the earth," Hallet went on earnestly. "His life career is helping others out of trouble. They say he has accomplished fabulous things, feats that range from stopping a revolution in an European country to

"In your hat!" laughed Leaking. "He's overrated. Here he is. What do we do now?"

"Tie him up," Hallet said hastily. He minced into the other office and came back with thin, stout, braided cotton rope.

The two men grasped Doc Savage, apparently with the idea of moving him from the chair to the floor, where he could be bound with more facility. But what happened was hardly the thing they anticipated.

There was blinding motion, two slapping sounds. Leaking and Hallet tried to cry out. They made no sound, for a great corded bronze hand had grasped each of them by the throat.

Chapter 2. THIRTY-STORY DEATH

THE NEXT few seconds offered a study in abject helplessness and an exhibition of incalculable strength. The two seized men at first wind milled their arms, but the awful agony of the grip on their necks seemed to surge like deadening poison through their bodies, and they became limp. Around Doc Savage's metallic fingers, and between them, the flesh of his victims all but oozed, so terrific was the pressure. The faces of the pair turned purple, eyes ogled and tongue stuck out stiffly.

Doc arose, and the two were limp as rags hanging from his great hands. They quivered a little and that was all.

The bronze man released them, and although neither was fully unconscious, they were too weak to do more than make croaking noises.

A search of their clothing brought the light small sums of money and billfolds containing cards. Leaking's full name seemed to be Manuel Caesar Dicer. Hallet carried a blue army automatic and

Leaking the slightly smaller gun with which he had clubbed the cop in the taxicab. The outer office was fitted with a leather divan. Doc popped the two captives down on this, bound their wrists and ankles securely with the same cord they had intended to use upon him, and fell to eying them steadily.

"I want to know what is behind this," he said. "It is going to be very, very unfortunate unless you start talking."

The captives glared, exchanged glances and said nothing. The globules of moisture on Leaking's forehead fattened, broke from their moorings and chased each other downward, forming little rivulets.

"Talk up!" Doc said sharply.

The pair registered discomfort, but held silence. This was something of a feat in itself, for there was a fierceness in the giant bronze man's weird flake-gold eyes.

Doc straightened suddenly, swung around the office once, then went into the inside room. This was fitted with desk, chairs, ice water stand, a large sheet metal clothes locker the color of grass, and shelves holding innumerable law books. Atop a fat legal volume on torts perched a telephone. Scooping up the instrument, Doc unpronged the receiver and asked for a number. His voice was low, and traffic sounds from the street below the open window kept his words completely from the two in the other chamber.

"Monk?" Doc asked when he got an answer.

"Sure," said a mouse like voice.

Doc Savage now spoke rapidly, but not in English. The tongue he used was not unmusical, composed of liquid gutturals and sharp clackings, but it was doubtful if more than half a dozen people in the so-called civilized world would have understood it. Yet the language was the mother tongue of a race once among the most powerful and cultured -- the ancient Mayans of Central America.

His conversation completed, Doc hung up and went back to the prisoners. They had been trying ineffectually to escape, but desisted when they saw him.

"I never saw either of you gentlemen before this afternoon," he said in an ominously calm tone.

"Yet you go to great trouble to seize me off the street."

Birdlike Hallet trembled; Leaking perspired; and neither let a word escape.

"Why did you seize me?" Doc asked, his voice vibrating a grim power. "What (lid you intend to do with me?"

This time, Leaking spoke. "H-how did you get rid of the effects of that gas so quick?"

"The gas never had any effect on me in the first place," Doc said.

"W-what?" Leaking stuttered.

"You underestimate the human powers of observation," Doc assured him dryly. "When you dropped that trick purse, I saw you."

"You picked it up, knowing it was a trick?"

"The picking was done most carefully, if you had noticed," Doc told him. "There were two logical things to suspect -- a poisoned needle and gas. To avoid a needle, I did not open the purse in the usual manner of a man who has found one. And to checkmate the gas, I merely held my breath until the breeze blew the vapor away."

"But why?"

"Why pretend to be overcome? Merely to find out what your game was. And now, any more questions?"

Leaking only glared.

"Then perhaps you will relieve my curiosity," Doc suggested. "Why did you seize me?"

Leaking blew sweat off his upper lip and said, "You go to hell I"

VIOLENT ACTION followed Leaking's profane suggestion. Doc Savage lunged, closed metallic hands upon the fellow and lifted him.

Leaking grimaced in agony and opened his mouth wide to cry out. Doc corked a wadded handkerchief into the gaping maw, and Leaking could only squeal through his nose.

Next, Doc gagged plump Hallet.

Leaking was carried helplessly through the door into the inner office. The door was slammed shut.

Hallet, the sparrowlike lawyer, sprawled helpless on the divan and ogled the closed door. He tried to move. His ropes were drawn excruciatingly tight, many of the strands almost buried in the fellow's soft flesh, and the gag distended his mouth to its greatest capacity.

Suddenly his eyes flew wider and his jaw sagged in horror. Out of the inner office were coming awful thuds, smackings and grunts. It was as if a man were being horribly beaten.

"You won't talk. eh?" Doc Savage's grim, powerful voice came through the door.

The sound of more blows followed, together with buzzing sounds that might have been a gagged man crying out in terrible pain.

Hallet tried to scream, hut his own gag made his best effort a whining, and he desisted to lay panting through his nostrils, round face draining of color until it had a clay hue. He was the picture of a man scared out of his wits.

Certainly the sounds emanating from the adjacent office were such as to strike horror. Again and

again Doc Savage's unusual voice put questions, to which Leaking only whizzed or whined through his nostrils, or, the gag removed, cursed smashingly. The blow thuddings always resumed, more violent than before. And finally there came the climax.

"Well, if you won't talk, out of the window you go!" Doc boomed.

The window rattled up.

Hallet's face was white enough to be written upon with a pencil, for he was visualizing that twenty-story drop to the street, and the hard sidewalk below. Many times he had looked down and visualized what would be the lot of one who fell.

Hallet abruptly tried to scream through his gag. He had heard a scuffling sound, as of a living body pushed over the window sill. A gruesome cry, faintly receding, followed that.

The connecting door leaped open. Doc Savage came through, his weird eyes hot aureate pools, the tendons on his neck standing out like rifle barrels.

Hallet sought to scream again. He had never glimpsed anything which looked quite as terrible as did the bronze giant.

Doc swept Hallet up easily and carried him to the inner office. The window was open, and Doc shoved Hallet half outside.

"Look down!" he directed.

Hallet looked, and shook as if he had taken hold of a charged electric wire.

The crowd on the sidewalk below resembled flies around some dark speck of succulence, while other flies came scudding across the street or climbed out of cars which were stopping. A fly in blue ran for the spot, tweetling a police whistle.

Doc wrenched Hallet back. His great voice was a grim crashing.

"They'll be up here to investigate in about two minutes," he said. "You have that long to tell your story'."

"I d-don't know anything!" Hallet stuttered when his gag was out.

Doc picked him up helplessly and ran him toward the open window, and the man screeched out in chilling fright, confident the bony hand of death was cupped to receive him down there in the street.

"I'll tell you everything!" he shrilled.

Doc calmly carried him back into the outer office and tossed him on the leather divan.

"Why did you and our -- er -- unlucky friend, Leaking, attempt to seize me?" the bronze man demanded.

Hallet wet his lips. "We were hired. We were to get ten thousand dollars for grabbing you and holding you where no one could find you for two weeks."

"So some one wants me out of circulation for two weeks, eh?" Doc showed no great surprise at the news; indeed, now that Hallet was talking, the bronze features had settled into a metallic repose.

"Who hired you?" he continued.

"I don't know," Hallet muttered.

Doc grasped the man, rumbling, "The window is still open!"

"Fountain of Youth, Inc., hired me!" Hallet shrieked fearfully.

"Who?"

"It was handled in a roundabout way," Hallet mumbled rapidly. "I was approached over the telephone with this proposition to seize you and hold you. The party who called me said there was no need of us ever seeing each other, and it would be better, in fact, if we didn't. The only name I got was Fountain of Youth, Inc."

"Man or woman?"

Hallet squirmed. "I am not positive."

"Don't forget that window!" Doc said meaningly. "You should know whether you talked to a man or a woman over the telephone."

"It was a shrill, unnatural voice," Hallet gulped. "I couldn't tell. Honestly, I couldn't."

"Why did this Fountain of Youth, Inc., want me held?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I asked that question, of course, but was told that there was no necessity for me knowing."

Doc's strange eyes dwelled upon the frightened lawyer for a moment. "Since you have no information of importance, I shall have to consign you to that window, it seems. Has Fountain of Youth, Inc., got an office?"

"Yes. It is Room 1402, the Queen Tower building."

"What about a telephone?"

"Yes. It is in the Queen Tower office. I had it traced."

"So you tried on your own hook to learn something of this mysterious Fountain of Youth, Inc.?"

Hallet had gotten some of his nerve back and was almost chirping, birdlike, when he spoke. "Do you blame me for trying to get a line on them?"

Doc did not answer, but considered. Although his features showed no expression, there was a certain finality about his manner which indicated that he was sure Hallet had no more information to reveal.

Doc swung into the next office. Hallet could see the bronze man through the open door. Doc went

to the big grass-green clothes locker and opened it. Sight of the object which rolled out caused Hallet to turn very purple in the face. LEAKING HAD been in the locker, bound and gagged. He fell out when Doc pulled the door ajar, and his garments made moist squishings, so profusely had he perspired. Leaking was uninjured. "I thought -- I thought -- " The words choked Hallet up and he could not finish. "The power of suggestion," Doc assured him dryly. "A few noises, some words, and you got the idea he had gone out of the window." "But the body on the street -- " "Ever hear of my five assistants?" Doc asked. "Y-yes," Hallet mumbled. "But w-what -- " "One of them, Monk by name, played the part of the body in the street," Doc explained shortly. "New Yorkers are curious souls, and they all ran to see what a man could be lying on the sidewalk for. That naturally made Monk's trick very lifelike. You see, Monk was summoned by telephone." "Oh!" Hallet swallowed. "I remember I did think I heard you phoning." Leaking, when the gag was removed from his jaws, swore choice profanity in a low voice that dripped rage. When it was suggested that he tell what he knew, he only snarled. Of a different caliber was this Leaking. A block of a jaw and ugly eyes showed determination, offering a hint that to get information from him would take application of a more moving third-degree method than had urged Hallet to talk. "My assistant, Monk, who played the dead man in the street, will be up here shortly," Doc stated. "With him will be another of my group of five aides, Ham. By the way, Ham is a lawyer of no little reputation and may want to take measures to have you, Hallet, barred from practice." Hallet scowled; Leaking went on profaning in a guttural, hoarse monotone. The afternoon sun sloped through the both offices, throwing shadows into the fear lines on Hallet's face, and glistening on the wetness that filmed Leaking's features. An elevator door clanked in the corridor outside, then feet tramped the hallway. They approached the office door. "That will be my two men," Doc said. He walked over and yanked the door ajar. A man came in, holding a revolver straight out in front of his chest. "Ain't I the lucky one, Savage!" he gritted. "Get them hands high!"

Chapter 3. MISTER SANTINI

THE MAN with the gun was the freckled, loose-lipped taxi driver who had helped Leaking kidnap Doc Savage. The automatic in his cigarette-browned fingers was a large one. Behind the driver strolled half a dozen other men. They were tough looking after the modern style, too fancy of dress, with a sleek, unnatural manner about them, the manner of men long accustomed to acting either very bad or very innocent. All held weapons. "Got rid of the hack and was comin' back here with the boys," growled the driver. "We saw some funny stuff downstairs -- a guy layin' on the sidewalk. That tipped us off to come up here with our rods ready." "Watch that Savage!" snarled Hallet from the floor. "He's covered!" the driver snorted; then, much louder: "Get back! Get back!" Doc Savage was advancing, apparently heedless of the leveled pistol. The taxi driver jabbed the gun threateningly. It was pointed at Doc's chest. "I'll plug you," the man blustered. Sprawled on the divan, Leaking comprehended Doc's Intention and tried to yell a warning. "The guy's probably got a bulletproof vest!" he howled. "Point your rod at his head!" Too late! Doc leaped. His arms were up clear of the line of fire, and he twisted as he came in. The gun smacked thunder and the bullet opened a long rip in the bronze man's coat, below the left armpit, then gouged stuffing out of the divan on which Leaking and Hallet sprawled. Doc, by twisting, had caused the slug merely to scrape across his bulletproof vest. The driver swore, tried to fire again. There was a dull impact. None present were quite sure they saw Doc strike the blow. But the hackman's nose was suddenly a flat, scarlet stringing pulp and he was gagging to keep from swallowing dislodged teeth. He fell down on all fours, concerned exclusively with his own pain. The other men were not yet inside. Doc banged the door. It had a spring lock and would hold for a time. Swinging into the inner office, he closed and locked that door behind him. A pistol whooped in the corridor. The bullet, puncturing the door, made a round daisy of splinters, then scooped leaves out of a law book which lay on the reception desk. "You dopes!" Leaking shrilled. "You'll hit us. Bust the door down!" Somebody kicked the frosted glass out of the outer door, reached in and turned the spring lock, which was better than breaking the panel down. The six men came inside gingerly, guns darting here and there so that they rather ridiculously resembled movie bad men, except for the killer expressions on their faces. "The inner office," Hallet grated. "Get him! And tie us loose -- I mean, turn us loose!" The excitement twisted his tongue. Hallet and Leaking were freed by the use of sharp knives. They had to be helped to their feet, so

taut had been their bindings.

The inner door resisted kicking. They shouted angrily for Doc to open up, got no response, then lighted on the great idea of picking up the reception desk and hurling it at the door. This knocked the door off its hinges.

The cat-walking across the threshold, guns ready, was repeated. They peered about, bewildered.

"Gone!" Hallet gulped.

LEAKING, MINDFUL of his own incarceration, sidled over and yanked open the grass-colored locker; but it was empty, and he stood cursing, swiping at his moist forehead with first one coat sleeve then the other.

"Was there a rope or somethin' in here that he could've used to slide down to the ground?" he demanded.

"The only rope was the one he used to tie us," Hallet disclaimed.

A man ran over to the window and looked out and down, then drew back, growling, "No sign of 'im!"

Leaking whipped to the window and gave close attention to the nature of the brick walls. They were very smooth, the bricks being set with a minimum of mortar and the mortar not grooved, but smooth and flush with the masonry.

"It'd take a good fly to stick on that wall," Leaking growled.

"I always did hear this Doc Savage wasn't quite human," a man mumbled.

"Shut up!" Leaking told him. "Let's look around. That bronze guy went somewhere."

The telephone rang loudly.

The men started as if something totally unexpected had happened, then looked sheepish, and Hallet went over, his gait more birdlike than usual, to answer the instrument.

The conversation lasted for a long minute, with Hallet saying nothing except "Yes." at intervals. But finally he put in a complete sentence.

"We got Doc Savage, but he escaped," he said.

Explosives came from the receiver, after which Hallet hurriedly explained exactly what had occurred and, judging from the way his neck turned red, took a cursing.

He hung up and stood adjusting a sleeve of his sparrow-colored coat, eyeing his companions the meanwhile.

"That was Fountain of Youth, Inc.," he said. "But it wasn't the same voice that usually calls me. I could tell this one was a man."

"Did this bird give his name?" Leaking demanded.

"He did. Said to call him Santini."

"Santini, eh? Any first handle?"

"None. Just Santini. He said to come to the office of Fountain of Youth, Inc., at once, and if he wasn't there to give us orders, there would be an envelope under the blotter on his desk, with our directions inside."

"Why didn't you tell him to go to hell?" Leaking snarled, and mopped sweat. "This is worth more than we're getting."

"Santini said there would be seven one-thousand-dollar bills in the envelope," Hallet smirked. "I forgot to tell you gentlemen that. The money is by way of a bonus."

Leaking stopped mopping and laughed. "That makes it different. Let's set sail, bozos."

They swung around, apparently having decided to dismiss the problem of Doc Savage's disappearance for the time being, and made for the outer door. But before they reached the aperture, the wrecked panel swung ajar so forcibly that portions of the shattered glass fell out.

A man looked inside the office and said in a tiny, mild voice, "I'm looking for a man named Doc Savage."

The newcomer was a study in evolution. His height barely topped five feet, but he would trip the scales at better than two hundred and sixty pounds. His face was incredibly home, only in a pleasant way, and great beams of arms dangled well below his knees.

His eyes were small and bright; big mouth was so large that it looked as if there had been an accident in its making. Exposed portions of his skin were stuck full of hairs which resembled lengths of rusty barbed wire.

Hallet gulped, flopped his arms like wings, swallowed and got words out.

"Monk!" he squawled. "This is Monk, one of Doc Savage's five men! I've seen his picture in the newspapers!"

Pistol snouts leaped in "Monk's" direction. Like an ungainly ape, the hairy fellow bounced back out of sight.

BEHIND MONK in the corridor crouched a slender wasp of a man whose clothing was sartorial perfection, and who carried a black, expensive-looking cane. In leaping back, Monk bounced into this dandified gentleman and almost upset him.

"Drat you!" rapped the nattily clad man. "Watch where you're going!"

"Get outa the way, Ham!" Monk grunted. "There's eight guys in there, most of 'em with guns!"

The two backed hastily down the corridor. Hands dipped into their coats, and from carefully contrived armpit holsters drew strange-looking weapons which perhaps bore more of a resemblance to

oversized automatics than anything else. To the firing mechanisms of these were attached curled magazines.

"Any sign of Doc?" "Ham" demanded.

"Nope."

Monk suddenly tightened on the trigger of his strange gun. From the ejector, empty brass cartridges climbed so rapidly that they looked like a brass wire; simultaneously, the weapon emitted an ear-splitting roar.

A man had looked out of Hallet's law office, and the fellow suddenly went limp and fell out into the hallway. His companions grabbed his heels, which were still in the office, and hauled him out of sight. Voices came out of the office.

"He ain't dead," barked the taxi driver's coarse tone. He evidently referred to Monk's victim.

"Looks like the slugs flattened and burst when they got under his skin."

"Mercy bullets!" said Hallet's voice. "They're hulls filled with a chemical which produces unconsciousness. I've read about 'em in the papers." "Them two guys must be usin' the supermachine pistols that Doc Savage is supposed to have invented," growled Leaking.

After that there was more conversation, but it was pitched so low that the words failed to reach Monk and Ham. The latter two had stopped down the corridor and were exchanging compliments.

"You dumb missing link!" the dapper Ham advised. "You hairy' freak! You certainly stirred up something when you walked up and shoved your ugly face through that door."

"I wanted to see if Doc was in there," said the small-voiced Monk. "And if you keep on callin' me names, I'm gonna shove you out where them red-hots can get a shot at you."

The two glared at each other, then, as if each had been nauseated by sight of the other, both spat on the floor.

"Where could Doc have gone?" Ham pondered.

"Suppose you dope it out with that great legal brain of yours," Monk invited.

Out of Hallet's office sailed a metal canister. This clank-clank-clanked down the corridor, suddenly went plop, and vanished in a wad of vile fumes of its own spewing.

"Tear gas!" Monk howled, his small voice abruptly vast, roaring.

He and Ham dived for the nearest stairway.

THEY STOPPED one flight down and exchanged black, hateful looks.

"If you had kept that noisy trap shut, we could have heard 'em gettin' ready to throw that cry-baby," gritted Monk.

Ham sneered expressively, and his slender-fingered hands tugged at his black cane and it telescoped from a point near the handle, thus disclosing that it was in reality a sword cane with a blade which looked razor-sharp.

"One of these days I'm gonna see if there's a man under that hairy' hide," he promised.

"Listen," advised Monk. "There's something going on upstairs."

They strained their ears, catching numerous small sounds that probably were foot scufflings, together with certain grunts and low words. The meaning of these dawned sharply.

"They're takin' the freight elevator down!" Monk howled. He sprinted down the hallway and sloped around a corner, Ham at his heels.

The fact that these two seemed continually on the point of coming to blows appeared to have little effect on their teamwork. They reached the sliding freight elevator door. This naturally could only be opened from inside the shaft.

Ham tapped it with his sword cane. The panel was of steel and sounded solid.

Monk drew back and gave the panel a resounding kick, but with no results.

He reached for Ham's sword cane. "Gimme that tin toothpick."

"No," said Ham. "What do you want to do? I'll do it."

"See if you can loosen the locking device while I shove on the door," Monk directed.

At that point, the cage passed downward with a noisy sigh. This caused the two to redouble their efforts, Ham fishing through the crack between the halves of the door with his sword cane and Monk shoving heavily.

The door came open. Far below, the cage promptly stopped, due to the safety device which cut off the current the instant the door was open.

Monk shoved his nubbin of a head inside, peered down, and snapped back as a bullet climbed squealing in the shaft.

"We got 'em!" he grinned. "They're between floors, and can't do a thing but shoot up through the grilled roof of the cage."

"Look down again and make sure," Ham suggested.

"Yeah -- and get shot." Monk hauled out his superfirer pistol, examined the magazine indicator, then leered at Ham. "I'm a great big black cloud and I'm gonna rain on them guys."

"You don't talk like you had good sense," Ham assured him. "But go ahead. It's not a bad idea." Monk prepared to fire, but instead of doing so, looked over his shoulder and started violently.

Doc Savage stood far enough down the corridor that distance made him seem less of the metallic giant than he was -- until his stature chanced to be compared with the nearby office doors.

"Let them go," said the giant bronze man.

Ham and Monk promptly let the sliding doors of the freight elevators swish shut. Then they joined Doc.

DOC SAVAGE had a passenger elevator waiting, and they entered this without delay at the bronze man's gesture. The lift sank, whistling a little.

"Where'd you go, Doc?" Monk demanded.

For answer, the bronze man said no word but simply drew from a pocket a collapsible metal grappling hook, to the shank of which was affixed a slender and very stout silken cord.

"Huh!" Monk grunted.

"Slid from the office window down to the window below, then loosened the grapple by flipping the cord," Doc explained. "Were they puzzled?"

"Plumb stunned, from the sound of it," Monk grinned.

The passenger cage let them out in the lobby. They ran around to the alleylike freight entrance, but a swiftly receding taxi was all that they saw of their quarry'.

That the cab carried Hallet and the others, they were sure, due to the heavy way in which the machine was laden and because they saw Hallet's face against the rear window.

Less than a minute later, Doc Savage had secured another hack.

"The Queen Tower building," he directed.

Monk began, "But, Doc -- "

"No chance of trailing that gang," Doc explained. "Anyway, I think they will head for the Queen Tower building. The office of Fountain of Youth, Inc., is there."

"What's Fountain of Youth, Inc.?" Monk demanded.

"That is one thing I want to find out," Doc told the homely gorilla of a fellow. "The other puzzle is: Why did that gang seize me? Fountain of Youth, Inc., whatever that is, seems to have hired them. But why?"

They mulled over the enigma in silence as their cab jerked and honked its way through downtown New York traffic, but after a few moments, Monk and Ham gave up the problem and fell to glowering at each other.

An onlooker would have sworn they were about to fly at each other's throats. The manner they bore toward each other was deceptive, however, for each would risk his life to preserve the other, and both had done so on occasion.

Their cab finally groaned to a stop.

"Queen Tower building, gents," said the driver.

THE QUEEN Tower was one of the newer structures in lower Manhattan, which meant its front was a symphony in black and white and shiny metals. Its lobby was spouting humanity, for the quitting hour of office workers was at hand.

Doc slid out of the cab. Then he seemed to explode, so suddenly was he back in the machine.

A man had stepped from the throng. He presented a startling appearance, due largely to his amazing mustache. This was extremely black, no thicker than a pencil at the base, and each wing was fully three inches long. It resembled a pair of oversize cat whiskers.

The man wore a brilliant red ribbon slantwise across his shirt front, and his afternoon garb was faultless. A pearlgray derby topped off the ensemble. Even in New York, his appearance commanded attention.

But what interested Doc Savage and his two aides was the flat automatic the stranger was plucking from under the tails of his afternoon coat. The weapon glinted pearl and gold inlay as it came up. The gun whacked. Two windows fell out of the cab as the bullet passed through.

"Oh, damn me!" shrieked the driver. He spilled out of the front seat and ran down the middle of the street, not looking back.

Doc and his two men got out almost as quickly, hitting the sidewalk on the side opposite the gunman. Monk and Ham had their superfirer pistols out. Doc's hands were empty, for he never carried a firearm, depending rather upon his wits and his scientific devices.

Monk tried to shoot under the cab at the man with the unique mustache. But the fellow was running, jumping high, a poor target. The next instant he popped into the Queen Tower.

"Dang jackrabbit!" Monk grunted.

Doc Savage and his two men reached the Queen Tower entrance together and surged inside.

A wake of howling, excited office workers showed the route their quarry had taken toward the rear. The chase led past the elevators, through a small door, down unfinished stairs and out a rear door, which gave upon an odorous side street.

A heavy, fast coupe was swerving away from the curb. The mustached gunman was at the wheel.

Monk lifted his machine pistol and it moaned. The bullets only flattened against the coupe glass. The homely chemist tried for the tires. He knocked off bits of rubber, but the tires did not go down.

The coupe roiled on, reeled around a distant corner and vanished.

They sought to find a taxi in which to push a pursuit, but the quarry was hopelessly gone before they got a hack lined out on the trail.

"That mug had the coupe waitin' for a get-away," Monk grumbled. "It was some boat. Had bulletproof glass and solid rubber tires."

"Wonder who he was?" Ham pondered.

That question was answered in the lobby of the Queen Tower, for it developed that the proprietor of the lobby cigar stand had not only seen the running gunman, but knew his identity.

"That was Mr. Santini," the proprietor explained.

"And who is Mr. Santini?" Doc queried.

"The president of Fountain of Youth, Inc."

Chapter 4. THE UNSEEN MESSAGE

AN ELEVATOR let them out on the fourteenth floor of the Queen Tower building and they walked toward a door which bore the legend they were seeking.

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH, INC.

"Mr. Santini seemed to know us by sight," Monk said grimly, his homely face solemn.

"That doesn't mean anything, you accident of nature," Ham pointed out sharply. "Doc's picture appears often in newspapers and magazines."

"Sure, shyster," Monk sneered. "Nobody but you would think of that."

Doc Savage, studying the door of the office, put in, "The thing which puzzles me most is why these men should be so anxious to get us out of the way."

Doc was listening. His sense of hearing was fabulously keen, due to a scientific device, an apparatus emitting sound waves of a frequency above and below the audible range, with which he attuned his ears for a certain period each day, as a part of a two-hour exercise routine that he had not missed taking each twenty-four hours for many years.

"Seems to be no one inside," he said.

He tried the knob, found the door locked, and employed a small curved metal device which he removed from a pocket. This was an especially designed lock picker and opened the door within a few moments.

The offices beyond -- outer reception chamber and two inner rooms -- were sumptuous to an extreme, the furniture being of genuine mahogany. The upholstery leather soft and rich, and the carpeting deep and silky. The latest in automatic typewriters, dictaphones, and announcing devices were installed.

Doc Savage made one rapid circuit and ascertained that Do one was present, then began a slower and more intensive scrutiny. His strange golden eyes missed little. There were words emblazoned on the door of one of the inner offices.

Q. SANTINI, PRESIDENT.

In that room, alongside a rich desk, Doc picked up a crumpled envelope to which he gave particular attention, although outwardly it seemed little different from much other wadded paper.

"What's so interesting about that?" Monk wanted to know.

Doc produced a magnifying glass that the homely chemist might discern what the bronze man's highly developed eyes had noticed -- the paper was moist, as if crumpled in a perspiring palm.

"One of the fellows who grabbed me was called Leaking, probably because of some strange affliction which makes him perspire a great deal," he explained. "Only a man who sweats freely would have damp palms on a day like this."

The bronze man now gave attention to the desk. In a drawer was a pad of plain white paper, together with a package of envelopes which matched the one he had found on the floor. If there had been a message in the envelope, it was logical to suspect that it might have been written on the pad.

Out of Doc's clothing came a tiny metal device, the principal gadget on which was a small reservoir filled with a liquid the color of coagulated blood. Doc held the paper pad over this and flicked a lever, causing the apparatus to give off a vapor.

After a moment, Doc examined the pad. The vapor had caused it to change color slightly. Vague, but clearly readable, writing had appeared.

"This is the message which was written on the top leaf of the pad," he explained.

Ham fumbled his sword cane and looked bewildered. "But how did you bring it out?"

Doc returned his apparatus to a pocket in a special toolcarrying vest which he wore, a vest cleverly enough padded that its presence was not noticeable to the chance observer.

"The application of iodine vapor to bring out impressions left by a pencil point is not exactly new," he said. "Let's read this."

MONK AND Ham came close to read what the paper held. The penmanship was firm, rounded, very readable.

"HALLET:

Kel Avery in on eight o'clock plane from Florida and must be prevented from communicating with Doc Savage. Better grab and hold for me.

SANTINI."

"Oh, oh," Monk grinned. "Now we're getting places."

"Leaking and Hallet and their gang beat us here and got the message," Doc decided.

Then the bronze man continued his search of the office suite of Fountain of Youth, Inc.

"Ain't we gonna do nothin' about this message?" Monk questioned, using a type of grammar that gave little hint that he was one of the most highly educated industrial chemists living.

"It's twenty minutes after five," Doc replied. "That gives us two hours and forty minutes before this Florida plane bearing Kel Avery arrives."

At Doc's words, Ham surreptitiously eyed an expensive wrist watch which he wore. The time was exactly twenty after five, a fact which caused Ham to sheath and unsheath his sword cane thoughtfully, for he knew Doc carried no watch, and there was no clock in sight in the office. To Ham's recollection, they had not passed a clock within half an hour.

Doc's uncanny ability to judge the passage of time was something at which the dapper lawyer had never ceased to marvel.

Doc came to a filing cabinet of metal painted to resemble mahogany, and unearthed cards which held his attention. The cards were large, indexed alphabetically, and each bore a name.

"Look here," the big man of metal suggested.

Monk came over and riffled through the index.

"For the love of mud!" he said, small-voiced. "This looks like a who's who of the town's moneybags."

"An index of the richest men in New York City," Doc agreed, and drew out a second drawer. "And here are other files of wealthy individuals, their names listed by states."

Ham joined them, tucked his sword cane under an arm and inspected the files.

"Every rich man in America," he murmured. Then he pointed at a small silver star which had been pasted on a card. "Wonder what this means?"

Doc's supple fingers traveled back and forth through the cards a few times. He found more silver stars, and gold one as well.

"You'll notice the cards give not only the man's name and the probable size of his fortune, but also his age and the state of his health. The old and feeble men rate gold stars, while those around fifty are marked with silver stars. The younger and more healthy men are not marked."

Ham twirled his innocent-looking black stick. "Get it, Doc?"

Doc nodded. "I'm afraid I do get it."

"Get what?" Monk demanded.

"I'll explain, hairy stupid," Ham began. "The men marked with gold stars are -- "

The phone rang.

DOC SAVAGE swung to the instrument, scooped it up, seemed to hesitate and consider for the briefest of intervals, then spoke. From his lips came an astoundingly exact reproduction of the brisk, birdlike voice of Attorney Hallet. Monk and Ham grinned in appreciation, although they had heard the bronze man's unusual command of voice mimicry exercised on other occasions.

"The office of Fountain of Youth, Inc.," Doc said quietly.

"Kel Avery can be found at 1120 Fish Lane," said a man's voice over the wire.

The voice was surprising. It sounded youthful and as full of bubbling life as a mountain brook, a voice which suggested a rather ridiculous vision of a boy joyfully turning handsprings as he spoke.

Doc Savage began, in Hallet's tones, "But I thought Kel Avery -- "

"Was on a plane bound foah New Yawk," said the spontaneous voice. "You are mistaken. Kel Avery is at 1120 Fish Lane."

So exuberant was the voice that the pronounced accent of the South had not been noticeable at first, but as the informant spoke this second time, the twist of speech was more apparent on certain words.

"Who is this?" Doc demanded, impersonating Hallet. "The receiver does not seem to bring your voice clearly enough for me to recognize it."

"You nevah heard mah voice before, Mistah Hallet," said the tone of youth.

"Then who are you? You know my voice."

"You take care of Kel Avery," advised the other. "I'll explain who Ah am later."

The distant receiver went clank on its hook. Doc Savage put his own instrument down slowly, eyes on his two men.

"That was the strangest voice," he said. "It sounded indescribably young and joyful; as if it belonged to an irresponsible lad."

"What'd he say?" Monk queried.

"That Kel Avery was at 1120 Fish Lane."

"Fish Lane is out in them Flushing marshes," Monk said slowly. "The district is not so hot."

Ham brandished his sword cane and put in, "But I thought this mysterious Kel Avery was on a plane to arrive from Florida at eight o'clock!"

Instead of commenting, Doc Savage lifted the phone again and requested a number to be found only in private lists which never went beyond the walls of the telephone company offices.

It was the number of Doc's office-laboratory-library on the eighty-sixth floor of the city's most impressive skyscraper.

A gentleman with a scholastic voice and a remarkable command of big words answered. Doc gave him a brief synopsis of what had occurred.

"Lookit -- Habeas!" Monk exploded. "How'd that hog get down here?"

HABEAS CORPUS was galloping toward them, great ears flopping like wings. The shoat, no larger than a small dog, presented such a grotesque picture that pedestrians halted and rubbered.

Ham leveled his sword cane. "What do you know about that!"

He was indicating a long, somber-looking sedan parked at the curb. This machine he had recognized as belonging to Doc Savage; there could be no mistake, for he had ridden in it numerous times and, moreover, it bore the distinctive license plates which the bronze man was permitted to use.

A young woman got out of the sedan.

Habeas Corpus, squealing delightedly, pawed at Monk like a dog.

"Cut that out or I'll kick you out from between your ears!" grunted Monk, who was interested in the girl. Pretty girls always intrigued Monk greatly, and this one was a knockout.

Doc Savage ordinarily did not let his features register much expression, but now he was looking a little astounded.

Doc had a fixed policy which he had adhered to for a long time, and that was to steer clear of feminine entanglements. The life he led was too perilous to permit such, for enemies would not hesitate to strike at him through any young woman upon whom he might permit his affections to dwell. That a young woman should be alighting from his car was entirely surprising.

Then she turned and they saw her face. "Pat Savage!" Monk howled.

Patricia Savage, tall, exquisitely moulded, had the same remarkable bronze hair as Doc Savage himself. They were cousins, and Doc had last seen her in western Canada, months before, when he and his five aides had gone through some perilous adventures in tracking down a gang who had slain Patricia's father.

Doc went forward eagerly which was something unusual for the bronze man. Ordinarily, he felt uncomfortable in the presence of young women, especially girls as entrancing as Patricia.

But Pat was an exception. Pat was something of a two-fisted scrapper herself, and almost as unique in her way as the big Doc was in his.

"Tell Renny and Long Tom the yarn, Johnny," the bronze man directed. "Then the three of you head for 1120 Fish Lane. Investigate this Kel Avery report. Monk and Ham and myself will be here for ten or fifteen minutes longer."

"Will you join us later at this piscatorial thoroughfare of Fish Lane?" asked the big-worded "Johnny."

"Right."

"Exactly what is your present whereabouts?"

Doc gave him the address of Fountain of Youth, Inc., then asked "Why?"

It was a rare thing when Johnny laughed, but he laughed now.

"You are going to get a surprise, Doc," he chuckled.

And with that, he hung up.

DOC SAVAGE was thoughtful as he replaced the receiver.

"Johnny does not go in for playful mysteries as a usual thing," he pondered aloud. "I wonder what is on his mind?"

"Maybe his big words finally made him dizzy," Monk grinned.

"More likely his association with you has gotten him down, you hairy mistake," Ham said unkindly.

The pleasantly ugly Monk scowled and registered injury.

"I'm gonna tell Habeas on you," he muttered seriously.

Ham's grip on his sword cane tightened. Habeas Corpus was Monk's pet pig, a big-eared, long-legged shoat which was fully as ridiculous a looking member of the pork family as Monk was of the human race.

Doc went through the file containing the data on America's most wealthy men. One card was dog-eared with thumb marks, as if it had been handled more than the others.

The card bore the name of Thackeray Hutchinson, a banker who was among the wealthiest and whom the United States government had once tried to convict of illegal practices in connection with the failure of a public utilities project. The charge had been defeated by clever lawyers.

Doc got Thackeray Hutchinson on the telephone, then stated that he wished information on Fountain of Youth, Inc.

"Never heard of it!" snapped the pompous banker, and hung up.

"He was lying," said Doc, who was a judge of voice expression. "We'll investigate him more thoroughly a bit later."

They rode an elevator down to the street. On the sidewalk, they halted and stared.

"I got tired of the woods," Pat smiled. "Johnny and the others told me I could catch you here if I hurried."

There was no gushing display of affection. She and Doc merely shook hands warmly.

"I brought Habeas along," Pat told Monk laughingly.

Monk took in her smart frock, her chic hat and the slender silk of her ankles.

"Golly, Pat," he said, grinning from one ear to the other, "you sure make these city gals look rusty. Thanks for bringing Habeas. Ham, here, will appreciate that."

Ham scowled at Monk, bowed graciously to Pat.

"Haven't you two settled your quarrel yet?" Pat laughed.

"One of these days I'll lose my temper," Ham said grimly. "Then they'll be hunting for a coffin

wide enough to hold that ape."

Doc Savage indicated the car. "We'll talk on the way uptown, Pat, but I'm afraid we'll have to drop you at the office until we get a matter settled."

"A matter?" Pat asked curiously. "Sounds interesting."

"There's a plot afoot;" Monk imparted. "Or rather, some other cookies are plotting something."

"I'm going along!" Pat declared firmly. "I've missed all the excitement we had while you fellows were up in my country. To tell the truth, it was in hopes of seeing some action that I came down to visit you."

Doc shook his head. "It's dangerous, or may be."

"Aw, Doc," Monk grumbled. "Pat's regular. What we went through in Canada proves that."

Doc surrendered. "All right."

They entered the sedan, Doc taking the wheel. The machine did not look new or particularly efficient, but the motor came to life under the hood with scarcely a sound, and the quiet power of their departure from the curb indicated costly gears and great power.

"The yearning to hunt trouble must run in the Savage blood," said Pat. "Gentlemen, I yearn for some action."

"Here it is!" Doc rapped abruptly, and stepped heavily on the power brakes.

A taxi had sloughed crosswise of the narrow street. It was the same cab which had been used a bit earlier by Leaking to kidnap Doc.

MEN MATERIALIZED with sinister abruptness out of the crowds on the sidewalk. Some carried trombone cases, and others long hand bags. They snapped them open. Out came sawed-off rifles, shotguns, a machine gun or two.

Patricia Savage slid off the seat onto the floorboards, opening her chic hand bag as she did so. Out of the bag came an enormous, much-worn single-action six-shooter. The gun had neither trigger nor sights, and a fanning spur had been welded onto the hammer.

Monk and Ham wrenched out superfirer pistols.

"There's that Santini bird!" Monk rapped.

Ham, squinting at the gunmen rushing toward the car, added, "And there's Hallet and Leaking!" Santini, resplendent in red chest ribbon and cat-whisker mustache, was one of the attackers who depended only on a hand weapon. He held his pearl-and-gold inlaid automatic.

"Tutto ad un tratto!" he howled. "All at once! Let them have it!"

The close confines of the street quaked, thundered and echoed with the crash of guns. Fully a dozen men had surrounded the sedan, and all fired simultaneously. Machine gun and automatic pistol ejectors sprayed empty cartridges on the pavement.

It seemed impossible that those in the sedan could live under that storm of powder-driven metal.

Chapter 5. THE HANGING MAN

FISH LANE was an unpaved rut which ran out into the bog that was the upper end of Flushing Bay. This bog was furred with tall, coarse salt water grass, and along the Lane stood a few shacks of wood, tar paper and tin, most of these structural materials apparently having come from neighboring junk heaps.

A car crawled quietly into Fish Lane, a long, streamlined machine with a fishtail back and pants over the wheels. It stopped.

The man who first alighted from the machine had hands of startling size. Huge and knobby, they eclipsed the other proportions of their owner, who would weight in excess of two hundred and fifty pounds, and who was gaunt and bony.

Wearing a long, solemn, funereal-going expression, he asked of some one still in the car, "Fish Lane is where Doc said to come, wasn't it, Johnny?"

"Eminently correct, Renny," said Johnny's scholastic voice. Johnny was a scarecrow of bones, except that the garments were hung on his frame were of excellent quality. Nowhere on his skeleton did there seem to be even a normal muscle, far less any surplus flesh. Dangling from his shirt lapel was a monocle on a ribbon.

They were a strange pair, these two. "Renny" was known all over the world for his ability and accomplishments as an engineer, having constructed bridges, dams, power plants, railroads, in many countries.

The bony Johnny was equally famous in his field of archaeology and geology, and he had formerly been the head of the natural science research department of a famous university, an environment which perhaps had given him his love of big words.

Big-fisted Renny's engineer associates knew him as Colonel John Renwick, while scholastic gentlemen knew Johnny as William Harper Littlejohn.

Gaunt Johnny peered into the car and advised, "Alight, Electrophobia."

The man who now got out of the car, stuffing a tangle of wires and delicate electrical apparatus into a door pocket as he did so, looked pale and almost feeble. Alongside the great, big-fisted Renny, he seemed almost an invalid, a fact that was deceptive, however, for the giant Renny would have hesitated about mixing in a fight with the puny looking one, knowing him as he did.

The apparent invalid was Major Thomas J. Roberts, "Long Tom" to his intimates, an electrical wizard extraordinary.

These three were the other members of Doc Savage's group of five remarkable assistants, and each was an expert, a so-called genius, in his line, although in their case as in most others, genius and hard work and protracted study.

Renny pointed with his huge fist. "There's the place where this Kel Avery is supposed to be -- 1120 Fish Lane."

THE BUILDING at 1120 Fish Lane was grayishly shabby and resembled a barred rock hen nested in a tangle of brush. Shingles were scabbing off the roof, tin cans had been split and nailed over knotholes in the up-and-down plank walls, and sacks and old clothing were wadded in place of missing windowpanes.

The Flushing elevated tracks were not far away and a train passed on it, making much clank and rumble.

"That joint isn't much," Renny rumbled. "We won't need to wait for Doc. Let's take it."

They were all agreed on the idea, and they went forward. Doc's word had been to await his arrival, but they knew the bronze man had made that statement in a general fashion rather than a literal one.

If there had been any apparent need for needing Doc's consummate skill in the present instance, the three would have waited. But to learn whether Kel Avery was in the shack or not seemed but a simple matter.

Doc Savage's five men were not puppets who did the bronze man's bidding. They were men of training, of sharp mentality, and had a habit of going ahead on their own initiative. Sometimes they made mistakes. More often, they did not.

Turning into the ramshackle building, they stepped over a fallen fence and trod a furrow through the brush and weeds where feet had trampled. In one spot they noticed tracks -- the prints of long, narrow shoes -- embedded in the moist loam.

"Seems to have been only the one guy walking in and out here," rumbled big-fisted Renny.

Another train passed noisily on the near-by elevated.

Gaining the door, the three men knocked; but there was no answer. Gaunt Johnny shifted to a knothole uncovered by tin and pasted his right eye to the aperture. His violent start was plainly visible to both Renny and Long Tom, and he used a pet ejaculation which he saved for occasions of supreme shock.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" he exploded.

Renny and Long Tom reached his side in concerted leaps. They clapped eyes in turn to the knothole, and each tensed. Then Renny bounded back to the door.

There was blurred motion, a crash, and splinters climbed in a cloud around Renny. With one blow, he had sent an enormous fist through the door.

It was a remarkable exhibition of iron ruggedness, but Johnny and Long Tom showed no surprise, for they had seen its equal and had heard Renny's frequent boast that no wooden door was made with a panel so stout that he could not smash through with one swing of the monstrosities which he called fists.

Weakened, the door collapsed. The three men dived inside. They gazed upward the instant they were across the threshold.

"Horrible!" Johnny breathed. "Revolting!"

"Damn bad!" agreed pale Long Tom.

THE TRASH of years of abandonment lay about the room, and from the rotting floor in one corner had sprouted a few toadstools. Paper had peeled from the walls long ago, while marauding boys had belted glass out of the windows with stones and the glass reposed in shattered fragments over the floor.

The door of a closet hung askew, half closed; from the partition between the shack's two rooms, the door was missing entirely, only hinges that clung like rusty scabs showing that there had been one.

Eyes of the three men remained fixed overhead, where the ceiling lath had long since been torn away to leave the attic naked and exposed to its highest recess, except for the two-by-four timbers to which the laths had been nailed.

They were not calloused men, these five aides of Doc's, although they had walked long in the shadow of violence and peril. They were not beyond being gripped by a scene of horror. They were gripped now.

From the roof peak stretched a rope which was a yard in length and terminated around the neck of a man. The man's feet dangled off one of the two-by-fours a distance of a foot or so.

The hanging man had a white beard which came nearly to his belt, and it covered the front of his chest like the stiff front of a dress shirt. His hair was white and very long, snowy beard and hair lending him a most striking appearance. His face was darkly purple from the throttling effect of the rope.

"Quick!" boomed Renny. "He may be alive!"

Renny and Johnny prepared to lift Long Tom, the lighter of the three, up to loosen the hanging one. Then their hair all but stood on end.

The hands of the man on the rope were crossed. They moved with flashing speed, darting inside his

coat. Reappearing, each hand held a blue revolver.

The bearded one squirmed and his feet found a two-by-four cross-piece. He shook his head violently and loosened the rope from his neck.

It all happened in the space of a finger snap, before the three men below could do a thing.

"Bettah keep yoah hands in sight," the stranger advised.

Chapter 6. DAN THUNDEN

VERY SLOWLY, so that the white-bearded man with the two blue guns could see each move, Renny and Johnny lowered Long Tom back to the floor. Then Renny's huge fists knotted and unknotted angrily.

"Take it easy," Long Tom warned. "This guy took us in, what I mean."

The whiskered one dropped down to the floor, white hair' flying. There was a weird lightness and agility about his movements. His features were unusual, also. They had the lines of a man of fifty, yet the skin was clear and the eyes had a youthful sparkle.

"Stand still," advised the gunman in a youthful, drawling voice. "I'm going to search yoah pockets."

His bony but agile fingers brought to view, from armpit holsters worn by Doc's three men, a trio of the unique supermachine pistols which were the bronze man's invention. He fumbled these, obviously curious about their mechanism.

Renny thought he saw his chance. He lashed a big hand at the white-bearded one.

The results were choking to Renny. There was a whistling sound, a bonki noise. Renny sat down heavily, eyelids fluttering.

He had been hit between the eyes with one of the blue revolvers and the blow had come so swiftly that he had not even seen it.

Long Tom and Johnny stared. They had just witnessed speed such as they had imagined only one man could possess -- Doc Savage.

"Why didn't Santini, Hallet and Leaking come, instead of sendin' you gentlemen?" asked the remarkable white-haired man dryly.

"Are you Kel Avery?" Long Tom demanded.

The other juggled the two blue guns slowly. "Are you tryin' to kid me?"

"Are you Kel Avery?" repeated Long Tom.

The thatch of white hair shook. "No, suh, and you should know that, hem' in Santini's gang."

The electrical wizard frowned, "Wrong, whiskers. We're not working for Santini

"Save that guff, suh," snapped the other. "Ah don't believe you can talk fast enough to fool old Dan Thunden."

"Dan Thunden," Long Tom grunted. "That your name?" Dan Thunden laughed loudly, boyishly. "Just as if Santini hadn't told you."

"I tell you we're not

"Shut up!" The blue guns juttet angrily.

Gaunt Johnny put in, calm-voiced, "Would you condescend to answer a single interrogation?"

Dan Thunden threw his white hair back with a headsnapping gesture. "What is yoah question?"

"How old are you?" Johnny asked, using small words for once.

"One hundred and thirty-one yeahs old," Dan Thunden said promptly.

Renny's jaw sagged. Long Tom and Johnny looked little less shocked.

"A dang lie!" Long Tom snapped. "Nobody could be as spry as you are at that age!"

Dan Thunden's white whiskers bristled indignantly and he seemed on the point of putting up a vociferous argument. Instead, he spun toward the door.

Doc Savage stood there, his great bronze frame almost filling the opening. Behind him were the homely Monk and sword-cane-carrying Ham. The three of them had approached with great silence.

Thunden leveled a gun at the door, roared, "Yoah hands up, suh!"

But Doc was already hurtling forward.

THUNDEN'S GUN convulsed. The shack quaked with powder roar!

Doc was moving with the full coordination of his tremendous muscles, and the bullet missed. A wall board split as the lead clouted it.

There was no time for a second shot. Thunden ducked wildly as Doc's great hands grasped for him. He got clear, dancing aside.

Johnny jumped for the white-haired man who said his his age was a hundred and thirty-one.

Thunden threw a blue gun. It took Johnny in the middle. The bony geologist folded, face distorted, tongue protruding.

Monk came in from the rear with the speed of a great cat. Thunden hurled his second gun. Monk wailed and wrapped both hands over the top of his bullet of a head, where the weapon struck. He sank to the floor, his wail turning into a howl of rage and pain. All of him but his vocal apparatus seemed paralyzed.

The next few seconds held action as Doc's five men had never before witnessed. They had seen many fights, but never one in which their bronze chief had been pitted against a man anywhere near his own equal in agility.

Dan Thunden could not possibly possess the Herculean strength of the bronze giant, but the white-haired old fellow did move with an unearthly speed. Time after time, Doc seemed oh the point

of grasping Thunden, only to have the strange fellow get clear. They flashed to the ends of the room, two men of superhuman abilities.

Dan Thunden did not have an easy time of it, however. At first, when he had carelessly used his guns to lay out Monk and Johnny, he had seemed supremely confident of his own ability. A grin had been on his aged, but remarkably healthy looking face. But the grin faded. He began to look worried.

"You sho' are no ordinary man!" he gulped, and his expression was that of a man who had met something he did not believe existed.

Leaping desperately, he reached a window. Glass and aged wood exploded as he went through it head-first. Surprisingly enough, he managed to land on his feet outside and started running. The window was too small to pass Doc's big frame in a hurry, and he had to swing around and out through the door. That lost him time. Thunden had gained yards.

Renny and Doc's other men piled into the chase. Johnny, bringing up the rear, still had his arms across his middle and groaned with each jump.

It became evident that Dan Thunden was no match for Doc in a straight race. The bronze man overhauled the bearded fellow.

Thunden stopped, whirled. A gun -- a tiny flat hide-away automatic -- came from inside the waistband of his trousers.

"Down!" Doc rapped, and flattened with his men.

Thunden's bullet made an ugly hissing as it cut through the brush and salt water grass. Shot echoes slammed, then came jarring back in fainter echoes from the distant walls of Flushing warehouses.

"White whiskers seems to be a walkin' armory," Monk growled, and snapped the safety off on his machine pistol.

The superfirer hooted. Brush and grass toppled as if mowed. The homely chemist emptied an entire drum, then reared up to observe effects, He slapped down again in wild haste.

Dan Thunden had crawled through the salt grass and now fired from a spot fifty yards from where he had last been seen. Despite Monk's mad speed in flattening, he might well have been shot had it not been for bronze-haired Patricia Savage, who sent a bullet snapping near Thunden, startling the white haired one into aiming badly.

Pat was in the sedan, parked a short distance up Fish Lane. She had remained in the car as a lookout.

Dan Thunden got away, reaching a paved street which abutted on the marsh ground and running up that until he had the good fortune to encounter a prowling taxi. He paused an instant before leaping into the cab to yell at his pursuers.

"If you don't believe I'm a hundred and thirty-one years old, look up the records on the skippah of the Sea Nymph, a schoonah that sailed from New York in 1843!" he shouted.

Then, menacing the driver of the taxi with his gun, Thunden forced the cab to carry him away in great haste.

Farther up the street children were playing, and that prevented Doc and the others from using their superfirers, or Pat her single-action six-gun.

PAT, PLUGGING fresh shells into her big revolver as Doc came up, grinned widely.

"Two fights and I've only been with you half an hour!" she laughed. "Talk about leading violent lives!"

Big-fisted Renny overheard that and was puzzled.

"Two fights?" he demanded.

Pat indicated the sedan with a slender, capable hand. The car windows had a frosty appearance and were pocked. Paint was knocked off the body.

Renny nodded soberly, comprehending. Windows and car body were of bulletproof construction.

Indications were that the machine had recently been in the path of a barrage.

"Santini, Hallet and Leaking and their gang jumped us," Pat explained for the benefit of Renny, Long Tom and Johnny. "Stopped our car by blocking the street with a taxi. Then they ran out with guns and cut loose."

"What happened?" Renny boomed.

"I aged ten years wondering if the sedan was really bulletproof," Pat smiled. "And was it a good feeling when those bullets bounced off!"

"What about Santini's gang?"

"They ran," Pat advised. "They had things all set for a fast get-away. They were gone before we could get straightened out and follow them."

Renny's puritanical face grew long and gloomy, which meant, contrary enough, that he was delighted.

"You're in awful bad company, Pat," he said seriously.

"I love this company," Pat assured him.

An hour later, Doc Savage and his five men were going through ancient shipping records by way of complying with strange, white-haired Dan Thunden's suggestion that they check up on his age.

"Here it is," Doc advised, indicating yellowed papers. The others gathered about and read. The

schooner Sea Nymph had sailed from New York in 1843, according to the aged documents, and her skipper was a gentleman bearing the name of Dan Thunden, whose age at that time was exactly forty. Gaunt Johnny fingered his monocle and did some mental arithmetic.

"Computation indicates Captain Dan Thunden of the Sea Nymph would be a hundred and thirty-one years of age if he had lived to this day," advised.

"Nuts," snorted the homely Monk.

"To whom are you attributing the qualities of a hardshelled fruit?" Johnny asked in an injured tone.

"Not to you," Monk grunted. "But it's silly to think any guy a hundred and thirty-one years old could be as spry as that old white-whiskered gent."

Doc riffled through more of the ancient papers. He pointed.

"Look," he advised.

Again, the other read.

"Holy cow!" gulped Renny. "That voyage in 1843 was the Sea Nymph's last. She was lost at sea and never heard from again."

SHORTLY AFTER the discovery that the Sea Nymph was listed as one of the mysteriously lost ships of the sea, Doc Savage spoke without consulting a timepiece.

"We have about thirty minutes to spare before heading for the airport to meet this Kel Avery who was ordered seized by Santini."

"Do you think they will go through with the attempted capture?" Pat asked curiously.

"Why not? They do not know we intercepted Santini's orders to Hallet and Leaking."

"Right," Pat admitted. "What about the half hour we have to spare?"

"We'll make a stab at learning what is behind this," Doc told her.

"How?"

"Recall the file of wealthy men in the offices of Fountain of Youth, Inc.?"

"You told me about it."

"I phoned one of the names in the file -- a banker by the name of Thackeray Hutchinson," Doc explained. "He acted very secretive and hung up on me."

"Which means he knows something," Pat said promptly.

"Right."

"And we're going to ask him questions?"

"We are."

Chapter 7. MURDER

BANKER Thackeray Hutchinson's domicile was one befitting a man who was by way of being one of the nation's wealthiest and most unscrupulously greedy moneybags. It was a penthouse covering the entire roof of a costly building which Thackeray Hutchinson owned in the Wall Street sector.

"I never did like this Hutchinson octopus," Monk muttered as they unloaded before the building which supported the penthouse. "He should have been shot when he was born."

"He's an orphan robber," agreed pale Long Tom.

A private elevator gave admittance to the penthouse, and this was operated by a rather tough-looking fellow in a gaudy uniform.

"Mr. Hutchinson, is not in," the operator advised harshly.

"We'll go up anyway," Monk growled.

The attendant started to object, but eyed the chemist's gorilla hulk and changed his mind. He ran them up in sour silence.

A butler put his nose in the air and also imparted that Hutchinson was not in. "Don't lie to us!"

Doc Savage said shortly. The flunky stared coldly at the bronze man. Then his haughty aplomb collapsed. There was something about Doc's flake-gold eyes and the quiet power of his voice that did not promise easy going to those who tried to resist his will.

"In the library," the butler mumbled.

Banker Thackeray Hutchinson sprang wildly from his easy chair as they walked unceremoniously into his presence. He stared at Doc Savage and his expression was that of a rabbit hunter who has just met a bear.

The moneybags had the jowls of a bulldog, the eyes of a lizard and the body of a pelican, along with the pelican's neck. His head was utterly bald and an unpleasant white, as if the top of his skull were showing.

"Damn you, get out of here!" he yelled. He wore a checkered suit with a ridiculously youthful cut, a suit such as a college freshman might wear until his classmates laughed him into leaving it at home. The effect was such that Ham, whose hobby was clothing, made a face as he glimpsed the loud suit.

"My name is Savage, Mr. Hutchinson," Doc began. "We have called upon you to --"

"I know you're Doc Savage, and a big shot with some fools!" the banker roared. "You may buffalo some people, but you won't get to first base with me! Get out!"

"We have called to learn what you know of Fountain of Youth, Inc.," Doc finished.

"Never heard of it!" the pelican man snarled.

"That is not true," Doc charged. "Your denial doesn't ring sound."

Hutchinson ground his teeth and leaped for a telephone. Monk moved with a lazy speed and got there first. The banker shrank away from the apish chemist.

"Help, police!" he screamed. "Help! Murder!"

"The police are here," Doc advised.

Hutchinson snarled, "Where?"

"We are the police. Myself and each of my men hold commissions on the New York police force."

The man whose manner of getting wealth had interested the Federal government retreated, scowling trembling a little. He was the picture of a man in a panic.

Doc Savage studied the fellow. During Thackeray Hutchinson's trial in connection with the public utilities fiasco, there had been much in the newspapers and little of it complimentary. There was one angle worth remembering -- this man had an awful fear of going to jail. It was rumored that he had spent over a million dollars in defeating the government charge.

"You are under arrest," Doc said abruptly.

Hutchinson blanched. "W-w-what?"

"Fountain of Youth, Inc., has made repeated attempts to kill me within the last two hours," Doc told him quietly. "You have been connected with the concern, and that means a trip to jail."

"Y-you're crazy!" the banker snarled.

"Accessory to murder, or attempted murder, is a criminal charge," Doc pointed out quietly. "Your money won't keep you out of prison."

Doc was bluffing, but the utter calmness of his voice gave Thackeray Hutchinson no hint of that. The threat of jail did what perhaps nothing else could have done. The pelican man collapsed in a chair.

"W-what do y-you want to k-know?" he mumbled. "I'll tell you."

AT ONE side of the room, dapper Ham twirled his sword cane and masked a smile. His law career had made Ham a master of scaring unwilling witnesses into divulging the truth, but even he could not have bested the job Doc had just done. The bronze man had hit on their victim's one fear -- that of going to prison.

"I'm only a c-customer of Fountain of Youth, Inc.," Hutchinson stuttered in his haste to get the information out.

"A customer?" Doc prompted.

The banker wrung his hands. "This is horrible! If only Fountain of Youth had not gotten into trouble! They had the secret! The secret man has hunted for since he was able to think for himself! And now they've got in trouble and it'll be lost."

The hand wringing became more violent.

"I was to pay them a million dollars for the secret," the moneybags went on. "It was cheap at the price. A select list of other rich men was to receive the secret, too. We had been selected carefully because of our wealth and-er-er other qualifications by Fountain of Youth. A million apiece, we were all to pay."

"Wait!" Doc put in. "This isn't making sense. What is this secret for which you and other wealthy men of your type were to pay a million each?"

Thackeray Hutchinson twisted his bald head to peer about uneasily.

"They've got a man here," he mumbled. "They said they had to be sure we did not tell the secret or plot against them to get the weeds."

"Fountain of Youth has a man here? One of Santini's gang?"

The bulldog-jowled capitalist shuddered. "Yes. One of Santini's men."

"Who is he?" Doc rapped.

Thackeray Hutchinson opened his mouth to reply. He shut it before words came out. He lifted half out of his chair. Gagging sounds escaped him as he tried to point at a door on the opposite side of the study.

The hard-looking elevator operator stood there, lifting a revolver.

"Spill your insides, will you?" he snarled.

His gun lipped flame; the recoil kicked his arm up. The room seemed to fly apart and come together again, so earsplitting was the report.

Thackeray Hutchinson sat down loosely in his easy chair. His eyes were closed tightly. There was a round blue hole in the middle of his forehead. Then his mouth fell open and let a scarlet flood spill down the vest of his loud suit.

Doc Savage scooped an ornamental vase off an end table. It was not an effective weapon, but the handiest one. He threw it.

The gunman tried to step aside. He was far too slow. The vase hit his gun arm. Enamelled particles geysered. The man dropped his revolver, stooped to recover it, saw there was no time for that and leaped backward. He slammed the door.

"The elevator!" Doc rapped. "Watch it!"

Big-fisted Renny and homely Monk dived to obey.

The gunman got the key turned in the lock -- they could hear it click.

Doc hit the panel. It was stout. The bronze man blocked out one metallic hand and struck. His knuckles drove completely through the wood, a feat that seemed more than bone and tendons could

stand, yet, when he withdrew his fist after turning the key, there was no apparent damage. Doc plunged down a passage. Yells and curses indicated the killer had been cut off from the elevators.

"He's makin' for the terrace!" came Renny's great rumble.

Doc crashed through double glass doors. The slayer was on the opposite side of the terrace, peering over the parapet. He looked around, grimaced, swore hoarsely, then swung over the edge and vanished.

Two long leaps took Doc to the edge. An ornamental fresco ran downward, the carvings of this forming fairly substantial handholds. The gunman was perhaps ten feet down.

Doc swung over and started after him. His movements were swift, making those of the man below seem slow by comparison.

The killer glanced up. Discovering Doc almost upon him, he yelled a meaningless threat. Then he tried to increase his own pace.

It was no spot for a race. The slayer missed his grip in his mad haste. He clawed the air furiously, but failed to recover, and his body tilted outward, arms windmilling.

At the beginning of his fall, he turned over so that he faced the street some forty floors below. The sight caused him to shriek long and horribly, and the sound grew rapidly fainter as his fall carried him away from Doc and the others.

On the street, pedestrians looked up, they ran away and made a place for the body to hit the sidewalk. The concrete cracked a little from the impact.

Doc climbed slowly back to the terrace.

Ham came out of the penthouse and said grimly, "Thackeray Hutchinson died like that!" and snapped his fingers to illustrate.

Chapter 8. FAST STUFF

THE CLOCK on the front of the main hangar was big enough that it could be seen from all parts of the flying field, but it was dusk now, and one had to be quite close to make out that the clock hands stood at eight.

Monk got out of Doc's streamlined car, saying in his small voice, "One thing is sure, and that is we haven't seen all the guys in this Fountain of Youth gang. So we gotta be careful." He jerked a thumb to take in the airport in general. "Some of them mugs might be around here anywhere, waitin' for Kel Avery's plane."

Somewhat of a crowd was about the airport waiting room with its long telescoping canopy that could be hauled out to planes on little wheels. The throng had a heterogeneous appearance. Some persons carried small books and others had cameras.

"Autograph hounds and photographers," rumbled big-fisted Renny.

"Which means a celebrity is arriving, doesn't it?" Patricia put in.

Doc said, "Pat!"

"Yes?"

"Can you change your appearance in a hurry?"

"If I had some dark glasses, I could. You can't imagine what a difference dark glasses make in a girl's looks."

Doc Savage dropped a hand into a door pocket and brought out a small leather case.

"Here they are. I do not think that Fountain of Youth crew got a good look at you this afternoon, and if you alter your appearance slightly, they might not recognize you."

"The idea is that nobody is to think I'm with you?" Pat queried.

"Exactly."

"All right." Pat tapped Ham on the arm. "Lend me that snappy topcoat you're wearing."

"Hula?" Ham was startled.

"It's cut like a ladies' garment. Come on, shed it!"

The homely Monk exploded stifled laughter and Ham, ears getting red, slid out of his snappily tailored topcoat and passed it to the bronze-haired young woman.

"Keep your eyes open and be ready to grab any loose ends that we let slip, Pat," Doc directed.

"I will." Pat faded into the gloom among the other parked cars.

A few moments later, when they saw her again, she had donned the smoked spectacles, changed her hair, and had draped the topcoat over her shoulders.

"Smart kid!" Renny rumbled softly. "I'd hardly know her myself."

Monk, gurgling mirth, moaned ecstatically, "I always did know something was wrong with that topcoat, and now I see what it is. The thing was made for a woman."

Ham glared in the murk, fumbled his sword cane and snarled, "For two cents I'd make hash out of you!"

Doc put in, "Listen!"

Out of the southern twilight was coming the multiple drone of airplane engines.

"That'll be the ship carrying Kel Avery," decided the bronze man. "Let's go."

They got out of the streamlined car, six men so unusual as to attract more than one curious stare.

Doc kept in the background; he seldom wore a hat, but he wore one now, yanked low to help the

murk hide his features. He did not want to attract the cameras or the autograph hunters. Long Tom, so pale as to seem an ill man, stopped an airport attendant, asking, "Why the excitement?"

"Maureen Darleen, the movie actress, is coming in on this plane from Florida," the attendant replied.

WHILE THE big passenger plane moaned closer, Long Tom sauntered over to Doc and spoke in a low voice.

"The photographers and autograph grabbers are here to meet Maureen Darleen, the picture queen," he imparted. "But if I remember my movies, this Darleen is not such a big shot. The best she's done is play opposite a well known actor or two. And that makes me wonder why all the fuss?"

"Haven't you read your papers lately?" Doc asked.

"Naw," Long Tom shrugged. "I been busy working on my electrical invention to utilize sonic waves to kill insects and crop pests."

"The papers yesterday and this morning were full of Maureen Darleen," Doc explained. "She was kidnaped in Florida yesterday, but escaped. Some of the newspapers hinted unkindly that it was a publicity stunt."

"Probably was," Long Tom grunted skeptically. "These movie people will do anything for publicity."

"They have to. If the public does not know their names; they have no box office pull, and big box office pull means big salary."

"You seem to be sticking up for this Maureen Darleen."

"I do not know her personally," Doc replied. "But I do know that she spends most of her salary to support a home for orphans in her home town down in Georgia."

"That may be a publicity stunt, too."

"She does not advertise her connection with the home. Anyway, there are less expensive methods of grabbing publicity."

Long Tom patted his armpit where reposed a supermachine pistol.

"Some of these cameramen and autograph hunters may belong to the Fountain of Youth gang," he grunted.

Doc nodded. "I was thinking of that."

The big plane circled the field once, the motors decreased their clamor and the ship swung in, sinking. The pilot was good and touched his ponderous charge to the tarmac without a bounce; then, with whooping gusts from the propellers, drove the craft toward the canopy.

Field attendants yelled and grunted and shoved to keep the crowd out of range of the propellers, and other flunkies ran the telescoping awning out.

The plane engines stopped and the cabin door opened. The throng burst bounds and rushed for the door, cameramen yelling and jumping up in an endeavor to get pictures, the autograph fans shouting for Maureen Darleen's signature.

Doc Savage and his five men kept in a group, although they were jostled about. They lost sight of Patricia in her disguise of dark glasses and borrowed topcoat, as she was submerged in the excited movie fans.

Suddenly a voice yelled from the edge of the melee. It was a shrill voice, very loud, and the words were plainly distinguishable as they knifed through the bedlam.

"Here is Kel Avery!" it cried.

Instantly after that, a man shrieked. Blows smacked. Men cursed.

"Help! Help!" bawled a voice.

Doc Savage pitched in the direction of the cries. His great frame went through the crowd like a torpedo through water. At his beck, his five men were a flying wedge.

"Help!" bawled the voice. "Leggo me!"

Doc sighted the fight. Several hard-faced, roughly clad men had seized a fat, stocky fellow and were hauling at him, beating and kicking.

"Stop that!" Doc rapped.

"Who the hell are you?" snarled a man, and swung with a clubbed revolver.

Doc was not where he had been when the blow descended, but a yard to one side. His fist lathed out; there was a wet smack. The man with the revolver threw lip his arms and floundered back, his lips a pulp and his teeth showing through splits where Doc's metallic knuckles had landed.

The others ran with the fat man. They did not get far. Doc was upon them, his five men close behind. They struck, grabbed, twisted.

Johnny, who looked so incredibly gaunt, grabbed a thug twice his own weight, enwrapping the fellow spider fashion. The victim shrieked terribly, proving that Johnny had a fighting ability that belied his professional appearance.

The brawl attracted a crowd. A newspaper photographer began to jump about in his excitement and fumble his flashlight apparatus.

"It's Doc Savage in action!" he howled. "T'hell with the movie dame! Get this!"

His flashlight gun made a whoosh!" and an eye-hurting splash of white light. Other cameramen joined the outskirts of the fray and their flashes winked blindingly.

A man wearing an aviator's helmet ran into the scrap, fists swinging, and was promptly knocked senseless, falling at the feet of a woman who began screaming hysterically.

Long Tom bored into the middle of a large man with a gun; his fists made a rapid drum roll, and the man collapsed, gurgling. Running for another foe, the electrical wizard went out of his way to bump a camera from a photographer's hands and step on it, ruining the exposed plates. Long Tom knew Doc's dislike for newspaper publicity, and the camera belonged to the newspaper which the photographer worked for, anyway.

Quite suddenly, the fight was over. Of the gang who had tried to seize the fat man, all were helpless, sprawled on the ground. There were exactly seven of them, and all had the earmarks of small-time criminals.

Doc helped the fat victim to his feet. "You're not hurt, Avery?"

"My name is not Avery!" shrieked the fat man. "I'm Joe Smith and I'm a reporter on the Morning Comet!"

Doc beckoned other newspaper men to come close. "This man says he's Joe Smith

"Sure, he's Joe Smith of the Morning Comet," said a journalist. "We all know him!"

Doc Savage's strange flake-gold eyes roved from Joe Smith to the overpowered assailants, and the bronze man's features were strangely fixed, more metallic than ever.

There sounded unexpectedly a weird, low, mellow trilling note, a fantastic sound which seemed to come from everywhere and yet from no definite source, and which ran up and down the musical scale, definitely rhythmic, yet adhering to no specific tune. Even those bystanders who heard the exotic trilling and looked at the bronze man's lips, could not tell from whence it came. Yet Doc Savage authored the sound.

The trilling was a small, unconscious thing which Doc Savage did when under sudden stress, or when greatly surprised. Even he could not tell exactly how he made it, but the sound always had great significance. Just now it meant that he was shocked and utterly disgusted with himself. At Doc's signal, the men who had attacked the reporter were hauled into the nearest hangar and the doors closed. The thugs were scared and bewildered and entirely willing to talk, hoping it would prevent them being charged with a worse crime than assault.

"A guy named Santini hired us to jump this bird Kel Avery when the plane came in, and beat him up," one of the men moaned. "Santini pointed out Kel Avery to us. We got fifty bucks apiece."

"It was Joe Smith, a reporter, you attacked and not Kel Avery," Doc said grimly.

"Santini said that guy was named Kel Avery, and for us to yell out his name," insisted the frightened yegg.

DOC SAVAGE turned the gang over to the airport officials and went outside to join his aides.

"We fell for a trick," he said grimly. "Santini hired these cheap crooks to attack a man in the crowd and get our attention."

"But why get our attention?" Ham demanded, puzzled.

Big-fisted Renny came up with the answer to that. The engineer was excited.

"Doc! Doc!" he ejaculated. "During the fight, another gang grabbed this Maureen Darleen and another woman and carried them off in a car, according to people I've talked to in the crowd. They slugged a bodyguard this Maureen Darleen had along."

A moment of silence followed the news and Doc Savage's strange trilling sound seemed to echo, but it was very low and hardly perceptible to the ear.

"What beautiful dopes we turned out to be," Ham muttered. "That other fight was to get our attention while this gang grabbed Maureen Darleen."

"But I thought it was somebody named Kel Avery that they were after!" Renny rumbled.

"Where is this bodyguard of Maureen Darleen's?" Doc demanded.

"Over here." Renny led the way.

The bodyguard looked the part. He was an athletic giant almost as impressive in physique as Doc Savage. The fellow's great muscles were more bulging even than Doc's, which meant he was a trifle muscle-bound. He had a square head, a corded neck and square, powerful fingers. Slung across his chest, in plain sight, was a harness for carrying two pistols in underarm holsters.

The man was sitting up, shaking his head slowly, when Doc approached him. He peered at the bronze man a bit vacantly, then felt of the holsters attached to his harness. They were empty.

Doc knelt, grasped the fellow's shoulders and shook him. "Are you Kel Avery?"

The overmuscled one shook his head from side to side. "Meester, my name, she is no Kel Avery. My name is Da Clima, yes."

His English was understandable enough, but the words were put together in the manner of one who had learned the tongue in later life. Such accent as he had was that of southern Europe.

"You are Maureen Darleen's bodyguard?" Doc questioned.

"Her guard, yes. Maybe was her guard." Da Clima sighed. "She, maybe it is, won't want a guard who as a guard is not so hot, no?"

"Do you know a Kel Avery?" Doc asked.

Da Clima squinted. Muscles as large as muskmelons bulged up under his coat as he lifted himself.

"Kel Avery is Maureen Darleen," he said. "You not know that, no?"

"Maureen Darleen and Kel Avery the same person?" Doc repeated, as if to make sure.

Da Clima nodded. "Kel Avery, or Kelmina Avery, she don't use that name, not so much. The name Avery, she not so good on the movie picture, no. Maureen Darleen much better, so the girl she use the name of Avery not so,, much."

"A lot of these movie actresses have stage names, Renny rumbled.

Monk came up, short legs taking great leaps.

"Pat ain't around here anywhere!" he snapped.

Doc gripped Renny's thick arm. "You said that gang made off with two women, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Let's go!"

Chapter 9. KEL AVERY'S STORY

THE CAR bearing the kidnapers and their two women prisoners was a long blue phaeton. It had gone toward New York. These two bits of information were forthcoming from members of the crowd who had seen the snatching.

Da Clima piled into Doc's streamlined car with the rest.

"Da Clima, he go along," he growled. "We catch them and Da Clima, he do them like this!" His muscular hands made pantomime of breaking things.

"How about that, Doc?" Monk questioned.

"Let him come, of course. We want to ask him questions." The big engine came to life under the tapered hood, but only sudden animation of ammeter and oil gauge showed that. The machine was fitted with an automatic shifting device, and Doc thrust the lever which meshed the gears, after which the shifting required no further attention.

Tires threw gravel all the way out of the flying field, shrieked on concrete as they swerved to the pavement, and then there was only the hiss of exhausts and the wail of air past the streamlined curves.

The speedometer arm jumped around to seventy. Doc touched a switch, and a siren started a banshee wail.

Doc spoke to Da Clima without taking his eyes off the scudding concrete.

"What do you know about this?" he demanded.

"Me, I not know the much," Da Clima disclaimed.

"Tell us what you do know."

"Yesterday, I read about it in the papers, the kidnap what is tried on Maureen Darleen," said Da Clima. "I am in this Florida then. Maybe you read about that, no? The kidnap what is try on Maureen Darleen

"Call her Miss Avery so there will be no confusion," Doc suggested. "Yes. We read about the attempted kidnaping."

"I go to her, to Mees Avery," Da Clima continued. "I am once the fighter, not so hot. Now, the nickel I pick up where I can. I fight. I shoot. I'm plenty the tough guy, me."

"Don't brag," Monk growled. "You're with guys who are tough, now."

"But you not so good in the head, no?" Da Clima queried. "You run to the wrong fight while them fellows, they get Maureen -- Mees Avery. They make of you the sap, no?"

Monk scowled. "Say, you funny-talkin' bundle of beef, are you huntin' a scrap?"

"Stop it," Doc put in quietly. "Da Clima, you went to Miss Avery after you heard of the attempt to kidnap her and offered your services as a bodyguard -- is that it?"

"That's her, the idea," Da Clima nodded. "I put up the talk and tell her that me, I am the one she need. So she hire me to watch out for her."

"A swell job you done," Monk snorted.

Da Clima started to answer, but caught sight of the speedometer and his eyes opened wide and black. He wet his lips uneasily and muttered, "Boy, we travel -- no?"

The speedometer read eighty-five. Buildings went by like pickets and cars, frightened to the curb by the siren, were blurred.

"What else do you know?" Doc asked.

"Me, nothing," said Da Clima.

"Don't you know anything about Santini, Hallet, Leaking, or a white-bearded man named Dan Thunden, who claims he is a hundred and thirty-one years old, or a company which calls itself Fountain of Youth, Inc.?"

"Nope," said Da Clima. "Never heard of any of them, no.,,"

"What an information mine he turned out to be!" Monk growled.

Da Clima scowled at the homely chemist and said, "Da Clima, he not like you, not much."

"Brother, the affection is returned," Monk rapped.

"Look!" pale Long Tom shrieked.

DOC SAVAGE had already applied the power brakes. The heavy streamlined car squatted a little, slithered, straightened, slithered again, then, as the bronze man alternately stamped and released the brake pedal, the machine spun with tires screaming and stopped with its radiator pointing hack the way it had come.

Da Clima was pale, frightened by the wildness of their stop, and his hands were clenched, his breath coming and going rapidly.

Under the tread of the accelerator the big car lunged back upon their course, then slackened speed and swerved off the pavement, bounding over the packed shoulder, and stopped.

A woman was standing in the ditch beside the road, in water to her knees. She was disheveled, mud spattered, her frock was torn at the shoulder, as if she had pitched into the ditch from a rapidly-moving car. She came toward them, wiping mud off her face.

"Maureen -- Mees Avery!" Da Clima cried in astonishment. Kel Avery was a tall young woman, blonde, blue-eyed, and even though she was swathed in mud and roadside grime, it was not hard to see why, as Maureen Darleen, she was considered one of the up-and-coming young movie actresses. She got in the car and said, "Back the way you were going, gentlemen! And step on it!" Monk grinned as if he liked that and made room for her, while Doc jockeyed the car around skillfully. They resumed their cometlike progress, siren a-howl.

"Which one of you is Doc Savage?" Kel Avery asked.

Monk pointed at the front seat, but said nothing.

Kel Avery took in the bronze man's remarkable head, his expanse of shoulders, the metallic texture of his skin.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't get a look at him, or I would have known."

"Ask her questions, Monk," Doc directed. "This driving takes a lot of attention. We're getting into the city limits."

On the floorboards, where he had been throughout, the pig Habeas Corpus sniffed of the movie actress's drenched, shapely ankles until Monk kicked him lightly in the ribs.

"They threw me out," said Kel Avery.

"After they went to all that trouble to seize you?" Monk asked incredulously.

"Oh, they thought I was my maid," explained the blonde actress. "The other girl made them think she was Kel Avery."

"What other girl?"

"The one who rushed to my side and acted as if she was one of my party, when the trouble started hack at the airport. Say, that young lady would go great in the movies. She's got looks, and how she can act! She made them think she was Kel Avery, and when she got her chance, whispered to me to begin to scream and they might throw me out, and if they did, I should find Doc Savage and tell him my story. So I screamed and they did throw me out."

Doc tooted the plunging car past an intersection, then threw a question over his shoulder.

"What did this other girl look like?"

"She was beautiful, as I said," advised Kel Avery. "And she had bronze-colored hair-hair like your own, Mr. Savage."

"It was Pat!" Monk groaned.

THERE WAS unpleasant silence for a while-silence, if the whooping noise of the big car's progress could be excepted.

Doc Savage himself showed little expression, for his command of his facial muscles was complete, but his five men showed that the thought of Patricia Savage being in the hands of Santini's crew was anything but pleasant.

Da Clima held on, face white, and seemed to shrink each time the speeding car careened.

"I was coming to New York by plane to get your help, Mr. Savage," volunteered blonde Kel Avery.

"Did you tell that to any one?" Doc questioned.

"Nobody. Why?"

"Because Santini and his outfit learned you were coming to me and tried to grab me and put me where you could not find me," Doc told her. "Or that's how it seems."

"Santini?" Kel Avery sounded puzzled.

"Ever hear of him?"

"Or of Fountain of Youth, Inc.?"

"What about Hallet or Leaking?"

"Never heard the names that I recall." The blonde's voice had a ring of genuineness.

"What about a white-haired man named Dan Thunden who says he is a hundred and thirty-one years old?"

"Oh!"

Doc lifted his eyes from the road and turned his head for a quick glance. The girl looked startled. "You have heard of Dan Thunden?" Doc asked.

"Yes," said Kel Avery. "He is my greatgrandfather, according to the letter I got from him. My greatgrandfather on my mother's side, his letter said."

"What else did his letter say?" Doc asked grimly.

"It said for me to take the package that was with the letter and guard it with my life, to be sure not to open it, and to come to Florida and I would be worth fifty million dollars within thirty days," the blonde said all in one breath.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled. Doc inquired. "You obeyed instructions?"

"Oh, it sounds silly, but I did," Kel Avery sighed. "You see, the press agent of the movie company I work for thought it would be a great idea to get some newspaper space. The company even paid me a salary to go to Florida as instructed, and the press agent was going to meet me there. But

before he came, I was kidnaped. That scared me. I came North."

"Why come North?" The actress smiled. "To put the thing into your hands." "Was that the press agent's idea?" Doc asked.

Kel Avery looked blank, then color crept up in her cheeks under the mud and she glared indignantly at the back of Doc's head.

"Those men threatened to kill me and I was scared!" she snapped. "They told me they would kill me unless I got the package. As a matter of fact, I didn't escape. They turned me loose to get the parcel. And the press agent does not know where I am. The press agent hadn't even gotten to Florida."

Doc was silent after the sharp answer, his metallic features expressionless. He made no movements, except such as were necessary in controlling the car.

A corner loomed ahead. Kel Avery screamed softly; Da Clima groaned and put big hands over his face; the car reeled, rubber shrieked, then they were around the corner, straightened out and going on safely.

"Where is the parcel now?" Doc asked, his great voice calm.

"In the plane on which I arrived, back at the airport," said Kel Avery. "You see, I sent it by air mail, knowing it would come on the same plane."

"Why that precaution?"

"I was afraid to carry it. Maybe I'm not very brave."

"You're brave enough," Doc assured her.

"This is what I call a deep, black mystery," Monk muttered.

Doc slowed the streamlined car abruptly, much to the relief of Da Clima, who swelled proportionately as the machine slackened speed, so that, when they were traveling forty, his chest was out, his chin up, his eyes bright and brave.

"It's no use," Doc said. "The car carrying Pat has given us the slip."

Bony Johnny absently fitted his monocle into his left eye, where it gave his optic a grotesque appearance, for the monocle was in reality a powerful magnifying glass which the gaunt geologist and archaeologist found occasion to use in the course of his work.

"This thing about Pat is appalling," he said. "Appalling!"

Chapter 10. THE PACKAGE TRICK

MANY CITIZENS of New York City knew of the headquarters which Doc Savage maintained on the eighty-sixth floor of Manhattan's most impressive skyscraper, for the newspapers had published that fact innumerable times. But not many citizens had seen the establishment. Had they done so, they would have been astounded.

The establishment consisted of an outer reception room and office which was sumptuously, but not gaudily furnished. Beyond this was a library which for completeness in its assortment of scientific books could be equaled perhaps by but one other library, its location unknown except to Doc Savage himself, being in a mysterious and remote spot which the bronze man termed his "Fortress of Solitude," and to which he retired at intervals to study, none knowing his whereabouts, not even his five trusted aides.

Connecting with the library was an experimental laboratory, this also having an equal only in the second laboratory which the bronze man maintained at his "Fortress of Solitude." The city laboratory held apparatus for almost every conceivable scientific experiment, as well as tools for the construction of the numerous devices for which Doc Savage found need.

Monk stood in the outer office, nudging Habeas Corpus gently in the ribs with a toe, and spoke his mind.

"That old yahoo, Dan Thunden, is sure a lick-splitting freak," the homely chemist declared.

"Imagine a gink a hundred and thirty-one years old being able to hop around like he can."

Only beautiful blonde Kel Avery was listening, but she was audience enough, since Monk would talk all day if it would keep him in the company of a girl as attractive as this one.

Doc was issuing commands, having just finished writing a number of names and addresses on slips of paper.

"Here are some of the wealthy men whose names were in that file which we found in the offices of Fountain of Youth, Inc.," the bronze man explained.

He distributed the slips to Long Tom, Renny, Ham and Johnny.

"Investigate," he directed. "Those names were in the file for some reason, just as was that banker, Thackeray Hutchinson."

Renny folded his paper slip with huge fingers. "Some of these birds should give us information," he said.

"Be careful," Doc admonished. "We do not want a repetition of what happened to Thackeray Hutchinson."

"That guy got what was coming to him," put in Monk, who had paused to overhear.

"What happened to him?" blonde Kel Avery asked curiously.

"He got shot between the eyes," Ham told her.

"Oh!" The young woman gasped and sank into a chair.

"This hairy ape" -- Ham indicated Monk with his sword cane -- "thinks it was all right for a man

to get killed."

"Aw, he was an orphan robber," Monk said uncomfortably, knowing very well Ham had deliberately put him before the movie actress in a calloused light.

"What about Pat?" Renny rumbled anxiously.

"We haven't a lead to go on," Doc pointed out. "We'll have to see what turns up."

The four men departed with their paper slips, intent on running down some information about Fountain of Youth, Inc.

Big Da Clima went to the water cooler, drank deeply from the gurgling fountain, then came back and stood in front of Doc.

"Me, I think I go out, not for long," he said.

"Why?" Doc asked.

Da Clima shrugged muscle-bound shoulders, and said, "Business."

"Very well," Doc agreed.

Da Clima lumbered out toward the elevators.

Doc nodded at Monk. "Follow him."

Monk grinned and waved Habeas Corpus back.

"Boy, do I hope this Da Clima gives me some excuse to tie into him," leered the homely chemist.

"I don't like him."

Monk went out.

KEL AVERY tried to wring muddy water out of her drying frock and asked, "You do not trust Da Clima?"

"Just a precaution," Doc told her quietly. "And it gives Monk something to do. He would feel neglected if he wasn't doing something."

"You have a remarkable group of men," said the young woman.

Doc bowed politely, suggested, "It is not advisable for you to leave here, since Santini and his crew must know about this headquarters. You can use the telephone and have fresh clothing sent up from a shop. There is an excellent one in the building."

"Thank you."

Doc Savage retired to the library where there was a second telephone -- and while Kel Avery called the shop, the bronze man put in a call of his own to the post office officials. Much talk ensued, and he was transferred to several officials before he got full satisfaction.

He had to explain twice what he wanted, and he found it necessary to give the mail officials the number on a small card which he drew from a pocket.

The card which Doc used held the information that he was a fully commissioned postal investigator, and bore the postmaster general's signature. This was one of many honorary commissions which Doc held.

Doc went next to the laboratory, where he switched on a short-wave radio telephone transmitter-and-receiver. This communicated to other short-wave sets in the automobiles used by his aides in their work.

Doc called Johnny, Long Tom, Ham and Renny in rapid succession -- but only Johnny answered. The others were evidently interviewing their rich men.

"You have my unadulterated attention, Doc," said bigworded Johnny.

"Listen," said Doc.

Then he spoke rapidly in the Mayan dialect which he used to communicate with his men when conveying secret and important orders.

"Supermalagorgeous," said Johnny when the conversation ended.

Doc went in and joined Kel Avery in the outer room. "You have arranged for my air mail package to come here?" asked the movie actress.

"It will be here in not more than twenty minutes," Doc replied.

"You took quite a bit of time," the young woman pointed out. "Did you experience any trouble?"

The bronze man seemed on the point of informing her of something unusual about the call he had made to the mail officials, but before the words formed, the outer door opened and Da Clima came stamping in.

"Me, I get two new ones," said Da Clima, and threw back his coat, revealing in his shoulder harness a pair of heavy blue revolvers. "My other two ones, them feller at the airport they get," he added.

"Bought two new revolvers, eh?" Doc said slowly. "They are not easy to purchase here in New York."

"For the feller with the money, anything she easy," grinned Da Clima. "At a hock shop. I get them, and I no need the license for to carry, either."

Monk ambled in shortly, tossed a bundle of newspapers on the inlaid office table, said, "There they are, Doc," as if he had been sent out to get the papers instead of to follow Da Clima. Then he ambled into the laboratory.

Doc joined Monk as soon as he could do so without attracting Da Clima's suspicions.

"The mug went into a hock shop, stayed a while, then came back here," Monk grumbled. "He didn't do nothing else."

"Call the police and tell them to have that pawnbroker's license to do business taken away from him, for selling firearms to unlicensed persons," Doc directed.

Monk nodded. "Any word from Pat?"

"None."

DOC WENT back into the outer office while Monk used the inside phone to make his call about the pawnbroker who sold guns to unlicensed persons, and who was therefore undoubtedly a source of firearms to the underworld.

The clothing which Kel Avery had ordered came up, and a dressmaker accompanied the garments, ready to make any alterations which might be necessary.

Bedraggled and mudcaked, the light-haired young actress retired to the library, and was out again shortly, the frock having fitted her without changes.

"Now you look again like Maureen Darleen, the movie queen," Monk grinned. "Not that you looked bad before, though."

"Thank you," the young woman smiled, then studied Habeas Corpus. "A remarkable-looking pet pig you have."

"Habeas is quite a guy," Monk admitted. "Speak to the Hollywood heart-throb, Habeas."

"Monk, I think she's a queen," said Habeas. Entrancing Kel Avery looked somewhat stunned, then realized Monk had used ventriloquism to make the homely pig apparently speak, and burst out laughing. But she sobered very suddenly.

"I'm worried about that other girl -- Pat," she said uneasily. "What do you -- think -- they're doing to her?"

"Probably trying to buffalo her into telling them where the box your great-granddaddy Dan Thunden sent you can be found," Monk guessed.

"I'll give up that mysterious box in an instant if it will get her freedom," Kel Avery said grimly.

"The mailmen with the box should be here shortly," Doc put in.

Kel Avery eyed the bronze man curiously, then said, "Just as Da Clima came in, you started to tell me something about the call which you made to the air mail officials about their sending my package here. What was it? Or have you changed your mind?"

Doc Savage smiled. "I haven't changed my mind," he said. Then, before continuing, went to the window and looked down from its tremendous height into the street. He was silent a moment as if in thought, then began, "What I was going to tell you

He fell silent, then pointed down through the window.

"An armored mail truck is pulling up in front," he said. "It must be bringing your package."

Kel Avery ran over to the window. "You told them to use an armored truck?" she asked.

"Of course."

Then Doc stiffened. The young woman glanced down and also became rigid, while Monk and Da Clima came over quickly, stared, then grew slack-jawed and attentive. The street below was brightly lighted.

"Oh, oh," breathed Kel Avery in a small, horrified voice.

AN UNIFORMED postal carrier carrying a package, had gotten out of the truck and had started for the skyscraper entrance. But at the same time three men had stood erect in an open touring car which was parked near by.

The men lifted their arms and threw what resembled glass bottles. The containers struck the sidewalk at the feet of the postal men and burst, making wet smears on the concrete. These wet splashes seemed to evaporate with startling suddenness. Bright street lights made this visible.

"Gas!" breathed Monk, the chemist.

The vapor, whatever its nature, was potent, for both postal men collapsed within a few moments.

Another carrier, springing out of the truck with a revolver, apparently came under the spell of the gas, for he also went down.

One of the men sprang out of the touring car and ran forward.

"Santini's gang!" Monk groaned. "He's holding his breath. Doc, can't we do something?"

"Quiet!" Doc rapped.

The man far below reached the recumbent postal carriers, stooped and seized the package which one had been carrying. Then he galloped back to the touring car and dived inside. The machine was moving almost as he hit the cushions.

"There goes the package!" gritted Monk.

"Them damn feller, they sure the smart guys!" Da Clima growled, and swung for the door.

"Wait!" Doc barked.

There was a ring of authority to the bronze man's voice that brought the excited Da Clima up and caused him to return, his expression puzzled, to the window, where he peered downward again.

The touring car was rolling more swiftly down the street. Monk wrenched up the window, roaring,

"I can hit 'em with my superfirer pistol!"

"No," Doc told him.

Monk spun around. "Doc, have you gone nuts?" But before the bronze man could possibly make answer, the homely chemist looked sheepish, then began to grin.

"Doc, you pulled a fast one," he accused. "What was it?"

"Have a look." Doc pointed.

Down in the street, a small undistinguished coupe was darting in and out through traffic in a manner that made it plain to the watchers above that it was following the touring car. Those in the open car could hardly tell they were trailed, due to the intervening taxicabs and pleasure cars.

"Johnny's coupe!" Monk barked.

"Exactly."

"But how did he

"I got him on the short-wave radio at the time I called the postal officials," Doc explained.

"Johnny was to follow the mail truck, and if anything came up, he was to use his own judgment."

"This may lead us to Pat," Monk grinned.

"Let us hope."

Chapter 11. THE SEIZURE

BUILT INTO the skyscraper which housed Doc Savage's headquarters, was a special high-speed elevator which gave access, not only to the ornate lobby downstairs, but to a basement garage where the bronze man kept his assortment of cars.

The presence of this garage was known but to few persons outside Doc's immediate circle of five aides.

Kel Avery was made a bit breathless by the terrific speed with which the elevator lowered them to the basement, while Da Clima, who seemed brave enough in the face of everything but speed, paled a little.

"The fast moving, you sure do a lot of heem, no?" he mumbled as they got out in the passage that led to the garage.

"There ain't no crook ever moved fast enough to keep ahead of Doc in the long run," Monk said.

"They may outguess him once in a while, but the first thing you know -- " Monk finished by making a gesture of catching something imaginary in the air.

Kel Avery put a hand on Doc's arm and asked, "It was about having Johnny trail the truck that you were going to tell me?"

Doc nodded.

She smiled. "I am glad of that, because if you had not told me, it would have shown you did not trust me."

Doc Savage selected a car which Santini or his followers would not be likely to recognize as they would if Doc used the streamlined machine. The machine he entered was a vehicle which resembled an ordinary delivery truck such as is used by small laundries or groceries.

Bulletproof glass and armor plate construction made this virtually a fast tank. The tires were filled with sponge rubber instead of air. The cab portion was fitted with comfortable seats which swiveled before concealed portholes, and there were racks holding superefficient pistols, body armor, gas masks, grenades, canisters of gas and even a small field gun that could be carried by two strong men and which fired a two inch shell.

"This, she some bus," Da Clima said admiringly.

A sloping ramp let them through the street door, which opened automatically at their approach and closed behind them, actuated by a hidden mechanism.

Doc switched on the short-wave radio telephone and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Johnny? Johnny?"

"Going north on Broadway," came Johnny's precise voice from the loudspeaker. "So far, there has been no difficulty."

"Have they seen you?" Doc asked.

"Emphatically a negative answer to that," said Johnny, who hated to use a little word where a big one would do.

"He means no," Monk advised Kel Avery.

The young woman was staring at Doc Savage as if fascinated, for sight of the bronze man's remarkable skyscraper establishment had brought home to her the fact that he was no ordinary individual.

"I begin to understand how you get the results which have made you famous," she murmured. "You do not depend alone on your own personal skill and that of your men. You use every scientific device possible in your work."

Doc said nothing, but gave his attention instead to the traffic. He disliked talking about himself.

"Deviating eastward over the bridge to Long Island," came Johnny's scholastic voice from radio. Long Tom's tones came in over the air waves, following the professorial Johnny's information.

"What's goin' on here?" the electrical wizard demanded.

THE DIFFERENT radio sets used by Doc Savage and his men were all fixed on the same wave length with crystal devices which prevented changes in frequency. Accordingly, conversation could be carried on much as if they were all hooked to a party telephone line.

Evidently Long Tom had just turned his set on and was puzzled at what he was hearing.

Doc told the electrical expert about the theft of the air mail parcel.

"Head for Long Island," the bronze man directed. "And tell me what information you received when you interviewed your rich man."

There was a pause while the distant Long Tom turned his ear in the direction of Long Island, then he began speaking.

"My rich man had flown the coop," he advised.

"Unfortunate," Doc said. "What are the particulars?"

"He got a telephone call a little while before I arrived, according to a maid," Long Tom explained. "He acted excited, grabbed some money out of his private safe, snatched a few clothes and jammed them in a suitcase. He ran out of the door and that's the last they saw of him."

"Sounds as if he were tipped off that you were coming," Doc hazarded.

"You said it."

Shortly afterward, Renny and Ham both reported experiences similar to that of Long Tom. They had not found their men at home, and in both cases, the fellows had fled hurriedly only a few moments before their arrival.

Johnny interrupted to advise. "The men who appropriated that package are now traversing an unpopulated section of beach road."

"Careful," Doc warned him.

"You are cautioning me!" Johnny snorted.

There was silence, except for the noise of traffic and the muffled sounds made by the cars.

Johnny reported his position more exactly, and Doc marked his whereabouts on a map of Long Island. The region into which Johnny was following his quarry was one of the most thinly inhabited sections of the Island.

Renny rumbled over the radio, "Doc, it's obvious Santini's gang warned the rich men to skip out, and they did it."

"What puzzles me is what persuaded them to skip so promptly," Ham interjected.

"They probably knew what happened to Thackeray Hutchinson," Doc stated. "The newspapers are on the street with news of his death by now. Fear of a like fate is enough to urge those wealthy men to do what they were told."

"Santini is sure taking plenty of trouble to keep us from learning what this is all about," Renny boomed. "Brothers, it must be big, whatever is back of this."

A few minutes later, Johnny spoke. He forgot his big words. His voice was a rattle of haste.

"They've stopped their car and are getting out!" he exclaimed. Then he clipped off his exact location. "It's on an old road near the beach."

"It will take us fifteen or twenty minutes to get there," Doc advised. "You've been traveling faster than it seemed."

"I'm going to trail them," Johnny said.

"Do that. And watch your step."

JOHNNY SWITCHED off the radio transmitter with a bony forefinger. He had stopped the car after pulling into tall brush where the machine was fairly well hidden, and he did not want the radio speaker to attract attention.

Drawing his handkerchief from a pocket, the gaunt geologist wrapped it carefully around his monocle, then pocketed the padded glass where it was not likely to get broken. This was a habitual precaution with Johnny when he contemplated going into action.

The sand was so soft that it seemed alive under Johnny's feet as he moved forward. There was a brilliant moon which caused the scrawny beach shrubs to cast grotesque shadows. Somewhere a night bird piped, and waves on the beach sounded as if some unseen person was pouring buckets of water upon the sand.

Light from flashlights splattered ahead. Voices muttered; laughter cackled. That would be the quarry.

"The way them mail carriers caved!" a man laughed. "Sweet, I call it!"

"It won't be so sweet if they croak," growled another. "Uncle Sam is a tough monkey to have on your neck."

"Forget it!" he was told. "That gas just made 'em senseless for a while."

They went on and Johnny, hurrying, got close enough that he could hear the mush-mush of their feet in the soft sand. If they posted a lookout, he wanted to be close enough to hear the command. Johnny was puzzled about their destination. This section of beach, low and unhealthy, was not even populated by summer cabins. Taken altogether, it was as remote a spot as could be found in the immediate vicinity of New York City.

"Who the hell's that?" challenged a harsh voice.

"Santa Claus," growled one of the trio who had robbed the mail carriers. "Who's you think? Is his nibs here?"

"Santini is," said the one who bad challenge, apparently a sentry.

"He'll do."

Johnny, mentally thanking his lucky star that he had been close enough to catch the challenge, circled and evaded the watchman, then continued after the trio. They did not go much farther.

A haze of flickering red appeared, resolved into a camp fire which burned before a tumbledown shed that was open on one side.

Santini appeared in the fire glow, then Hallet and Leaking, the latter still perspiring despite the coolness of the night.

Johnny stared steadily at something in the murk beyond the fire. It stood in the edge of the water, a few yards offshore. Some one threw wood on the fire, and he made out the lines of the thing.

A plane! It was a big ship, massive of hull, with great wing spread and two canvas-swathed radial motors. An amphibian—for the thin geologist could make out the stream-lined humps which harbored the landing wheels, flow cranked up out of the water.

Santini mopped at a small cut on his chin and growled, "That damn Pat Savage is a cat. She kicked me in the face and almost got away!"

That snapped Johnny's attention off the giant seaplane. So they knew Pat was not Kel Avery! How had they learned that? But most important of all, Pat was here!

"We got it," vouchsafed one of the three newcomers. "Bueno!" Santini pocketed the handkerchief with which he had been dabbing at his cut chin, adjusted his sharp mustache points, then extended a hand. "Give me!"

He was handed the parcel which had been taken from the mail men.

The breeze from the sea whipped in briskly, causing the moored seaplane to bob and fine sand to whisper against beach grass and shrubs.

"We will go inside where it is not windy," Santini decided.

The instant they were inside, Johnny started to advance. He wanted to observe the contents of that parcel.

But the bony geologist stopped as if his spine had frozen. And it did feel cold, too, from the chill metal object which had jabbed against the back of his neck.

"Unless you be proof against bullets, you'd bettah stand still," a remarkably youthful voice breathed in Johnny's ear.

Chapter 12. THE DISAPPOINTING PARCEL

JOHNNY STOOD as immobile as he could, for he had recognized the juvenile tone as belonging to white-bearded Dan Thunden, and common sense told him the cold thing against his neck was a gun snout. Hands slapped against his person and the superfirer pistol, his only weapon, was removed. Johnny wore a bulletproof vest, a fact that Dan Thunden's search disclosed.

"I'll shoot you in the head," advised the boyish-voiced old man.

"So you're still working with them!" Johnny whispered back.

Dan Thunden cursed round, seafaring oaths under his breath.

"I'm wukkin' on them, not foah them," he gritted. "I laid aboard the lookout back yondah, and he won't set his sail foah some time to come."

"Then you and I had better work together," Johnny said hopefully, his large words forgotten in the urgency of the situation.

"Old Dan Thunden is wukkin' foah himself," Thunden whispered vehemently. "I didn't know who you was when I met you befoah, but now I know you are one of Doc Savage's outfit. Well, I don't want any paht of you."

"Listen," Johnny began. "What -- "

"Belay yoah jaw an' walk up to that shanty," Dan Thunden grated. "We are gonna do some listenin'."

Johnny, feeling discretion the better part of foolhardiness, since the gun snout was a determined pressure against his neck, ambled forward and stopped against the shack wall. There were wide cracks between the boards which offered orifices for both eye and ear. Burning brightly on the open side of the ramshackle structure, the fire spilled light over the interior, and they could see plainly what went on within.

Johnny's first look gave him a shock. Patricia Savage was not in sight.

Several men besides Santini, Hallet and Leaking were in the shack, among them the killer of the banker, Thackeray Hutchinson, who had masqueraded as an elevator operator.

Santini kicked litter aside on the floor and made a clean place on which he placed the mail parcel.

"We've had fits over this," he said.

Fishing in a watch pocket beside the ribbon that crossed his chest so gaudily, he brought out a penknife with which to cut the tyings on the bundle.

After the string and outer wrapper of paper was removed, Santini lifted a folded square of heavy paper. He opened this. It crackled and fluttered in the breeze that eddied inside the shanty.

"Verameilte!" Santini exploded. "Indeed! Dan Thunden, the old goat, even sent his great-granddaughter a map showing the island's whereabouts!"

"You are sure it is the island?" asked the man who had killed Thackeray Hutchinson.

"Yes. Here is the island," said Santini, and placed a finger on the map.

Johnny strained his eyes and made out the general location of the island -- it was in the Caribbean, some considerable distance from Florida -- then Dan Thunden gave his head a push to

prevent him from seeing more. But Johnny had fixed in his memory the approximate location of the isle.

Inside the hut there was scuffling sound, a low, stifled cry. "The damn girl!" snarled Leaking. "We no longer need her," Santini said callously. "Shoot her!"

The man who had killed Thackeray Hutchinson leered, drew a revolver, spun the cylinder, then growled, "A knife won't make as much noise," and drew a long hunting knife from a sheath sewed to the inside of his vest.

Dan Thunden's gun nudged Johnny's neck.

"Walk," breathed the young-voiced old man. "Quick! Befoah they ha'm mah granddaughtah."

Johnny found himself urged around to the open front of the structure. Dan Thunden was going to use him as a shield -- and the fact that he wore a bulletproof vest failed to ease Johnny's mind a great deal.

"I couldn't miss yoah-all from heah," Dan Thunden called from the open end of the hut.

NOT A man inside the ancient building stood still at the 'unexpected words, for it is human nature to start violently when surprised, an inheritance probably from tree-dwelling ancestors who found it necessary to leap for their lives at sounds of danger.

But only one man was foolish enough to try resistance. The killer of Thackeray Hutchinson held his knife in hand. He whipped back his arm to throw the blade.

Dan Thunden's gun roared splittingsly in Johnny's ear, and its muzzle flame seared his neck.

The knifeman let fall his blade, took two or three bobblekneed steps, then put both hands over the spot where the top of his skull seemed to be torn off, and dived head-first to the sandy floor. He lay there, a red flood spilling out of the top of his head.

"He's dead," Dan Thunden advised the others meaningly.

Santini juttet his hands up and the others followed his example.

Then Johnny saw Pat Savage. She had been lying against the wall through the cracks of which they had peered, this accounting for the failure to discover her earlier. Ropes bound her arms and ankles and a strip torn from Ham's natty topcoat had been used to gag her.

Dan Thunden gave Johnny a shove. "Get ovah with them, wheah I can watch you!"

Picking up the map which Santini had dropped, the whitehaired man hurled it out into the fire.

Flames bundled it hungrily and it turned into a black crisp and a curl of yellow smoke.

"I should nevah have sent that to mah great-granddaughtah," Thunden growled. "But I didn't know but that we might find use foah it. I guess all concerned can find the island if need be." He paused to scowl at Johnny. "Except Doc Savage and his scuts, and we don't want them in on it."

With that, he continued unwrapping the package. A box of thin, light wood came into view. It resembled a large cigar box, except that there were no printing or labels on it.

Expression expectant, the young-old man flipped the lid back. He tensed, gulped something unintelligible under his breath. His long-fingered hand dipped into the contents turning up flakes of greenish-gray leaves.

"This heah ain't it!" he howled suddenly. "This heah stuff is just plain sage!"

So shocked was white-haired Dan Thunden at the discovery that the box contained something other than he had expected, that his attention left his prisoners.

"Look out!" Johnny rapped.

He was too late. Santini leaped. His foot collided with Dan Thunden's gun arm. The weapon spun away.

"Presto!" Santini yelled. "Haste! Grab him!"

Men piled on Dan Thunden. They were met with a whirlwind of blows, a dazzling display of fighting skill. The old man was an amazing acrobat and a fighting cyclone.

Johnny joined the fray by clouting a jaw with a bony fist. He failed to drop his quarry, due to his own haste, and was clouted back for his pains.

A man jumped astride Johnny's bony back, locked legs around his middle and drubbed the back of Johnny's head and neck with hard fists. Johnny fell backward on the fellow. The man who had been hit on the jaw jumped on Johnny's stomach with both feet.

Pat Savage began to flip about, endeavoring to get rid of her bindings. Failing in that, she managed to trip a man who was running at Dan Thunden.

Thunden had felled three assailants with his bare fists. Then Santini danced around behind the old fellow and struck him a terrific blow alongside the ear. Thunden's knees hinged; his eyelids fluttered.

Santini's men took advantage of this weakness. They rushed, swarming over the white-haired man and bearing him down. In a moment he was beaten fiat, gripped and held helpless.

Grinning, Santini got up, ran over and kicked Johnny twice in the head, after which the bony geologist was easily subdued. Santini stepped back and adjusted his ornate mustache. The ribbon across his chest was loose and he carefully fitted it back in place.

"Bueno!" he exclaimed. Then his pleasure faded as his eye lighted on the box. He went over and scooped up some of the greenish contents, let the flakes sift through his fingers, then straightened.

"This is not the stuff!" he snarled.

Dan Thunden, straining at the men who held lima' growled, "This heah gal must have made a change.',

Santini swore.

Pat made unintelligible noises through her gag.

Dan Thunden glared at Pat. "What did you do with the package that I sent you?"

Santini started at that. Dan Thunden had addressed Pat as if she were his great-granddaughter, and this was a surprise to Santini, who had learned in some fashion that Pat was not Kel Avery. Dan Thunden's mistake was no surprise to Johnny. Had blonde Kel Avery not said that she had never seen her greatgrandfather? Old Dan Thunden did. not know Kel Avery by sight, and naturally had mistaken Pat for Kel.

Santini took a full breath. It was plain that he was going to advise Dan Thunden of his mistake. Johnny said loudly, "Miss Avery, don't tell them a thing! Whatever you do, don't tell them a thing!"

Instead of speaking, Santini blinked. His expression showed that he bore half a conviction that Pat was Kel Avery.

"Mu-m-m-bur-r-r," said Pat through her gag.

"Untie her and see what she says!" ordered Santini.

A man started toward Pat, but stopped very suddenly, for Pat had whipped up a gun in her bound hands. It was the weapon which had been kicked from Dan Thunden's hand at the start of the fight, and which Pat had managed to reach without being noticed.

"Mum-m-m-mw-urr-r-ah," said Pat.

It was not hard to understand what she meant, and hands went up.

"EXQUISITE!" BREATHED Johnny, and sprang to undo the gag and free her wrists.

Pat made hacking noises when the gag was out.

"I came to New York for excitement," she said. "Man, oh man, am I getting it!"

She stood erect, stamping her feet to restore cramped circulation, but keeping the gun level and determined.

"Why did you mail that package?" she asked Dan Thunden sharply.

The white-haired man shrugged. "I was hopin' you would see fit to become mah pahtnah."

"What?" Pat demanded incredulously.

"You see, I needed money," said Dan Thunden. "I was goin' to meet you in Florida and tell you the whole story." He paused to glare at Santini and the others. "But these gentlemen must have got the telegram you sent me tellin' me you would go to Florida. Or did you send such a message?"

"The message was sent," said Pat, evidently deciding she could get more out of him by pretending she was his greatgranddaughter.

"I nevah got it," said Dan Thunden. "And that explains why I did not meet you in Florida. Did Santini send a man down theah to

Santini suddenly took a long chance. He stood near Dan Thunden at the moment. Leaping, he got behind the whitehaired man and shoved with all of his strength.

Dan Thunden was hurled toward Pat. Taken by surprise, and not wishing to shoot the old man, Pat jumped aside. That gave Hallet and Leaking their chance, working with wits almost as deft as Santini's. They sprang quickly forward.

Pat shrilled angrily and fired, but her arm was knocked up and the bullet merely clouted rotten wood out of the ceiling. Santini ran in and got her gun.

Johnny struck Santini in the face. Whirling, Santini put the muzzle of the gun against Johnny's chest and pulled the trigger until the gun was empty.

The reports were deafening in the shack. Johnny was knocked back, spinning, by the force of the slugs. Coat fabric over his chest smoked and dripped sparks. He fell flat on his back and lay there, eyes widely open, all of his gaunt length immobile.

Dan Thunden, still stumbling from the shove which had propelled him at Pat, got his balance and whirled, but saw the odds were against him, for Santini's thugs already had their guns out.

Head down, Dan Thunden plunged outside. A Santini gunman shot at the white-whiskered form flying through the firelight, but Thunden only leaped higher into the air and went the faster, until he was lost in the darkness and the stunted brush of the beach.

Four men, struggling together, held Pat.

"What a life!" Santini gasped.

A MAN ran over to examine Johnny.

"Let him go," snapped Santini. "I shot him many times in the heart."

Leaking swabbed at perspiration running off his face in fast drops.

"Boss, I move we shake the dust of this place," he puffed. "Things are getting too tough. This skinny guy you shot is one of Doc Savage's outfit, and that means hell. This Doc Savage will move the earth to get the guys who rubbed out his pal."

"Only too true," put in Hallet nervously. "Kidnaping that bronze man was one thing. Killing one of his men is another. Savage is a wizard, and the United States is going to be too warm for us." Pat said, "You birds are just getting wise to yourselves!"

A man slapped her over the mouth. She bit him. The man cursed, lifted a gun.

"No!" yelled Santini. "She is the one who knows where the other box is!"

"But she ain't old Thunden's great-granddaughter!" objected Leaking.

"Maybe we make the mistake and she is Kel Avery," said Santini. "Did you not see the old goat accuse her of making away with the parcel?"

"Maybe," Leaking admitted. "But we got word -- "

"Never mind the 'buts,' " Santini rapped.

After that, there was a brief pause during which no one seemed to know what to do next, and it was obvious every one was thinking desperately.

Santini's swarthy face lighted. His sharp mustache ends shot up in the air as he grinned. He swung a hand around his head and brought it down on a thigh with a great smack.

"Bueno!" he yelled. "Good! Excellent! Wonderful!"

"I hope it is," Leaking said pessimistically.

"It is," Santini laughed. "The one great idea, I have. We will take the plane and go to the island. Doing that, we will be away from this Doc Savage. We will get a supply of -- " He stopped and eyed the surrounding night, and did not finish.

"What about the girl?" Leaking questioned.

"We take her along," Santini grinned. "We make her tell where that parcel go to. It may be we do not find the -- " He paused again and scowled at the night. " -- we do not find what we want on the island, then this box be very valuable indeed."

"Not a bad idea," Leaking admitted.

With that, Pat was hauled, kicking and striking, out to the beach and thrust into the giant seaplane.

"Boss," a man addressed Santini.

"Si," snapped the chief. "What eating you?"

"When we reach this island and find the storeroom, do we get to use the stuff ourselves?" the man asked.

Santini hesitated, shrugged. "Of course. Si, Si."

The man who had asked the question expanded visibly and slapped his chest solidly, delightedly.

"I feel like a guy who had just been promised a million," he smirked.

The canvas jackets were wrenched off the motors; selfstarters whirred, clanked, and the exhaust stacks spilled sparks, smoke and noise.

With every one aboard, the plane wallowed away from the beach. Hammering motors put the big craft on step, and it took the air.

INSIDE THE tumbledown beach shack, Johnny stirred slightly. He shut his eyes and moaned; several times he sought to arise, and at last succeeded. Propped up shakily, he tore open his coat, vest and shirt.

The bulletproof vest which he wore was of mail, not rigid armor plate. It was a vest designed by Doc Savage for himself and his men to wear continually, and therefore it was light, intended to save them only from an occasional bullet.

Impact of the revolver slugs at close range had stunned Johnny, rendering him helpless, and he had lain there, at no time unconscious, but unable to fight effectively and knowing it.

He had heard all that was said.

Getting up on his feet, he wavered outside, fell down, then got up and propped himself against the shack. There was a roaring in his ears and he coughed a crimson spray, but it was not until the roaring went away slowly that he realized it was motors of Santini's enormous plane which he had been hearing, and that the craft had seemed to recede to the southward over the Atlantic Ocean. Johnny peered around, unsteady on his feet, trying to find some trace of Dan Thunden. But there was none, and he was still peering fruitlessly when a fast car made noise on the beach road and headlights waved a white glare.

It was Doc Savage's armored delivery truck, and it stopped near by. Doc and the others unloaded. Monk ran up and stared curiously at Johnny.

"Do you know any cuss words?" Johnny asked thickly.

"Hell, yes," Monk said.

"Then cuss some for me," Johnny mumbled, and fell forward on his face.

Chapter 13. FEAR CAY TRAIL

A THOUSAND big, noisy thunderbolts seemed to be making music for Johnny while he sat on a cloud in sepia blackness. The thunder music was steady, and not nice to listen to, nor to feel, either, because one of the cannonading thunderbolts occasionally flew off at a tangent and struck Johnny heavily in the chest, making him feel as if he wanted to open his eyes and jump, except that the cloud which held him up was so soft and comfortable.

Somebody said, "Close the windows. I think Johnny is coming out of it."

Johnny opened his eye and what he saw showed him that he was not on a cloud, but on a comfortable berth in Doc Savage's largest speedplane.

Monk was closing the windows to shut out the motor noise, which was terrific, the silencers being cut off from the exhausts for greater power efficiency.

Around about were Kel Avery, burly Da Clima, Doc's five men and Doc himself. The plane hit an air

bump, jumped a little, then settled level again. Cloud scud scraped past the windows.

"Where are we?" asked Johnny, and was surprised at the strength of his own voice.

"Over the Caribbean," Monk advised.

"What?"

"A good many miles off the southern tip of Florida," Monk elaborated.

"But the last I remember is folding up on that Long Island beach!" Johnny gulped. "How did you find out where Santini went?"

"You talked," Monk assured him. "Maybe you don't remember it. Doc shot some stuff into you to make you rest. You told us a complete story."

Johnny shut his eyes; opened them. "I recall now. It was like a dream. How badly am I hurt?"

"A few cracked ribs," said Monk. "You can navigate all right now, Doc says, unless you jump around too brisk."

"I'll be superamalgamated!" said Johnny.

"Which means he's all right," snorted Ham, who was on a berth opposite, sword cane across his knees. "A sick man couldn't think of such words."

Johnny sat up, found himself fairly steady, then asked, "How long have I been out of the picture?"

"You got slammed night before last," Monk explained.

The bony geologist asked hastily, "Have I missed anything?"

"Not a thing."

"What about the patriarch with the alabaster locks?"

"Dan Thunden?" Monk grunted. "Believe it or not, he hired one of the fastest planes in New York and lit out for this part of the world. A bird named Windy Allen owned the plane and flew it."

"How did you acquire that knowledge?"

"The pilot he hired, Windy Allen, was talkative and told around what a swell wad of coin he was to get for flying the old goat down to the Caribbean. Doc checked up the airports as a matter of routine, and got the dope there. That Windy Allen sure lived up to his name."

Johnny raised higher, leaned over and peered down through gossamer puddles of cloud which were almost blindingly white because of the sun shining upon them. Perhaps a mile below was a finely riffling expanse of ultramarine, a limitless vista of blue that slid away to the horizons in a panorama so vast that it was a bit breath-taking.

"The Caribbean," Johnny said. "Right."

"Bring me a chart and I'll point out the exact spot that Santini indicated."

Long Tom had retired to the tiny, soundproofed cubicle which held the radio apparatus. He popped into view like a pale jack-in-a-box.

"I just got an S.O.S.!" he barked.

DOC SAVAGE swung back to his side. "Where is it coming from, Long Tom?"

"The bird isn't giving his position," advised the electrical expert. "From the sound of his fist, he's sending the letters as he picks them off a code chart."

The bronze man bent over the instruments and adjusted the dials. The signals from the loud-speaker were very weak, and he turned on more volume. Irregular, hesitant, the dots and dashes whined out of the ether.

"Whoever is sending does not know the code," Doc agreed. "We'll try the directional antenna."

Doc turned a larger knob, and this swung a directional loop aerial mounted in the plane fuselage to the rear of the cabin. Possibly thirty seconds were required to pick the point at which the erratic signals were the loudest.

"Either northwest or southeast of us," he decided.

Kel Avery wrinkled her brow, "But can't you tell nearer

"The directional loop only shows the plane of greatest intensity of radio signals," Doc explained. "The sending station is on a line drawn through our present position from the northwest to the southeast, but the only way we can tell the exact direction is to take another bearing when we have gone on a few miles."

Johnny came hobbling back, favoring his injured chest, holding a chart in both bony hands. He pointed.

"The place Santini indicated is southeast of here," he said.

"The radio S. O. S.!" Long Tom barked. "I wonder -- " He did not finish.

The radio speaker continued to buzz three dots, three dashes, three dots in monotonous succession. The signals seemed to grow weaker as the minutes passed.

Doc worked with dividers, rule and pencil on the chart, and some five minutes later, when the great plane had hurtled through almost twenty-five miles of sun-scorched sky, he took a second radio-compass bearing and drew a line. Where this intersected the first bearing, was the location of the wireless appeal for aid.

"Southeast," he announced, and promptly went forward to change the course of the plane.

Johnny had fallen to studying the chart. A puzzled expression overspread his long, studious face.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" he muttered.

"What's eating you?" Renny wanted to know.

"There is no island shown where Santini had his finger on the map," Johnny muttered.

Doc came back from the cockpit, having turned the flying over to the ingenious mechanical robot. Johnny met the bronze man with a look of bewilderment.

"The chart does not show an island, Doc," he advised.

The bronze man considered for a moment, then went on back to the radio cubicle. He switched on the transmitter and alternately sent and received for some time.

"There may be an island, after all," he said at last.

"Huh?" Renny grunted. "But the map -- "

"I got in touch by radio with the hydrographic office of the Navy Department," Doc explained.

"They looked over old charts of this region for us, and it seems some ancient maps did show the presence of an island."

"Did the island have a name?" Renny asked.

"Fear Cay," Doc said. "It was named that on the old maps."

RETURNED to the wave length on which the S. O. S. call was being sent, the radio speaker continued to buzz dots and dashes. At no time, however, was anything received other than three dots, three dashes, three dots.

"Queer the guy don't give his position," Monk muttered. "Anybody with gumption would know enough to do that."

Long Tom, after listening intently, glanced around. "That sender cannot be far away," he said.

"How can you tell!" Kel Avery asked curiously.

Long Tom shrugged. "Oh, when you're close to a station, very close that is, there's a noticeable difference. You can almost hear the key close."

Ham laid his sword cane aside, got a pair of binoculars and began to use them through the scattered patches of cloud. A slight quantity of oil from the engines had smeared the windows and he slid one of the panes back in order that he might see better. The motor moan came in with whooping volume.

"Fear Cay!" Ham bawled suddenly.

Every one in the plane crowded to cabin windows.

Pretty Kel Avery was breathless. She looked even more the cinema star now, for she wore about what a movie director would request his star to affect when making an adventure picture. Her boots, laced breeches and leather blouse were new, but serviceable.

Big, overmuscled Da Clima hulked in the background, his square face slightly purple, as if he were straining mentally, possibly trying to envision what not even Ham's powerful glasses could as yet reveal.

Fear Cay was still miles away. But it seemed to rush toward them, so terrific was the speed of the plane.

Doc went to the pilot's cockpit and tilted the plane downward.

The sea heaved up at them like a bloating green paunch and the cay, climbing out of the haze, took on definite contour.

"I say," Ham pointed out excitedly. "It doesn't look like a place where a boat could land!"

The lawyer was drawing attention to the coral reef around Fear Cay. Such reefs encircling islands of coral formation were a rule rather than an exception, but usually they had one or more openings which gave access to the lagoon within. But there were no apertures in the jagged band around this cay.

Looking down from the height of the plane, the reef resembled a necklace of ugly gray foam, for the waves broke over the coral fangs with smashing violence.

The island itself was low, a bog of mangrove swamp and jungle. Nowhere did it project more than a few yards above the sea.

"Couldn't be seen from a great distance," Renny boomed. "That helps explain why it isn't on the modern charts."

Long Tom jammed his head into the radio box, then hauled it out again.

"That S O.5. is being sent from Fear Cay!" he barked.

Ham dropped the binoculars and scooped up his sword cane to point.

"Yes, and I think I see where it's being sent from," he shouted. "Look! That wrecked plane!"

THE REEF around Fear Cay was a foaming ring of stone, but the isle itself had at most points a wide beach of silver-colored sand, lined with tall royal and cocoanut palms. The trees bobbed, their bundled fronds contorting, for there seemed to be considerable of a breeze.

The plane lay at the beach edge, half buried in a tangle of mangroves. Both slender wings were wiped off. The wind fluttered fabric around the edge of a great hole which gaped in the fuselage, and the single engine was detached and lay deeper in the mangroves, barely distinguishable.

Ham called, "Doc! See any one?"

"No," said the bronze man.

"Are we going to land?"

"We are."

Doc banked the plane out over the reef where jade and emerald surf sloshed itself into an ivory

suds, then swooped over the lagoon with its kaleidoscopic coloring. The hull touched so lightly that only the braking effect and the appearance of a long foam tail showed them they were down. Whooping motor gusts kicked them inshore.

The royal palms seemingly grew larger, standing up like pillars of silver from the gaudiness of oleanders, jessamine, poinsettia. Gulls and a fork-tailed frigate bird sailed inquiringly about the plane.

The breeze was blowing inshore, and the air above the beach was gray with fine driven coral sand. The palm fronds convulsed steadily, and palmetto leaves trembled to the wind.

Doc cut the motors. The plane was kicked around with its nose into the wind, then sailed backward until the reinforced hull grounded on the beach.

The men unloaded.

"Eyes open!" Doc warned.

They all ran toward the wrecked plane. The wind-blown coral grains gnawed at their naked skin like sleet, and the sun was brazen, merciless with its heat. They waded into palmettos, sank ankle-deep in soft ground, then worked through mangroves.

Doc stopped abruptly and pointed, saying nothing.

"Holy cow!" Renny gulped.

A long, grisly object lay under a bush. He was clad in khaki trousers, boots, a leather blouse, an aviator's helmet. It bore the shape of a man, vaguely, but where face and hands should have been there was only grisly, bare bone.

"A skeleton!" Renny rumbled. "But Doc, it takes years to turn a body into a skeleton! And those clothes are not even weather-beaten!"

Doc Savage advanced, while Monk caught Kel Avery's arm and guided her back so that she would not be unnecessarily upset.

The leather blouse of the thing on the ground was unbuttoned. Only rib bones were beneath. They were bare and white; almost polished.

"A freshly made skeleton," Long Tom decided aloud. "Now, I ask you, brothers, what do you make of that?"

A brittle silence was his only answer. Doc picked up one of the boots, shook it -- and bare white tibia, fibula and metatarsal bones rattled out.

"Whew!" Ham gulped, and his knuckles whitened on his sword cane.

"What d'you make of this?" Long Tom asked.

Doc Savage indicated the skull, after removing the helmet. "The top of the head is caved in, as if it might have been fractured when the plane crashed."

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny murmured. "You maintain this is the pilot of the demolished aircraft?"

Doc did not answer, but arose and studied the tracks around the plane and the marks it had made when wrecked.

"The ship was trying to take off, probably just got into the air, and a number of bullets put the motor out of commission," he said. "The ship is full of bullet holes. Possibly it crashed trying to land!"

Doc came back and searched the leather jacket which had enclosed the bones. He found papers and letters which bore a name.

"This is Windy Allen, old Dan Thunden's flier," he announced.

THE BRONZE man gave attention to the wrecked plane. Inside, there was a radio transmitter and receiver. Doc removed the metal shields and held a palm on the vacuum tubes on the transmitter side.

"Hot," he said. "That means some one used them for sending, probably up until the time our plane was sighted."

"Who?" asked Renny.

The big-fisted engineer did not put the query with the manner of a man asking a question to which he does not expect an answer. Renny knew Doc's ability as a sign reader.

Doc circled slowly, the flake-gold pools of his eyes seeming a bit more agitated, more refulgent. There were tracks in the soft earth, prints which told the bronze man what had occurred.

He had seen the footprints of Santini, Leaking, Hallet, old Dan Thunden and the others on the south beach of Long Island. All of those prints were here about the wrecked plane.

"The ship seems to have been shot down by Santini and his crowd," Doc announced. "Thunden and his pilot were aboard. Dan Thunden escaped into the jungle, but the pilot got a fractured skull in the crash."

Renny indicated the skeleton. "But what made the pilot like -- this? They couldn't have been here more than a few hours? What made him a skeleton so quickly?"

Doc Savage did not reply, and there was a somewhat breathless silence while the others waited hopefully. Then Renny shivered, knowing Doc was not going to commit himself.

"Who used the radio?" the big-fisted engineer persisted.

"Thunden," Doc said.

Renny boomed, "Then the whole crooked crew -- Santini, Thunden and everybody -- is on this

island!"

"Exactly!" Doc said. "And that means it would not be a bad idea to locate Santini's plane."

"How?"

"From the air."

Renny nodded and looked about. Monk and Kel Avery were somewhere back toward the beach. Ham, Johnny, Long Tom and Da Clima had separated, evidently to look over the vicinity.

"We'd better call our gang together and get in the air," Renny decided.

They moved toward the beach, the whisper of wind-blown coral particles increasing, palm fronds a-rattle above, the small gale wailing faintly in the mangroves.

"I wonder if Pat is all right." Renny rumbled, and made flinty blocks out of his massive fists.

"Say, if they've done anything to her -- " His teeth ground audibly.

They gathered about the plane, prepared to wade out and clamber aboard.

"Look!" Doc said sharply, and pointed.

Down the beach some two hundred yards, a man had popped out of the mangroves. He was a wiry man with white beard that covered his chest like the front of a dress shirt, and a great mane of snowy hair.

"Dan Thunden!" Monk breathed.

Dan Thunden threw out his chest, fashioned a cup around his mouth with his hands and howled into the wind.

"Bomb in your plane!" he yelled.

HAD THE bomb gone off at that point, astonishment could not have been more complete. Kel Avery and Doc's five men, all of whom had come running at the call, stood rigidly and stared at Dan Thunden.

Da Clima for once showed a nimble wit. He leaped toward the plane, big feet churning up water and sand. He dived through the cabin door. Doc Savage was on his heels. They raked the plane interior with anxious glances.

Doc worked aft, for there was the most likely hiding place. Da Clima went forward, muscle-bound shoulders hunched, eyes roving.

"The bomb, how she get in the plane?" he mumbled anxiously. "Every damn minute some of us feller, he watch the plane. Yes."

Doc pounced abruptly. He had discovered a cabin pocket which looked more plump than it had before. His hand delved in gingerly and brought out a bundle of six or eight sticks of dynamite to which was attached a trio of flashlight batteries wired together, a detonating coil, and an alarm clock with a crude set of contacts rigged on the minute hand and the clock face.

Da Clima lumbered up and looked.

"That, meester, she no so funny!" he gulped. "To go off in five minutes, the clock she is fixed, no?"

Doc clambered out of the plane with his explosive prize, carefully adjusted the clock hands to close the contact earlier, then flung the bomb far down the beach. It bounced, rolled close to a royal palm, lay there an instant, then detonated.

Coral sand climbed in a great mushroom. Tiny seashells were mixed with the sand and whistled about like buckshot. The silver bole of the royal palm split, fronds fell out of the top, then the palm upset slowly and majestically. Echoes coughed hollowly then subsided.

Even the whine of the breeze, the hissing of coral sand, seemed to subside. Dan Thunden still stood on the beach two hundred yards away.

Abruptly, down the beach in the opposite direction from there Dan Thunden stood, there was a commotion behind a gum bush. A man stepped out, stood staring at the plane, seeming surprised that it had not been blown into fragments.

The newcomer was Santini, and he was so far away that the red ribbon across his chest seemed small as a scarlet thread.

Doc Savage spoke rapidly in a low voice.

"Monk, Ham, Da Clima and Miss Avery -- stay with the plane," he directed. "Johnny, you and Long Tom and Renny get hold of Dan Thunden if you can. He and Santini are fighting each 'other, and I'd like to know why Thunden won't throw in with us. He warned us and probably saved our plane from that bomb."

Renny rumbled, "What about you, Doc?"

"I'll try to do business with Santini," Doc said grimly.

Chapter 14. THE ISLAND OF DEATH

SANTINI SHOWED scant interest in doing business with the bronze man's party, however. The instant Doc started toward him, the mustached man dived a hand for the coat lapel under which his chest ribbon disappeared, and brought out his ornate automatic. Evidently he no longer carried it under the tails of his coat.

The gun whacked. Powder noise and its echoes cackled among the tall palms. The slug kicked up sand, went on a hundred yards and kicked sand again.

Monk unlimbered a superfirer pistol and blasted away at Santini. But Santini had dived to cover. In the opposite direction, Dan Thunden scampered to shelter, white beard flying.

Doc ran in pursuit of Santini. The three men he had designated to chase Thunder -- Johnny, Long Tom and Renny -- set out.

"Dang it, Doc, don't you want some help?" Monk yelled.

"If anything happens to that plane, we might spend the rest of our lives here!" Doc called, not turning. "You stick there!"

Santini did not shoot again. Tracks showed that he had set out directly across the island. The terrain was higher here, with a growth of crotons, calabash trees, custard apples and even guavas cactus. There was sand and enough grass that Doc could follow Santini's trail without great difficulty.

They crossed a low stretch where mangroves were a tangle, a festering morass populated by hump-backed spiders and land leeches. Then came high ground again and large gnarled silk cotton trees, and farther on, jungle with lianas and grotesque aerial roots entwining.

Santini was following a definite trail, one cleared through the jungle some months ago, judging by the shrubs which had grown up in the path. The swarthy man with the remarkable mustache was evidently running at a head-long pace, for Doc himself was going fast and had not yet sighted Santini.

From the air the island had seemed entirely of coral formation, but it now became apparent, as the terrain lifted sharply, that the central area was of more substantial construction. The bronze man's casual glances discerned clay-slates, micaceous and talcose schists as well as crystalline and compact limestones, a formation which his knowledge of geology told him constituted what geologists call the Caribbean series.

Doc paused frequently and listened. He could judge Santini's progress now by the occasional outcries of tropical birds. These noises, raucous at best, might have sounded no different to an inexperienced ear, but the bronze man could detect those that were alarmed.

Abruptly, Doc turned aside. Santini had stopped.

A metallic phantom, making no appreciable stir in the jungle, Doc circled until he caught sight of Santini. The man had halted to use his eyes and ears. Santini seemed satisfied that he was not followed. The swell and collapse of his chest, as he sighed his relief, was visible.

Santini went on more slowly, breathing deeply to regain his wind, mopping perspiration.

The breeze made soft noise in the foliage. Gulls going past overhead sailed sidewise in the small gale. Thrushes and banana birds flew through the trees when disturbed, rather than above the foliage where the breeze was stronger.

Voices came from ahead. Doc quickened his pace, then halted to peer through a screen of vines.

Santini had met the lawyer, Hallet. The fat barrister seemed to be nervous, his birdlike mannerisms more pronounced. He had stripped to his undershirt and was fanning himself with a dry palm frond. Two heavy blue revolvers were belted about his middle, cowboy style, the belt loops stuffed with cartridges.

The pair consulted in voices so low that the words did not reach Doc. Then they went on, and the bronze man lost sight of them. He followed their trail.

It was not more than four or five minutes later when weird things began to happen.

A loud cry rasped out, guttural with an awful terror. It was Hallet's Voice. And it ended in uncanny fashion, ended suddenly, as if the man who shrieked had been enveloped completely by the horror which had come upon him.

Macabre silence followed. Then birds flew up, calling harshly from all over the jungle, making a frightened bedlam.

DOC SAVAGE glided forward and soon caught sight of Santini.

The swarthy man with the waxed mustaches was backing across an expanse of rock, eyes fixed with hypnotic steadiness upon the stone a few yards distant.

The rock was smooth except for the undulations and tiny cracks made by the weather. There was nothing to show what fascinated Santini.

Doc Savage remained where he was, ears straining, and abruptly he caught a horrible moaning cry, muffled until he could not tell from where it came.

The cry affected Santini in grisly fashion, for he sprang backward as if the sound was that of some voracious beast, invisible in the scalding sunlight, but which was menacing him.

Santini veered to the left abruptly and ran across the expanse of weather-cracked stone. He vanished over a small ridge of rock.

Doc ran forward, swinging so as to pass near where Santini had been when he evidenced such terror. Nothing out of the ordinary came to the attention of the bronze man's eyes.

What had happened to Hallet was a profound mystery. Doc topped the rocky ridge. He halted so suddenly that his feet skidded a little.

Santini had vanished!

Doc went forward a few yards, flake-gold eyes probing and alert. Then he circled, warily, lest there be a trap. It was too much to believe that Santini had sprinted far enough to get into the jungle beyond the rocky space.

Doc went completely around the rocky area, and nowhere did he find tracks left by the swarthy man who affected the waxed mustache and the scarlet chest ribbon.

Going back to the starting point, the bronze man began a painstaking process of following Santini's trail over the smooth, hard stone. To do this, he employed a small, powerful magnifying glass.

Santini had plunged through a small water puddle at one point, deposited by a recent rain. For the next few yards the trail was clear, wetly defined.

Doc ran ahead, following it. Suddenly, there was a low, dull clanking noise. Down went the slab of rock on which Doc stood!

There was no time to pitch clear. Doc plummeted downward. Eight or ten feet he judged his fall to be. Great muscles enabled him to land lightly on hard rock.

Scufflings and scratchings came from one side. A terrific blow smashed down on his head. He sank as if struck by a gigantic hammer.

DOC SAVAGE was twisting aside instinctively as the blow landed, and the movement absorbed much of the violence. His head remained clear. On all fours he scuttled to the left, encountered a rough stone wall and stood erect.

Silence fell. Stone grated softly above, probably the stone trapdoor closing more tightly. It must have been made with diabolic exactness, for Doc's sharp gaze had failed to detect it. True, part of his failure to notice the trap could be blamed on Santini's wet tracks, for they had progressed boldly across the slab which had tilted.

The blackness was almost eye-hurting. Doc felt in a pocket, found a coin and tossed it. His opponent failed to fall for the trick. The metallic tinkle echoed and reechoed, indicating a large cavern with many passages.

Doc wore his vest of many padded pockets containing the mechanical devices which he used frequently. They were gems of scientific skill, these gadgets. They had saved his life on many occasions.

A tiny tubular container, hardly as large as a talcum can, came out of the vest. Doc opened it noiselessly, then made several passes through the air. A cloud of fine powder, quite invisible in the intense murk, was wafted in the direction in which he knew his foe to be.

Doc replaced the container, and more slowly, deliberately waiting for the powder to settle, he produced what an observer, had there been one who could see in the dark, would have mistaken for a flashlight. But this had a lens that was so purple as to be almost black.

Doc thumbed the button. The flashlight device was a tiny, powerful projector of ultra-violet rays, the light which is commonly called "black" because the retina of the human eye is not sensitive to them, the beams which cause certain substances, such as ordinary vaseline, to glow with weird colors.

A startling thing happened. The figure of Doc's foe stood out in the darkness, an eerie blue apparition. The floor on which he stood and the contour of a stone wall behind him, was also visible. This was due to the fact that the powder which the bronze man had thrown was one which glowed when exposed to the ultra-violet beams.

The enemy could not see his bronze quarry. He never knew Doc was close to him until metallic fingers closed about his throat, stifling an outcry.

Clutching, Doc got hold of a short rifle with which the man had clubbed that first blow. He wrenched and got the weapon. Then he crushed the fellow down to the floor.

The man struggled and kicked, tried to cry out, but his muscles might have been denuded of life for all the good it did him. Against the bronze giant who held him, the attacker was helpless.

Doc sought and found a certain spot on the back of the fellow's head, low down near its juncture with the top cervical, the chain of small bones which comprised the neck. He exerted pressure in a fashion taught him by his fabulous knowledge of surgery.

The victim promptly became rigid, paralyzed. He would remain helpless and speechless until Doc, or some one with equal skill and knowledge, worked on his neck again, after which he would have nothing more than a bad headache and a stiff neck to show for his experience.

Doc used a conventional flashlight.

The man was one of Santini's thugs. The fellow had been a member of the party which had endeavored to kill Doc and his companions in the car outside the office of Fountain of Youth, Inc., in New York City.

Roving his flash beam, Doc discerned a passage which led to the left and downward. The floor was sandy and showed numerous tracks. The bronze man advanced, following the tracks.

A TWIST at the head of the flashlight caused the beam to narrow until it was no larger than a cigarette, a long white string which roved ceaselessly. The flash was one which operated from a spring generator rather than a battery which might exhaust itself. The generator ran soundlessly.

Details of the cavern became apparent. The underground labyrinth was not the work of human hands, but of the elements. Softer stratas of stone had been worn or dissolved by subterranean waters. At spots there were chambers of considerable size. Again, it was necessary to stoop and even crawl.

But nature had received assistance at some points. On three different occasions Doc's light picked up spots where the passages had been widened by human hands to permit comfortable passage.

A strange odor, not exactly pleasant, soaked the stale air. Doc sampled the tang several times, once stopping for several moments to give his nostrils a chance. The smell was not animal, nor was

it of putrefaction. It was vague, baffling.

Discovery of a light ahead caused Doc to forget the aroma for the time being. He doused his own illumination, then glided forward.

The other lights came from electric lanterns -- several of them. Doc heard the thump of hammers on stone, and the scraping of shovels.

Santini and a number of his men were gathered in a long, low chamber. Evidently they had not heard Doc's encounter with their fellow at the entrance.

"Stop making noise!" Santini snarled. "Fermate! Stop!"

Men who had been tapping the stone walls and shoveling in the sand floor, ceased their efforts.

Santini took a long breath, shuddered and wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"Che vergogna!" he muttered. "What a shame! Our good friend Hallet has met with misfortune."

"Hell!" said a thick-necked fellow, and dropped his shovel. "You mean that Doc Savage got 'im?"

"Worse than that," replied Santini.

"Whatcha mean, worse?"

"There was a trapdoor in the rock of which we knew nothing," explained Santini. "Hallet walked in advance and fell through. He screamed, and I saw what happened to him before the trapdoor closed again." Santini paused to shudder. "Si signors, I saw. It was ghastly! And after the trap closed, I could bear him moan!"

The man with the shovel cursed, then asked, "It was -- "

"He is a skeleton by now," affirmed Santini.

DOC SAVAGE advanced a few paces more and stood well within the chamber, but to one side in another passage which led off to the north, or so it felt from the current of air against his neck. The air was strong with the unexplained odor.

The men with the lights and the tools were silent for a time. Evidently they all understood what had happened to Hallet, and were thinking it over. Several looked uneasy.

"It's that damned old Dan Thunden's work!" grated a man.

"Yeah," another agreed. "The old rip! He's sure caused us hell. It mighta been better if we hadn't tried to doublecross 'im in the first place. Givin' him his half split in the racket would've been better than goin' through what we're goin' through."

Santini sighed. "It is spilled milk. How were we to know that old Thunden would steal that package, containing all of the product that we had, and mail it to this relative of his, Kel Avery."

"Kel Avery," a third man grunted. "Damn it! I'm still wonderin' if the girl we've got is really Kel Avery, or that Doc Savage's cousin."

"We shall know the answer to that before long, I promise you," Santini declared.

The men stood in silence, as if not knowing what to do. Doc occupied the interval with thinking over what he had heard. Dan Thunden had once been a partner of Santini's, it seemed, and they had split after a quarrel over Thunden's receiving half the proceeds of whatever nefarious scheme they had underfoot.

"Why did old Thunden send the girl the package in the first place?" a man pondered aloud.

"It was undoubtedly his first step in an effort to persuade her to furnish financial backing for his project," said Santini.

"You mean that old white-whiskers intended marketing the stuff himself?"

"Si," Santini nodded. "That is my guess."

"Did you destroy Savage's plane?"

Santini swore round oaths of south Europe. "Non! The bomb was in the plane -- but Dan Thunden was watching, unknown to me. He jumped out and yelled a warning, and they got the bomb out in time." The man with the shovel dug savagely into the sand. "But why'd Thunden do that? Is he workin' with Savage now?"

"Non." Santini shook his head. "His is the game of a mastermind. He hopes for Savage and his men to vanquish us. Then he will step in and eliminate Savage."

"Give old Thunden credit," some one muttered. "He's got a brain."

"He oughta have," said another. "He's been around a hundred and thirty-one years. A guy that old oughta have some gray matter."

Again the conversation gave signs of getting nowhere, and Doc Savage decided to try an expedient which he had used on other occasions. The bronze man was a master of mimicry, of voice imitation. The last man to speak had been on the outskirts of the group, in comparative darkness. Doc set himself to attempt a difficult feat, that of using his skill as a mimic and as a ventriloquist to make it seem that the man had asked a question. Doc wanted to find out just what had happened to Hallet.

Santini interrupted at the wrong instant, saying, "You had best resume the search. We must find Dan Thunden's supply of the material. The old devil has hidden it well."

"You think it's in this mess of caves?" asked some one. "I'm not certain, but it is likely,"

Santini replied. "It was in these caves that Dan Thunden dwelled for the ninety-one years since his ship was wrecked here in 1843, and only he alone of the crew reached shore. It is reasonable to think that he would store it here."

"Right at that," somebody agreed.

Doc decided to try his ventriloquism trick.

"What gets me is just how those bodies are turned into skeletons so quickly," he said, assuming the voice of the man on the outskirts of the crowd. "Just how is it done?"

The bronze man got a bad break. From the direction of the entrance, feet pounded. Leaking appeared, a-drip with perspiration, excited.

"Doc Savage is in here!" he howled.

THE INSTANT he heard that, Doc Savage moved silently along the wall, intending to get past Leaking unobserved, if he could.

"How do you know Savage is in here?" Santini roared.

"The guard at the door was laid out!" Leaking barked. "He's paralyzed, or somethin'. Only that bronze guy could've done it!"

Flashlights and electric lanterns which had not been in use by Santini's party, were now turned on. Their glow flooded the confines of the cavern and outlined Doc's great bronze frame.

Leaking saw Doc. The fellow's pores seemed literally to squirt water as terror struck him.

"There he is!" he squawled.

Guns roared. Lead spaded at the hard stone, knocking off fragments, leaving metallic smears.

Only one avenue of flight was open. Doc took it. Back into the side passage he whipped.

Behind him weapons continued to thunder, the rap of pistols intermingling with the whoop of repeating shotguns. A machine gun let loose a staccato bedlam. Bullets squawled and ricocheted and seemed to pursue Doc like invisible bees.

Doc used his flashlight, for haste was more desirable than concealment. He rounded an angle in the underground channel, vaulted over a slab of stone which had fallen from the roof and slid down a steep slope.

Next came a large room, and beyond that a narrow passage again. Doc scuttled along this for a hundred feet. Then a door barred his way.

The door was of timbers, very solid, and nowhere could be discerned a fastener. Doc threw a shoulder against it. The panel held like Gibraltar, did not as much as squeak under his hammering bulk. He stood still, his flashlight roving the timbers.

A shouting, shooting tumult, the pursuit came closer. It looked very much as if Doc were trapped.

Chapter 15. THE NET TRAP

Doc SAVAGE kept his flashlight beam on the door. He had twisted the lens assembly again, making the beam wide and brilliant, and as he stared, he gave the spring wind of the generator another twist, an act which might possibly have been attributed to nervousness. But in no other way did he show that he was in peril of imminent death. His bronze features were composed, inscrutable.

He reached up abruptly and inserted his fingers in a narrow crack at the top of the door. Beyond, barely in reach of his finger tips, he found a small lever. He threw this, and the door came open.

Doc's eyes, sharp beyond the average under ordinary circumstances, had missed nothing in this moment of stress, for he had discerned faint smudges at the top of the door, a sufficient clue.

He pitched through the door and slammed it at his back.

Santini and his men reached the panel, cursing, firing their guns. The lead slugs dug dully at the hardwood, but did not come through.

Doc ran his flashlight beam about in search of fasteners, but they were concealed in the stone wall in such a fashion that he could not get to them without a lengthy search.

Fingers came through in search of the secret catch. Santini and his men obviously knew of it. Doc struck the fingers with a hardened, metallike fist. A man screamed and the fingers were withdrawn, dripping crimson.

Somebody thrust a machine gun snout through the hole and began to spray bullets methodically. Doc grasped the gun muzzle, pulled, but the weapon was too large to come through. It continued firing, and the barrel soon became too hot to hold. Doc released it.

A second rapidfirer joined the first. Then some one began to fish for the catch with a bent ramrod. Doc clutched the ramrod and jerked it through, getting a scream from the fellow who had his finger hooked in the loop at the rod end. "Badate!" yelled Santini. "Take care, Signor! We are getting nowhere this way!"

"I've got a grenade!" a man barked.

"Come bello!" Santini squawled, relapsing into his native tongue in his excitement. "How beautiful! Datemi! Give me!"

Doc retreated hastily from the door. The grenade would blow down the panel, and it was safer for him to attempt to find an exit.

He was a score of yards down the passage and rounding an angle when he heard the door grate open. They had discovered they could reach the catch, hence had not used the grenade.

Preceded by a storm of angry bullets, Santini and his gang charged in pursuit.

"We've got 'im now!" a man bawled.

"Fool!" grated Santini. "We do not know, but that there may be another exit from this passage."

"Haven't you explored all of this place?" some one demanded.

"Non," said Santini. "On my first visit here, when we found the old man, Dan Thunden, living here, we did not pry into this place. It was not healthy."

Doc crossed a chamber, dived into another underground channel, and a moment later the voices of his pursuers were echoing behind him.

"Didn't old Dan Thunden trust you when you was here the first time?" a man grunted. "Looks like he'd have been so glad to see his first white man in over ninety years that he'd have fallen over himself to show you around!"

Santini said nothing to that except to snarl, "Presto! Make haste!"

And Doc Savage, with his pursuers close behind him, came to a sudden stop. His flake-gold eyes, aghast and faintly unbelieving, rested upon the macabre thing before him.

He had come upon a vision to impel horror in the most strong-willed of men.

COMPLETELY forgotten for the moment were the words which the bronze giant had overheard -- words which had told him that Dan Thunden had been a castaway upon this island since the wrecking of the schooner of which the man was captain in 1843; and that the first visitors to the island had been Santini's party.

How Santini had arrived at the island, remained to be seen, but it was probably by air, for the ugly reef completely around the island was an impassable barrier to any surface vessel.

Wrinkled trousers, a shirt open at the throat, costly shoes now mud-stained, lay on the floor before Doc's eyes. The garments were wrinkled -- wrinkled, but not entirely collapsed, for there were bones inside. 'The skeleton of Hallet, the birdlike lawyer!

That the skeleton had belonged to Hallet was not to be doubted, for Doc had seen the garments on the living man. The jungle muck on the shoes was still damp, and overhead was the mechanism of the trapdoor which had precipitated the shyster lawyer to his death.

Doc's eyes roved over the floor; his flash beam probed. But there was nothing to indicate the nature of the fantastic fate which had overtaken the bird-mannered barrister. The floor bore no stains, no prints.

There was a minor fracture on Hallet's skull, as if he might have fallen upon his head and been knocked unconscious, or perhaps mortally hurt. But what had turned him into a skeleton remained an unearthly mystery.

A yell pealed behind Doc. Flashlights splattered their beams upon him. Santini and his gang had arrived. A gun bellowed in the cavern, all but rupturing eardrums, and Doc felt the cold snap of the slug past his head.

The bronze man aimed his flashlight beam at the men and it raced an incandescent rod against their eyes. They cursed, blinded.

"Fate presto!" Santini yelled. "Make haste! Seize him!"

But Santini did not take the lead and his men showed no desire for a fight at close quarters. There was nothing to prevent them shooting, however. Their guns sounded as loud as cannons in the underground labyrinth.

One man was canny enough to throw up a hand and drag his black hair down over his eyes, serving to shut off some of the glare so that he could tell about where Doc's flashlight lens was. He emptied an automatic. Luck was with him.

A bullet collided with Doc's flash; glass geysered, and the white funnel of the beam collapsed magically.

"Bueno!" howled Santini. "Good!"

Doc whirled and glided down the passage. He was handicapped. He had no other light, except the one which utilized ultra-violet rays and the powder which glowed, and that was of no use just now. Running was difficult, moreover, and slow, since each yard of progress had to be felt out, the subterranean way being full of stony outthrusts which snagged face and limbs at the most unexpected moments.

With his best speed and a reckless disregard of physical pain in smashing into jutting rocks, Doc barely managed to keep ahead of the baying pack at his rear. He covered what seemed to be at least a hundred yards. Side passages were everywhere. This portion of Fear Cay was virtually an underground honeycomb.

The bronze man halted suddenly, his ears alert. Ahead, there was sound.

He listened, and the skin at his nape felt an absurd tendency to crawl in spite of his power of control, for the sound from in front of him was weird, a noise which resembled nothing so much as a great pan of frying fat. It was louder at moments, a crackling and popping such as is heard when an egg is broken into a skillet of hot grease.

Santini and the others heard it, too. They stopped hastily. Strained silence held them for an instant.

"Hell's bells!" a man mumbled.

"A scoltate!" breathed Santini. "Listen!"

"I'm draggin' it outa here!" another wailed in terror.

They fled in abject fear.

DOC SAVAGE stood and listened to the flight of the men who had been stricken with stark terror by the sound that was like grease in a pan on a hot stove. The strange noise came closer as the bronze

man delayed, and he could tell that it was close to the cavern floor, as if it might be flowing in the fashion of liquid.

Out of his pocketed vest Doc brought the canister holding the powder. He flung some of the stuff in the direction of the sound. Then he used the ultra-violet projector.

What he saw made him feel as if cold fingers had grabbed at his nape and rimed up through his hair, standing it on end. There was no beast, no monster, nothing of physical size coming toward him.

The cave floor, however, seemed to be alive and undulating as if it were a river. Indeed, some fantastic fluid might have been flowing toward him. The powder, landing on top of such a sinister stream and floating there until it was made phosphorescent by the ultra-violet beams, would have caused such a phenomenon as he saw now. But it was very dark and the eerie sheen of the powder did not reveal details.

Doc backed away. The frying sound seemed to grow louder and the animation on the cavern floor more boisterous. It was as if the incredible menace was angered by his retreat.

The bronze man put on speed in his retreat. Santini and his gang had fled and were not menacing him, so there was no sense in risking his life just to learn the nature of the mystery on the cavern floor.

The crackling and popping was left behind. Whatever made it did not seem capable of traveling swiftly.

Doc found himself wandering through the tangle of underground tunnels. He still retained his sense of direction, but the course over which he had come was blocked by the mysterious horror which flowed on the cavern floor, so there was nothing to do but prowl cautiously in an effort to locate another exit.

Santini and his men were still in the subterranean passage. From time to time Doc heard echoing shouts, the words unintelligible. The sounds were ghostly in the inky darkness.

The bronze man searched through his pockets. And that was a sign that he was worried, for he knew very well that the pockets held no matches. True, there was a pair of tiny bottles holding chemicals which, when exposed to the air and mixed, would burn brilliantly and with great heat, but their light would last for only a moment. It would not be wise to waste them.

Unexpectedly, he saw light ahead, It was the unmistakable glow of the hot tropical sun. Doc ran forward.

There was a rectangular aperture overhead. Perfectly square, it had been evidently hewn out by human hands. A ladder led up to it, a stout ladder that was almost a staircase.

The bronze man was examining the ladder when an excited shout bawled out behind him.

"Here's the bronze guy!" the voice howled.

IT WAS one of Santini's men. His Voice echoes bounced hollowly. Then Santini himself shouted from near by.

"Buena!" Santini barked. "Do not let him escape!"

Feet scuffled as men ran forward. A gun roared. The bullet chopped at the stone.

Doc leaped for the ladder. Three steps he mounted with dazzling speed, then four. But something happened. There was a grinding. The ladder dropped downward, carrying the bronze man with it. Too late, Doc realized this was another of the traps which the fantastic underground realm held. There was no time to leap clear.

He fell fifteen or twenty feet, was torn off the ladder by the shock of landing, and slammed down on hard stone. Leaping up, not greatly damaged, he felt around him.

There was only smooth stone, circular, some eight feet in diameter, with no opening as far up as he could reach.

A man threw a flashlight beam into the rock pit from above, and Doc saw that his prison was a well-like cavity capped by a trap on which the ladder had rested. The man with the flash was Leaking.

Leaking mopped at his face, shifted his flashlight to his left hand and used the right to draw a revolver.

"Here's where I fix everything," he snarled, and leveled his weapon.

Santini lunged, knocking at the gun. It roared -- and the bullet, deflected, flattened near Doc's feet.

"Wait, Signor," Santini said grimly. "I have the big idea."

"Huh?" growled Leaking.

"We will make this bronze man do a job for us," chuckled Santini. "Ah -- great, wonderful, majestic, superb! This idea of mine, she is the swell one."

"It'd better be good," Leaking muttered doubtfully.

Chapter 10. THE TRAIL SINISTER

LEAKING's gun, in firing the shot which Santini had knocked aside, had made a good deal of noise, and the sound had volleyed through the hole toward which Doc Savage had been climbing when the trick ladder collapsed. The report had carried some distance through the tropical sunlight.

The big-fisted engineer, Renny, heard it. He promptly halted. cupped big hands behind his ears and listened.

"Hey, gang, did you get that?" he rumbled.

"A percussion with the characteristics of a firearm," admitted the gaunt Johnny.

"Let's look into that," snapped Long Tom.

Renny dropped his oversized paws from his ears, started forward, then hesitated.

"Doc set us to hunting old Dan Thunden," he pointed out.

Long Tom shrugged his weak-looking shoulders and said sourly, "A fine lot of luck we've had! The old geezer gave us the slip like a ghost. We're wasting time prowling around here. Let's see what that shot was."

"A recommendation of acumen," said Johnny, and promptly threw his bony frame at the tangled jungle.

Johnny was the freshest of the three, for they had put forth no small effort in endeavoring to overhaul white-bearded Dan Thunden. The heat and the density of the vegetation was a combination to sap vitality. The huge Renny was perspiring and bedraggled, while Long Tom, although far from exhausted, seemed a bit paler than usual.

Johnny's fortitude was remarkable, considering the fact that another man would have been in a hospital from those cracked ribs.

In Johnny's incredibly thin frame there seemed to repose an unlimited resistance to fatigue. Johnny's outstanding physical quality, in fact, was his endurance. He seemed never to get tired. They came out upon a comparatively level expanse of weathered stone.

"The shot came from about here," said Long Tom.

"I think it was farther on," Renny rumbled.

The electrical wizard shook his head in a violent negative.

"It was muffled, as if fired in a hole or something. Let's look around and see if there's a pit or a cave in these rocks."

'They advanced, eyes busy. Johnny, lifting his tower of bones on tiptoe, peered around and got himself located.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" he said quietly.

"Eh?" Long Tom queried.

"It was right around here that we last saw Dan Thunden," said Johnny. "The fellow traversed a convoluntary course prior to his evanescence."

"Eh?" said Long Tom. "I didn't get that last."

"He means that Thunden prowled around a lot before he vanished," explained Renny.

"You're going to choke on those words some day," Long Tom warned the bony Johnny.

They continued their search for the source of the shot.

As a measure of safety, they carried their small super-machine pistols in their hands and made sure that spare magazine drums, fully loaded with the mercy bullets which produced quick unconsciousness, were handy in coat pockets.

Renny thumped something unintelligible, lifted his machine pistol and sent an ear-splitting bawl of sound over the cay.

Long Tom gulped, "What the -- "

"Dan Thunden!" Renny rumbled. "Over there!"

He pointed -- and his two companions, looking, saw a thatch of white hair, a snowy beard, an old-young face, vanish behind the thick bole of a cocoanut palm.

"He flattened before I could line up that first burst of bullets," Renny growled.

The big-fisted engineer fired again. The machine pistol was charged every third cartridge with a tracer bullet, and a grayish thread seemed to stretch from the muzzle to the distant palm, where a shower of cocoanuts were kicked down.

Renny corrected his aim, but Dan Thunden had reached more substantial cover.

Forgotten was the investigation of the shot they had heard. The three men raced in pursuit of Dan Thunden.

They crashed headlong into brush, tore at lianas and entwining plants. Knee deep in slime where the ground was low, they kicked and wallowed, knocking off the big land leeches, avoiding the hideous looking spiders.

A cayman, an alligator not much longer than one of Johnny's bony arms, fled madly at the uproar. For a time, they lost their quarry. Then they saw him peering at them from a tangle of mangroves, and they set out again.

But once more, Dan Thunden distanced them with an ease that was disgusting.

"He must know every inch of this island to get around like that," Renny grumbled.

"The fellow has the agility of an acrobat," complained Johnny.

Then they saw Thunden again. He was leaning from behind an upthrust of coral this time. He ran before they could fire.

Renny and his two companions, following, came near enough to the beach that they could hear the surf grumbling in sea coves of coral out on the reef.

Thunden had vanished once more, but only for a few moments for they saw him a third time, far down the beach, running easily.

"For a lad a hundred and thirty-one years old, he takes the cake," Long Tom snapped, and

increased his speed.

Renny stopped, booming, "Wait!"

"What's the idea?" Long Tom pulled up.

"Yes, elucidate," Johnny invited.

"I just got wise to something," Renny rumbled. "Old snowy whiskers is pulling a fast one on us. He is showing himself deliberately, to lead us where he wants us to go."

Johnny absently drew his monocle out, unwrapped it from the protecting handkerchief, saw it was unbroken, then replaced it, seeming at no time to be aware of what he was doing.

"Eminently correct," he admitted. "We are being decoyed."

Long Tom plunged on, calling over his shoulder, "O. K.! Now that we know what he's doing, we'll keep our eyes open. But I'm in favor of giving him a chase."

The other two reached the same decision and ran after the electrical wizard. But they were more cautious now, at times barely trotting. That Dan Thunden was leading them to some spot which he wished them to visit was evident, for he was careful not to let them lose his trail.

"Strange way for him to act," grumbled Renny.

"No stranger than his warning us of that bomb in our plane," Long Tom countered.

Renny nodded. "I'd like to get my hands on him. He'd tell things."

"You said it," Long Tom agreed. "And the first thing he would explain would be just what turned that aviator into a skeleton."

'The conversation ended sharply, for Dan Thunden had halted and was making strange gestures with his hands -- one finger was to his lips; he patted the air with the other hand.

"Seems to be asking us to be careful," Renny decided aloud.

Dan Thunden now stepped off the beach into the jungle, and did not reappear.

Renny and the other two went forward cautiously, nearing a headland where the mangrove swamp jutted out. Beyond was a jungle-walled cove, with a beach of black manganese instead of white coral sand.

But they did not progress far. From the jungle a revolver bawled. The bullet squawked over their heads and chopped up water out near the reef.

The shot had come from the jungle.

THE THREE men pitched for the undergrowth, Johnny grimacing a little. The racing about, heedless of his fractured ribs, was beginning to have its effect.

They opened up with their superfirer pistols. The slugs mowed down leaves, splattered against hard palm boles and cut away vines.

A man howled in fright, and they could bear him running away through the tropical labyrinth.

"I recognize that voice," Johnny groaned. "It's one of Santini's gang!"

The agony in the gaunt geologist's voice caused Long Tom to eye him anxiously.

"The ribs?" he queried.

"No," said Johnny.

"That's a dang lie," Long Tom snapped. "You're about played out. Blast it, you oughta be in a hospital yet. Stay behind!"

Johnny obeyed that command as they rushed forward; but not from choice. He was simply too weak to hold up his end of the charge.

They sighted a man fleeing through the growth. He was making for the cove. Renny sighted deliberately. His superfirer moaned.

The runner threw up his arms, tossing a revolver high into the air. Then his head went down and he stumbled, turned a perfect somersault, after which he lay and squirmed with decreasing vigor until, by the time Doc Savage's three aides had reached him, the man was limp and unconscious from the effects of the mercy bullets.

The flesh was torn slightly across his shoulders, but he was not greatly damaged -- unless infection set in from the wounds, which was unlikely, since the mercy bullets carried their own antiseptic agent, and even the tracer chemicals were of a type which did not produce infection.

"Let's see where he was goin'!" Renny boomed.

They plunged on, caught the blue wink of sun from water ahead, and came out on the cove beach. Gasoline smell met their nostrils.

"Holy cow!" Renny exploded.

The three of them pitched backward for the shelter of the jungle.

THE COVE was a narrow, shallow indentation, and at one end the mangroves grew out into the water.

A plane -- Santini's great seaplane -- was beached near this point. Green boughs had been cut and spread over the cabin and wings of the plane; others, longer, cut and thrust into the soft black manganese sand around the ship. The result was a perfect job of camouflaging, which explained why they had not sighted the plane from the air.

Under the concealment of wideflung palm fronds near the plane there was a hut, also of green fronds, thatched so that its presence had escaped notice from above.

Three men stood near the hut. Each held a submachine gun. At sight of Doc's men, they began firing.

Renny's superfirer, bawling, sent back a hail of lead. One of the enemy trio went down. The other pair dived behind palm trunks.

The fight which followed was short. Santini's men were at a disadvantage, being outnumbered now, three to two. Nor were they as good marksmen as their foes. They had to plant bullets in vulnerable spots, and that was difficult because of the bulletproof vests which Doc's men wore.

The decisive factor in the fray, however, was the fact that the slightest wound from one of the mercy bullets would put the man who received it out of commission.

As the last of the pair fell from behind his palm tree, squirming with the delirium that preceded the quick stupor of the mercy chemical, Renny darted forward.

Johnny tried to follow, stumbled and went to his knees, grimacing. He tried to get up, but failed.

"I'll be superamalgamated," he gritted. "I seem to have -- folded up!"

Big-fisted Renny went back, scooped the bony geologist up easily, and bore him along. They reached the plane under his covering of green limbs and Long Tom, tearing the boughs aside, burst in to inspect the ship.

His feet slogged through the water; metallic thumps indicated he had stepped upon the floats; a clatter showed he was in the cabin. Then his voice came out hollowly.

"I'm a son of a gun!" he ejaculated.

"What is it?" Renny demanded.

"Come in here and look," the electrical wizard invited.

Renny, carrying the vociferously objecting Johnny, worked to the plane and found Long Tom pointing at the wings, more particularly at elongated punctures which gaped in the thin metal skin of the wings.

"I first noticed the fuel tanks showed empty on the gauges, then looked around for the reason," said Long Tom. "There's the reason."

Renny nodded soberly. The cuts in the wings must have been made by a small ax, or a knife wielded by a strong arm; and they had penetrated the fuel tanks.

The strength of the gasoline odor moved Renny to glance down, and he saw in the black manganese sand the tiny pocks made by the dribbling fuel.

They stared at the evidence of vandalism in silence.

A jubilantly youthful voice said, "You gentlemen did a good job theah. But youah work is not done."

The three men knocked down a length of camouflage wall in getting outside. They stared in astonishment.

Dan Thunden stood some fifty yards distant, beside a ridge of ragged gray coral.

Renny snarled, lifted his superfirer.

"Wait!" howled Dan Thunden. "Youah boss, Doc Savage -- Santini has gotten hold of him!"

Renny lowered his gun. "What?"

"You had bettah help Savage," called Thunden. "Just tag along behind me and I'll show you what to do."

Renny yelled, "Wait!" but Thunden bobbed behind the coral ridge and vanished.

The three men started in pursuit, but wrenched up as they heard a stirring in the hut near by. A feminine voice came out of the shack of green boughs.

"Do I get any attention around here, or not?" it asked.

Chapter 17. TROUBLE UNDERGROUND

"PAT!" RENNY howled -- and all three men whirled back and dived into the crudely constructed hut.

Patricia Savage sat on the black sand inside, her face flushed and angry. A length of stout piano wire, evidently a spare piece from the plane repair kit, had been fastened securely around her slender waist and the other end spiked to a palm which formed the rear brace of the hut.

Renny lowered Johnny and pounced upon the piano wire. He wrenched at it, but it held. He began twisting it, kinking and unkinking in an endeavor to break it.

"You won't get anywhere that way," Pat advised. "I did that for hours."

Renny nodded and put his huge hands to work on the knots. They were tight, and had evidently been fled with pincers.

"You all right," Long Tom asked Pat.

They could see that she was.

"I'm madder than a tomcat caught in a rat trap," Pat imparted violently. "What was that I heard the old whiskered goat yelling about Doc?"

"Something about Santini having gotten Doc," Renny said grimly.

"Oh!" said Pat, and shuddered.

"I don't believe it," Renny informed her, after freeing one strand of the piano wire. "Doc has never yet been in a jam where he didn't have an ace up his sleeve."

"This Santini is the devil with a red ribbon across his chest," Pat murmured.

"Did they ever find out that you weren't Kel Avery?" Long Tom asked her.

Pat shook a negative with her bronze head. "I wouldn't be here if they had. Man, those fellows

are bad! They'd have thrown me out of the plane if they had known who I was. They very near did it anyway."

"They kept you alive in hopes of making you tell them where the contents of that air mail parcel went to?" Long Tom questioned.

"That's why."

"Where did it go to?"

"Do you think I know?" Pat asked sarcastically. "Ask that other girl -- Kel Avery, or Maureen Darleen, or whatever she calls herself."

"You don't seem to like her."

"I don't like anybody who got me into what I've just gone through," said Pat.

Long Tom grinned. "I thought you wanted to be amused by a little excitement."

"This has gone past the amusement stage," Pat said, then grinned back at the electrical wizard.

"But I don't mind, much."

Renny gave the piano wire a wrench. It came free and he straightened, advising, "There you are."

Pat jumped up and ran out of the hut. "Come on! Let's see if anything has really happened to Doc!"

Outside, they looked around hopefully. It was Johnny, his eye unaffected by the weakness that came from his shattered ribs, who leveled a pointing arm and declared, "There he is!"

White-haired Dan Thunden had waited. They could see him through the jungle, poised near a convenient palm bole that was bulletproof.

"Hey, you! -- c'mere and tell us what this is all about!" Renny roared.

Dan Thunden's answer was a quick disappearance behind the palm.

"For two cents, I'd shoot him full of good hard lead bullets the next time he shows his nose,"

Long Tom snarled.

"I wouldn't," Pat advised.

"Why not?"

"He's on our side -- until we clean up on Santini's outfit."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"From Santini's talk."

THEY SET out after the elusive Dan Thunden, holding their anger in check, but vowing vengeance.

It was humiliating to be pawns maneuvered about by the old fellow, but they were not so unwise as to fail to realize it was best that they follow him.

At such times as they lost the trail, Dan Thunden showed his white head and made a noise to put them right.

Toward the expanse of rock near the center of the cay, their course led -- the same stony area where they had heard the shot which they had as yet no way of knowing had signaled Doc Savage's capture by Santini's crew.

"Did Santini's talk tell you anything else?" Renny asked Pat as they worked through the tangled undergrowth.

"Plenty!" Pat advised. "What?"

"The most fantastic story you ever heard," Pat explained. "This Dan Thunden was shipwrecked here in 1843, more than ninety years ago, and was the only one from his ship to reach shore. He has lived here since."

"I've still got my doubts about that guy being a hundred and thirty-one years old," Long Tom put in.

"Santini does not seem to doubt it," Pat retorted. "And Santini is nobody's sucker."

"We'll let that ride, then," Renny grunted. "What else did you learn?"

"That Santini found this island by accident," said Pat. "He was flying from South American in a stolen plane. He had gotten into some trouble down there over killing a government official in Venezuela, and he was making for the United States, after leading every one to believe he was flying south.

"He could not take the usual air routes, or fly over islands where there were settlements and radio, or where he was likely to sight ships. That explains why he happened to come over this out-of-the-way corner. He was having motor trouble and landed."

"Then what?"

"Then the mystery darkens," Pat replied. "They found Dan Thunden -- and something else, something worth a great deal of money."

"What?"

"Search me."

Renny came to a full stop in order to eye Pat curiously.

"Do you mean to say you don't know yet what all this fighting is over?" he rumbled.

Pat wrinkled a nose at the big-fisted engineer. "Are you criticizing me?"

"No," said Renny. "But I had high hopes."

"So did I," Pat told him. "I tried to pump Santini, but got precisely nowhere. They were very glad to learn I did not know what was behind the trouble. And I had to be careful not to get them to believing I was not Kel Avery."

Johnny put in, rather weak-voiced: "Santini and his gang came to Fear Gay to get more of the stuff which was supposed to be in that air mail package, but wasn't, didn't they?"

"Right," Pat said, then looked anxiously at the bony geologist.

Johnny had neglected his pet luxury, his big words, and that showed he was suffering. Johnny managed a twisted grin of reassurance.

Pat continued: "Santini's crowd shot down Dan Thunden's plane when it arrived, and killed the pilot. Since then, they've been trying to catch Thunden to make him show them where the thing they're after is hidden."

"Santini -- killed -- the pilot?" Long Tom asked slowly.

Pat caught the strangeness in the electrical expert's tone said curiously, "Yes. Why?"

"The pilot was a -- skeleton -- when we found him," said Long Tom.

Pat shuddered. "And that reminds me of another thing. There's some horror on the island of which Santini and his men are in deadly terror. They would not tell me what it is."

RENNY TOSSED tip a beam of an arm and advised, "There's that stretch of bare rock ahead where we heard the shot."

Dan Thunden vanished from sight of them a moment later, and they drew their superfirers and haunted the jungle shrubs as they crept ahead, aware that the strange old-young man's previous disappearance had marked the nearness of danger.

Pat studied the expanse of naked stone, then gasped, "Oh!" softly.

"Eh?" Long Tom eyed her.

"I heard Santini and his men talk about this place," said Pat. "It is honeycombed underground with caves. It was here that old Dan Thunden lived for more than ninety years. Santini and his gang thought the stuff -- whatever it is that they are searching for -- was hidden here."

There was silence while they peered through a bank of oleander and poinsettia in an effort to locate an opening. But there was no sign of an aperture. They advanced, Renny in the lead.

"Careful," Pat warned. "From Santini's talk, I think this place is a net of traps. Dan Thunden rigged them up as a diversion while he lived here."

"Some idea of a pastime!" Renny snorted.

They continued to go forward, eyes busy on the rocky surface underfoot. There were many cracks, numerous tiny pits, but none of them seemed to be a secret door.

Unexpectedly, Dan Thunden called to them from the jungle.

"Stamp on that square of reddish rock to youah right," he advised. "That'll open the trapdoah!"

Renny hesitated, then swung to the right. A few moments later he was inspecting the panel of faintly rose-colored stone. Then he put his hands in his pockets and teetered thoughtfully on his heels.

Removing the big hands from his pockets, he dropped to his knees and began to feel over the dull vermilion stone.

"The old goat said to stamp on it!" Long Tom snapped.

"Dry up," Renny said, trying to keep his rumbling voice down to a whisper. "I'm going to get even with white whiskers for his little tricks!"

Renny fumbled with the cracks around the stone for a time, then stood up. He stamped.

To Dan Thunden it undoubtedly appeared that Renny was slamming his heel down on the square of red stone, but he was actually kicking a few inches to one side. Renny turned.

"It don't work," he called.

"Try it again, suh!" yelled Dan Thunden.

Renny stamped -- again missing the square panel.

"Something has gone wrong!" he shouted. "We'll get over to the other side of the place while you come and open it."

With that, he guided Johnny, Long Tom and Pat away. They stopped some hundred and fifty yards from the stone, turned and saw Dan Thunden scuttling for the rock.

The old man reached the panel and delivered a resounding blow with a heel. 'The panel promptly flew open, lid fashion.

Dan Thunden howled, "I told you to stamp -- "

Then he sank down prone on the stone and seemed to go to sleep.

RENNY AND his three companions, reaching the whitehaired man, found him snoring loudly, unmoving.

'The square of red stone was still open. A black cavity was below.

Pat looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled understanding.

"Doc's anesthetic bulbs!" she exclaimed.

"Good guess," Renny grinned. He indicated the edges of the secret door, where tiny particles of thin glass could be distinguished. "I put some of the bulbs around the slab, and they broke when the lid opened. The gas inside of them produces quick unconsciousness."

Pat drew back instinctively.

"The gas loses its strength in less than a minute," Renny advised her. "It won't overcome us now."

Long Tom, who looked like a physical weakling, stooped and picked up Dan Thunden's frame with manifest ease.

"The old goat wasn't so wise after all," he grinned. "Boy, when he wakes up will his face be red!"

There was a stir in the black void below the secret door. A man cursed, then queried, "What's goin' on out there?"

It was one of Santini's men; he must have heard the noise as the hidden panel opened, and come to investigate. He was canny; they could tell by his voice that he was well back in the subterranean depths, protected from a bullet.

Renny tried a trick, knowing that his voice would sound unnatural to the man below and hoping the fellow would fail to identify it.

"We've got old Dan Thunden," Renny said. "Come up and have a look."

"Yeah," growled the man beneath. "Who're you?"

That stumped Renny; but Pat came to the rescue.

"Tell him Snicker," she breathed. "That's the name of one of the three who were watching me."

"Snicker!" Renny called.

The man in the cavern was silent, still suspicious, and finally said, "C'mon down here where I can get a look at you. I gotta be sure it's you, Snicker."

Renny's long, puritanical face was very sober for an instant, because he knew the Santini gangster would become alarmed before long. Then the gloomy-looking engineer dipped a huge hand into his coat and brought out some of the tiny glass globes which held more of the anaesthetic gas that had vanquished Dan Thunden.

Taking careful aim, Renny lobbed three of the bulbs in quick succession. Hitting and breaking, they made squishing sounds. The gas was colorless, odorless, and victims were always unaware of the effects until it was too late to do anything.

There was a sound as of a bundle of old clothes being dropped, and they knew the man below had collapsed.

AFTER DESCENDING a series of steps cut in the native stone, they found their victim -- a broad and squat man with a crooked nose and a pitted face--snoring lazily behind an outthrust in the cave wall. They relieved the fellow of a submachine gun and a canvas knapsack containing extra ammunition drums.

Johnny, who had been receiving Renny's assistance in traveling, asked, "What impends now?"

Long Tom, who did not smoke, but who carried a cigarette lighter in lieu of matches, thumbed the tiny flame alight and squinted in the fitful glow which was cast over their surroundings. He noted particularly the rugged nature of the cavern floor.

"This is no place for you, Johnny," he breathed. "The going will be too rough for those ribs of yours."

The thin geologist sighed. "That is regrettably true."

"So you better stick here on guard. You can watch Dan Thunden and this other guy."

"They will be unconscious for at least an hour," Johnny pointed out. Then he groaned slightly and sat down. "But I'll stay here."

"Sure you won't pass out?" Renny asked.

"Positive," Johnny insisted.

They left him there, a form as thin as death itself, crouched above the two men who slept so weirdly. His bony fingers held a superfirer pistol, and handy it' his right coat pocket were several of the anaesthetic bulbs.

A man who knew how, could use those bulbs without a mask, simply by holding his breath for the space of almost a minute, during which time the vapor would have its effect on an enemy who breathed it, then dissipate itself. The stuff worked only when taken into the lungs.

Pat whispered, "Careful! Remember, there's something on this cay that can turn a man into a skeleton. Whatever the thing is, Santini and his men are in deadly fear of it."

"We've seen a sample of its work," Long Tom replied quietly, thinking of the skeleton of the aviator which they had found on the beach.

They endeavored to make as little noise as possible. Between the three of them only Renny had a flashlight, one of the instruments which got its current from a self-contained spring generator. The beam of this was played about cautiously.

Once they heard a faint, strange noise from some side avenue of nocturnal murk. Listening, they were puzzled.

"Sounded like fat frying," Long Tom mumbled.

When the sound did not come closer, but continued low and barely audible, as if coming from behind a closed door, they went on.

To avoid becoming lost, they daubed spots of a chemical mixture at intervals. This stuff would glow when exposed to ultra-violet light, and Long Tom, the electrical genius, carried a projector of the "black light" similar to the one which Doc kept on his person. Thus their back trail would be marked plainly if needful.

They were crawling along a sand-floored tunnel, when Renny's huge hand stopped them.

"Get that!" breathed the engineer.

THERE WERE voices ahead, hollow, the words not understandable. They advanced -- and a glow of

light appeared. Men stood in a circle around a great metallic figure which lay on the sandy floor of a chamber.

"Doc!" Renny gulped. "They did get him after all!"

Doc Savage was bound with a stout rope woven from plant fibre. Literally hundreds of turns encircled his mighty frame. He resembled a mummy.

Santini and a part of his gang made up the circle of men. They seemed still to fear the bronze giant, securely though he was bound, for they did not venture close. And they were careful to keep their flashlight beams off the bronze man's eyes. There was something about those flake-gold orbs, a hypnotic quality that chilled. Santini said, "You're probably wondering why we did not shoot you when we had the chance, Signor Savage." Doc said nothing.

Santini scowled. "You were kept alive to do a bit of work for us. 511 And if you do it well, we will permit you to live."

Long Tom's machine pistol clicked softly as he threw the safety.

Renny, gripping the electrical expert's arm, breathed, "Let's listen to this first."

They could hear Santini perfectly.

"There is something on this island which is worth many millions of dollars, Signor Savage," Santini continued. "It grows here. But we do not know what it looks like when it grows. We only know what it resembles after it is dried and treated. This material is hidden somewhere, and only old Dan Thunden knows of the hiding place.

"When we visited this island the first time, we learned of this thing and arranged with Dan Thunden to sell it to wealthy men who could afford to pay us millions for it. We went to New York and made contact with a number of wealthy men."

"The names in the file at the office of Fountain of Youth, Inc.," Doc suggested, and his powerful voice showed no strain.

"Exactly, Signor Savage," Santini agreed. "They were very anxious to buy what we had to sell, and pay a handsome price. It was then that we decided to get rid of Dan Thunden. That might have been a mistake. He found out our intentions and seized a box containing our entire supply of this fabulously valuable substance.

"The old man had very little money, and he hit upon the idea of persuading a relative who had much money -- Kel Avery -- to finance him in selling the stuff. He sent the box to Kel Avery and arranged a rendezvous in Florida, which we were fortunate enough to apprehend his mail and prevent him keeping.

"We tried to kidnap the girl and get the box, but failed, and she became alarmed and decided to call on you for aid. We tried to seize you before she got to you, and there our troubles really started."

"Why the review?" Doc demanded sharply.

Santini smirked. "Merely a foundation for telling you that we want your aid. We will trade the safety of yourself and your party for your help."

"How can I help you?" Doc asked.

"I know something of your ability," Santini said. "You will notice that we keep our flashlights off your eyes. That is because we happen to know you are a skilled hypnotist. You can hypnotize Dan Thunden and make him tell where this -- shall we call it a treasure -- is hidden."

"You haven't got Dan Thunden," Doc said dryly.

"We will get him," Santini snapped. "Now!"

'The man whirled with his flashlight and started for the exit.

So unexpected was the move that Renny, Long Tom and Pat were caught unprepared. Santini's flashlight illuminated them.

"HOLY COW!" Renny boomed. "We've gotta make a fight of it!"

His superfirer blared. Simultaneously, he pitched into the cavern. Long Tom trod his heels.

Santini's gang, taken by surprise, reacted variously. One cried out in fright. Mother dropped his flashlight. Others drew guns. One fell from Renny's blast of mercy bullets.

It was Santini himself who showed the most presence of mind. He sprang backward and vanished into the gloomy rear of the underground room. It seemed that he had a definite destination.

Long Tom and Renny were both shooting now. They concentrated on the flashlights, the blinding beams of which were a menace. With explosions of glass, bowls from the men who held them, the flashes went out. More men dropped. Confusion grew.

"We've got 'em goin'!" Renny roared, and charged. Long Tom and Pat followed. Pat carried the submachine gun which they had taken from the man at the entrance, but she did not use it, knowing that it was the way of Doc and his men never to take human life.

Then something happened. There was a rattling at the sides of the room. The sand seemed to come alive, exploding upward.

A net appeared, a mesh woven of stout fibre. It had been buried under the sand, and was being pulled by ropes attached to the sides and hidden in recesses in the walls. The motive force was evidently a great weight sliding in a pit, for they could hear the rumble and jar of its descent. Renny and the other two were jerked from their feet. The net mesh was large enough to pass their feet and their arms through, and they hung there like fish caught by the gills.

The net trap was cleverly constructed. It hauled them over and slammed them against one wall, holding them there with an inexorable strength.

Renny snarled, and tore at the net. His huge hands did manage to snap two of the strands. He shot down a man who ran toward him.

Then Santini's gang was upon them. Santini appeared from where he had retreated to actuate the trap, howling, "Non! Non! There is no need to kill them now!"

Clubbing guns reduced the prisoners to senselessness. "Go see if they left a watcher at the entrance!" Santini gritted.

Chapter 18. LOTS OF LUCK -- ALL BAD

WILLIAM HARPER LITTLEJOHN was sitting on the top step of the secret entrance when he heard men running through the caverns beneath him, coming closer. Johnny was perspiring and pale, absently fingering his monocle magnifier. He was suffering from his injured chest.

He stood erect hastily. An instant later, he knew it was Santini's men who approached. He grasped some of the anesthetic bulbs, took his time, then threw them into the blackness below.

Startled curses indicated he had downed at least one man. There was a confab. He could not catch the words. Some one tried to shoot him, but had no luck. Johnny returned a blast from his superfirer for effect.

Had there been only the one exit, Johnny might have held Santini and his men prisoners below for an indefinite period -- but there were other openings.

A hundred yards distant, a section of stone flew up. Two men popped out with sawed-off shotguns. Johnny did the only thing possible -- he got up and ran. Grasping Dan Thunden's inert frame, he attempted to carry the white-haired old-young man along.

In Dan Thunden reposed the secret of Fear Cay, and Johnny wanted mightily to get at the bottom of that mystery.

Santini himself put in an appearance and yelled, "Non! Non! Do not shoot Thunden!"

Johnny tightened his grip on Thunden, realizing that the presence of the white-headed man meant safety. But the burden slowed his pace amazingly. He staggered. Twice he went entirely down.

It dawned on Johnny that he was never going to escape with his prisoner. So, reluctantly, he dropped the form of Thunden, then sprinted into the jungle. He reached the dense growth, plams and gum trees sheltering him from a storm of lead.

Head down, Johnny ran with a long-legged stride. He was headed for the spot where Doc's plane had landed, and he kept going in that direction. At his back, pursuit was steady, but the enemy did not gain.

Johnny was reeling and nearly out when he came upon Monk and Ham.

The apish Monk was bristling, eager for a fight, his pet pig, Habeas, trailing him. Ham had his sword cane in one hand, his superfirer in the other.

"We heard the shootin'!" Monk grunted. "What's goin' on?"

Johnny waved a bony hand to indicate pursuit, then sank down weakly on the most comfortable-looking spot, an expanse of rank green plants. He sat there while Monk and Ham dashed forward.

"Where's Kel Avery and Da Clima?" he called in a feeble Voice.

"Back at the plane," Ham called without stopping.

An instant later there was a bawling of machine pistols, the slamming reports of repeating shotguns and the cackle of automatics. Lead made eerie noises in the jungle. Leaves were cut free and drifted with the breeze. Occasional cocoanuts dropped noisily. Frightened birds made a great uproar until they had all fled the scene of hostilities.

For perhaps five minutes, the guerrilla warfare continued intermittently. Then Ham and Monk came creeping back through the jungle. They had resumed their perpetual quarrel.

"If you'd throw that sticker away and learn to shoot, we'd have better luck," Monk growled, eying Ham's sword cane.

"How could I find anybody to shoot at when you charged around like an elephant and showed them where we were?" Ham snapped. "Nature had sure run out of brains when she got around to equipping you!"

This was a slight exaggeration, considering Monk's reputation as one of the greatest of living chemists.

They reached Johnny, and Monk advised, "There was just a lot of lead-throwing and noise. I don't think anybody was hit. And they beat it. Now, tell us what's happened."

Johnny did not reply. He was on all fours, eyes close to the ground, and he did not look up. He seemed in the grip of some spell.

"What's been going on?" Monk asked Johnny again.

The bony archaeologist and geologist did not lift his eyes. He seemed frozen in his crouching position.

"Hey!" Monk barked anxiously. "What ails you?"

Johnny lifted an arm, beckoned.

"Look at this," he requested, and indicated one of the plants in the bed of which he had been seated.

Monk came over and stared.

"Just a funny-lookin' weed," he snorted.

JOHNNY LOOKED pained, and pointed at the growth of plants.

"Weed!" he sniffed. "Neither of you ever saw flora of that type before."

"So what?" Monk queried.

"Examine the confines of this area of vegetation," Johnny invited.

Monk and Ham complied with that request, and the result was a surprising discovery. The plants which had intrigued Johnny grew in even rows, as if cultivated.

"Somebody's garden patch," Monk grunted.

"This is very strange," Johnny murmured.

"Not half as strange as some other things," Monk said. "For instance, what is it that is making people into skeletons around here? And what is Santini after? C'mon. Let's go back to the plane." Before leaving the spot where he was seated, Johnny carefully plucked a few shoots of the plants which had so intrigued him and tucked the sprigs inside his hat band where they would not be crumpled.

By the time the men had reached the plane, Johnny had completed a rapid outline of what had occurred. Monk and Ham grinned widely over the news that Dan Thunden had been seized, but scowled darkly at word of the final outcome.

They stood on the white coral beach where the sand stung their faces, and looked about. There was no one in sight.

"Thought you said Da Clima and Kel Avery were here," Johnny suggested.

Monk, his expression suddenly anxious, lifted his voice, "'Miss Avery!'"

Silence followed.

"Blazes!" Ham muttered, and nervously sheathed and unsheathed his sword cane.

Monk called again. Once more there was no answer.

"Something's happened!" he rapped. "Da Clima and Kel Avery had orders to stick right here!"

A moment later, Habeas Corpus began squealing and grunting off to one side. The three men dived for the spot, Ham using his sword cane to knock aside the jungle vegetation, Monk and Johnny with their machine pistols ready.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny mumbled, and all three stared at what Habeas had found.

BIG DA CLIMA was piled slackly on his stomach in the leafage, his legs crossed in a grotesque fashion, one arm twisted under his chest, the other flung up and over his head as if to protect it. His head was askew, the face up, and a crimson rivulet had crawled down out of his hair, trickled on down his face and over neck, to redden his shirt collar.

"Look for Kel!" Ham barked, and sank down to see how badly Da Clima was hurt.

Monk dashed about; Johnny tottered. Both waved their rapidfirer pistols, anxious to find a target, and both had rage-tensed faces. But neither found a sign of the enemy.

When they went back, Ham looked up from his task of kneading Da Clima's wrists, got their disgusted head shakes, then said, "He's coming out of it. There's hardly any bump at all on his head."

Da Clima sat up at last. His manner was remindful of the first time they had seen him. back at the New York airport. He blinked, swayed his read from side to side and looked stupid.

"Where's Kel Avery?" Ham snapped.

"Da Clima, how he know?" the overmuscled man mumbled.

"What happened to you?"

Da Clima (lid not seem quite positive on the subject.

"For you feller, I stand around and listen, yes," he said 'vaguely. "Then all of a sudden the top of my head, she go bane! like the firecracker on the Fourth of July."

"Then what?"

"How do I know?" Da Clima scowled. "'The world, she kind of stop for to go around, then."

"Somebody sneaked up behind and kissed your bean with a gun barrel or something, eh?" Monk growled.

"Maybe," Da Clima admitted. "I no see the soul, not a soul."

The big man stood up, glared at his knees which seemed inclined to buckle, then hammered himself upon the chest -- weakly at first and erratically, almost missing with his own fist, then more accurately and soundly, so that his great torso gave off hollow boomings.

"Show me the damn feller who is do this to Da Clima!" he roared. "I tear from him the arm and leg, yes!"

"You sure do talk, big boy," Monk growled. "But in action you ain't been so hot."

Da Clima glowered. "What you mean by that? The insult, no?"

Ham put in placatingly, "Don't mind the missing link, Da Clima. He fell out of the nest when he was little."

Da Clima laughed harshly and frowned at Monk. "I might have known this feller he born in a nest in the tree, like the monkey."

Johnny snapped, "Stop it! This is no time for personalities! What are we going to do?"

"Take the plane and try to spot Santini's men," Ham suggested. "Maybe we can locate them before

they get Kel Avery to their headquarters."

They ran for the plane, clambered into the cabin, and Monk took the control bucket. He threw starter switches. Nothing happened. They clambered out and investigated.

"Santini's men took the carburetors off the motors!" Ham groaned.

THEY UNLOADED, held a brief conference, and it was decided to head for the rocky area afoot. Just what they would do when they reached the scene of the underground caverns they were not sure, but each man made a pack of equipment which he thought might be necessary.

Johnny described the location of the expanse of stone, and they concluded the place could be reached more quickly by taking the slightly circuitous route around the beach. They could travel more swiftly, especially Johnny, who was not equal to much more jungle.

"Boy, you're gonna suffer for that crack about me fallin' out of the nest," Monk promised Ham in an undertone as they trotted along the white coral sand.

Ham started some caustic retort, held it back and pointed. "What is that?"

All four men followed his indicating arm. Bits of timber, aged and weather-beaten, projected above the sand close to the jungle.

"An old wreck," Monk snorted, and would have gone on.

"Wait!" Johnny said sharply.

The skeleton-thin geologist and archaeologist went forward, eyed such of the timbers as were above the sand, then kicked about, uncovering others.

It was the frame of a ship -- not a large Vessel. The wood had once been carved in elaborate fashion.

"What're we killin' time here for?" Monk demanded impatiently.

Johnny eyed him. "Did you ever see a Roman galley?"

"Blazes, no!" Monk growled. "I'm not two thousand years old."

"This," Johnny indicated the wreckage dramatically, "was once a Roman galley. I am sure of it."

The emphasis which the gaunt scientist put on the declaration was enough to impress the others.

They knew from past experience that Johnny was not addicted to excitement without just cause.

"A Roman galley," Monk said slowly. "But how did it get here on this side of the Atlantic?"

"Drifted, perhaps."

"Nix. Ocean currents are wrong for that."

"Then possibly it had sails which were set, and the wind blew it across," said Johnny. "The thing is not impossible. It could have happened. This island is on the outskirts of the Caribbean, and a craft blown across the Atlantic might conceivably have landed here, or been wrecked, as this one was undoubtedly."

Monk nodded. "I still don't see why all the excitement?"

Johnny touched his hat band where the sprigs of weed reposed.

"I have an astounding theory," he said. "But we will go into it later."

"Yes," said Ham. "We've got Kel Avery and the rest to worry about now."

Soon they turned into the jungle. They went as quietly as possible, but banana birds and noisy parakeets were stirred up, while gulls and frigate birds sailed inquiringly overhead.

"Gonna be hard to get close without bein' heard," Monk opined.

The expanse of smooth stone opened before their eyes. The sun was nearing the horizon, but still hot, and the rock was like so much molten substance poured out, still white with its own heat. Crouched behind a gnarled silk-cotton tree at the edge of the stony area, they used their eyes and small pocket telescopes, but discerned no sign of life. More important, there was no trace of the secret entrances. The flinty surface looked one solid mass.

"Can you find any of the trapdoors?" Ham asked Johnny.

Johnny grimaced doubtfully. "I don't know. I shall try."

They advanced, weapons ready, pausing frequently to sink down and jam ears to the hot stone to listen for sounds from below. The heat waves danced and all but scorched their skins. They were already red with sunburn, their northern tan being little protection against this tropical inferno. But they heard nothing.

Suddenly Da Clima, off to one side, dropped to all fours and pawed at a crack.

"Me, I find the hole!" he gulped.

DA CLIMA wrenched, pounded with the heel of a hand and so suddenly that they all sprang backward, a lid of stone flew up, exposing a dark gullet that led downward.

Monk extended a hand. "Shake," he smiled.

Da Clima glared at the hairy paw. "What for?"

"I'll take it all back," Monk informed him. "You have finally performed a useful service."

"Ahr-r-r," growled Da Clima, and scrambled down into the black cavity which he had uncovered.

The others unlimbered flashlights which they had brought from the plane, and followed the over-muscled Da Clima. Roughly hewn rock enclosed them so closely that Monk's massive shoulders rubbed and at times he had difficulty in passing. Da Clima's bulk was only slightly less.

The way widened for a time, then narrowed again. They passed a side tunnel. A stout hardwood log, which they tested carefully, bridged a crack that cleft beneath them.

Monk dropped a tiny pebble, counted almost to twenty before it hit water.

"Nice place, this," Monk whispered.

"Pipe down," Ham suggested.

Monk picked up Habeas, who was following them, and carried the big-eared pig tucked under an arm. Habeas was making no sound now. Not for nothing had Monk spent innumerable hours in training the shoat.

Da Clima, first into the depths, was still in the lead, and as they came to a point where it was necessary to get down on all fours and crawl, he went ahead.

"Ugh!" Da Clima exploded unexpectedly.

The next instant, his gun emitted a blast that all but ruptured their eardrums. Then the muscular giant scuttled forward, reached a sizable chamber, and reared erect. He plunged on.

"A man, he see me!" he howled. "That guy Santini, I think it was I -- "

Men shouted ahead. They caught Santini's foreign accent. A gun lashed red flame. They fired back. Their shots were not answered.

"Gonna be tough from now on," Monk growled.

They stood there in darkness, their flashlights extinguished.

"I," said Ham, "have an idea."

THE DAPPER lawyer could be heard fumbling at the pack which held the stuff they had brought from the plane.

"What is this idea?" Monk whispered.

"We'll use the light-spot cartridges on those birds," Ham said grimly. "That should give them something to think about."

"Boy, you are bright," Monk admitted, and dug into his own pack.

Light-spot cartridges was the designation given by Doc Savage's men to a special shell which the bronze man had designed for the superfirer. Doc had created many unusual bullet types for the remarkable guns, from tracers and mercy slugs to explosives of such power that a single one could knock down a small house.

The light-spot pellets were among the most unique. They were charged with a mixture of thermite and magnesium, the exact ingredients known only to the bronze man, and burned with a brilliant white light wherever they struck.

Certain of the amino drums were charged alternately with five light-spot slugs and five mercy bullets, an effective combination. The new drums were fitted and the guns latched into single-fire position.

"Let's go!" Monk growled.

They charged forward. One of Santini's men fired at them.

"Let 'em have the spots!" Monk rapped.

A volley of metallic clicks followed. Utter silence ensued.

"Blazes!" groaned Monk.

"Something's wrong!" Ham grated. "These ammo drums are duds!"

Monk snarled unintelligibly. "I know! When those birds got to the plane, they doctored the bullets!"

He got no further. Santini must have heard their Voices.

"Rush them!" he howled.

Feet slammed. A gun glared red lightning. Monk thumbed on his flashlight, then tossed it to the floor where it would furnish illumination for the fight.

The next instant, Santini's men were upon them. There was no shooting now. The Santini gang seemed confident. They swung clubbed guns, fists, kicked and clawed.

A dozen seconds of desperate conflict told Monk and the others that they were outnumbered. They tried to retreat.

Da Clima got the retreat idea first. He popped into the cramped tunnel through which they had just crawled. In some fashion, he seemed to stick there. He began to bawl in terror.

Monk pinched Da Clima, shoved him, but the big fellow did not budge, although Monk's pinches must have been very painful.

"Danged if this mess of meat ain't a jinx!" Monk roared, and gave Da Clima another terrific pinch.

Three Santini followers sprang upon Monk, and three guns bludgeoned together for his head. For Monk, it seemed as if all of the lights went out suddenly and his surroundings became very still.

Chapter 19. THE WEEDS

MONK'S eyes opened a little, rolled until they were all whites, then slowly assumed normalcy, and he looked at Doc Savage.

The bronze man was some ten feet distant, tied around and around, mummy fashion, with turns of fibre rope. His head and his hands alone projected from his tyings, and cloth had been lashed over his hands so that he could not use his fingers.

Monk tried to move, groaned, "Blast it, I'm paralyzed!" then realized he was tied in much the same fashion as Doc.

"They don't take many chances, do they?" he mumbled.

"Are you all right?" Doc asked.

"His skull is thick," Ham's voice said from somewhere.

Squinting about, Monk saw that Ham lay near by, bound like himself. Johnny, Long Tom and Renny, formed a row along the sandy floor.

Da Clima scowled at Monk and strained against his ropes. He lay just at the edge of the area lighted by an electric lantern.

Pat Savage and Kel Avery were opposite, both tied, and white-bearded Dan Thunden was between them. Thunden seemed to be slumbering yet from the effects of the anesthetic gas.

They were in a ragged stone chamber. Santini and his men stood about, looking elated.

"It is the big reunion, eh, signors?" Santini inquired.

"In your hat," Monk grunted.

Santini laughed jubilantly, came over and stood playfully on Monk's chest, bouncing up and down a little.

Monk rolled abruptly, throwing Santini, and Santini, regaining his feet, kicked Monk in the side with great violence, swearing the while in his native tongue.

Monk showed his teeth and grunted loudly at each impact. like an animal in distress.

"This is the joyful occasion for me," said Santini.

Then he went to Renny and began to kick and abuse him as he had Monk. He treated Long Tom in like fashion, and was standing on Da Clima's massive torso when Dan Thunden rolled over and groaned. Dropping his diversion, Santini sprang forward and pointed at the white-bearded old-young man.

"This is what I wait for!" he snapped. "Take him somewhere and make him answer our questions!"

Two men picked up Dan Thunden, head and heels.

"Do not go near that door with the secret lock," Santini warned. apparently as an afterthought.

"We do not want our friends here to turn into skeletons. Not yet, signors."

The two who carried Dan Thunden started out with their burden, but before they had gone far, Doc Savage spoke. His words were in the guttural, not unmusical tongue of ancient Maya, the language which only the bronze man and his five aides spoke and understood, excepting those in the lost Central American valley to whom the language was native.

"Talk to me in this language," Doc directed in Mayan. "Make them think we're cooking up something."

Santini glared as he heard the unintelligible words, then snarled, "Non! No,i! Speak so that I understand!"

"Go chase yourself," Monk advised him in Mayan. "Say, Doc, what's the idea of this jabbering? It'll only start him kicking our ribs again.

"I want them to separate us," Doc said in Mayan. "if I can get by myself, I have a scheme to try."

Monk asked in Mayan, "What is it?"

He never got his answer. Santini, sputtering his rage, took the bait.

"Take this bronze man to another room," he ordered. "Two of you watch him! Shoot him at the least suspicion!"

Doc was promptly hauled out.

Monk muttered in Mayan, "I don't see what Doc can do. They've searched him, and he's tied up like nobody's business."

"Losing faith in Doc?" Ham asked sourly.

Monk sighed and lay back. "Brother, he's the only hope we've got."

DOC SAVAGE was carried into a circular recess in the stone, a place from which there was only one egress, and deposited on the sandy floor. The two who had carried him straightened up, puffing, perspiration like a shiny grease on their foreheads.

"The guy weighs a ton," one captor grunted.

"Pipe down!" the other muttered, and planted an electric hand lantern so that its beam bore upon the bronze man.

"That's the idea," said the first. "We've gotta watch 'im."

But Doc Savage did not want them scrutinizing him too closely, and he discouraged their attention by the simple expedient of staring at them intently, lids widened so that the full power of his flake-gold eyes had effect.

"Cut it out!" snarled one of the two captors.

Doc seemed not to hear, and a moment later, the hand lanterns were shifted so that the bronze man did not lie in direct brilliance, nor yet in complete gloom, but in a half light where he could not move appreciably without being observed.

"The guy can hypnotize a feller with them eyes," the more burly of the pair mumbled. "That's what Santini said, anyhow. I ain't takin' no chances myself."

There was no apparent possibility of Doc Savage gaining his freedom, so securely was he bound.

The bronze man's five aides knew something of his remarkable ability, had seen him accomplish the seeming impossible in the past, and even they had been skeptical about his chances. Mixed with the skepticism had been hope, though, for Doc had a way of making the incredible seem simple.

Santini's men had wrenched the heels off Doc's shoes to make sure no gadget was hidden there.

'The nails which had held the heels projected. The shoes were fitted with modern zipper fasteners

instead of time-honored laces.

Moving an imperceptible bit at a time, Doc hooked a heel nail in one zipper ring and stripped it down. He did the same with the other shoe.

From somewhere down the passage that led from the room, Santini's voice ordered, "Come here, you two!"

"You mean us?" called a guard.

"Si, si, you!" snapped Santini's voice.

"But we're watching -- "

"Canes!" snarled the voice. "Dogs! He will not escape in the minute I need you!"

The two watchmen walked out of the stone cubicle.

Doc Savage kicked off his shoes. His great frame seemed to turn to rubber, for he doubled backward in the fashion of a skilled contortionist, and his toes found the knots that secured his rope bindings. There were no feet in his socks, merely spatlike straps under the instep, leaving his toes uncovered.

The bronze man's toes took on the prehensile deftness of fingers. In fractional seconds, the knots were untied. He twisted about, working with fabulous speed, but making little noise. He came to his feet.

Down the stone passage, the two guards were peering about in puzzled fashion, for they had not found Santini at the point from which the man's voice had apparently come.

"Boss!" one growled. "Where the deuce did you go?"

There sounded two dull thumps. Both men dropped senseless. Neither was ever exactly sure what had happened, for they did not see or hear the metallic nemesis who loomed abruptly behind them and struck with both fists simultaneously.

Nor did either guard realize at the moment that they were the victims of a skill at voice mimicry and ventriloquism.

Santini had not called. Doc had done that.

DOC WENT forward and looked into the room which held his five aides, along with Pat, Kel Avery and Da Clima. A number of Santini's men were there, alert and watchful. An attempt to free the captives was sure to mean a fight, noise, an alarm.

From a nearby cavern emanated gruff words, interspersed with angry explosives. That would be Santini questioning old Dan Thunden. Doc made for the sounds.

In addition to Santini, four men were with Thunden. Four ropes had been tied to the white-haired man's wrists and ankles and a man held the end of each rope, pulling backward with all of his strength.

Thunden's finger tips were gory horrors. Santini held a pair of small pliers. Even as Doc sighted the group, the pincers were employed to yank another nail off one of Thunden's fingers.

Thunden moaned, writhed. Crimson crawled from lips into which he sank his own teeth.

"That is all of the finger nails, Signor Thunden," Santini said callously. "It seems that we will have to pull out an eye next. I will do it slowly, so that you can see with the other eye the knife as it cuts the muscles to free the orb from your head."

The recitation of grim details seemed to accomplish what the previous torture had not done.

"What do you want to know?" he groaned.

"I suppose you have no idea?" Santini sneered.

Doc advanced a little to be in a position to better catch the words. His feet, still bare, contacted something. He stooped and felt with sensitive fingers.

It was the packs which his aides, Monk, Ham, Johnny and Da Clima, had brought from the plane. The knapsacks made a little mound. Doc stepped around them and went on a few feet, then stopped.

Dan Thunden said, "The stoahroom, suh, is just inside the wooden doah."

Santini swore. "You mean that we have to take a chance with those -- with those -- "

"With my little friends, yes," Dan Thunden growled. "And I do hope you have an accident."

"How do we get in there?" Santini demanded.

"Can you walk on stilts?"

"Non!"

"I don't give a hoot how you get in!" Dan Thunden snapped. "I have told you wheah the stoahroom is."

"Just how is it opened?" Santini asked.

"Theah is a black ledge in the rock," said the whitehaired man. "You jam youah weight against that."

Doc Savage waited to hear no more, but glided backward. He paused to run deft fingers over the packs lying on the floor, and thus managed to locate the one which Monk had found.

Monk's pack was distinctive because it held a thing without which Monk seldom ventured into action -- the apish chemist's amazing portable laboratory which contained chemicals and apparatus for almost every purpose, all nested in a marvelously compact space.

With Monk's pack, Doc raced along the passages.

THE BRONZE man reached the massive wooden door with out incident. He listened, an ear against it.

There was no trace of the sound that was like fat frying. His fingers found the secret catch and the

timbered panel swung back, grating softly.

Doc's movements in the passage beyond were silent. Monk's pack held a spare flashlight, and he used this. The black ledge which Dan Thunden had mentioned was easily distinguished.

Doc started to plant weight against the dark stone, then hesitated. He drew back and searched for something with which to exert force without getting too near. He was thinking of those many traps which old Dan Thunden had rigged in this strange subterranean place.

Footsteps sounded beyond the door. They were rapid, running. Doc drifted silently into a patch of gloom. A flashlight swayed close.

Leaking appeared, dripping perspiration, his upper lip held between his teeth. There was a desperate expression on his unlovely face, a quivering eagerness in his plump hulk.

Leaking's look showed Doc exactly what was up. Leaking had heard Dan Thunden's words and was bound to inspect the storeroom ahead of Santini. Such action could only mean treachery.

Leaking must intend to double-cross his boss.

'The flashlight which the perspiring man carried picked up the black ledge. Leaking's time was evidently short, for he threw his weight against the black ledge. Nothing happened.

The man stood back. In his excitement, he had failed to attach significance to finding the heavy wooden door open. Once more, he plunged against the strip of dark stone.

Mechanism grated. Steel flashed. There was a hollow glug.

Leaking reeled, swayed. He seemed to come apart in the middle and fall in a flood of scarlet.

The upper part of his torso fell forward and blocked the slender panel of stone which had opened.

Doc advanced swiftly, not looking at Leaking's body, and examined the unholy mechanism inside the door. It was of hardwood, cleverly made, actuated by a lever on which a heavy weight bore.

Attached to the device was a great, razor-sharp cleaver, roughly fashioned from some iron part of a sailing ship. This was rigged so as to slash outward when pressure was placed upon the black stone.

It was this cleaver which had chopped Leaking in two halves.

Doc Savage still carried Monk's pack. He opened it, using his flashlight. The bronze man knew where every phial of chemical reposed. He drew out bottles, then walked into the storeroom, eyes alert for other grisly traps.

THE STOREROOM was not large, and the walls were inset with crude shelves. On these reposed jars of baked earthenware.

Doc opened the handiest, dipped in fingers and brought up some of the contents.

The bronze man did not seem surprised at what he saw -- leaves, a bilious green in color, dried and carefully packed. The sprigs did not have the color and shape of tea, nor yet of sage.

A botanist would have been intrigued by the leaves, for they were of a type difficult to catalogue. But Doc Savage, who was ordinarily interested by anything new and strange, gave them little attention. He let them fall back, and opened several more of the most convenient containers. Over the leaves in each jar, he sprinkled a bit of the chemical which he had taken from Monk's portable laboratory.

His departure was as ghostly as his coming, and executed none too soon, for steps could be heard as a number of men came near. They appeared, Santini and some of his followers.

They did not glimpse Doc, for he had concealed himself where they would walk past, leaving him behind them. At sight of the open door, Santini snarled profanely and sprang forward. He discovered Leaking's decapitated form.

"Che!" he gulped. "What -- what is this -- "

Then he burst into a roar of ugly mirth which bent him over and caused him to slap his beribboned chest to regain his breath.

"Leaking is try to pull the crooked deal on us, si," he chortled. "And old Dan Thunden is try the same thing. Leaking is fall into Thunden's trap. Come hello! How beautiful!"

They advanced into the storeroom and clutched up the handiest jars, which were those that Doc Savage had opened and sprinkled with chemical.

"At last we have the material," Santini murmured, and waved an arm to take in the other jars.

"There is enough of it here to make us all rich men."

A man eyed Santini eagerly. "Boss?"

"Si."

"You're going to keep your promise, ain't you?" asked the man. "You said, back on Long Island that night, that we would all be given the weed when we found the storeroom."

Santini hesitated, then nodded. "It is true. Later, you can all

The men were bright-eyed with eagerness. There was a near madness in their manner. a strange spell woven by sight of the unusual weed in the jars.

"Now," muttered the spokesman. "Let's sample the stuff. It's supposed to make a guy feel better right off, ain't it?"

Santini nodded. "It is."

"What's the word? Do we sample it now, or not?"

"It must be mixed with water," said Santini. "We will try it at once. All of us."

"That's the idea!" The speaker was almost blubbering his joy, and the others were like him, excited to the point of incoherence.

"The real Fountain of Youth," one gulped.

"You said it," agreed another. "The stuff that makes you live forever!"

Chapter 20. THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

SANTINI AND his men appeared shortly afterward at the long cavern which held the prisoners, carrying the jars of the weed.

The captives stared at them and seemed puzzled -- with one exception.

Johnny, the bony geologist and archaeologist, who also knew a great deal about botany, was the only one of the prisoners who looked as if he had an inkling of what it was all about. But he said nothing for the moment.

"We have found it!" Santini shouted. "Bi'enc! We shall all live forever, my men, and we will sell enough of the stuff to make us all millionaires!"

Santini retired to a near-by room which had, it seemed, been Dan Thunden's living quarters in the past, and where could be found utensils for mixing the strange leaves, as well as a spring of fresh water.

In the excitement of the moment, the guards forgot their charges. There was little chance of the captives escaping unaided, however.

Laughing, excited, the men crowded to the point where the mixing was in progress, and the room where Renny and the others lay was left unwatched.

"I don't get this a-tall," Monk muttered. "Did you hear what they said? The crazy dopes seem to think they've found something that will give them everlasting life."

Ham made a sudden tongue click of surprise. "I get it now! Fountain of Youth, Inc.! Remember the Fountain of Youth that history says Ponce De Leon hunted for? It was supposed to be somewhere in Florida."

"You've gone as crazy as they have!" Monk snapped. "The Fountain of Youth could be on this cay,"

Ham insisted. "Maybe, long ago, the reef was passable and canoes came here. The Fountain of Youth might not be a fountain at all, but that funny-looking weed Santini had. Maybe that plant does bring everlasting life."

"Nuts!" said Monk. "I won't swallow 110 such scatterbrained ideas. Not much!"

"Stay stupid, then," Ham retorted. "Or have you a better explanation?"

Johnny had been holding his tongue with an apparent effort, and now he spoke.

"Ham is eminently correct," he said.

Monk managed to roll over where he could eye Johnny. "Yeah?"

"Remember the wreckage which we found that bore a pronounced resemblance to structural segments from an ancient Roman galley?" Johnny queried.

"Has that got something to do with this?" Monk asked.

"It has, emphatically," said the big-worded geologist. "That wrecked galley was the clue that made me think of a legend from history which explains the presence of this weed that brings everlasting life -- supposedly."

Monk sniffed, "I still maintain that's hooley! There isn't no -- "

"Ever hear of Cirene?" Johnny interrupted.

"Cirene?"

"C-i-r-e-n-e." Johnny spelled it out.

Monk assumed a pained expression, his habitual look when thinking. "Was that a city that grew up about the time of old Egypt and Carthage?"

"Right," Johnny nodded vehemently. "Cirene stood on a plateau, and its source of wealth was a fabulous medicinal herb known as silphium. Even the coins of Cirene bore a design of the ruler watching his subjects weigh this remarkable plant.

"Legend gives this herb great powers, claiming it cured every ailment; wounds -- even disease. From all over the ancient world ships came for this herb, and it became extremely high-priced.

"The Romans came and put a tax on silphium, an enormous tax. The people of Cirene were enraged and, hating the Romans tremendously, they set about destroying the herb to rib themselves of the high taxes. In time, silphium became extinct.

"Men have searched for some sprigs of it, even a single plant, since that age. Only a year or two ago, there was a newspaper story about an Italian doctor who thought he had discovered silphium again in Cirenaica."

"I don't believe it," Monk grunted.

"It's in the history books, dammit!" rapped Johnny. "Now, it is foolish to think the people of ancient Cirene would destroy a plant so valuable. Perhaps they loaded some on a galley and sent it out for an island or another part of the coast, and the galley got lost and eventually wound up here on Fear Cay."

In his vehemence, Johnny had departed from his big words, and his recitation was the more emphatic.

The others were silent after he finished.

Two of Santini's 5 men came in. Without a word, they picked up big Da Clima and carried him out.

Renny shuddered, rumbled, "They've started their killing!"

"Poor Da Clima," Pat said sorrowfully.

A voice of quiet power came from the murk near by. "Do not worry too much about Da Clima," it said.

"Doc!" Renny breathed.

The bronze man appeared, admonishing silence, and began untying them.

"I was waiting for them to take Da Clima away," he advised.

Monk grunted, "You figured they'd take him! Why?"

"He is one of them."

Monk's jaw fell down on his barrel of a chest. "Da Clima is working with Santini?"

"He is."

"How long have you known that, Doc?" the homely chemist breathed wonderingly.

"Since Santini was tipped so mysteriously that the air mail package was coming to my office in New York," Doc said. "Only Da Clima had an opportunity to pass that information along."

KEL AVERY, still looking very much the motion picture actress in spite of all that she had been through, overheard Doc's information and seemed deeply shocked.

"When Da Clima came to me in Florida and offered his services as a bodyguard, Santini had sent him!" she gasped.

Doc nodded. He had Renny, Johnny and Monk free of their bonds. He went to work on Pat's ropes. Their situation was dangerous. At any instant, some of Santini's men might return.

"Doc, was I right about that silphium from Cirene theory?" Johnny questioned.

"You were," Doc replied. "I saw the weed, and it is unquestionably the highly medicinal species of silphium."

Johnny glanced triumphantly at the doubter, Monk. But Monk appeared not to have heard, being engaged in making fierce faces and rubbing his huge arms to unlimber muscles.

"Wait'll I get that egg Da Clima!" he gritted. "I knew he was a phony all along. He was responsible for us bein' caught. Pretended to get himself wedged in a hole and blocked our retreat."

All were on their feet now. Doc opened a knapsack and passed out the superfirers which had been taken from his men, and which he had found in the course of his prowling through the stone labyrinth. Receiving the guns reminded Monk of something else.

"Some of our ammo drums were duds," he growled. "I'll bet Da Clima was responsible for that."

They grouped closely and started an advance. They were, they knew from words they had previously overheard their captors drop, in a dead end of the caverns. To escape, it would be necessary to pass Santini and his men, either by violence, or by stealth.

"There's just one thing that ain't cleared up," Monk said softly. "What's turnin' men into skeletons on this island?"

"Quiet," Doc breathed. "That will have to wait."

"So you know what it is?"

"I saw the things -- after a fashion," Doc replied, and did not elaborate that his glimpse had been by use of the powder which glowed under ultra-violet light.

Misfortune walked with them, it developed, for Santini and three of his men appeared, laughing, swabbing at their lips, evidence that they had quaffed of the silphium brew.

Santini emitted a startled bawl. His hands, clawing for his inlaid gun, tore the bright ribbon loose from his chest. He shot as he leaped backward. His bullet, fired hastily, hit no one. Those with him sought cover, one lifting a submachine gun.

Storming lead from the rapidlirer drove Doc and the others to cover. They crouched behind stone bulwarks, and it could not but dawn on them that their position was as dangerous as at any time hitherto.

"Blazes!" Monk mumbled. "Got any of those anaesthetic bulbs, Doc?"

"I could not find them," the bronze man advised. "Santini did not put them with the rest of our weapons."

Santini began yelling again. "Fate presto! Make haste! Bring me the bundle containing those glass balls which we took from these porcos!"

"Hey, boss, you can hold your breath until the gas loses its punch," said a member of the gang.

"Da Clima, here, says to do so."

"We will throw them one at the time," snapped Santini. "Thus we will keep the cloud of gas fresh. They cannot hold their breath forever."

"That, she is the big idea of mine, yes," Da Clima's big 'voice chimed in. "Da Clima got the good head, no?"

Tense uneasiness gripped Doc's party as they heard the words, for they knew that their enemies had hit on a most effective way of capturing them.

"That damn Da Clima hatched that one," Monk grated. "If I could have one wish before I kick off, it'd be to get that bird in my hands."

"For once, I can agree with you," Ham growled. Renny boomed, "Doc, I'm in favor of rushing 'em. Let's go out with fireworks!"

"Wait," Doc advised.

"Blazes! Do you think there's another way out?"

"No. We won't even waste time hunting for one."

"Then -- "

"Just wait," Doc advised. "Let's see what happens."

DURING THE next few moments it seemed that the future held nothing but trouble. Santini and his men fired occasionally to prevent a charge. They were only waiting for the thin-walled glass balls which contained Doc's unusual anesthetic gas.

Then Santini, in a strained, uneasy voice, said, "Do you feel -- queer -- signors?"

A man cursed. Another groaned.

"That damned weed -- " some one began, and did not finish, but fell to coughing and gagging.

These sounds of agony decreased in strength, terminating in a thump which might have been a man falling.

Doc and his party waited. Pat stood near enough to Doc that the bronze man could hear her even breathing. Somewhere in the distant reaches of the cavern there was a piping, forlorn squeal.

"Habeas," said Monk. "I'm glad he's all right."

"Come," said Doc, and stepped out boldly.

Monk clutched anxiously for the bronze giant, thinking he was taking unnecessary chances in thrusting himself into the zone of fire. But nothing happened. Gingerly, half expectant of a bullet, Monk followed Doc's example. They were not fired upon, although they stood boldly outlined in the glare from the flashlights of Santini's gang.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled, and leaped forward.

They found Santini sprawled upon the stone floor, limp, but still breathing, and the other members of the gang were near by, all immobile on the sandy floor. Not one of the crew was conscious.

"I've seen lots of unexpected things happen," Monk muttered wonderingly, "but this one comes nearer to magic than the rest. How do you explain it?"

"The silphium tea that they drank," Doc told him.

"Huh? Is the stuff poison?"

"Not that I know of," Doc elaborated. "You see, Monk, I put some powerful narcotic from your chemical laboratory into the handiest containers of the siphium."

"You drugged 'em!" Monk exploded.

"Indirectly," Doc agreed. "Yes."

Kel Avery emitted a sudden piercing shriek. They whirled upon her, startled. She threw back her head and began to laugh, wildly, madly, while tears ran from her eyes. She trembled and beat her hands together.

"She's hysterical, now that it's all over," Monk mumbled, and went over to quiet the young actress as best he could.

"Let's get out of here," suggested Ham.

In single file, the most convenient way of traversing the tortuous passages of the underground network, they worked forward.

"We've still got to find the parts they took off our plane," Long Tom reminded.

"Sure," Renny agreed. "But even if we don't find them, we can repair the fuel tanks in Santini's plane and shift the gas from our ship. Reckon old Dan Thunden punctured Santini's tanks."

Monk stopped suddenly. "Dan Thunden! What became of him? I forgot all about the old goat."

The answer to Monk's query came from no member of the party, but from the stone of Fear Cay itself. The entire cay seemed to jump violently. There was a roar that left their heads aching. A torrent of air, sand and small stone gushed upon them, bowling Long Toni and Johnny off their feet.

"That came from one of the entrances!" Doc rapped.

They ran forward, but did not go far before a whoop of hateful laughter yanked them up. The sound came from a passage to the left, and it was Dan Thunden's old-young voice.

"I've got Santini's grenades," the strange character shrilled. "You just heard me close one entrance, and I'll get the othahs When I open the place up again, theah won't be nothin' of you but bones!"

Chapter 21. THE CRAWLING TERROR

IT WAS difficult to locate the enraged voice in the hollowly-resounding passages. Doc led the rush for the spot from which it seemed to emanate.

"He was tied up the last I saw of him," the bronze man offered quietly. "He must have gotten loose. He is tremendously strong."

"A living example of how effective this Fountain of Youth is," Ham agreed.

Dan Thunden evidently had a gun -- for it roared in the cavern.

Monk grunted loudly and fell down, but heaved up again, grimly silent.

"Are you hurt badly?" Doc demanded.

"My leg," said Monk. "I can still navigate."

Dan Thunden became terrified at their advance and fled. Knowing every cranny of the caverns as he did, he traveled so swiftly that they barely managed to keep within earshot of his footsteps.

"Where's he headin' for?" Renny pondered aloud.

"There's a heavy wooden door which shuts off a part of the cavern," Doc explained. "He seems to be making for that."

"What's behind the door?"

"The things which made that skeleton we found on the beach, and turned Hallet into one like it," Doc replied.

They found the bones of unfortunate Hallet shortly afterward. They were scattered, for some of Santini's gang had evidently given them a kick in passing.

Johnny was weak, and being helped along by Renny. Pat kept close to Doc's side, along with Kel Avery, whose hysteria had subsided magically at the return of danger.

"That old man is dangerous," Pat warned. "If we don't head him off, he'll entomb us in here and turn his pets, or whatever is behind that door, loose on us."

They soon caught sight of Dan Thunden. He had opened the massive door with the secret fastener, and was just passing through. His form towered fully eight feet off the floor.

"He's on stilts!" Long Tom barked. "What d'you think of that!"

"I think he's thinking fast," Doc said grimly. "And we haven't much time. Get that door shut. Let him go, if necessary."

But Thunden had other plans for the door. He spun, facing the glare of their flashlights, and thrust a hand into a coat pocket. Bringing out a small object of metal, he threw it'

A hand grenade! The thing arched toward them. But not far! Doc's hands, as usual, were empty of guns. The only thing he held was a flashlight. He threw that.

Flashlight and grenade met in the air, a little nearer them than Dan Thunden, and almost in the big door. There was a white flash, a roar, and the inevitable rush of air.

Johnny and Renny both upset, as did Pat and Kel Avery. Doc himself was staggered. The door split and the massive timbers made a great noise falling to the floor.

Dan Thunden on his tall stilts was overbalanced. He toppled, tried to balance himself against one stone wall, and in doing so, bore his entire weight on one stilt. The stilt snapped off.

The old man fell squarely on his white-thatched head.

A weird thing happened to the floor about him. Seemingly, it came to life and began to undulate and crowd toward where Thunden lay. In fractional seconds, the rusty-looking floor spread over the prone form, covering it, until Thunden's body resembled only a rugged hump of reddish-black sand. There was a great frying noise.

"Too late to help him!" Doc rapped. "Let's get out of here." They ran back the way they had been coming, fleeing from the horror on the cavern floor. Not until they had gone scores of yards did they discover that the concussion of the exploding grenades had in spots jarred great rock fragments from the ceiling.

Farther on, the way was entirely blocked.

"Blazes!" Monk muttered, resting his injured leg. "How are we gonna get to Santini's outfit?"

They were not to get to Santini, it developed, for they could not find an opening large enough to crawl through -- and behind them grew the sound that was like the gentle popping of hot grease into which an egg had been broken.

They gave up the effort to reach Santini, found an exit, and climbed out into the sunlight.

JOHNNY WAS the last to leave the cavern. He sat on the lip of the hole through which the others had scrambled, squinting his eyes in the hot evening sunlight, listening to the frying sound below.

"What was that thing we saw?" Kel Avery asked thickly.

"You mean the things that got your great -- "

"Yes, the things that covered my great-grandfather, Dali Thunden," said the actress.

"Carnivorous jormicoidea," Johnny told her.

Monk glared at him and snapped, "I ain't in a good humor! Use little words for once, will you!"

"Ants," said Johnny. "Flesh-eating ants. Isn't that right Doc?"

The bronze man nodded. "They used one part of the cavern for their colony. That is undoubtedly why Dan Thunden shut it off with that door."

Monk leaned back and sighed, "So it was that simple! And I had visioned a new menace that was threatening mankind."

The voracious ants, literally millions of them, were not a menace to be taken lightly, they discovered in the days following. It was necessary to be always on guard against the carnivorous insects, for they traveled in armies and their bites induced a poison, if suffered in sufficient number, that would render a victim helpless. Woe to the man whom the insects came upon when asleep. The ants were not, Doc explained repeatedly, of a species new to science.

Their stay at the island was to dig out the entombed Santini and his men. But they found only bones. There had been cracks large enough to admit the voracious ants.

The store of siphium was intact, and Doc, searching, located growing plants on the cay. These were carefully dug up, packed, and made ready for transportation to the United States.

Monk tried out some of the silphium tea on his wounded leg, and the results were remarkable. The puncture began to heal almost at once.

"Boy, we've got something," Monk insisted. "We've cornered the Fountain of Youth!"

Doc did not disillusion him at that moment. The bronze man suspected that old Dan Thunden's longevity was due to perfect health -- that, of course, the result of drinking silphium tea -- and the fact that Thunden, an exile on the island, had been kept away from the distractions and dissipations of civilization which might undermine health.

That the silphium was only a valuable medicinal herb proved correct, for it was an amazingly efficient antiseptic and tonic, a disease preventative. But they did not learn that until months later, after a number of scientists and doctors had made careful experiments.

Doc and his party got their plane ready to leave Fear Cay. They had found the missing motor parts.

"I just thought of one thing that ain't been cleared up yet," Monk said in sudden excitement as they were loading up.

"What?" Doc questioned.

"The package of silphium that Kel Avery sent by air mail from Florida," explained Monk.

"That is in New York," Doc told him.

"Huh?"

"Remember when I talked to the air mail officials?" Doc countered.

"Sure. But nobody heard you, except the mail people."

"I told them to open the package, take out the real contents, and substitute something which looked similar," Doc said. "They did."

Pat looked at the bronze man and asked, "Do you ever overlook anything?"

THE END