

HEX

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. A MATTER OF WITCHES

The lilac is a flower. Any good dictionary will furnish the information that the lilac is a well-known garden shrub with large clusters of pink-purple, fragrant blossoms. It is commonly found in gardens and along dusty New England country roads.

Unfortunately, there is another fact about the lilac which the dictionaries do not mention. Since this is a somewhat fantastic fact, the dictionaries doubtless do not print it because a great many people would not believe. The fact is:

Picking a lilac will arouse the anger of witches, it will start the witches making a lot of trouble.

. . . Believe this if you want to, or call it superstitious hokum.

Miles Billings didn't believe picking a lilac would arouse the witches. Furthermore, he didn't even believe in witches.

Yet it was very, very sad that Miles Billings happened to stop and pick a lilac while he was walking down a dusty New England road some distance south of Salem.

Miles Billings wasn't the type of man who cared about witches or their magic, being an engineer, a highway engineer, and one of the best. He was such a noted engineer that an organization that planned to spend several million dollars on a new super-highway project through that section of New England had paid young Miles Billings a handsome fee merely to come up here and make a survey. This morning he had completed part of that survey by journeying about the surrounding hills in his car, and now he had traveled out of town on foot, and was more minutely inspecting soil and terrain.

The "town" behind him was something to grin about. No one lived in it. There were houses and a factory. One section of the factory had fallen down ten years ago. The houses—not more than two score of them—were sagging on their foundations. Miles Billings had learned from a man driving through the deserted old street this morning that the town had once supported a mill and had been prosperous. But there was nothing prosperous-looking about the ghost village now.

"It's hexed."

That's what the stranger had said. He had been a six-foot New Englander of lanky ruggedness, the kind of man who looked as if he wasn't afraid of anything. He had climbed out of his dilapidated car when he saw Miles Billings, and asked, "Hunting for something, mister?"

"No, just looking around," Miles Billings had stated.

"For what?"

"Well, making a survey. Do you live here?"

The big-framed man had gawked. "Live here?" He had shuddered visibly, then nodded toward his car.

"I'm on my way to Salem to find me a job. Live here! Hell, it ain't healthy here!"

MILES BILLINGS had taken a deep breath of balmy air, listened to the cheerful chattering of birds along the old elm-tree-lined street, and commented, "Not healthy?"

"Nope!"

The big native looked half frightened.

Miles Billings himself was not big. He was of medium stature and looked slender, even when he was wearing knee boots and breeches, the traditional garb of an engineer. He had thick red hair and blue eyes that were keen and sharp. A rough flannel shirt was open at his throat and more red hair was visible on his chest. He had looked up at the six-foot native and said disdainfully, "You seem scared of something, brother."

"Yep," the man admitted surprisingly.

Miles Billings frowned. "Now look," he said. "You said you need a job. Right?"

"Yep."

"Well, in two weeks there'll be more jobs around here than you can shake a stick at. Steam-shovel operators, ditch diggers, truck drivers, helpers, lots o' laborers—" The engineer shrugged. "Take your pick of anything you can do, if you need a job."

The lanky man had looked awe-stricken. "All of them people are coming here?"

Billings nodded. "The highway," he said, pointing in a straight line directly down the old dusty street, "goes straight through. Right out by that hollow at the end of this street. We'll make it the most direct route possible, and—"

Then he stopped, seeing that the native was staring out of popping eyes. The man exclaimed, "You mean—through Witches' Hollow?"

Miles Billings grinned. "Sure. If that's what you call that place down past the mill."

The man scrambled into his car, leaned across the door and gulped, "Mister, you'd better ask old Cotton Mather Brown to tell you about that place. I'm getting out of here!"

"But—"

The native yelled, "Ask him about the witches that dance down there in the hollow!" And the dilapidated car took him away in a cloud of dust.

Miles Billings, walking down the country road now, thought of the incident and grinned. He hadn't bothered to look up any Cotton Mather Brown. He saw a nice lilac flower beside the road, and went over and picked it.

TEN minutes after Miles Billings picked that lilac flower, he met Cotton Mather Brown. That is, he met a tall, scraggly-looking farmer with the old produce truck.

The truck stood in the middle of the road down which the red-headed engineer was walking. Steam spouted from a radiator that was making threatening sounds of blowing up. The farmer, looking like a thin scarecrow in patched overalls and floppy straw hat, was standing in front of the car and cursing.

Miles Billings came around the side of the produce-laden truck, stood for a second watching, and then suggested, "Water might help it, mister."

The truck farmer swung around quickly and glared out of pale-grey eyes for a moment. "Never seen you before, brother." His eyes squinted, and then he announced, "Say, I reckon you be that engineer I heard about! Well, I'm Cotton Mather Brown, and there be something I ought to warn you about."

Miles Billings smiled. "You wouldn't be referring to the witches, would you?"

The scrawny-looking truck farmer seemed to get something stuck in his long throat. He gurgled, got red-faced, then choked out, "I . . . uh . . . then you've heard?"

The engineer nodded. "Yes," he said cheerfully. "And I'm afraid we're going to have to disturb their poor ghosts. Going to run a super-highway straight through here."

The truck farmer gulped.

"Now listen," he said. "Listen to me, friend!"

"Yes?"

"The name Cotton Mather mean anything to you?" the farmer asked.

Miles Billings nodded. "Certainly. He was a clergyman during the old Salem witchcraft days. Then he became interested in witch lore and did much to banish the witches of this section. He was quite an authority on the subject, and wrote books."

"Well," said Cotton Mather Brown, "I'm descended from him. I know all about the witches. And I'm telling you—" He stopped and swore, because the truck radiator was making louder rumbling noises, and more steam was whistling out of the radiator top.

Billings said, "It might be a good idea to worry about some water first. I saw a spring back there a pace in an old churchyard."

Cotton Mather Brown looked horrified. "That's the Witches' Church!" he exclaimed. "No one dares get water in there!"

"Why not?"

"Why not?" The farmer looked at Miles Billings as though he had encountered a lunatic. "Because the Witches' Church is hexed, that's why not! The last person who went in there never came out, and they say as how his skeleton still hangs in the belfry!"

The engineer's alert eyes twinkled. "Look," he suggested, "have you got a pail?"

Cotton Mather Brown jumped. He said, "Listen, I reckon you think this is a joke?"

"Well—"

"You ask Hyacinth if it's a joke!"

"Hyacinth?" Billings asked, puzzled.

"That's him coming along there with water I sent him for a half hour ago, the lazy good-for-nothing."

Miles Billings turned and studied the object stumbling up the dusty road.

Hyacinth, it appeared, was about five foot two and no huskier than a shadow. Clothes—shabby, patched clothes—flopped about his thin frame like something flung over a wire coat hanger. He wore an old dark coat, the cuffs of which hung down over his hands. Somewhere he had salvaged a battered black derby and it almost hid his small, dark eyes. He looked about as menacing as a bantam rooster.

But when Hyacinth set down the pail of water and spoke, he sounded as hard-boiled as a Tenth Avenue kid.

He cocked his small head to one side, stared coolly at Miles Billings, and rapped, "Say, Cotton, who the hell's the redhead?"

"An engineer," said Cotton briefly. "On the new highway. We'll give him a lift to the edge of town."

"Why?" asked Hyacinth.

Cotton Mather Brown sighed. "Hyacinth, where's your danged manners? We ought to talk to the gentleman about what he is going to be up against here."

For a moment Hyacinth lost some of his bantam-rooster cockiness. "You mean you're gonna tell him about the witches?"

"He don't seem to want to hear."

Hyacinth shook his head sadly. "That's too bad. He sure as hell oughta know about them blasted things."

THAT night Miles Billings had his first experience concerning the witches. That came after he had left Cotton and his helper, hard-boiled little Hyacinth. Concerning Hyacinth, Cotton had explained, "Hyacinth, here, came to the farm one day looking for work. He was one of them what-do-you-call-its."

"Bindle stiff," Hyacinth put in blandly.

"Yep. One of them. He was on the bum. So I give him a job and now he helps me with the truck farm."

The idea of anyone selling produce around this deserted section had puzzled Miles Billings. He asked, "Where do you find customers?"

Cotton had waved an arm toward a ridge beyond the nearby ghost town. "High-class new development over there," he explained. "Outskirts of Salem. Danged good business. And there's also a few customers around here."

They had reached the southern boundary of the old mill town. Ahead, grass grew in the tree-shaded street. Cotton brought the old truck to a shuddering stop, and around them settled the vast silence of the ghost town in the soft hush of a mid-afternoon in summer.

Cotton had been munching an apple taken from his worn overalls, and he had passed another apple to Miles Billings. Hyacinth lay sprawled, suddenly asleep, on potato sacks in the rear.

Cotton stopped chewing and said, "Waal, here's where I turn off, mister. You don't get me to drive through that town! You fellows better forget about that highway. It's only going to make you trouble, I figger."

Miles Billings climbed down from the seat, smiled and waved his hand. "Thanks, Cotton," he said. "But I'm afraid I can't agree with you."

He went walking down the single street, chewing on the apple, glad that it was summer. Behind him, the produce truck started up and rumbled off toward the ridge beyond the town.

Witch town, was this? Miles Billings laughed. He sort of liked the solitude of the place. It was restful. He strolled past the row of old houses, noticing their boarded-up windows. On the right side of the street was the block-long building of the mill; red bricks covered with age-old vines, windows broken and looking like ghostly, empty eye sockets in a skeleton face.

At the other end of town, near the section that the stranger looking for work had called Witches' Hollow, he came to his hastily constructed camp—a tent and a portable shed where the engineer had stored some of his valuable instruments.

Inside the tent was a drawing board, and though it was warm, Miles Billings shed his shirt and went to work on sketches of the proposed highway route—a streamlined, super-highway that he visualized as cutting straight through the old ghost town. It should be a fairly simple construction job, with the exception of some swampy land north—that place called Witches' Hollow.

Miles Billings was to appear tonight before board members of the adjacent town just north of here to present his outline of the highway. At dusk he had his plans ready and was about to climb into his car.

He was aware of a slight headache, and figured it was induced by putting off supper or working too long in the heat. He would get a bite in the town where he was to meet the local officials that still controlled this ghost town.

He started toward his car parked at the side of the road—and heard the stealthy sound in the tool shed behind his tent.

MILES BILLINGS saw the figure scampering away toward the woods. He started running. For a medium-sized man, he could run. Outdoor life had kept him healthy. He was active. He took out at a gallop and soon realized that the person ahead was running as though the very devil himself were after him.

He yelled, "Hey! What have you got there?" He increased his speed.

The figure ahead stumbled over a vine, started to get up, tripped again and went sprawling. The engineer dived, got hold of a fistful of collar and pulled the culprit erect.

The thief—he was gripping a steel stake taken from the engineer's belongings—was a young lad of about twelve; freckle-faced, bright-eyed, scared.

Billings said, "What's the idea?"

"Please, mister," the kid stammered. "I . . . I had to have it! I had to have the stake!"

"What for?" Billings gripped the boy as gently as possible, but careful that he didn't escape until he had heard his story.

"For pop," the boy cried.

"Pop?"

"Yes, sir. Pop caught the hound-dog running in our place and eating the chickens. And he shot him, he did. Only that dog kept right on running, mister. He-he—" The lad's eyes showed stark fear. "He's dead and still running!"

Miles Billings' headache was hammering enough now to make him slightly impatient.

"Look," he said somewhat angrily, "your father must have missed the dog. He simply could not have shot him if the hound was able to run away. He—"

"Mister," the boy half sobbed, "not that dog. He was one of Hannah's dogs, and he was bewitched. Now pop's caught him in a trap and we're goin' to drive a stake through his heart!"

Miles Billings stared. "You're going to—"

The kid got loose, twisted suddenly, and went hightailing into the nearby woods and disappeared. The engineer followed, aware that his head was now pounding furiously.

And sometime later he returned to his car, panting, weary, just a little dizzy. He cursed witches' hollows, witches' brews and every other kind of hex. He arrived at the board meeting in the next town a half hour later and still without his evening meal.

THE five sedate-looking members all looked alert when quick-moving Miles Billings came into the board room. Each had heard something of the engineer's reputation. One whispered to another, "This fellow's clever. He'll push a highway through that town so fast it'll take your breath away."

"Yes," another added. "I've read three articles about that express highway he supervised down on Long Island. They say he's a whiz."

There were brief introductions. Miles Billings then got down to business. He was a man of action. On a large table he spread out sketches of the route he had visualized that afternoon. He said, "Gentlemen, the new super-highway will be the greatest improvement this section has seen in years. It can be put through that old mill town easily—and quickly."

Heads nodded. "We figured that," said one.

The engineer rubbed a hand across his eyes, seemed to hesitate for a moment, then went on in a rush of words—words that seemed a little shriller than a moment before.

"Yes," he said swiftly, "we'll bring it into that town on a long, easy curve, then shunt it off around that Witches' Church and up over the hill a bit. And then from there—"

Someone gasped. "But that isn't at all necessary, sir. A straight route would be—"

"From there into a pretzel circle behind the old mill," Billings went on oddly. "In fact, I think it will be nice to swing it off again up over the ridge, over to that new subdivision a mile away. That would be quite pretty. Next, down to Witches' Hollow. There we can build a lake and have boats."

"Mr. Billings!" a board member said testily. "Are you aware that what you're saying is pure nonsense? We desire a direct route, Mr. Billings."

"—and pineapples!" said the engineer, unable to be stopped. "Pineapples just off Main Street, oranges at No. 22, that swamp is a bog and you'll have to go right through it. Better consult Colonel John Renwick, greatest engineer living—"

Miles Billings was swaying slightly, his eyes a curious stare, his bright-red hair ruffled where his hand pushed through it in a weary gesture.

"Renwick," he repeated. "Ask Doc Savage about Renwick. He'll know about bog, the steel stakes, the pineapples and tropical orchids." The engineer staggered. "Ask him—"

A board member grabbed an associate's arm as Miles Billings continued with a senseless stream of words. He exclaimed, "Good heavens! The man's completely cracked!"

"Wacky!" put in another.

And a third, more quietly, "I'd say that the poor fellow is bewitched."

Chapter II. THE PIXIES

THE hospital was small. Few people in this village two miles north of the deserted mill town ever used the hospital. As one native said, "We're just plain danged healthy hereabouts."

But there was nothing very healthy-looking about the man occupying the bed in the hospital room tonight. It was several hours after Miles Billings' unusual speech before the five board members. And the man in the bed was the red-headed engineer himself.

A doctor stood close by the bed. Beside him stood a second man, a member of the town board. He was saying, "Strangest thing I ever saw. He isn't drunk. Can't be crazy either. Has a reputation as one of the smartest engineers living. But he sure talks like a loon now."

The doctor, a short, rotund man with a little beard on his chin, rubbed his jaw. The case was something he had never run up against. He was trying to act professionally and still figure out what was wrong with his patient.

The man in the bed had no fever. His pulse and breathing were apparently normal. But he had been talking steadily ever since his arrival, and the crackpot things he muttered were absolutely

senseless.

The doctor said, "What's this he's been jabbering about a man named Colonel John Renwick? And of a man named Doc Savage?"

The fat little doctor scrubbed his beard. "There's something familiar about the name."

"Also known as Clark Savage, Jr., a scientific man of mystery, a marvel of physical development, a—"

"Oh-him!" the doctor cried. "I've read the papers on surgery by Clark Savage, Jr., that prove he is one of the greatest men of science living today. Why, he—"

"Exactly," said the other man. "Well, this Colonel John Renwick is one of his assistants, and a renowned civil engineer. We've phoned Doc Savage's headquarters in New York and asked for Renwick. We explained about the highway, and what had happened to Miles Billings."

"But how does that help?" the doctor wanted to know.

"You don't understand," the board member went on. "Miles Billings was hired because of the swamp north of the old mill town. That swamp is really a bog, and it has stuck every road engineer in the past. We figured Billings would know how to whip it."

He stopped, indicating the jabbering figure in the white bed. "Now look at him! So there was only one way out. We had to get this Renwick. He'll solve our problem."

"You got him?"

"Yes. That is, from Doc Savage's headquarters, Renwick was located in Boston. He's on his way up here now. He's a man of action, an engineering wizard."

The doctor nodded, turned toward the bed a moment and listened silently to the ravings of Miles Billings, the engineer. He shook his head.

"Poor fellow, I've given him a hypo. Maybe he'll snap out of it in the morning."

A moment later they went quietly out of the room. A nurse in the outer hallway was ordered to look in on the patient occasionally, though the doctor thought that Miles Billings would soon be sleeping soundly.

As they parted at the outer door, the board member said with confidence, "You can bet this man Renwick will figure things out in a hurry."

RIGHT at that moment, however, Colonel John Renwick, better known as Renny in the Doc Savage organization of world-wide adventurers, was apparently having a job of trying to solve a simple problem.

The car parked in the middle of the dark road was long and big and powerful. Yet it did not dwarf the giant figure of the man standing on widespread feet before the bright headlights. Hands that were as large as small pails were parked on the towering figure's hips. A face that was as gloomy-looking as an undertaker's was frowning.

"Holy cow!" the big man said as he stared off into the surrounding gloom. It was Renny's favorite expression.

He cupped the hamlike hands to his mouth and then yelled "Heh!"

The word, like a lion's roar, went rumbling off into the night. Silence again settled over the deserted old ghost town.

Renny Renwick moved away from the big car's headlights and squinted into the darkness. He made out the gloomy outline of the old mill, across the dusty street, the row of sagging old houses. To himself the towering giant of a man muttered, "Could have sworn I saw someone just before I stopped!"

Behind Renny, in the darkness, a door on the porch of one of the houses squeaked.

Instantly he had stepped with two long strides to retrieve the flashlight lying on the car seat.

He flicked the switch and swung the beam toward the nearest stoop.

And saw the door closing.

There wasn't a light in the house; windows were boarded and the steps leading up to the stoop were sagging with age.

Renny went bounding toward that house, cleared the steps in a single bound and drew up short at the door. He gave a shove. The door didn't budge. One of Renny's ordinary shoves should have moved a small-sized tree.

The gosh-but-I'm-feeling-awful look on Renny's face grew more gloomy and he sent one huge fist smashing into the door. The big engineer was never more happy than when smashing his bony monstrosities of fists through thick-paneled doors.

"Holy cow!" he cried, and rubbed his knuckles.

His fist had bounced off the door as though it had been a steel wall.

Renny's dark eyes narrowed. He knew now that he had seen a shadowy figure move across the roadway. He had distinctly heard the door of this house open. He had seen it close.

He stood massaging his knuckles and getting madder every second. "Say!" he called out. "Who's trying to kid who?"

A long Whooo! came slapping back at him from the old mill walls across the roadway.

Renny tried a board at one of the windows. It moved. With one powerful grip of his fingers, he ripped board and half of the sash loose. He was ready to smash a fist through the remaining boards when he stopped suddenly, noting something in the flashlight glow.

Behind the broken boards was a steel wall. Renny muttered, "Well, I'll be danged!" All the rest of the windows and doors in the decaying old house had the same steel protection. Puzzled, Renny went back to the car. News of Renny's presence being urgently needed up here had been relayed from Doc Savage's headquarters in New York City. Directions had been brief. He had forgotten the name of the village near the ghost town. He wasn't sure whether it was north or east of here. That's why he had stopped when he had imagined he saw someone in the street. Climbing back into the seat, he grumbled an oath. He hadn't been wrong. He had seen someone. He started up and used the flashlight beam out the side of the car, pointing it along the side of the road. At the edge of town he saw the faded wooden sign hanging at a cocked angle from a post. The town he sought! The sign read:

SALEM CORNERS—2 MILES

He arrived there three minutes later, inquired about the small hospital, was directed there by a native chewing on a piece of straw before the village general store.

The nurse, not hard to look at and slender in her white uniform, opened the door of the small building. She took one look at the giant of a figure standing there and cried, "Oh!" She started to close the door quickly.

Renny said swiftly, "Holy cow, ma'am, what's wrong? I'm Mr. Renwick. I'm expected here."

"Oh!" the pretty nurse said again and opened the door wide, stepping back. "You," she said self-consciously, "sort of frightened me." She was looking at Renny's gloomy face.

She added, "The patient is not dead—yet! He's sleeping soundly, so you can ease your mind."

Renny stepped inside, commented, "I know he isn't dead."

"But—"

The nurse was about to comment on the giant-sized man's funereal expression, but thought better of it. She could hardly know that Renny never smiled. He was probably most cheerful when looking like a gravedigger on a tour of a crematory.

"This way," she said.

She indicated one of four doors. There were only four rooms for patients in the whole place. The nurse opened the door, stood to one side and said quietly, "Don't disturb him. We want to keep him quiet."

Renny nodded and stepped inside. His head wasn't many inches from the ceiling. A dim night light illuminated the bed.

Renny stared. He turned to the nurse and asked, "Disturb who?"

Puzzled, the nurse came all the way into the room. She gawked at the empty bed, at curtains fluttering in the warm breeze at the open window.

She stifled a scream, cried, "Good heavens! He—he's gone!"

THE native known as Cotton Mather Brown insisted that the pixies had got the engineer, Miles Billings. Renny located Cotton at the latter's farm south of the ghost town the following morning. He was informed about Cotton when the natives of Salem Corners had finally given up the all-night search for Miles Billings.

There had been no single trace of the engineer. Renny had joined in the search. There had been frequent mention of witchcraft, of the fact that Miles Billings wore no charm to ward off the evil spirits.

Renny, disgusted at the simple beliefs, his face long and sad-looking, had rapped out, "Nonsense! Witches went out in 1692!"

So he went to see Cotton.

Cotton, looking as though he hadn't removed the patched overalls or the battered straw hat of the previous day, was eating breakfast. Stringy gray hair stuck out from beneath the flopping straw hat. He didn't bother to get up at Renny's entrance.

"Set and eat, stranger," he said.

Hyacinth, the shabby little tough helper of Cotton's, was standing at an old coal stove flipping griddle cakes. He was still wearing the old derby.

Renny briefly explained his mission, told what had happened to Miles Billings.

Cotton went on stuffing his big mouth a moment. Then he said around a mouthful of pancakes, "I warned him, danged if I didn't!"

"Warned him?" Renny prodded gloomily.

"Yep! That blasted highway of his was goin' right through the churchyard, along Main Street and out through Witches' Hollow. You danged well can't disturb the witches' ghosts like that."

Renny frowned. He looked quizzically at Hyacinth when the scarecrow-looking fellow placed some griddle cakes in front of him. But he was hungry, and he ate.

He tried again with Cotton. "And nobody lives in the town?"

"Nope!"

"What about that first house you come to as you drive north?" Renny went on. "Someone was in there last night."

Cotton looked up, wiped at his bristly-bearded face with the side of his arm. "You reckon you heard somebody there, brother?"

"That's right," admitted Renny.

"Then that was Hannah!"

"Hannah?"

"Yep."

"Who's Hannah?" Renny prodded further.

"She died about a hundred years ago, I figger. Been hanging around here ever since."

RENNY took a last bite and stood up, his towering form making Hyacinth look like a midget in a derby. To himself, he thought, "Crackpot!"

Out loud, he said, "Well, thanks," and went out.

He spent the remainder of the day making a survey of the proposed highway route. Telegrams had arrived for him early that morning at Salem Corners—urgent messages from the man financing the super-highway, begging that Renny help out.

Within a few hours Renny had a direct route mapped out. He had located Miles Billings' camp and some plans there. With a few changes, Renny's plans coincided with the other engineer's. The swamps down at Witches' Hollow would be the only problem.

To Renny, it appeared that the swamp was over a really treacherous bog. But the giant of an engineer had recently perfected a new type piling that could be used in such bottomless quicksand. He thought that he could put the road through the hollow. Doing so would save a detour of several miles over the ridge outside of town to the east.

At seven that night Renny appeared before the board members. This time, every member was enthusiastic. They had obtained the greatest engineering expert living to help them out. They were anxious for his report.

As Renny entered the board room he was conscious of an odd feeling that had been with him all afternoon. Physically, he felt perfect. He heard the hushed discussion of the members, and somehow their words were a jumble to him. He tried to shrug off the thought and launched into his survey plans.

"Gentlemen," he started, "the super-highway will be one of the—" Renny paused, suddenly leaped into a hopeless jargon of words. "Find Hannah. Hannah's all right, gentlemen. She has the oranges and lemons for me. Growing them for . . . Wait for Monk. . . . Billings . . . Nurse ought to be careful. I—"

Suddenly, rubbing his massive hand across his furrowed brow, Renny staggered across the room, drew up to his immense height and seemed to be desperately trying to fight off the terrible thing that had struck him.

He staggered downstairs to the street, where his long closed car was parked. He pulled at the door handle, still jabbering inanelly, still staring dazedly. He flopped down inside the car and yanked awkwardly at control switches on a built-in radio inside the car.

The radio was a special short-wave set that all the aides of Doc Savage used. It was tuned to the skyscraper headquarters of the Man of Bronze, in New York City.

The set warmed, there was a steady hum, and a squeaky voice queried. "Hello. Hello? Is that you, Renny?"

For moments Renny sat stiffly, apparently unhearing. Then the query seemed to penetrate his thoughts. He said, "Monk, highway got . . . fruit shrubs off color . . . Hannah and nurse and Billings . . . look out for—"

Renny's words ended in a hopeless mumble.

The radio loud-speaker hummed for a moment. Then came excited words, words in a childlike, high-pitched voice.

"Listen, shyster—don't try to tell me! That was Renny! And goshamighty, he's gone nuts!"

Chapter III. GIRL MISSING

On the eighty-sixth floor of a New York City skyscraper, within a great paneled room, the walls of which were lined with high bookcases, two figures stood tensely before a modern short-wave radio set that was on a table.

There was a remarkable contrast between the two men.

One was tall, immaculately dressed in hand-tailored clothes of the latest design. Slender, waspish-waisted, he had the debonair appearance of a well-known movie actor.

The other man, save for clothes, might have been something out of a cage at the zoo. Half as broad as he was tall, massive in the chest and arms, he had a gorilla-like stance and small bright eyes that made him apelike in appearance. The peculiar thing was that when he spoke, his voice was a child's piping squeak.

"Listen, you courtroom trickster," the apelike man was saying shrilly, "don't try to tell me that wasn't Renny! An' there was something wrong with him!"

The taller, well-dressed man looked at his associate witheringly. "Did you ever hear Renny talk crazy like that?" he asked.

"Dang it, no! That's just the trouble. Something musta happened to his mind."

"Something happened to yours," said the dapper-looking man meaningly.

"What do you mean, shyster?"

"They forgot to include it in that hairy thing you call a body when you were born." The smartly

dressed man indicated the radio set. "Now look, you can't tell me that was Renny. It was a gag, a trick. Someone is trying to drag us into trouble that does not concern us in the least."

The other man spread his hairy fists. He sighed. He said shrilly, "You're so dumb it's a mistake to call you Ham."

"Why not?"

"Because a ham can be cured."

The squabbling threatened to become a battle.

For these two liked nothing better than an argument or a fight. Also, they were two of Doc Savage's most trusted associates. And they were as different as day and night.

The tall, dapper man called Ham was none other than Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, probably one of the world's greatest lawyers. Harvard was proud that he was one of their graduates. Tailors of Park Avenue followed Ham for blocks in order to learn the latest in sartorial splendor. Amazingly quick-witted, seldom without his black cane, he was frequently the cynosure of female eyes. And for that, also, he was the envy of his hairy-fisted partner.

"Monk"—Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair—looked like an ape and talked, oftentimes, like a bum. Yet he was a renowned chemist, a man who had thousands of friends. Though he liked nothing better than a scrap—as attested to by his homely, scarred face—he had an infectious grin that frequently threatened to jam his little ears together on the back of his head.

Monk finally threw up his massive arms in disgust and piped, "All right, you can stay here, then. But I'm gonna find out about Renny. I'm gonna—"

"Well, go ahead."

"Lookit, shyster, don't try to tell me that—"

SOMEWHERE a signal sounded. It was one of the devices of Doc Savage that indicated one of the high-speed elevators had stopped at this floor. A moment later a small light in a wall panel told them someone was outside the heavy, specially constructed door to the apartment.

Both men walked into the reception room, a room furnished with a huge safe, an exquisitely inlaid table, and a deep rug and comfortable chairs.

Dapper-looking Ham frowned and said, "Well, you hairy oaf, see who it is."

There had been no knock, yet both men knew that someone waited outside the entrance door to the reception room.

Monk snorted and went to the door. As he reached for the knob, he looked over his shoulder at Ham and said shrilly, "All right, but then I'm leavin' to see about Renny."

Ham snorted, "Will you please open that door?"

The well-dressed lawyer stopped, his eyes brightened, and he straightened his necktie.

Monk turned toward the hallway, gawked out of his little eyes, and was suddenly trying to smooth down his hair. He said, "I . . . ah . . . that is—"

The lovely creature standing there had been puzzledly looking for a bell button. There was none. She was dark, slender, and had the kind of eyes that make men start looking up the prices of ermine coats.

She said, "Which one of you might be Doc Savage?"

Ham, always suave, was the first to step forward and say, "Won't you be seated, Miss—ah—"

The girl with the lovely dark eyes came in, but she did not fall for the smooth lawyer's trick of learning her name. She remained standing.

And she had given Monk's barrel-shaped figure a startled look, turned to peer at Ham.

"You

must be Doc Savage," she said with emphasis.

"I—"

Monk put in swiftly, laughing, "Lady, that guy's married and has thirteen half-witted children. Doc Savage isn't here."

Monk's remark was a pet one when the hairy chemist desired to belittle his partner before a girl. Ham drew himself up stiffly, gave Monk a withering look. "We are two of Doc Savage's assistants," he said with a smile. "If there is something you want—"

"I'm in trouble," the girl said suddenly.

"Trouble?" Ham pushed forward a chair, and the girl sat down. She had trim ankles and wore smart clothes, Monk observed.

"Yes," she went on. "I simply must see Doc Savage."

Monk grinned. "Lady," he said, "trouble is what we like. Right now Doc Savage is at the Medical Center performing a very delicate brain operation. But I can help you. Now you just,"—Monk's squeaky voice became confiding, "you just tell me all about it."

He moved close to the dark-eyed girl's chair; and Ham, glaring, cut in front of him and said, "I can handle this, helpless. I thought you were leaving to see about Renny."

Monk glanced past Ham at the girl, grinned broadly, said, "I've changed my mind."

Ham smirked.

"Does the new one work any better?" he asked.

There threatened to be another argument, until the trimly slender girl jumped to her feet, a hand hovering near her throat, exclaiming, "Gracious me, I can't wait then! I had hoped to see Mr.

Savage."

She started for the door. There was something in her eyes, an expression of fright. She was trembling.

Ham said quickly, "But wait! If you're in trouble, Doc Savage will help you. We'll convey your message to him."

For a moment the girl looked as though she were about to speak. Then she started for the door again, saying tremulously, "No! I can't! I wouldn't dare!"

Ham looked worried. "But just give us some idea, Miss-er--"

Still the girl would not reveal her name. But on the threshold she paused, looked sharply at the two aides of Doc Savage a moment. Then she blurted, "It's about the witches!"

"Witches?"

Monk scratched his head, and the girl looked at him.

"Do you believe in spooks?" she queried.

"No," Monk said with a grin. Then his homely face sobered. "But they scare hell outta me!"

The dark-eyed girl nodded. "Exactly. But this is worse. The witches got Miles Billings--"

She stood a moment, lovely curved lips half parted. Again fear leaped into her deep eyes, as she finished, "Mercy, I've said too much. I . . . I've got to go now!"

She went running toward the bank of elevators.

Monk started to say hopelessly, "Dang it all, and she sure was a number--"

Then he jumped, dived toward the hall. "Hey!" he squealed. He went galloping after the girl who had looked so frightened.

There was the sound of an exclamation, a sharp slapping noise, and then the swish of an elevator gate closing.

Monk came back into the reception room with his hairy hand over his face. He said dismally, "She sure was a striking-looking girl."

He took away his hand, and Ham took one look at the puffed eye and howled.

"Yeah," he exclaimed, "more striking than looking!"

Monk seemed not to hear. He was standing staring into space, his homely face wrinkled in thought. Suddenly he grabbed the lawyer's arm, piped shrilly, "Blazes! I knew it!"

"What's wrong with you now?" Ham prodded.

"What she said!" Monk squealed. "Witches! Billings! That's that guy Renny went to see! She must know about Renny!"

But the quick-thinking lawyer had already swung into action. He lifted a receiver from a wall phone that connected with one the doorman used in the lobby of this skyscraper. He got the man, described the girl who had just left this floor. He said briefly, "Watch where she goes!"

And then, to Monk, "Come on! For once, I think you've got something."

Ham had his sword cane; he scooped up his hat from a table.

Trailing, Monk commented, "Wait'll I get her!"

ACCOMPANYING the two men were two strange-looking pets. One was a pig, long-legged, scrawny, with a snout made for exploring into rat holes. The animal had ears like a hound dog's, and seemed to be a strange creature to be trailing at Monk's heels. Yet there was a deep affection between the hairy chemist and the pig, named Habeas Corpus. This was perhaps caused by the pig's constant bedeviling of the dapper lawyer.

The other pet was a stunted ape named Chemistry. This was Ham's almost constant companion, and because of the chimp's waddling gait, his dangling long arms were not unlike Monk's own--on a smaller scale, of course--it gave the lawyer immense pleasure in constantly reminding hairy Monk that both he and Chemistry were in all probability descended from the same ancestors.

The pets followed their masters into the elevator.

The doorman at the lobby entrance had discouraging news.

When Monk described the slender, trimly formed girl of the lovely eyes, the doorman said, "Brother, three like her have gone out of this building in the last five minutes. All nifty lookers!"

"But this one," Ham put in, "had the face of an angel."

"And dressed like a million dollars," offered Monk in his piping voice.

"And a shape," added Ham.

"Oh, that one!" exclaimed the doorman.

"That's right. Where did she go?"

"Took a cab," the man said.

Monk and Ham groaned, then both were dashing out to the sidewalk at the same time. The two pets followed. The hack stand was a popular one, and there was a starter in charge. To him, Ham said, "Girl--lovely girl. Left here a moment ago. Did you overhear--"

"Oh, her!" said the young man, who it could be seen had an eye for beauty. "Yes, I overheard the order to the driver. Something about the Holland Tunnel and Newark airport. But--"

Ham grabbed Monk's arm and pulled him into a waiting cab. He gave a warehouse address on the Hudson River.

TEN minutes later they were climbing into one of the small planes that Doc Savage always held

ready within a building that looked old and deserted. In reality, the inside of the place, the flying equipment stored there, would have caused an observer to gasp with admiration. Shortly Monk and his partner were in the cockpit of a fast little plane that was equipped with both pontoons and retractable landing gear, and that carried the latest scientific flying instruments. Monk, at the controls, skimmed the choppy waters of the Hudson and lifted the plane smoothly in the air. In the distance could be seen a curved string of lights that was the George Washington Bridge.

Monk said, "She must be gonna take a plane from Newark."

"Or perhaps owns one," suggested Ham. "She looked to me like the type."

Monk swung the small plane toward the New Jersey shore. Soon the field lights of Newark airport were picked up. The urgent, incoherent call from Renny had been received about nine o'clock. It was now going on ten, and there was the threat of rain in the night air.

Ham was peering from one of the cockpit windows as Monk started to drop down toward the field. No other planes were coming in at the moment but, as is the custom, the lawyer contacted the airport dispatcher in order to receive instructions.

He identified himself—Ham was known here at the air field—told that he was seeking a dark-haired girl who should be just arriving at the field.

Words came back:

"Young woman taking off at this moment. Stand by until field is clear. Then come in at 2,000 feet and circle once."

Ham's fingers were gripping the microphones tensely. "You say young woman is taking off now? In what plane?"

"Her own,"

came back the startling reply. "Hell, mister, that girl owns half a dozen planes!"

"Who is she?" Ham said into the mike.

"Who? Look, brother, that girl is June Knight, the daughter of Mortimer Knight in Boston. In case you don't know—"

But Ham did, and he took off the earphones and looked startled. He whistled. To Monk, he said, "Ever hear of Mortimer Knight, stupid?"

The hairy chemist nodded sagely. "Heck, yes! He's that Boston millionaire. Big shot. I'll betcha he's got more dough than—"

"Well," said Ham tensely, "that dame you're so hot about chasing happens to be his daughter."

It was Monk's turn to whistle. Abruptly he grinned. "An' I was goin' to pop her on the nose!" he commented.

Just then the powerful-looking chemist jumped up straight in the pilot's seat, gripped the plane steering wheel furiously and threw the ship into a side slip.

The two pets, looking scared, skidded across the flooring.

Something like a rocket, a black rocket with red trimmings, zoomed past their nose and roared off into the overcast night.

"Goshamighty!" squealed the chemist. "Wh-wh-what was that?"

"The girl!" announced Ham. "Boy, can she fly! Either that, or the devil himself is after her."

Monk had straightened out the ship, pointed its nose after an object that was fast becoming a vague spot in the night sky.

He said queerly, "Or maybe the witches."

"What do you mean?"

"Dangitall!" rapped the chemist. "We gotta help her. Didn't she act scared when she told us about 'em?"

He opened the throttle wide and they settled down to at least keeping the other plane located in their sound-detector device. Monk took a compass bearing.

"Only one place she's goin'," he said.

"Where?"

"Boston!"

AN hour later—it had started to rain in great sheets and Monk was flying entirely by instruments now—Ham figured they were about over the East Boston airport. He picked up the microphone.

Beneath them there seemed to be endless ocean, with no field lights visible anywhere. The lawyer contacted the dispatcher at the Boston airport, and was told:

"All planes grounded here. Fog like pea soup. Ceiling zero, You'll have to turn back to Hanford. Don't come in!"

The smartly dressed lawyer groaned. He started to relay the information to Monk, then watched as he saw the chunky chemist fooling with the sound-detector.

Monk piped disgustedly, "Blazes! She's veered off and headed north. I wonder where she's goin' now?"

They soon found out.

While Monk kept the girl's fast-moving plane located in the sound-detector device, Ham checked air speed against a map which he now held in his lap. He called out the names of towns on the coast line.

"We're over Revere," he said. And then, "Nahant Point. We'll pass Lynn in a few moments." A little later the lawyer frowned and announced, "Say, she's headed right for Salem!" Monk's little eyes looked worried.

"That's where them danged witches used to hang out, ain't it?" he piped shrilly.

Ham nodded.

Suddenly the chemist sat forward and said warningly, "Listen!"

But there was no sound from the detector device.

Monk said, "She's cut her engine. She's goin' to land!"

They started losing altitude and came down fast. At a thousand feet they broke through clouds and fog. Gently rolling terrain was dimly visible below. Rain had settled into a thin drizzle now.

Monk flicked on the wing lights and Ham pushed a lever that lowered the retractable landing gear. "Where is she?" he wanted to know.

Monk's sharp little eyes, as he craned his short, thick neck, were on a spot below them. "Field down there," he piped. "She was right over it when she cut her motors. I'm goin' to set her down there too."

The powerful plane motor idled, coughed, picked up speed again as Monk jockeyed into the wind and came down at a sharp angle.

Ham yelled worriedly, "Hey, you fool! Want to crack us up?"

Monk merely grinned as he set the ship down with a breath-taking thump. They climbed out, followed by the two pets, Habeas and Chemistry.

Both men stared around into the drizzling rain, and Monk said puzzled, "Blazes, where is she?"

The field was large, ridged with ruts, and they had trouble walking. Ham was just reaching for a pocket flash when the powerful chemist gripped his arm and said, "Lookit-up the field there! I guess that's her comin' this way."

Someone with another flashlight was headed toward them.

A few moments later they saw that it was not a flashlight, but a lantern, and there was a slender figure carrying it.

Monk and Ham hurried forward, both anxious to see the girl again.

Only it wasn't a girl, but a little bantam of a man in a flopping big coat and a battered derby.

A little guy who, when he spoke, sounded tougher than a plug-ugly from a Second Avenue pool hall. He snapped, "Hey, punks, what's the idea of settin' that crate down in our p'tato patch? Want t' get hell knocked outta ya?" He glared over the lantern.

Monk, like a mastiff puzzledly studying a cocky little toy terrier, observed the man silently for a moment and then piped, "Where's the girl?"

"What girl, brother?"

"The one who landed in the plane," Monk frowned. "An' talk like a danged gentleman or I'll push in your face!"

"Ain't no plane around here," the bantamweight said. "Or dames either. Ain't been a dame on this land since Annie Peabody went off her nut."

"Annie Peabody?" Ham put in. "Who's she?"

"Listen, boobs," said the stranger, "Annie Peabody was hexed by the witches back in 1692, remember? You couldn't get a dame on this farm if you bribed her with a million bucks."

Monk snorted, said to Ham, "C'mon."

They searched the field. Followed by the pint-sized scarecrow figure, they plodded through rain and mud for a quarter of a mile in two directions. Surrounding the field were deep woods in which a plane could not have possibly landed.

There was no trace of the lovely dark-eyed girl. Also there was no trace of the plane. Monk said sadly, "An' I was jest learnin' to like that dame, too!"

He was rubbing at his blackened eye. The homely chemist loved opposition—and June Knight had furnished the kind he enjoyed.

Ham said thoughtfully, "Maybe we ought to get in touch with Doc."

The tough-looking little fellow accompanying them looked up sharply. "Did you say Doc, partner?" Ham nodded.

"Say, you two birds wouldn't be connected with a guy by the name of Doc Savage, would you?"

Ham said that they were.

The little fellow with the old derby half over his ears looked suddenly interested.

"Then you must know a guy named Renwick?"

Monk jumped. "That's right. What about him?"

The man shrugged his thin shoulders. "The hayseeds were talkin' about that guy up to the Corners tonight. I guess that bird's in trouble."

"Trouble?" exclaimed Ham.

"Yeah. He's disappeared."

Chapter IV. THE SCREECHING LADY

ON a deserted side road somewhere south of Salem the following morning, a long open car moved slowly. It was about an hour after dawn, and it had stopped raining, and there was the vast solitude, the lazy peacefulness of early morning in the country.

The car was a remarkable-looking machine. Topless, it was a gray roadster of unusual length. Sixteen cylinders were concealed beneath the long hood, and on a straight road the machine could do one hundred and fifty miles an hour.

More remarkable in appearance was the figure seated behind the wheel.

The man was Doc Savage.

Hatless, it could be seen that the figure's hair was of a bronze hue, and lay flat and smooth against a well-formed head. Clear skin was just a shade lighter than the hair, of the same gold hue. More striking were the eyes; these seemed to be of a rich flake-gold. Magnetic, compelling, they looked steadily ahead with a calmness seen in no other man.

The man was a physical giant, though so well proportioned that it would not have been evident except for the second man seated, dozing, beside the Man of Bronze.

The dozing man was dwarfed by the bronze giant's size. And since he was a gaunt, half-starved-looking person anyway, right now he appeared no better than a bag of bones. As the man dozed, eyeglasses threatened to slip from his nose. He looked not unlike a studious professor.

Doc Savage, the figure at the wheel, said quietly, "We might stop here and look around. The place somewhat answers Monk's description of it."

The words were softly spoken, yet so deep and vibrant was the voice that the gaunt figure seated beside Doc Savage came wide awake with a jerk.

"Huh?" he said, half sleepily.

But the bronze man was looking back at the road. His metallic features were as unmoving as a statue's while he seemed to be listening for something.

The sound came faintly from ahead—a soft pattering in the dusty road. Dust eddied in tiny rings. The man of the starved-looking features peered out the side of the car, adjusted his thick-lensed glasses and said, "A prognostication of pluvial precipitation. I thought it had stopped."

The speaker was William Harper Littlejohn, a member of Doc Savage's organization, and one of the world's greatest geologists. Better known as Johnny to his friends, the skinny man had a weakness for four-dollar words.

The bronze man asked, "You mean it looks like rain again?"

Johnny nodded.

Suddenly the Man of Bronze stared overhead. He was listening. The road ahead still showed little puffs of dust.

"And you think that's rain?" Doc repeated.

The gaunt geologist nodded. "In all probability."

Doc suggested, "Look!"

He motioned overhead.

A small speck was slowly becoming a larger object in the cloudless blue sky. The sun was shining. There was no sign of rain.

"Airplane," Johnny announced.

"Yes," Doc Savage said. "And they're shooting at us." He was suddenly shifting gears, wheeling the long roadster around in the road.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" exploded lanky Johnny. "Let's get out of here!" The geologist forgot about big words when he was excited. And he was excited now.

Doc said, "That would seem to be a good idea." He was already sending the car along the road at better than fifty.

Doc Savage, in that moment before the puffs of dust had appeared, had heard the sound high in the air—the drone of a powerful plane's motor. No other person would have caught that imperceptible thing. But the bronze man had hearing vastly keener than an average man's.

Trained from early childhood along specialized lines, he was a scientific product fitted for an unusual career—that of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers. He was a renowned surgeon, a scientist second to none, a muscular marvel. Also, he was quite human.

The plane came down out of the sky, and took shape and form. It came down, a streaking comet, doing better than three hundred miles an hour. A quarter mile above the earth it flattened out, and suddenly a long queue of dust puffs snaked along the road, barely missing the roadster by inches. Johnny howled, "Doc, those crazy fools are trying to kill us!"

"So it seems," the bronze man said quietly. His flake-gold eyes were raking the roadside. They were now close to deep woods that bordered the right side of the thoroughfare. An old wagon trail curved from the road toward the woods.

At better than sixty miles an hour, Doc Savage threw the wheel over and hit the wagon path in a long slide. Deftly, he straightened out and the sleek machine leaped ahead like a frightened hare. They streaked beneath enshrouding trees.

Doc braked the car to a stop, cut the ignition and climbed out. Beside the car, he looked more giant size than ever. This was a peculiar quality that was not evident when the bronze man was standing alone.

Johnny came tumbling out of the car too. From inside his coat he yanked a long pistol to which was attached a small round drum. The weapon was one of the special machine pistols that all Doc's aides carried.

He yelled, "Blast their hides! Wait until I—"

Doc said calmly, "It would be better not to reveal our position. You can't fight machine guns with a pistol. But we might try to get a good look at that plane."

They moved cautiously through the deep woods. Impossible for anyone in the speeding plane to see them now, they had the advantage of being able to peer up through the trees.

Doc saw the plane come close in another power dive. The great single wing barely skimmed the treetops. It shot off into the distance like a plummet.

A black plummet with red trimmings.

OTHER eyes were watching that modern plane.

Monk and Ham had been inspecting their small plane by daylight, in order to make certain that no damage had been done when Monk had set the plane down so recklessly in the darkness.

Monk, a half-eaten carrot in one hand, had just climbed from the cockpit to announce, "Listen, shyster, I hate to admit it, but maybe I was wrong about that girl landing here last night."

Ham smiled broadly. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to have his partner admit to a fault.

"Why, you hairy mistake?" he prompted.

"Because a wire's loose on that danged sound-detector," Monk piped. "Musta loosened just before I thought her motor went dead. Maybe she's in Halifax by now. Or—"

It was at that moment when the plane dived out of the sky about a mile away from where Monk and Ham were in the potato patch.

They too saw the streaking plane take size and form, saw it go into a power dive down close to the earth. They watched the plane flatten out and skim over distant woods. Then it came toward them, started climbing, and turned off to the east just before it reached their field.

It was Monk who howled, "Goshamighty! Did you recognize somethin'?"

"It's black," said Ham.

"With red trimmin's!" exclaimed Monk. "It's—"

"—June Knight's monoplane!" finished the lawyer.

Monk jammed the rest of the carrot into his mouth and stared after the vanishing comet of a speeding plane.

Neither man knew, of course, of the distant shots that had been fired as the plane dived down near the roadster containing the bronze man and Johnny. In fact, Monk was puzzled about Doc Savage now. He asked:

"Funny Doc hasn't showed up. Do you think he got our message?"

Ham had finished inspecting the plane's landing gear.

"You heard what they said at the Medical Center," he said. "Doc had left, but they assured us the message would be delivered to him."

"Yeah, that's right," the chemist said somewhat vaguely, and stood beside the plane rubbing a hand across his eyes.

Ham asked, "What's wrong with you?"

Monk forced a grin. "Thinkin' of that girl has got me dizzy."

Ham smirked. "Why drag the girl into it?" he asked. "Just trying to use that molecule you call a brain must make you groggy."

Monk ignored the remark, turned to watch a figure approaching them across the rutted field.

It was the gangling, overall-clad figure of Cotton Mather Brown, whom bantam-like Hyacinth had taken them to see last night. Cotton had told Monk and Ham about his meeting with both the engineer, Miles Billings, and Renny. He had even gone without sleep and helped the two partners while they searched for the girl and missing plane. Each man had taken a different route, but nothing had been found. An hour before dawn Monk and Ham had snatched an hour's sleep at Cotton's farmhouse nearby. Cotton, his wide-brimmed straw hat flopping like a small awning above his lanky figure, came up. He said, "Howdy."

Ham asked, "Any news about those missing people yet?"

Cotton shook his head. He reached into his tattered overalls pocket, removed a plug of tobacco and took a bite. He chewed a while, spat, then got around to saying, "Man comin' out here to see you gents."

"What man?" Monk asked, his little eyes a trifle vacant-looking.

"Man with a warrant," said Cotton matter-of-factly.

"Warrant?"

Cotton spat again.

"Yep. He's the blasted constable."

"But—"

Just then, along a road that cut through the middle of the field toward Cotton's old, single-story house some distance back toward the woods, an old flivver came rattling. It stopped and a man climbed out, starting toward them.

AS he came closer, it could be seen that he wore knee boots, breeches, flannel shirt and a Stetson hat. There were six-guns at his hips and a handle-bar black mustache at his mouth. Given a horse, he would have looked like a peace officer from a Western cow town.

Cotton said, "That's him."

To the arrival he added, "Hi, Milt."

The tall man nodded, then swung to look at Monk and Ham. He studied the hairy chemist curiously, as though not quite certain of what he saw.

"You two own this jalopy?" He indicated the plane.

Monk, massaging his forehead, apparently did not like the way the constable had stared at him. He said belligerently, "Sure. Want to make something out of it?"

"Keep your mouth shut, you hairy goof!" Ham said.

"Yep. Make this out of it," the constable rapped, and handed the chemist the white paper.

He added, "That's fer whichever one of you is the pilot of this crate. Fer disturbin' the peace and breakin' our flyin' ordinance."

Ham, worried, put in, "But I don't understand—"

"Read the warrant," the constable said testily. "That danged monkey there," indicating Monk, "flew so low over our town last night half the population had heart attacks. He danged near took the steeple off the church too. Besides, he's started all the trouble again."

Ham frowned. "What trouble?"

"The Screeching Lady of the Marsh trouble, dang it! She hollered her head off all night."

Ham looked at Cotton for an explanation of this last remark.

The scrawny-looking truck farmer said, "She's the one the sailors drug off the ship and murdered back in the seventeenth century. You can still hear her hollerin' when something upsets her."

Suddenly hairy Monk was staring oddly. He swaggered over to the constable and started talking in a queer, strained voice. Ham gulped as he heard his partner's words.

"Sure," Monk said strangely, "I met her last night. She sure is a nifty. Me and her were gonna go down to 22 this morning at five o'clock—"

"Monk!" Ham cried worriedly.

"—an' see about the new crop of rubber trees!" Monk continued crazily.

The constable twirled his handle-bar mustache and gave both Cotton and Ham significant looks. He said dryly, "I reckon we better add insanity to that warrant, too! This hairy baboon is as crazy as a bedbug."

And to Monk, gently, he said, "You say you got a date with her, friend?"

Monk nodded, looking gleeful, and started jabbering crazily again.

The constable took Monk's big arm carefully, speaking suddenly as one would to a child. "O. K., pal, you just come along with me an' I'll take you to her."

Grinning happily, Monk started willingly with the lawman. Far across the field, Habeas, the pig, was busy chasing Chemistry toward the woods.

Ham jumped, "Say! You can't—"

But Cotton touched the dapper lawyer's arm, said quickly, "Careful! Maybe we can figger a way out of this. But don't get that danged constable mad. He's a ripsnorter."

As they stared after the other two, Cotton remarked, "I was afraid something would happen when you two lit in this danged potato patch."

"Huh?" Ham asked, startled.

"Yep. You shoulda had a sprig of honeysuckle on that crate to keep away the pixies."

DOC SAVAGE heard about the trouble with Monk later. He and Johnny, some time after the plane had disappeared, had brought their long roadster from the concealing woods and headed back for the dusty road. Just as they eased out onto the thoroughfare that led northward to the ghost town, the two farmers came hurrying along. The bronze man and Johnny could not help but hear the men's excited words.

"Yessir, an' I heard he's seen her too!" one man was saying.

"You mean the Screeching Lady?"

"Yep. Say he looks like an ape, and Milt took him down to the jail. Too bad Milt ain't got a padded cell."

"You think that guy's bewitched?" asked one of the two.

"If he ain't, I'm a ring-tailed lalalalooza."

Doc Savage, unusual gold eyes like restless deep pools, leaned out of the car and asked, "You said the prisoner looks like an ape?"

The two men, who had already passed the car, turned back. They stared at the unusual figure of the bronze man seated behind the wheel. All men gawked when they first saw Doc Savage. His appearance was that striking.

One farmer finally managed to get out, "That's right, Looks just like a gorilla. I heerd."

"Where's the jail?" the bronze man asked.

"A couple rods back this way, sir. You can't miss it."

Doc thanked the men and slipped the car in speed. Beside him, bony Johnny said worriedly, "I'll be superamalgamated! Doc, do you think they meant Monk?"

They were already doing sixty. They passed other groups of excitedly talking men going in the same direction.

The bronze man said, "Any trouble that Monk gets into should not surprise us."

Chapter V. THE SKELETON'S BONES

THE jail was located in the township two or three miles below the deserted ghost village. It hardly looked like a jail. It was a square yellow building with a sign hanging outside that read "Town Hall."

The jail was a room off the kitchen, reached through a side door. Within this room were two heavily barred cell chambers that were painted a dirty aluminum color. Monk was housed in one of the two rooms. He had already been tricked into the jail by the time Doc Savage and Johnny arrived, elbowing their way through twoscore gaping farmers outside the building. They were admitted by the constable, Milt.

Beside the bronze man, outside the cell door, starved-looking Johnny Littlejohn stared sadly at Monk and said, "A primigenous specimen of mankind."

Behind the bars, Monk's homely, scarred face looked like an infuriated ape's, and he jumped up and down, gripping the steel bars as he did so. The burly chemist's tremendous strength went into the bars, rattled them and threatened to tear loose the second-floor planking.

The constable, standing across the outer room polishing his star-shaped shield with the back of his sleeve, jumped also and came running forward.

"Hey!" he yelled at Monk. "You gotta cut that out!"

"Where's the Screeching Lady?" squealed the hairy chemist.

Doc Savage looked at the constable. On entering, Doc had merely stated that he and Johnny were friends of the arrested man. As yet, no one knew the bronze giant's identity, though there had been startled murmurs as Doc elbowed through the crowd outside. Doc asked now, "What happened to him?"—indicating Monk.

The chemist jabbered inanelly, "Ask her about the sailors. She's gonna meet me and tell me all about the sailors. After that we're goin' lookin' for the rubber plants and the nasturtiums, but you oughta wear your coat inside out—"

"Happened?" the constable named Milt said coldly. "By hell, stranger, the guy's as wacky as a lunatic! I've phoned into Marblehead for a strait jacket, and when—"

Doc stepped close to the cell bars and spoke quietly. Yet the vibrancy of the bronze man's voice carried to all parts of the large outer room.

He said, "Monk, do you know me?"

Some magnetic quality of Doc's voice made the excited chemist pause for an instant in his senseless talking. He peered out of his little eyes for a moment at the bronze man. Then, abruptly, he took hold of the bars again and gave indications of shaking down the building.

"I gotta see her!" he piped shrilly. "Me an' her have got a date. She came through the keyhole and, she told me all about it. She can bark like a dog and purr like a cat. She—"

Johnny said mournfully, "Too bad, Doc. He was a swell guy, too."

Behind them, another voice added, "That hairy mistake has sure got us in a mess now!"

IT was well-dressed Ham, carrying his ever-present sword cane, and accompanying him was ill-kempt Cotton Mather Brown. Habeas and Chemistry, the pets, followed.

Ham briefly explained about this trip up here with Monk, also of the morning's happenings. He indicated the bronze man and said to Cotton: "This is Doc Savage."

The farmer, and the constable who had been again interested in polishing his badge, both jerked to attention.

"Doc Savage?"

"That's correct," said Ham.

"Not the Doc Savage?" queried Milt, the constable.

"No other," explained the lawyer.

"Holy gosh!" cried Milt. "In that case, maybe we can figger something out for this poor feller."

He indicated Monk, still blabbering away inside the cell.

Doc asked, "Just what do you mean?" in response to the jailer's remark.

"Waal," said Milt, "Jesse Benedict is on the town board. He jest about owns this country and everything around it. Maybe he could do something. He lives in a big show place down along the coast."

"You might call him up then," suggested Doc.

The constable went out to the kitchen, and Doc Savage moved back to Monk's cell. The chemist was still talking endlessly and senselessly.

"—and the pixies got her when she come down there in the field. The pixies are little black devils with green eyes. Sure I know you, Doc. Besides, if you don't wear your coat inside out—"

The bronze man was suddenly leaning close to the bars. He said quietly, "He answered the question."

"What question?" asked Ham.

But the bronze man did not explain the comment.

AN hour later, the board member known as Jesse Benedict arrived in a limousine that boasted both a chauffeur and a footman. A pompous man of medium build and alert features, he wore clothes that drew the admiration of dapper Ham.

Jesse Benedict was a person worth money, and he showed it. He was a leader, domineering, quick-acting. From time to time as he talked, he raised his left lapel and smelled of a small, white

flower there. His favorite remark in response to various statements was a casual "I see." Then he would again smell the flower.

Jesse Benedict said to the bronze man, "I have heard of you, Mr. Savage. And I happen to know your reputation—that a million dollars would not tempt you to take a case unless it deeply concerned some poor victim in trouble, or unless a great wrong has been done. You might explain to me just what has happened now. There is some talk about a super-highway—"

Doc nodded, "A man named Miles Billings, a renowned engineer obtained to make a survey for that highway, has disappeared."

"I see," said Benedict, taking a short sniff of the lapel flower.

"Shortly before Miles Billings disappeared, he was apparently bewitched."

"I see."

"Also," continued Doc Savage, "one of my own aides, Renny Renwick, has apparently met with the same fate."

Ham put in, "And now it has Monk too!"

There was the sound of continual prattling from behind the cell bars.

"On top of that," went on the bronze man, "a girl seems to be somehow mixed up in it. She, also, has disappeared. She is the daughter of a personal friend, Mortimer Knight, of Boston."

This time Benedict forgot to smell of the flower.

"Mortimer Knight!" he exclaimed. "He's big. He's about the most important person in New England. How would he be connected with—"

"Knight is financing the super-highway project," Doc Savage said. "He has also sent me this telegram."

Well-dressed Ham was surprised at the bronze man's close knowledge of the mystery to date.

Neither he nor lean Johnny, the geologist, had known that Doc had been contacted by Mortimer Knight.

Both aides stared over Benedict's shoulder as he read the urgent message:

AS A FRIEND I BEG OF YOU TO INVESTIGATE MYSTERY OF THE TALKING MEN. I ALSO HOLD FEAR FOR MY DAUGHTER'S LIFE. THERE IS MORE TO THIS THAN PEOPLE THINK. HURRY!
MORTIMER KNIGHT.

Jesse Benedict said somewhat in awe, "I see, I see." Then, glancing toward Monk's cell,

"Obviously, we should start by doing something for this poor fellow. Anything else I can do to be of assistance will be gladly started."

Benedict stepped toward Monk's temporary prison.

Oddly, there were no further commotions from within the cell; instead, Monk was standing at the bars quietly, apparently listening to the conversation.

The chemist said very calmly, "What is this, a joke? How about somebody lettin' me out of this brig?"

William Harper Littlejohn, his long, thin face startled, exclaimed, "I'll be superamalgamated!"

The others, preceded by well-dressed Ham, were staring. The quick-thinking lawyer commented, "That hairy oaf is as sane as any of us!"

Monk, within the cell, grimaced. "What the heck!" he piped. "Say, what are you boobs talkin' about?"

It was pompous Jesse Benedict, fingering his lapel flower, who commented coolly, "The arrest of this man has apparently been a grave mistake." He glared at Milt, the cowboy-looking constable.

"Release him at once!"

Soon Monk walked out of the cell, stared puzzledly at the others and said, "You birds look like you'd seen a ghost!"

It was the bronze man himself who attempted to question the hairy chemist about his bewitched talking spell.

Doc asked, "What happened?"

"What happened?" Monk squeaked. "When?"

"This morning. What is this talk about the Screeching Lady, sailors and wearing coats inside out?"

Monk gave the bronze man a puzzled look. "Dangit, Doc, I don't know what you're talkin' about!" He looked suddenly concerned. "Doc, you sure you're feelin' all right?"

Doc Savage went on, "You remember nothing apparently."

"Remember what?"

The bronze giant did not answer. His metallic features gave no indication of his thoughts. But often when Doc came to some conclusion, he did not make his findings known all once.

He said now, "The first thing is to find Miles Billings, Renny and June Knight." Doc looked at his aides. "Johnny, you, Ham and Monk will take care of that. Obviously there has been a definite reason for their disappearances. It is somehow connected with this super-highway project."

"But what is it all about, Doc?" Ham queried.

"That is still to be learned," said the bronze man. "Get back there to where you left the plane.

Incidentally, you might keep your eyes open for a fast black plane with red trimmings. It is somehow connected with the mystery."

Hairy Monk jumped. "Doc, did you say a black plane with red trimmings?"

The bronze man nodded. He told about the sudden, furious attack upon himself and Johnny. Monk squealed, "Blazes! Last time we saw that crate June Knight was flyin' it herself. An' now we're tryin' to help her!"

Doc did not comment on this.

Instead, he finished, "In the meantime, I'm going to complete the highway survey. Delay in this project is costing Mortimer Knight several thousand dollars each day."

Jesse Benedict took a sniff of his lapel flower and offered, "I'll be glad to drop your men off at Cotton Mather Brown's place, Mr. Savage. I have time enough for that."

Doc nodded. "That will be fine."

As the others went out, the bronze man turned to speak a moment to the constable, Milt. There were some questions he wanted to ask before leaving.

Milt, his long black mustache waving as he spoke, stuck his head in the kitchen door and announced, "Phone call for you, Mr. Savage."

Doc went out to the jailer's combination living room and kitchen. Apparently Milt was a bachelor, for the room showed lack of a woman's tidiness. Dirty pots and dishes were piled in a sink that needed scrubbing. Empty cans filled a basket beside the stove. The stove top itself contained butts of cigars and ashes from a pipe.

The voice on the phone asked, "Is this Doc Savage?"

The bronze man said it was.

"You want to know something about that girl—June Knight?" the thin-sounding voice went on.

Doc was silent a moment, concentrating on every detail of the mysterious voice.

"Well?" the thin voice prodded.

"We would like to find June Knight," Doc stated.

"Then you listen for the rattling of the skeleton's bones tonight in the old belfry," the speaker finished, and hung up.

WHEN Doc, his unusual flake-gold eyes seeming to stir just a trifle more restlessly, put up the phone, the constable queried, "Important news?"

Like all rural folk, Milt was inquisitive.

"Perhaps," said the bronze man.

"You ever meet a spook?" Milt asked seriously.

Doc shook his head.

The constable pounded across the kitchen in his high boots and pointed to a calendar. It was Friday. He asked, "You see this?"

"And so?" prompted Doc.

"You don't work on Fridays," Milt said in a subdued voice. "I don't ever wash them dishes on Friday. It's unlucky. I figgered I was goin' to get into a danged lot of trouble for servin' that summons on Friday—and look what happened. You better not try to do anything today, Mr. Savage."

"Sorry," said Doc, "but something has happened. Work will be necessary."

"Happened?"

"Yes. It concerns the skeleton's bones," the bronze man said, and went out to his car. He had not commented on the fact that someone had known he was at the jail.

DOC SAVAGE did not find the skeleton or hear the rattling of the bones immediately. It was still early afternoon, and he investigated the proposed highway route that was to pass through the deserted mill town.

Alone, he visited the ghost village that was so vacant, so silent. There was the row of dismal-looking houses, boarded up, gaunt, like gravestones marking a place long dead.

The mill itself had once been a fine building of red brick. Now it was a block-long, silent structure out of which the thousands of broken glass panes stared like sightless eyes. At one end of the mill, toward the rear, was an old-fashioned water wheel. There was a creek behind the mill.

Doc Savage located the camp from which the red-headed engineer, Miles Billings, had worked. The bronze man found sketches of the plans for the super-highway, and checked them against ideas of his own. Doc was convinced that Miles Billings had acted shrewdly in laying out the proposed highway route. The man had shown intelligence.

It was unbelievable that he had suddenly talked so inanely.

The swamp north of town—Witches' Hollow—offered a problem, of course. Doc drove out there, parked the long, sixteen-cylinder roadster, and took a look around. He was quickly convinced that the swamp was mostly bog.

He met no one all afternoon. Apparently Monk, Ham and gaunt-looking Johnny had followed a trail that led away from the old ghost town. The bronze man did not even meet a stray dog on the byways of the silent village. It was as though death lived here, soundless, endless, unmoving.

It was just about dusk when Doc Savage arrived at the church south of the deserted town. The church was a square frame building with a little steeple at one end. It squatted like a big, dirty brown box over the tiled gravestones that were half covered by tall grass in the surrounding churchyard.

Doc climbed the front steps of the church, found an unlocked door on sagging hinges and pushed his way inside. There was a small vestibule. Beyond this, a larger room containing two dozen pews

and a platform that had once been an altar. Cobwebs and decay were everywhere. Looking overhead from the outer vestibule, Doc saw the belfry. Stairs led in a spiral up there. Doc climbed the stairs that ended in a tiny room. There was a bell suspended from a rafter overhead and a length of rope that was frayed and rotten. There was nothing else. Only the sound of a rat scurrying through a partition behind the wall.

Doc went outside again. It was dark now. The night was stiffly silent. The bronze man climbed behind the wheel of his roadster and sat silently for several moments. Deeper gloom gathered beneath the nearby trees and mist lay in the low places. Doc leaned over, flicked a switch on a short-wave receiver located in the dash panel. Whenever the bronze man and his aides were separated, they kept in touch by these short-wave sets tuned to a special wave length. Doc tried to bring in the plane in which Ham and Monk, with Johnny, would be carrying on the search for the missing persons. At first there was only the power hum of the receiver.

Then the church bell started ringing. Doc glanced around in the gloom and switched off the loud-speaker. The sound of the church bell ringing was coming from the deserted building the bronze man had just left. Doc climbed out, worked his way through the gravestone cluttered yard again and mounted the rickety steps. He peered inside the musty old church. The bell had stopped tolling now and there was silence.

From a pocket of his coat, the bronze man took a flashlight and shot the white circle of light around the vestibule. Through the open doorway to the church proper, he thought he saw something move. He stepped carefully that way.

A peculiar trilling sound suddenly seemed to fill the old building. Exotic, vibrant, it was a tone that came from the bronze man himself. It was a peculiar sound that he made in moments of mental stress—or surprise. Right now it was made because of surprise.

The black-garbed old crone who arose from one of the pews stood stark in the flashlight glare and grinned at the man of bronze. Grinned around broken, dirty teeth and out of sharp, old-looking eyes. She held a black cat beneath one arm and was stroking its back.

The old crone cackled, "I thought you'd come."

"Then you're the one who phoned," said Doc, "about the skeleton's bones. Is that correct?"

The lined, age-old face split in a grin. "Hey, hey!" the evil-faced old woman said. "They've stolen the skeleton."

"What skeleton?"

"The one that used to hang in the belfry."

Doc Savage's metallic features were expressionless. "It might be a good idea," he said, "to explain exactly who you are."

"I'm the witch," the old hag cackled. "Around here they call me Hannah. You look on that biggest gravestone outside and you'll see my name. It gets them angry around here because I won't stay dead."

The bronze man was motionless. "Dead?" he asked.

"Hey, hey!" said Hannah. "They buried me a hundred years ago!"

Chapter VI. NO NAMES, PLEASE!

DOC SAVAGE was an unusual person who, in his youth, had been brought up differently than other young men. He was a product of science, of mind over matter. He had been so scientifically trained that he was now one of the world's greatest surgeons. Besides, he had few equals in the fields of chemistry, electricity and kindred other subjects.

The bronze man had been trained to understand that there is an explanation for all things. But right now there seemed to be a lot of things that needed explaining, and it almost appeared that there simply were not any explanations for things that had occurred.

There had been the disappearance of Miles Billings, a brilliant young engineer. Billings, they had said, was bewitched.

Likewise, a giant of a man, a two-fisted fighter right in Doc Savage's own organization—one who would be the last in the world to believe in spooks—had also appeared talking crazily. Renny had been obviously bewitched. Also, he had vanished into thin air.

Then there had been the girl.

Monk, perhaps because of his great vitality, his resistance, had temporarily fought off the bewitching.

Yet now here was a creature who probably knew more about the mystery than anyone. A witch, if there ever was one—and stating that she had died a hundred years ago!

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes were thoughtful, as he asked, "What is this about the skeleton's bones?"

Hannah, the witch, chuckled.

"The skeleton hung up in the belfry," she said shrilly. "Now they've stolen it, and for that, they must die!"

"Who?"

A sly expression crept into old Hannah's dark eyes. "Never you mind."

The bronze man said, "What difference does it make? The proposed new highway that is going in here will pass right through this church site. This place will have to be torn down regardless." Still stroking the cat lovingly, Hannah rasped, "No! Those who live yonder in the mill town will never permit it!"

Doc Savage never betrayed emotion. His bronze features remained the same now. It was only the restless stirring of his unusual eyes that told of some inward reaction.

"The mill town is deserted," he stated. "It has been long since anyone ever lived there."

Hannah said, "Hey, hey! That's what you think, my friend. Nevertheless, they still live. The elementals still live. And they are seeking the bodies of the living. Miles Billings angered them, and then Renwick—"

Doc Savage tensed. He took a step forward, and Hannah moved back in the pew and gripped the black cat closely against her thin chest.

"What do you know about Renwick?" Doc demanded.

The old crone cackled shrilly. "Renwick has the skeleton's bones," she said wisely.

"He has the bones—" Doc's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "Where?"

"I can show you!"

Hannah indicated the front door and added, "Follow me. But there must be no light. We go in darkness."

Doc stepped aside as the bent and dark-cloaked figure moved outside into the night.

THE trail did not lead back to the road. Instead, Hannah moved through the graveyard, circled around in back of the old church and headed through deep woods set back from the road where the bronze man's car was parked. She walked swiftly and with uncanny skill in the darkness. There was no light, no moon, yet the old hag plodded ahead with unerring steps.

Only because of the bronze man's great vision, the long and rigid hours of training he had given his eyes, was he able to follow without using the flashlight.

There was deep, impenetrable silence beneath the trees and thick foliage. The trail seemed to slant downward for at least a mile, then started climbing. Ahead, the darkness lessened somewhat, and night light revealed a small clearing.

The squat-looking cabin was in the middle of the cleared space and smoke was spiraling from the chimney.

"In there you'll find him," offered Hannah. She motioned Doc ahead.

Doc Savage opened the hut door, saw dim light from a big fireplace across a single room. On the hearth something bubbled and steamed and filled the single room with sound.

Doc turned back to the woman after casting a swift glance about the scantily furnished space.

"There is no one—" he started.

From the rafters over the bronze man's head, the hard voice said warningly:

"That's what you think, friend!"

The bronze man stood very still. It seemed to be the best idea at the moment.

For the man crouching above on the rafters had a revolver in each big fist. Doc got a glimpse of his face in the vague light. It was clean-shaved and quite unpleasant-looking. The gunman was all of six feet, gaunt, sandy-haired, well put together.

He dropped down from above, landed agilely on his feet, keeping the big guns pointed at Doc.

He rapped, "Me and Hannah sorta thought you'd go for that Renny gag." He didn't talk with the twang of a farmer; instead his cold voice had the snarl of a big-city gunman.

And yet, to Doc, there was something oddly familiar about it.

The bronze giant was standing very still, eyes unwavering as the tall, lean man took a step toward him.

The man said with a snarl, "I'm gonna get a raise for this, bronze guy. The boss says you coulda caused a lot of trouble around here."

Doc was silent, carefully studying the gunman. He knew that in a moment he would have the man spotted. There was something—

But the man must have suspected Doc Savage's motive. He suddenly twirled the big revolvers in his fists, came closer and snapped, "No, you don't! Guess we'll just put you on ice for a while until we figure out how much you know."

He swung the gun butts at the bronze man's head.

SEVERAL assorted things then happened with camera-fast speed. There was empty air where the gunman's weapons struck. There were steel-wire bands encircling the man's wrists, and he squalled and dropped the revolvers. He grappled with the giant of bronze.

Seconds later a solid oak table in the middle of the room was scattered about, a heavy galvanized pail contained various dents where the man's head had bounced off it four times furiously, and dust began to swirl around in the room as though an army had just tramped through.

For the third time the big, wiry man climbed to his feet, stared dazedly at the bronze figure, then lowered his head and slammed forward in a renewed attack. At the same time he bellowed, "Hey, you guys . . . help!"

More men were suddenly barging into the room from outside. Behind them a shrill voice cackled, "Hey! Hey! Willie can't take it!"

"Willie's" partners looked like something just out of the police morning line-up. All were brawny, solid thugs with big hands and mean-looking faces. There were five besides the man who had covered Doc Savage. They joined the battle with yells.

One said, "Watch me take him!"

That one landed in the open hearth with his head thudding against the bricks. He backed out screaming, batting at sparks and embers that threatened to start a blaze in his mop of black hair. Another found himself tangled with the broken table legs. A third added a new, deeper dent to the heavy bucket.

About this time, the assailants decided this bronze man was no set-up. One of them picked up a brick that had been jarred loose in the big fireplace. He came up behind Doc and swung the brick right at the back of the bronze giant's head.

Doc Savage staggered, went to his knees, and immediately four of the men piled on him and started battering away with clubbing fists. Doc, with a mighty heave, lifted all four into the air—when suddenly the one called Willie, back on his feet again, yanked a large fish net from a wall hook and got it over the bronze man's head.

He bawled, "You guys hurry and get him tangled up in this thing!"

Furious action took place as Doc was strung up in the net. The fellow with the brick hopped up and down behind his partners and kept bopping Doc with the brick at convenient intervals. Finally one direct blow stunned the bronze man.

Willie straightened and grinned. "That's that!" he said. And then, "Where's that damned Hannah?" "Outside." answered one of the thugs.

"Tell Hannah to get that glass of water." Willie laughed oddly. "I think maybe this bronze guy wants a drink."

Others laughed.

"Jeepers!" exclaimed one. "Wait'll this Doc Savage starts seein' the pixies!"

JUST about that time, Johnny and well-dressed Ham were convinced that it was burly Monk who was seeing the pixies again.

The three aides of the bronze man had been taken back to Cotton Mather Brown's farm in Jessie Benedict's limousine. There they had climbed into their small plane. After a hair-raising run down the rutted potato patch, and a more breathtaking skimming of tall trees at the end of the field, Monk had got the plane into the air.

They had visited Salem Corners, where both Renny and the red-headed engineer had disappeared.

They had scoured the country surrounding Cotton's truck farm in a search for the girl, June Knight. They had found nothing.

It was almost midnight. They had left the plane in a field near the empty ghost town and were now exploring the dismal, death-quiet town. The three aides had left the plane shortly before Doc Savage tried to contact them from his car at the Witches' Church.

Ever since leaving the plane, ever since it had grown dark, Monk had again acted oddly.

Gloomy-looking Johnny, the geologist, had been investigating the state of preservation of woodwork in an old house they had entered. The house was on the single main street of the vacated town. All three men carried flashlights.

Ham, careful not to smear his immaculate clothes, had found an old legal-looking tome and was avidly reading its contents. Chemistry, the pet ape, was at his side.

But hairy Monk, frowning because there was little prospects of a fight in the immediate future, sat on an old box looking disgusted. The pig, Habeas Corpus, was rooting around near a rat hole in a wall baseboard.

Ham looked around and said, "Monk, see this?"

The short-legged chemist did not reply, though he was seated only a few feet away.

Ham turned to long thin Johnny and commented, "Monk worries me sometimes."

The gaunt archaeologist yanked a board loose from a window sash and studied it. He turned around and gave Monk a studious stare. Then he looked at the lawyer.

"A clear example of deranged cogitiveness," he stated. And, tapping a finger to his head significantly, explained, "Nuts!"

Ham looked worried. "Now look, Monk—" he started.

The hairy chemist continued to stare at his two partners.

Ham, annoyed, rapped, "Listen, you hairy mistake—"

Monk suddenly grinned. "That's better," he said agreeably.

The lawyer gulped. Apparently Monk was pleased because he had been addressed by anything but his correct name.

"Better?" Ham said. "What are you driving at, you big-eared baboon?"

Monk grinned. "After dark," he said, "you call me any of them names you like. Only don't call me M—" The chemist caught himself and looked suddenly scared.

Ham demanded, "Say, what's eating you, Monk?"

At mention of his name again, Monk howled and jumped up, barging toward the dapper lawyer with a threatening, upraised fist. "Listen, shyster," he said excitedly, "Cotton was tellin' me all about it."

"All about what?"

"About how the pixies locate you. You shouldn't oughta answer to your name after sundown. That's bad luck."

The lawyer frowned, twisted to regard the long-nosed pig, poking into a dust-filled crack and blowing dust in various directions.

"Get that blasted Habeas away from there," he started.

Monk roared, swung at Ham, then hurried to pick the pig up tenderly in his powerful arms. He turned, glaring at his partner. "Listen, you male manikin, you lay off the names, you hear? Danged if I want to be found by those whatchacallits. I've been jinxed enough!"

Ham sighed and shook his head hopelessly. Beside him, Chemistry, the small chimp, grinned.

Monk looked ugly.

From the open hall doorway behind him, the voice asked, "Your name Monk, brother?"

The chemist almost left his shoes.

Chapter VII. BEAUTY IN A CELLAR

THE speaker was Hannah, the witch, and seeing her, Monk turned nervously to his partner, Ham, and said in his piping voice, "Now, you see? You've gone and done it!"

Hannah was holding the black cat, fondly stroking its sleek fur. From the doorway, she continued, "The speerits have spoken."

"Huh?" said Ham, grabbing Chemistry when the chimp spotted the black cat in the old crone's arms. Habeas was still unconcernedly rooting in rat holes.

Johnny stared at Hannah and said, "I'll be superamalgamated!"

"The speerits have spoken," repeated the woman, grinning around her broken teeth. "You three belong to the Doc Savage organization, ain't that correct?"

"Correct," reported the lawyer, Ham.

"Well," said Hannah, "Doc Savage needs you."

"Needs—"

"Your bronze friend is in trouble. He has become bewitched!"

Hairy Monk groaned. "I knew it!" he squealed. "We should've heard from Doc hours ago!"

"Where is Doc Savage?" asked Johnny, more calmly.

"Follow me," said the woman, and started out through the dark, musty hallway. She apparently had eyes like a cat's.

The three aides followed, Monk complaining because they had not reported back to the bronze man. Outside the old house their flashlight beams splashed on gnarled old elms, outlined the dusty road that had once been a main thoroughfare, reached out and limned the broken windowpanes that were like haunting eyes in the long, empty mill building across the street.

Hannah rasped, "No lights, fools! That will anger the speerits. This way!"

She started off toward the mill building. The old factory was three stories high, and gloomy in the dark night. Chemistry held Ham's hand tightly. Behind them there was a squealing as Habeas, the pet pig, discovered that his master had left him alone in the empty house. He came scrambling after the group.

It was a grotesque sight. Burly Monk, tall Ham, and gaunt Johnny with the let's-find-us-a-funeral expression, all trailing behind the frail, small woman clothed in the black rags.

An old path led between high hedges and wildly growing scrubs. Grass grew like hay in what had once been a lawn bordering the mill site. Hannah was evidently seeking a door entrance in the side of the mill building.

Ham queried, "But why here?"

"Sshh!" said the witch.

Monk, uneasy, turned around once. He had been trailing the others. He suddenly let out a bellow.

Ham turned, asking, "What's wrong now, you blasted idiot?"

Monk was abruptly rolling up his sleeves over his bulging arm. He said happily, "This is the first time I ever seen spooks who shaved." He flicked on his flashlight briefly.

The six assorted thugs who had been closing in on the group moved forward swiftly in a wedge-formed attack.

THE sleeping ghosts of the old mill town must have had a poor night's rest at the sudden bedlam that followed.

Monk, nearest the advancing wedge of tough-faced men, let out a bull roar and dived forward.

Ordinarily, the chemist talked in a childlike, piping voice. But when he tangled in a good fight, he bellowed. He was working up to a nice start now.

He grabbed two of the assailants—burly fellows with square jaws and massive shoulders—and started giving examples of a Cuban rhumba player shaking two gourds. The gourds, in this case, were two human heads, and they rattled nicely when Monk banged them together.

He dropped the two gasping figures and the men headed for spots distant. Monk reached for another form.

Ham, preferring more deft methods of fighting, had pulled a long, thin sword from the handle of his trick cane, which he always carried. The tip of that sword cane contained a chemical drug of mild form, but which would temporarily paralyze a victim who received one of its jabs.

Oddly, one of the assailants seemed to know about the menace of that sword, for he screamed, "Look out for that thing, Joe! It'll knock you stiffer than a board." He started retreating. Just then a car motor was heard roaring somewhere up the old village street. A machine streaked down the single thoroughfare, brakes squealed, and a powerful spotlight glare jumped over the fighting tangle of men. Someone yelled from the car:

"An' those punks are supposed to be South Boston toughs! Tell 'em to scram and we'll turn the Tommy loose on those Doc Savage guys!"

Johnny, moving like a long, hungry-looking wild cat, had been tying one man up in a knot. He overheard the orders of one of the two men in the car. He dropped his captive and his thin, bony hand reached into a pocket of his loose-fitting clothes. It came out grasping a small vial. The object was a small smoke bomb of the bronze man's invention. Smashed, it released thick clouds of black smoke through which it was impossible to see.

Lanky Johnny broke the bomb and the men in the car dared not loosen the machine-gun fire. Men, noise and Monk's bull roars were all involved in the black fog revealed by the cars' spotlight. Those of the thugs who had already ducked out of the battle were streaking for the machine. Others popped out of the black fog—or were thrown out—and did likewise. The car was slammed into speed and the motor made roaring sounds that racketed against the mill building walls. It left the scene in a hurry. One man was seen to tumble off the side of the car as it started down the dust-filled street.

Monk, emerging from the black smoke to join Ham and Johnny, who had a flashlight glowing now, said gloomily, "Blazes! I was just gettin' started!"

Johnny said, "One of them fell out there in the road," and started that way, followed by his two partners. The pets, who had been hopping around, gleefully taking nips out of the assailants' legs, followed along.

THE man they picked up in the road was dazed. There was a thin scratch across his swarthy cheek where he had apparently been nicked by Ham's sword cane.

The lawyer said, "He isn't quite out, but he will be soon."

He shook the helpless man, demanded, "Where are those others headed?"

The fellow opened his beady eyes, stared dazedly for a moment. The drug on Ham's cane had apparently stupefied him and he spoke against his will.

"Jesse Benedict's," he muttered.

Ham remembered the wealthy board member who had the habit of sniffing at his lapel flower. "What about Benedict?" he prodded.

The fellow stared.

Monk shook his fist beneath the man's nose. "See this?" he piped.

A flickering of the man's eyes said he understood.

"Truth serum," Monk explained, indicating his fist.

"Benedict trying to help—Doc Savage," the victim muttered, scared. "Someone called him about man—named Renny. So they—have gone after—Benedict!"

The man slumped and became almost unconscious.

Lean Johnny appeared worried—if that were possible. He always looked like a pallbearer regretful because the corpse wasn't twins. "I'll be superamalgamated," he said. "Someone ought to help Benedict. He helped get Monk out of the brig."

Johnny was suddenly shaking the dazed man again. "You know where Jesse Benedict lives?" he demanded.

The man nodded weakly. "Big shore estate. . . coast . . . near Marblehead."

The bony geologist swiftly stooped over, hefted the crook to his shoulders. For a man with such a broomstick physique, Johnny handled the man easily and without apparent effort.

He said, "Then you and I are going to Benedict's. We're going to fix a nice reception for those pals of yours." Johnny looked at Monk and Ham. "I'll take the plane. You two better find Doc. Maybe he needs help."

Ham agreed. He watched Johnny leave and turned to speak to Monk. "Listen, goofus, round up the gopher-hunting pig of yours and we'll—"

He stopped, looking around. The lawyer shot a flashlight glow around the scene of the recent battle. Tall grass was trampled, weeds were uprooted, and small trees were bent at angles.

Chemistry, the ape, was rubbing a bruised nose, squatting near Ham.

But there was no sign of hairy Monk or the pig.

Ham yelled, "Hey, Monk, you nitwitted dunce! Where are you?"

Echoes of the lawyer's voice bounced from the nearby building walls. Then silence, thick, sinister, settled over the gloomy village street.

There was no answer.

YET Monk was not far away. He was trailing the little witch, Hannah.

Just as Johnny had been ready to depart with his captive, the dazed thug, Monk had caught a vague glimpse of a dark-cloaked figure. And so he had remembered the scraggly-toothed old hag who had led them into a trap. The witch!

Ordinarily Monk did not scare easily. He enjoyed nothing better than a good scrap. Yet he did not

like this witchcraft business. It worried him. He had a vague remembrance of things horrible while he himself had been slightly bewitched this very morning. He knew, dimly, that he had experienced something that he could not recall to his mind now. It puzzled the chemist.

Thus he was determined to catch this old witch creature who had so mysteriously appeared—and disappeared. She knew something about Doc. Furthermore, Monk had another motive in mind.

He would rather be stalking the witch than having her trail him. And there was that evil-looking black cat—

The hairy chemist had thought he had seen something move across the dusty road, near one of the row of old houses. He had trailed around to the rear of one of the frame buildings, and there he had seen a cellar door standing open. Monk still had his flashlight. He switched it on.

Habeas, the long-legged pig, was making small snorting sounds as he poked his long snout around near the open, slanting, basement door. He climbed down two steps and sniffed some more. He looked up at Monk as though to say, "Boy, I've got something here!"

Monk, his curious nature working overtime now, followed the pig down the short flight of steps and into a dank, oddly smelling basement. The odor puzzled the chemist, for instead of being the foul smell that should accompany the scene of littered cans, decay and oldness everywhere, it was not unpleasant. In fact, it was the sweet, heady fragrance of rare flowers.

"That danged witch didn't smell like this!" Monk thought. He trailed Habeas across the basement room. Signs of age were everywhere. Heavy moss grew on the damp walls; overhead, flooring sagged on worm-eaten beams.

But there was nothing old-looking about the modern padlock on the door just ahead. Habeas had paused at the foot of the door and was doing some interested sniffing.

Monk was staring at the padlock. It was unfastened, and hanging in the hook. The hasp to the door was open. Someone, the chemist knew, had recently entered this room beyond.

"The pixies be damned!" Monk muttered and swung open the door.

In the flashlight glow a strange sight met his gaze.

The place was about three houses long and one wide. It reminded the chemist of an underground mushroom cellar. But mushrooms never smelled like this.

The big room was in reality a hothouse. Overhead were strung odd-looking sun lamps, apparently operated by a portable generator outfit that stood in one corner of the room. There was the rich odor of freshly turned earth.

But more striking were the neat rows of unusual things growing in the underground basement. Monk rubbed his little eyes and stared.

Before him were orange trees, hung heavy with ripe fruit. He moved along an aisle and saw something else that made him gawk.

A pineapple patch in full bloom!

In another carefully cared-for space were rare orchids with their delicate coloring.

Monk blinked his eyes, shook his head and stared some more. "Dangdest thing I ever saw!" he piped. Then he looked suddenly worried. He remembered the omen: Never answer to your name after dark! He recalled that he had heard Ham calling after him as he had wandered off searching for the witch.

"Blast it!" Monk said worriedly. "I'll bet I've gone and got hexed!"

He was certain of it a moment later, when he wandered farther into the strange cellar and saw the person asleep in the chair.

The figure was that of a girl, and she was hauntingly beautiful in sleep. Long, dark lashes curved above the clear white skin of warm-looking cheeks. The slender, trim figure half reclined in the deep chair was that of a goddess.

Monk sighed and shook his head. "Yep," he said, "I'm hexed! She sure couldn't have landed that plane down here!"

The sleeping girl was the millionaire's daughter, June Knight.

Chapter VIII. JAIL OF DOOM

MONK was flabbergasted. He took a step closer to the slumbering girl, cocked his head sidewise, stared.

He said, "Blast it, it can't be!"

He rubbed his eyes again, pinched himself. He took another hesitant step forward and touched the girl's arm. Sure enough, she was there all right.

The chemist saw the small bunch of pretty red flowers lying loosely in the girl's limp, tapered fingers. He swung to look at the pet, Habeas.

The pig was sitting near the girl's feet looking too, and if the expression on the shoat's face meant anything, it said, "Yeow! Ain't that gal something, though?"

The hairy chemist's greatest ambition was to tangle in a fight. His greatest weakness was pretty girls. The one so peacefully sleeping before him was about the loveliest creature he had ever seen. Monk leaned forward once again and touched her, still not quite convinced that he wasn't dreaming.

The girl opened dark, lovely eyes, gave a little start, then sat erect. A warm smile touched her beautiful face.

"Darling," she said softly, "I've been looking all over for you!"

Monk jumped.

"I-er-what-" he started, and then he grinned. He forgot that just twenty-four hours ago, he had been ready to "bop" lovely June Knight on the nose. He forgot, also, it was this girl who had led him on the merry plane chase to Cotton Mather Brown's potato patch. Monk suddenly forgot everything save that June Knight was smiling at him bewitchingly.

She stood up, tall and slender and nicely curved. She took a step forward, laid cool hands on Monk's yard-wide shoulders and breathed sweetly, "I've been so worried about you, pet."

Monk gulped. He grinned. He looked like a moon-struck boy of twelve with a case of puppy love. The chemist threw out his barrel chest and said, "I always told that good-for-nothing shyster that some day the right girl would come along!"

June Knight suddenly took Monk's massive hand and said, "Come, darling, we shall go and tie the black bows on the beehives. That will keep the evil ones away. And then—"

Monk gave a start. His homely face turned a pale shade of green. He gawked at June Knight and stammered, "Wh . . . wh . . . what the—"

"Then we must go back to that hospital and find out why that awful nurse ever let you escape," the dark-haired girl rambled on. "What on earth has ever happened to your face, Miles, darling? I picked some flowers for you, but perhaps lilies would have been better. Besides—"

Monk was suddenly goggle-eyed.

"Miles?" he squealed. "Say, you called me Miles!"

Romantic thoughts in the homely chemist's brain abruptly exploded like dropped light globes.

"Lookit, lady," he said worriedly, "you wouldn't be mistakin' me for that fellow Miles Billings, would you? Because I ain't him!"

But the girl with the disturbing dark eyes had suddenly pushed the small bouquet of red flowers up beneath Monk's nose.

"Smell," she offered. "Aren't they lovely lilies?"

Monk got a good whiff whether he wanted to or not. He pushed the flowers away and gripped the girl's slender arm as he started hurrying her out of the strange basement hothouse.

"Bewitched!" he was mumbling. "Wacky as a gollawhoppus!" And, to the girl, "What do you mean, lilies? I'll betcha those things are poppies. They sure look like poppies to me. I never saw any red—"

He paused, passing a hand across his brow. He felt slightly lightheaded.

Monk looked intently at the girl, then propelled her more swiftly forward.

"Say!" he piped. "We're gonna find Doc Savage. There's somethin' danged mysterious goin' on around here!"

The homely chemist's own announcement brought a startled expression to his small eyes.

"Blazes!" he finished, his head throbbing, "you got me feelin' funny too!"

THE jail where Doc Savage was being held prisoner could not have been a better place in which to keep him hidden.

Because it was the last spot where anyone would have looked for the bronze man. The jail was seldom used. About once a month a drunk or a bum was given a night's free lodging. Anyone seeing the bronze giant now, anyone who had never heard of Doc Savage—if that were possible—would believe that another drunk was just awakening with a bad hangover.

Doc got up from the hard steel bed, weaved around the small barred room a few times, then stood clutching the thick bars and staring out dazedly into the outer, larger room.

He murmured something about "Pixies. The pixies are after the black cats. We should—"

Doc broke off, mumbling.

And outside the small cell the tall, lean man of the sandy hair laughed. It was the gunman who had covered Doc Savage from the hut rafters in the woods. He had a few moments ago entered the outer cell room from the kitchen, and was standing watching the bronze man.

Through the partly open doorway came the sound of hard voices talking. A man came in to join the light-haired man called Willie. This second gunman had fresh scars on his face and a bandage across one ear.

He glared at Doc Savage and snarled, "Damn you! It's a good thing you're behind them bars, bronze guy!"

Doc still was mumbling senselessly.

Willie, rubbing at a bruised jaw, commented, "It's a good thing for you he's behind those bars, punk! But shut up. I think he's gonna talk. The stuff's workin'."

Whatever it was the two were expecting seemed about ready to happen. They moved closer to the cell, at the same time keeping out of arm's reach.

Willie asked, "How much do you know about this case, Doc Savage?"

For a moment the bronze giant seemed to be trying to fight off the effects of whatever had taken hold of him. Small veins stood out on his metallic features. Muscles corded in his throat and his unusual gold eyes were terribly bright.

Then a greater force seemed to overpower him and he started talking again. "Three crows flying over the house mean bad luck," he mumbled. "Look out for the little black cats with bob tails."

"Nuts!" exploded the mean-looking thug with the bandaged ear. "It's workin' too good. You ain't gonna learn a thing from that guy!"

But Willie tried again. He asked questions about the girl, June Knight. Tried to learn just what suspicions the bronze man held concerning the mysterious happenings.

Doc stared out of glazed eyes and muttered, "You shouldn't work on Fridays!"

"Hell!" snapped sandy-haired Willie. His face suddenly looked evil.

"Well, that's that," he continued. "Anyway, I don't think he knows much. What he's gonna know in about ten minutes from now will be less than that." He laughed queerly.

Willie's partner looked startled. "You mean, the—"

He motioned downward.

"Yeah," said Willie. "That dynamite the township's got stored in the cellar is all set. They'll think rats set it off, see? Accident." He looked at Doc Savage and grinned. "This bronze fella will be blown all the way to Witches' Hollow! The stuff's all ready. All we gotta do is set a fuse and then scam."

Laughing, the two men went back to the kitchen, closing and locking the outer room door behind them.

IN the littered kitchen, other men waited. They were the tough-looking henchmen of Willie, and all had bruised jaws and swollen eyes. None looked very pleasant about the fact.

"Well?" asked one, "Did that one-man hurricane talk yet?"

"Sure," said Willie. "But he's balmy as a squirrel. We ain't gonna get anything outta him."

"Think the bronze guy knows anything?"

The one with the bandaged ear laughed uproariously. "What he knows now he's gonna tell to the angels. So why worry?"

He looked at sandy-haired Willie, received a nod and quickly disappeared down a stairway to the basement. There was the sound of heavy cases being moved.

Willie did next an unusual thing. He went to a closet, took out boots, faded denims, cowboy hat and six-guns in fancy holsters. He pulled at the hair on his head and the straw-colored wig came loose, revealing his natural black hair. He put on the cowboy clothes, stepped to a mirror nailed to the kitchen wall and pulled a black walrus mustache from his shirt pocket. He carefully glued the mustache in place.

Turning, he said to the others, "This outfit sure has fooled a lot of 'em."

Willie hardly talked like the hick constable, Milt, but he certainly was the same person.

The man who had disappeared into the basement popped up hurriedly from below.

Willie, now the constable, asked, "All set?"

His helper nodded.

Willie said, "Now we go to take care of that bird, Renwick. We'll locate the others later. We at least know where Renwick is."

"But what about you?" someone asked. "Some damned hick might see you with us—"

"I'll take the flivver," Willie said. "You guys cut through the woods and pick up the regular car. I'll meet you later."

Willie's helper was looking nervous. He had already started for the door, exclaiming, "You blokes better cut out the gassin' and get to hell outta here. That dynamite sure is gonna make a ruckus in about five minutes."

Willie followed the others toward the back door. Passing the closed door beyond which was the bronze man locked securely in the cell, he grinned and jerked his thumb at the closed panel.

"Almost wished Doc Savage was in his right mind," Willie commented. "Then he could appreciate this!"

And going out, he added: "I'm goin' to serve me a summons up in Salem Corners, so I'll have an alibi."

The tall man who was now garbed as the constable, climbed in his dilapidated car and drove hurriedly away in the black night. The other men lost no time in snaking for the woods and putting distance behind them.

It wasn't five minutes later that the prison of Doc Savage blew up. It was exactly four. The building went up with a great whoosh, and red glare lit up the dark sky for miles around. One of the crooks running through the woods some distance away was knocked flat on his face. Wind was stirring the trees, and it had been a still night.

Another thug said dryly, "Boy, somebody oughta page Fred Allen and tell him there won't be any Town Hall tonight!"

Chapter IX. STRANGE MEETING

SEVERAL miles north, just south of the old ghost town, Monk and the girl of the disturbing dark eyes saw the red glare against the dark sky. The homely chemist heard the explosion.

His head was still throbbing, aching queerly the way it had this very morning when he had acted so strangely. But he was fighting off the odd feeling now, trying to conquer it.

The faint blast some distance away didn't help any.

He piped shrilly, "Hope that noise wasn't inside my head!"

Monk and the girl were tramping southward on the dusty, deserted road. There had been no signs of

Ham or the witch, Hannah. Though he would never admit it, Monk was worried about his dapper partner. Habeas, the pig, trailed along behind them.

June Knight had still been talking strangely. But slowly, as Monk flicked his flashlight over her features from time to time, the dazed look seemed to be leaving her lovely face. Once she had exclaimed quite sensibly, "Gracious, where are we?"

"Looking for that boy friend of yours—Miles Billings," the chemist had offered.

June Knight gripped Monk's brawny hand tightly, exclaiming, "But Miles, darling, don't be silly!" Monk sighed. "Oh, well—" he started, and let it pass. For he rather liked the idea of holding hands with June Knight.

They met Ham just coming out of the side road that led to Cotton Mather Brown's truck farm. The well-dressed lawyer was accompanied by the runt ape, Chemistry. Habeas, at Monk's side, made a dive for the chimp and there threatened to be a small war before the pets were separated. Like their masters, the pets were continually wrangling.

Monk had jumped forward to help, leaving the girl standing in gloom. Ham was complaining, "You prehistoric throwback, where've you been?"

The chemist grinned. "I found her in the cellar."

Ham misunderstood. "You mean the witch?" he prodded.

"Heck no," said Monk. "I mean the bewitched—"

Exasperated, Ham roared, "Well, which witch, dunce?"

Just then June Knight stepped forward into the arc of Monk's flashlight glare. Quite sanely she said with a smile, "Oh, it's the handsome gentleman I met in Doc Savage's New York headquarters!" HAM gave a start at sight of the girl again, quickly recovered his composure and bowed gracefully. The two shook hands and Monk glared, speechless.

Monk knew that you could never figure women. Blast it, here a moment ago this girl had been apparently bewitched. Now she was as normal as himself. Funny how dames could straighten out when they took one good look at the ultramodernly dressed lawyer.

Not to be outdone, Monk pushed forward and gripped the girl's arm. "Yes," he said significantly, "we're trying to find Miles Billings. You better keep looking for Doc, Ham."

Ham didn't fall for his partner's suggestion. Instead, he smiled warmly at the girl and said, "Monk had me going there for a moment on that bewitched business."

"Yep," Monk interjected proudly, "I'm on my way to becoming a great wit."

The dapper lawyer sniffed disdainfully. "Correct," Ham agreed, and Monk's chest swelled.

"You're halfway there already!" finished Ham.

Monk scowled. "Listen, shyster, that has all the earmarks of being a dirty crack. For two cents, I'd—"

Arrival of scrawny-looking Cotton Mather Brown, still looking as though he had not removed the flopping straw hat and patched overalls in several weeks, temporarily delayed the fight about to start.

Cotton said, "Say, does Doc Savage have a roadster?"

Ham nodded.

"With one of them streamlined hoods, and painted gray?"

"That's right," Ham agreed.

"Well, I reckon it's gone then," said Cotton picking at his teeth with a length of straw.

"Gone?" squealed Monk. "Where was it to begin with?"

"At the Witches' Church, earlier this evenin'. But it ain't there now, brothers. An' I want to see Doc Savage; I figger I got some news fer him."

"News?"

"Yep. That Hyacinth, that blasted no-account helper of mine, has located Miles Billings."

The girl, June Knight, gasped. Slender fingers flew to her throat. "Oh, thank heavens!" she breathed faintly. "Where?"

"Down yonder in the holler," explained Cotton. "Hyacinth sent a kid from a neighboring farm high-tailin' up here with the news. He—"

"But what is Miles Billings doing down there?" asked June Knight.

Cotton hesitated a moment. Then he blurted, "Attendin' the witches' meetin'!"

THE "holler" was the swampy section just north of the ghost town, the place called Witches' Hollow. Monk and Ham, with the girl, were driven there in Cotton's farm-produce truck. Habeas and Chemistry, the pets, fought over an ear of corn as they rode potato sacks in the back of the truck. Apparently June Knight was quite sane now. Ham questioned her briefly about the mysterious disappearance of both herself and the fast plane.

June Knight explained, "I came down in a small field just beyond where we were now. And I practically rolled into a meeting of some terrible men."

"Terrible?"

The dark-eyed girl nodded, shuddering. "Gangsters—the toughest kind. They took my plane, but I managed to escape through the woods."

Monk complained, "I don't get this. The town's dead, the people what ain't in it are dead, and yet as soon as you start somethin'—well, bingo!—up pops a gang of plug ugliest. Them birds never

lived around here. Looked like they escaped from Alcatraz. Damndest thing I ever saw!" Cotton put in, "Never seen the likes of it." Then he went on chewing his piece of straw. Monk told about the witch and ending up in the strange basement. He looked at Cotton. "You ever seen that cockeyed place?"

The scarecrow-looking truck farmer looked frightened.

"No, siree!" he said quickly. "There's been talk about that danged witch bein' up to crazy things, but you don't get me prowlin' around no cellars in this town!"

At that very moment they were passing along the gloomy street of the deserted mill town, and Cotton Mather Brown drove as though seven devils were after him. They drew up beside the road a few moments later. Cotton indicated deep woods.

"Me, I'm not stayin'," he said. "But you'll find a path leadin' through there that'll take you to the holler. Watch out for the bogs. Them witches, they say, meet down there."

Suddenly, above the sound of the rattling truck motor, came a long, mournful "Whooooo!"

Cotton could hardly wait for the others to pile out. "Hear that?" he asked.

"Sounds like an owl to me," offered Monk, but his eyes belied his words.

"They say as how that's the Screechin' Lady!" exclaimed Cotton. He lost no time in getting the truck turned around and leaving.

June Knight's eyes were bright. "Nonsense!" she cried. "If Miles is down there, we've got to find him."

Ham took the girl's arm and started along the path, using a flashlight. Monk and the pets followed dubiously, the homely chemist saying without confidence, "Sure, this witchcraft stuff is a lot of hooley."

But there didn't seem to be any hooley to the weird scene taking place in the clearing which they shortly came upon.

It was a setting not unlike viewing a strange cult ceremony in darkest Africa.

Standing stiffly still, peering through trees at the edge of the fire-lit clearing, it was June Knight who whispered breathlessly, "Good Heaven! It . . . it's black magic!"

THE two aides of Doc Savage and the girl saw the altar made out of huge flat slabs of stones. An altar, at the foot of which blazed a great fire. There was something lying prone on the sacrificial bier, and it appeared like a human form.

Surrounding the long slab, sinister and terrible-looking in the night, were black garbed, still forms. At their head, slightly behind the spot where the human figure's head was resting, stood a smaller person. It was the half-toothless old hag, Hannah. Gripped in her left arm was the coal-black cat, and the creature's gaze captured the fire's glow and cast it back like two evil eyes. In Hannah's right hand was a knife, partly upraised.

There was a chanting sound coming from Hannah's lips. From time to time she paused, and when she did so, those of the surrounding figures chanted in unison.

Ham said softly, "Monk, we've got to stop them. You circle to the left; I'll take the right. That guy on the slab—they're going to—"

June Knight choked back a scream with her knotted fist raised to her curved lips. "Oh!" she moaned. "Perhaps—perhaps it's Miles Billings!"

Ham patted the girl's arm reassuringly. "You stay here. Watch these pets that they don't get ideas and spoil our attack. There's plenty of time. Those devils are just working up to this ceremony."

Monk had already started off beneath the concealing trees. Ham moved silently in the opposite direction. Each aide held one of the machine pistols that all Doc Savage's men carried.

Ham reached a spot directly behind half of the cult members facing one side of the long flat slab of stone. He inched forward cautiously watching for some vague sign of Monk's appearance on the far side of the red-lighted clearing. Shortly, Monk's squat figure appeared.

And Ham went suddenly cold.

For behind the homely chemist stalked other forms—more of the black-cloaked cultists, closing in on Ham's partner and cleverly bottling up the chemist. The lawyer held back a cry of warning, wondering if he could attract Monk's attention in some other manner. At the same time, on some hunch, Ham turned—and saw a similar group of advancing figures behind him!

Across the clearing, June Knight screamed.

MONK and Ham went into action at the same instant.

A machine pistol went off with a roar. Monk started bellowing. Abruptly there was a whirling, swaying tangle of billowing black cloaks, arms, legs, and Monk's swinging fists. Jaws cracked. Grunts exploded. Men went flying.

Ham, quick-footed, as lithe as a panther, wasn't doing so badly himself. The pistol was clubbed from his left hand, but his thin sword blade came up in his right and heads started ducking out of the way.

Hannah, the witch, had been standing on a small pedestal watching the fight. She cackled gleefully, "Hey! Hey!"

She suddenly jumped down, ran toward the spot where Monk was trying to down five figures all at once, and her hand shot toward the hairy chemist's broad back.

Monk's massive arm shot around in a great sweep, knocked Hannah flying into nearby thick undergrowth. There was the sound of the witch snapping oaths, picking herself up and fleeing through the enshrouding foliage.

Across from the fighting group, there were no further cries from the spot where June Knight had waited.

Monk abruptly realized that he was flailing at the empty air with his huge fists. He stopped. Stared. The burly chemist became aware that everyone was gone, including the girl and the two pets. The chemist looked worried, bellowed, "Ham!"

There was no reply.

Ham, it appeared, was missing too.

A moment later something burst out of the surrounding woods. Something with arms and legs, and a voice. Only the little fellow was panting, sucking in big gulps of air and having difficulty getting out words.

He spluttered, "Ah-ah-ah-" And finally, "Damn!"

Monk had found his flashlight, dropped during the fight; also his machine pistol. He pointed both light and gun at the panting figure and started to snap, "Say, who-"

Then he lowered the weapon and snorted in disgust. For the excited arrival was the cocky little bantamweight, Hyacinth.

Hyacinth's little dark eyes were bright beneath the derby that must have been salvaged from an ash can. He said, "You know what, brother?" He came close to Monk and stuck out his little jaw. Monk glared. "I know plenty!" he said shrilly. "What was this dang-blasted business about a witch ceremony here? Cotton said you sent back word-"

"Sure," said Hyacinth. "The damned witches had Miles Billings, that engineer." Hyacinth worked his thin shoulders that looked like a wire coat-hanger beneath the too-big coat. "The damned crowd of them was too much for me, an' I went back for help. Guess I missed you, brother. But damned if I-"

Monk looked disgusted. "Damned if you don't make me wanna paste you one, squirt!"

The hard-boiled little helper of Cotton Mather Brown grinned. "Say, you!" Then he stared around the clearing, said suggestively, "Where's Billings?"

"Billings?"

"Sure, nitwit, the guy they were ready to sacrifice."

Monk stared at the stone slab where the victim had been tied down. It was bare.

Hyacinth looked suddenly pugilistic. "Look, brother, it might be a damned good idea if we got busy tryin' to find them birds." He started off quickly toward a path that cut through the deep woods. Monk leaped to follow, the light in his hairy hand.

They saw tracks through the still-damp undergrowth, the marks of many feet that had stamped through here. They followed the smeared marks for perhaps a quarter mile, came abruptly on the bog. Little Hyacinth drew up with a jerk, leaped back and motioned the hairy chemist away from the spot. He said in his cocky little way, "See that, fella?"

Monk did not have to look twice. His little eyes were wide. "Quicksand," he offered.

"Damn right," said Hyacinth. And then, "An' you don't see those tracks goin' through it either, do you?"

It was true. The jumbled mess of foot tracks ended abruptly at the bog's edge—as though men running, excited, might have plunged right into the place before realizing its terrible menace. Monk groaned. He was thinking of his partner, Ham; of the lovely girl, June Knight. And also of his pet, Habeas.

Hyacinth stood rubbing his little jaw. He pushed the battered derby to the back of his head. He looked thoughtful, his small eyes squinting. "Seems as though there was somethin'-" he started. "What?" Monk prompted, dully.

"Somethin' I damn well wanted to tell you."

Hyacinth was fumbling around in his coat pocket, the patched coat that dangled around his skinny little frame like a flapping awning. Finally he got his hand untangled from his pocket and stood holding something.

He said, "I met Cotton when I ran back lookin' for you birds. He told me about the explosion at the jail. He says that blasted hoosegow was blown to hell an' gone."

Monk remembered the red glow he had seen in the sky, and the sound that he had thought was in his head. But right now he was more worried about Ham and the girl, and his pet.

"Hell with it," he said, uninterested. "Long as I wasn't in it."

"But that bronze guy friend of yours was," said Hyacinth. "Cotton found out, somehow. He said-"
Monk gave a startled cry. He started trembling. His massive shoulders suddenly slumped.

"Doc . . . Savage . . . was in that . . . jail?" he asked haltingly.

Hyacinth held up the broken piece of red brick in his hand.

"Yep," he said. "And this is all they've found of that damned clink!"

Chapter X. DAWN AND DISASTER

AT midafternoon of the following day, in a small cove near the Forest River in the vicinity of Salem, a sleek-hulled white yacht lay gently rocking with the motion of slight ground swells. There

was no breeze. It was hot. Few boats were about.

But below decks of the yacht there was activity. Men were hurrying along a passageway. They stopped before a cabin door and one said, "The dame's in here, Slug."

"Slug," it appeared, was a flashily dressed, pale-eyed man with a lot of protruding jaw.

He snapped, "That damn hellcat tied up?"

One of the men laughed. It could be seen that his face was ridged with fresh scars—like those made by clawing fingernails. "Hell, yes!" the scar-faced man said. "Me, I go for the wrens with lotsa fire!"

"Well, Willie's comin' down to see her. I betcha he makes her talk!"

Oddly, none of the speakers looked like sailors. None were dressed as seamen. And they talked like hoodlums who had never been any closer to the sea than on a Staten Island ferry.

Willie came down the passageway and the others stepped aside. Willie was the hick constable, Milt, only now he was back in his make-up of sandy hair and clean-shaven features. Willie was rubbing bruised knuckles.

He said with a growl, "It took four of us to strap that damned Renwick to a bunk. Wouldn't surprise me none if he even tore that loose! Where's the dame?"

"In there, boss." Someone indicated the closed door.

The group followed tall Willie into the cabin.

The luxurious cabin was decorated with old rose and ivory, and the furnishings must have cost a small fortune. Every piece of furniture was a thing of beauty.

The girl tied in the chair was beautiful too.

She was June Knight, lovely daughter of the Boston millionaire, Mortimer Knight.

Willie started to say, "Now, girlie, you're gonna tell us about—"

Dark-eyed June Knight screamed. Opened her mouth, threw back her head and gave an imitation of an Iowa hog-calling contest. The cry was enough to shatter eardrums.

Willie grinned. "Holler your damned head off," he said. "Ain't no one can hear."

The girl stopped, her face red. Her dark eyes blazed as she cried, "Where's my father, you devils?"

Someone said with a laugh, "Guess!"

"Well then," said June Knight breathlessly, "where's that nice gentleman who works for Doc Savage—Ham Brooks?"

There were more laughs. Willie explained, "That guy's with the big boss. He's being well taken care of. I'm not the boss, lady, but you damned well better tell us about Dawn, or it ain't goin' to be pleasant. The boss, he don't fool!"

June Knight's eyes looked vague. "Dawn?" she asked.

The smile was gone from Willie's hard features. He stuck out his jaw and growled, "Quit your damn stallin'! You know what we mean—Dawn! Now, where is it?"

Something that slowly crept into the depths of June Knight's lovely eyes gave away the fact that she understood. It was fear. She started to tremble, her slender, trim body straining against the cruelly cutting ropes.

She said with emphasis, "You can—go—to hell!" Her small, firm chin came up defiantly. Then she added, "Doc Savage is helping my father. I'll bet he knows whatever deviltry you scoundrels are up to. How you ever got control of my father's yacht, what in the world you were ever doing in a deserted little ghost town—well, Doc Savage will find out!"

The last was almost a scream as June Knight trembled with anger.

Very quietly, Willie announced, "You can save your breath, bright eyes. An' you better start talkin' about that Dawn."

Then, with vivid description, Willie briefly explained about the dynamiting of the Town Hall, of what had happened to the Man of Bronze. He finished, "So Doc Savage has departed this earth—via the airways." He laughed nastily.

The others laughed also.

"So now you better tell us about Dawn!"

June Knight's eyes had suddenly misted. Her chin quivered. She stammered, "You say—Doc Savage—is—dead?"

From the doorway behind the group, the strangely vibrant voice said, "You should have kept a lookout on deck."

DOC SAVAGE hardly looked as if he had been in an accident. He was the same giant of bronze, and his flake-gold eyes were cold.

For a brief instant the men in the cabin stood open-mouthed. Then they moved! Yelled. Jumped. Went for guns.

Someone bawled, "He—he's alive!"

But no one moved as swiftly as the bronze man.

He shifted sideways, and as he did so his hand flicked outward. A small, thin glass ball struck the rug beneath the feet of the milling thugs. It was broken by a heavy shoe. Immediately, Willie's excited henchmen started gasping and staggering around in circles. They seemed to lose all interest in trying to get out their guns. Two fell down; another followed suit.

To the girl, tied in the armchair on one side of the cabin door and somewhat apart from the staggering men, Doc said quickly, "Hold your breath."

Doc said this rapidly, then was seen to hold his own breath as he ducked clear of a leaping man with a clubbed gat in his big fist.

The flying assailant never reached the bronze giant. His dive continued in a headlong plunge to the floor, and he lay still.

For the small glass ball contained a harmless, but quick-acting anaesthetic gas. The men would be unconscious for some time, though the gas dispelled and became harmless after a moment. Since the gas was invisible, the men had not known enough to hold their breaths.

In a moment the bronze man's great chest expelled air and he looked at the girl. "It's all right now," he reassured her.

He moved to June Knight's side, and trained fingers worked deftly. Soon she was free, and she stood up, flexing aching muscles. She said in awe, "I-but-of course I've heard you're a very unusual person, Doc Savage. Yet they said you had been killed."

The girl's eyes were wide.

Doc did not take time for explanation. He indicated the unconscious men, said, "They will be out for several moments. Are you afraid of a gun?"

June Knight's lovely dark eyes brightened. "If I had had a gun earlier—" She looked coldly at those who had captured her.

From a pocket, Doc Savage took a small revolver, passed it to the slender girl. "It might be a good idea to keep them covered," he explained. "I'll be back in a moment."

He hurried out.

ALONG a passageway, dark at the farther end, aft, someone was coming toward the bronze man, just around the bulkhead. Moving with smooth precision, Doc flattened against the wall, grabbed a burly figure who came into view.

The man was over six feet, and thick through the shoulders. He had been jumped on in dark alleyways before, and he knew how to scrap.

His fists struck out as he snarled, "Say, who thinks they're grabbin' who?"

That was about all the big fellow said. His fists found empty air, something like an air hammer connected with his jaw, and then steel-like fingers were seeking a spot at the back of his thick neck. Seconds later the man was unconscious.

Doc Savage had used a certain nerve pressure that would render the bruiser helpless for some time. There was no time for arguments now. Doc needed each precious moment.

He eased the limp man to the deck, pushed him to one side, continued swiftly along the passageway.

Before a cabin door that showed scratches, a split panel, Doc paused. These things were indicative of the battle two-fisted Renny must have put up before he was subdued. Likewise, Renny must be tied up in this cabin.

Doc went inside. Seconds later he was helping the towering engineer from the bunk. Renny gave a bull-like snort of relief.

"Holy cow!" he bellowed. "They said you were dead, Doc!"

The bronze giant explained briefly about Monk being placed in the Town Hall jail, about how Monk had almost shaken down the cell bars. He told of his own capture.

Apparently Doc had not been a victim of the queer-acting, bewitching trouble that had stricken Monk. Because of his great vitality he had managed to fight off the thing. But to Willie and the others, Doc had pretended he was dazed. They had left him to be killed in the explosion.

Doc explained that the moment they had left him, he had removed a cell bar, already loosened by powerful Monk, and had escaped through a window of the outer cell room. For the time being, Doc had wanted to let the others think him dead.

Doc looked at the big engineer now. "Can you remember anything?" he asked.

"You mean about me being bewitched?"

The bronze man nodded.

Renny shook his head. "Damndest thing," he said. "I woke up in my car somewhere near the shore. About fifteen mugs piled on me and I ended up here." The engineer stared gloomily at Doc Savage.

"Doc, what is this all about?"

The bronze man's metallic features were thoughtful. "Apparently," he said, "it concerns pineapples, orange trees and a strong-arm squad working for some big shot."

Renny looked quickly at Doc, the perpetual frown on his big features. "Doc," he asked, worried, "you sure it hasn't got you too—" The engineer stopped, rubbing thoughtfully at his own brow. "I seem to remember something about queer plants—and—" Renny gave up.

"It is gone, I guess," he finished.

Doc Savage said, "It's not as crazy as you think. Before trailing you here, I visited the ghost town. Perhaps we now know something about why the superhighway must be stopped."

Renny brightened. That is, if you could say his face ever did that. His solemn, puritanical look always made him appear like a beaten politician the day after election. Yet his dark eyes had now shown renewed interest.

"Then what is it—" he started to ask.

But the girl's scream, muffled, from somewhere forward, put an end to anything Doc might have been going to say.

DOC was out of the cabin first, followed by the giant engineer. Three burly thugs were running down the narrow passageway, straight for the Man of Bronze. The first assailant swung a huge fist. Doc side-stepped and let the three men hurl into Renny. The engineer never looked more solemn. His monstrosities of fists started swinging at jaws. Many hours later the three attackers woke up and asked vaguely what reef the yacht had struck.

Doc had reached the girl's cabin. Apparently the men with Willie had recovered from the gas quicker than the bronze man had figured, for there were still two men, besides Willie, in the room; and they were struggling with pretty June Knight over the gun. One man had a dirty paw clamped over the slender girl's lovely mouth.

June Knight bit, clawed and kicked. She had plenty of courage.

Doc Savage picked up the two holding the girl, banged their heads together once, then dropped them. He swung on tall, sandy-haired Willie.

But Renny had entered the room, picked up the fake constable and was getting ready to jam the man's lanky form through a porthole.

A closet door opened in the cabin, the snout of a machine gun protruded into the room, covering the bronze man and his aide, and a harsh voice snarled, "We kinda thought this trick would work!" And in the cabin doorway behind Renny and Doc, more men appeared with guns.

The man seated behind the machine gun inside the closet said with a grin, "This baby sure can do a lot of bewitching, misters!"

He patted the menacing barrel of the heavy weapon.

Doc and Renny were quickly tied up.

The girl was struggling in the arms of two captors. One man snapped, "Now I guess we'll get back to that business about Dawn. Come on, talk!"

But June Knight's small chin set grimly. "I'll die first!" she flared, dark eyes bright.

Doc and Renny were lying prone on the floor, helpless.

Just then a man stuck his head in the doorway, announced, "Just got a message from the big boy, Willie."

Willie turned, said quickly, "Yeah, what?"

"They've located the girl's old man in Boston. He was found on Boston Common—bewitched." The speaker grinned. "He told about Dawn, so we're to shove off and get down there kinda quick."

Willie looked back at the girl, smiled thinly. "So that's that," he said.

He gave brief orders to the others. "We pull up our hook at dark. Take the captain outta the brig and make sure he's manacled. He's gonna navigate this tub and like it."

Someone asked, "But what about this bronze guy an' the—"

Willie started for the door. "They're goin' to do some swimmin' with lead weights," he said, grinning.

On the threshold he paused, adding, "I'll bet no one will ever try to put a highway through that town again!"

Chapter XI. MYSTERY IN BOSTON

AT ten that night, the bronze man and Renny Renwick were dumped overboard from the yacht.

First, lengths of heavy chains had been secured around their ankles. Their wrists and legs had previously been bound with ropes. Some time after dark, Doc and the big engineer were carried on deck. It seemed that all preparations were ready for a short quick trip to Boston Harbor.

Willie and his hard-faced henchmen had cared not about discussing their plans before Doc Savage—since he was going to die, anyway. The girl was still being held captive for any information that might be needed from her. Likewise, it appeared the captain and a few crew members were being held prisoners by the gang.

So under cover of darkness, and as the white yacht eased out of the cove, Doc Savage and Renny were picked up and pitched into the coastal waters somewhere south of Salem.

A harsh laugh drifted back over the water as both weighted victims disappeared in a boil of froth. Then the surface became smooth again.

Doc Savage, upon cutting the water, made no effort to struggle. Instead, just before being dropped overboard, he had taken a tremendous lungful of air. The bronze man had long practiced exercises in lung development. Pearl divers are known to be able to hold their breaths for several minutes. Doc Savage could go without air twice as long as the best pearl diver of the South Seas. He let his body be carried downward by the lead weights—down—down—until he struck the muddy ooze at the bottom of the inlet. He was perhaps in about eighteen feet of water. There was quite a little pressure, and he had to work carefully to conserve his energy.

His feet, ankles went into the slimy mud. Instantly the chains slipped somewhat. Doc was already bent double and jamming his wrists into the ooze at the same time. In a few seconds he had worked the ropes loose from his hands. Then he pulled carefully at his ankle bindings. The chains were hardest to get off, for they could hardly give like the ropes had.

But the bronze man was adept at "escape" tricks. He had once duplicated each feat of the famous

magician, Houdini. In exactly one minute and a half, he was free.

Doc grabbed at Renny's thrashing figure, near him. The big engineer had not been as calm about his predicament as Doc Savage. He had already used up stored air in his lungs when Doc grabbed him. Grabbed him with a hand over Renny's nostrils and mouth, so the big fellow would not swallow water. Then, even though the engineer was still weighted, Doc's powerful legs kicked out and they shot toward the surface. One hand still grabbed Renny. The other hand and arm scooped water downward and Doc's legs worked like mighty paddles. Seconds later they broke the surface and the bronze man released his hold on his aide's mouth and nose.

The sound Renny made sucking in good air was like a foghorn warning of hidden reefs.

Shortly he spluttered, "Glu-glug-holy cow!"

Doc advised, "Lie on your back. Try to pull your feet up. This won't be easy."

Doc Savage had rolled over on his own back, gripping the two-hundred-and-fifty-pound engineer with one arm. He struck out for the shore in a powerful life-saving stroke, knowing that he could not possibly loosen his aide's bindings and chains until they were ashore.

It was a long pull, and Renny's weighted feet had a tendency to drag him down again. Yet the bronze man did not seem to tire. In fifteen minutes he was pulling the engineer out onto the sand of a small beach.

In the distance, out across the water, the riding lights of the white yacht were fast disappearing in the gloom.

LATER—the warm night air had soon dried their clothing—Renny led their search for his big car.

The machine, as Doc explained, was needed for a quick trip to Boston, less than an hour's ride away. They located the limousine, similar to Doc's own, parked beneath low-hanging trees on a lane that led down to the shore. Keys had been removed from the ignition, but Renny drew another set from his pocket. It was a precaution that the bronze man trained his men to take.

Soon they were hitting seventy toward the main highway that led into the Hub City. Renny was curious about several things which had so far happened. Also, he had overheard talk of something called Dawn. He could not figure out how that was connected with the mystery of the ghost town.

Doc said, "It appears something is going to occur in Boston that is tied up with this bewitching business. And June Knight has been taken there on the yacht. Thus it will be best to pick up the trail from that point."

"But Monk and Ham—" Renny started.

"With Johnny, looking for Miles Billings, the engineer originally employed by the girl's father," explained Doc. "We'll contact them later. We should reach them on their plane, or else in the roadster—if they have found it. Someone took it from where it was parked by the Witches' Church." Doc explained about the trap which had been set for him in the shack hidden in the woods.

The bronze man, of course, did not know that Monk and Ham had run into trouble at the cult meeting, or that skinny Johnny had gone to see Jesse Benedict, who was trying to help them.

Doc, as was often customary, fell silent. He was driving, since he knew this section well, and soon they were rolling along a highway bordering Massachusetts Bay, at Revere Beach. Thence into East Boston, following the elevated into Atlantic Avenue and past North Station.

A moment later they pulled up at a Coast Guard station near the Boston waterfront.

Inside, the bronze man was immediately recognized. He described the white yacht of Mortimer Knight, told how it had been stolen from the cove near Salem.

"It should be close to the harbor at this moment," finished Doc.

Renny stood looking around solemnly.

The coast guard officer hurried to accommodate the bronze man. Shortly, he had contacted a flying boat that covered ship movements along the adjacent coast. Yes, the pilot reported, Mortimer Knight's yacht, the Spray, was only a few miles north of the harbor at the present moment. It should dock in half an hour.

The alert-looking officer turned to the bronze man, asked, "If there's trouble, do you want the Spray seized, sir?"

Doc remembered the girl, June Knight, who was being held captive aboard her father's boat. He shook his head, though he explained about the boat being manned by crooks. "It would be best," Doc went on, "to let them think nothing is wrong. Allow them to dock. We'll be back here in a little while to learn what berth she is entering."

The coast guard man saluted, for he had heard of Doc Savage's methods, of the bronze man's capabilities. He figured Doc Savage could handle this situation better than himself.

Doc led the way back to the car, stated, "We might try to reach Mortimer Knight. Those men on the yacht were saying something about his being found wandering on Boston Common."

"Yeah, and bewitched too," offered Renny.

At nearby Scollay Square, they located an all-night cigar store. Renny went inside to phone, since, whenever possible, the Man of Bronze tried to avoid publicity. Just stepping from the car would have immediately attracted attention to the bronze giant.

Renny was back shortly, announcing in his booming voice, "Say, Doc, they got Knight in a hospital out in Back Bay! I called his home, and a servant told me. But at neither place would they say what was wrong. They seemed damned mysterious about everything, and—"

At that moment a newsboy passed, and the youngster was yelling something about, "Huxtry! Huxtry! All about the Salem witches! Read about--"

Doc leaned out of the car, procured a paper, saying as he did so, "Perhaps we're too late." Doc did not explain his remark.

Black headlines in the evening edition explained the newsboy's cry. They read:

MILLIONAIRE, APPARENTLY BEWITCHED,
FOUND ON BOSTON COMMON

Mystery Surrounds Wealthy Mortimer
Knight's Condition.

The article, covering two columns, went on to state that Mortimer Knight had been found by police wandering on Boston Common, apparently out of his head, jabbering senselessly about pixies, black devils, cats that pulled down trees, and witches who would not die.

Newspapermen had discovered that Knight was in a Boston hospital, but had been refused admittance. They had learned, regardless, that doctors were puzzled by the millionaire's illness. Renny said, "Holy cow! Doc, I was one of them goofy talking men for a while. But that was up there on that highway project. How it ever hit anybody down here in Boston--"

"Obviously there is a connection."

"But--"

"The talking is not as silly as you think," Doc said quietly.

Without further explaining his remark, Doc put the big car in speed and headed back to the coast guard station.

Inside the office, the officer in charge looked up from a radio control switchboard. His alert features were worried.

"It is quite mysterious," he said.

"Mysterious?"

The man nodded. "When last sighted, the Spray was heading in for Boston Harbor. But it has not arrived. It seems that she has suddenly completely vanished!"

Chapter XIII. PROWLERS IN THE NIGHT

RENNY had waited in the car.

When the bronze man came back to announce the yacht's disappearance, the gloomy-looking engineer seemed preoccupied. He merely gave a casual "Oh" in response to Doc's statement. Then he went back to tensely scanning an inside page of the newspaper which they had just bought.

"Funny," Renny murmured absently.

"What's funny?" prodded Doc.

"About the guy in Detroit."

Doc Savage took the paper and noted the column that his aide indicated. The news item had not been given the space the article about Mortimer Knight had, yet it was set off to catch attention. A caption read:

DETROIT BANKER SUFFERS
A STRANGE AFFLICTION

Well-known Financier Talks
Vaguely of Witches

The item below the subhead told about one Martin Woods, a wealthy bank executive, who had been found in a dazed condition wandering near his palatial home out in fashionable Grosse Point. Oddly, details of the banker's illness were similar to those mentioned about Mortimer Knight, in Boston. And yet in the Detroit bewitching case, the man had finally stopped his foolish talking and was apparently cured--only to state that he had absolutely no remembrance of what had happened to him. He could not recall a single thing about what he had said while apparently bewitched.

Doc Savage murmured musingly, "It's something big."

"Huh?" asked Renny, looking up from the newspaper article.

"Bigger than we think," added Doc.

"But--"

"Did you ever hear of Dawn?" the bronze man said.

The engineer scowled. "Why, yeah. Those mugs on the yacht said something about her."

"She

is not a woman," put in Doc, "though we must admit she is very beautiful."

Renny looked startled. "Now listen, Doc," he said patiently, "you haven't had much sleep lately. Perhaps you'd better--"

Doc smiled. "I'm all right," he said. Abruptly, he started the car and headed back toward Atlantic Avenue. Doc seemed to have arrived at some decision.

"We are going to have to work fast," he explained. "First, we'll call Pat."

"Pat?"

The bronze man nodded. "I'll need the fastest plane we have. Also some truth serum. Pat can bring both up. In the meantime, you search for that missing yacht and June Knight. Then you might try to

locate Monk and the others. I'll join you later."

"But I don't understand—" Renny started to say.

"It is quite misleading," Doc admitted, though not making any explanations. "Yet it all connects. We'll have to hurry."

The bronze giant had parked before North Station, and he was climbing from the limousine. "You'd better wait until we see if Pat is at her shop," Doc advised. "Then you can take the car. Pat can meet me here in Boston."

Doc moved swiftly, yet without attracting undue attention, toward a side entrance to the big station. It was late anyway, and few people were about. The bronze man located a row of empty phone booths in a side corridor.

Soon he was connected with Pat's beauty shop in New York. Pat's shop catered to a Park Avenue clientele. Pat herself was the bronze man's cousin, and quite beautiful. Outside of her shop interests, her greatest ambition was to be involved in one of the Doc Savage adventures. Only this happened too seldom to suit the vivacious Pat.

Doc got his cousin on the wire, informed her of the need of his fastest plane and the truth serum. He mentioned other items. The girl, thrilled, promised to be at the Boston airport within two hours.

Just before hanging up, Doc advised, "No need to try and break your neck. Hold that plane down to two hundred."

He went back to the car.

Renny's massive figure was hunched over the car radio transceiver. Excitement showed on the engineer's puritanical features. He said in his bull-like voice, "Doc, I've contacted Monk!"

Doc Savage stood quietly listening to the piping voice coming from the loudspeaker.

"Lookit, Doc,"

the chemist blurted excitedly, "I've found your car. You'll never guess where! An' I've learned somethin'! Blazes, you know who is behind this? Well, it's—"

Suddenly there was a growled oath. Then noise and struggling sounds coming from the speaker. The racket which followed sounded like a giant press clamping down on steel and smashing it like an egg crate. Then again, it might have only been Monk in action.

Renny yelled into the microphone, "Monk?"

Suddenly there was silence. Tense, ear-straining silence.

Monk's radio had gone dead.

THE incident convinced Renny that things had started to occur with flashing rapidity. He realized that the bronze man was impatient to cover some angle of the mystery which he had not explained. Doc was already hailing a cab, parked a little distance behind them.

To Renny he directed, "Monk should be able to take care of himself. Right now it is more important for you to locate June Knight. Drive along the shore, cover every inlet and cove." A brief smile touched Doc's metallic, smooth features. "And this time," he added, "don't get bewitched." The big engineer looked grim as he wheeled the powerful car off into the night.

In the cab Doc gave the address of the Boston hospital where Renny had said Mortimer Knight, the Boston millionaire, was being treated in secrecy.

At the hospital a desk clerk said, "Sorry, but no one can see Mr. Knight. If you'll leave your name—"

The clerk had been looking at the bronze giant with a little awe, yet he had been quite emphatic about no one seeing the patient.

"The name," Doc said, "is Clark Savage, Jr."

The desk clerk seemed to have swallowed an egg. His face reddened, he jerked to his feet and blurted, "I—ah—not Doc Savage?"

The bronze man nodded.

The man could not act quickly enough to escort Doc to an elevator. He had often heard of the bronze man's reputation as the world's greatest surgeon. Other accomplishments of Doc Savage were known to him.

To the elevator operator he said emphatically, "This is Doc Savage, to visit Mortimer Knight. The hospital is at Mr. Savage's disposal!"

Doc was swiftly taken to the stricken man's room.

Several grim-faced doctors had been holding a consultation at the foot of Mortimer Knight's bed. They were perhaps the best doctors obtainable in Boston. Recognizing the Man of Bronze, they nodded respectfully, stepped to one side and permitted Doc to speak to the millionaire.

The man in the bed did not look ill. His eyes were sharp and bright. Mortimer Knight was a small, alert little man with tremendous energy. He had never known a sick day in his life. Only by observing closely could it be seen that there was a slight expression of vagueness in those black eyes now.

The millionaire was stirring restlessly in the white bed, mumbling jumbled words to himself.

Doc spoke. The tone of his voice, though very quiet and low, had a strangely magnetic quality. It carried distinctly to every corner of the room, and was compelling, vibrant.

"I am Doc Savage," the bronze man said. "It is quite important that you try to concentrate."

Otherwise Dawn will be stolen. Try to think. Where is Dawn? We are trying to help you."

The sharp eyes of the millionaire came to rest on the bronze man's face. He said ramblingly, "The specters that beset her were all veiled. Turn around three times, jump over the wall backwards. Thank God you got my message. They've got the plants in square pots, but-but Dawn is in the vault and you must put the horseshoes on the four corners of the barn--"

The consulting doctors were shaking their heads sadly at Knight's senseless prattle. Oddly, the bronze man was not. He was leaning forward, his features as immobile as a statue's. Only his unusual flake-gold eyes moved, and these were strangely thoughtful. From time to time Doc prompted with a quiet, "Yes? Yes, go on."

Doc listened to the talking man a few more moments. Then he leaned forward and, handling the millionaire gently, turned him over on his stomach. Doc Savage's hands went to Mortimer Knight's neck and started massaging certain nerve centers below the ears.

The bronze man's hands were large, well-formed, and they had been known to snap a steel cable with a twist. But now they worked gently, swiftly, and soon no further jargon came from the millionaire's lips.

Doc straightened, looked steadily at those so tensely watching him, and announced, "In the morning he will be all right. But you might give him a sedative to relieve his mind of the terrible strain."

"Strain?"

Doc nodded. He had already stepped toward the door.

"Yes," he finished. "Loss of a half million dollars should be a strain on anyone!"

He went out.

IT was well after midnight. The cab in which Doc Savage was riding skirted the Botanical Gardens and came to Boston Common. Doc said, "You may stop here."

Doc climbed out, handed the man a bill. The driver squinted out of narrowed eyes, asked, "Say, aren't you--"

Then he was talking to empty air. The bronze man, moving smoothly, silently, had disappeared beneath old trees that bordered the spreading, hilly lonesomeness of the historical spot.

Doc Savage desired that not even the cab driver know his next mission. Because it was to be a forced entry into one of sedate Boston's wealthiest homes.

The great stone house sat atop Beacon Hill and was surrounded by a high, spiked iron fence. Beyond the mansion a hill slanted downward toward the Charles River. A high gate in the iron fence was padlocked.

Moving swiftly, Doc trailed the fence to where it cut beneath enshrouding trees. Then, with powerful, adept movements, he climbed one of the lancelike spikes, balanced carefully atop the fence, and next dropped to the lawn inside.

The silence of the night was thick everywhere.

The mansion was in darkness. Doc was soon beneath a window casement on one side of the stone walls. The ledge of the window was well above his head, but the bronze man sprang upward, reached it easily, pulled himself up with no effort. His sharp gaze scanned the heavy sash.

As he had expected, Doc Savage found hidden wiring that would set off an alarm the moment the window was tampered with. But from the special equipment vest beneath his coat, Doc removed a small instrument. The device was one of the bronze giant's own invention. Placed close to the sash, it kept the alarm system from being set off when the window was forced open.

Doc Savage was inside a richly furnished room a moment later. From another pocket the bronze man had taken odd-looking goggles, which he placed over his eyes. Then using a special flashlight, he flicked it on and examined the long room carefully.

Strangely, the flashlight gave no evidence of the bronze prowler's presence. Using a black light ray, it outlined objects only to the person wearing the special glasses. Doc was able to see without being seen.

The vault door was behind a huge wall painting at one end of the room. There was a lock combination and quickly Doc Savage was working at it with deft fingers. Ordinarily, a safe expert would have taken half an hour to feel out the tumblers of the heavy vault, to get the storage place open. But so highly trained were the bronze man's senses that he had the vault open in five. He stepped inside, still using the black light-scanner.

Then, after a moment, there came a musical sound that filled the outer room like some lingering, far-off note of an exotic bird. It was the trilling tone that Doc Savage made in moments of distress--or perhaps startling discovery.

The vault door was heard to close. Silence enveloped the big room. Somewhere a clock ticked steadily, faintly.

Sometime later--perhaps half an hour had elapsed--a buzzer rang somewhere deep in the back of the mansion. A moment later it sounded again. Then for a while there was silence.

Then there was the scuffling sound of slippered feet coming down the wide front stairs, of someone going to the front door.

The man was grumbling, "Damndest people. Waking a body up at this hour!"

A chain was released, there was the sound of the door opening.

The nasal, snarling voice grated, "See this, friend? You just try yelling and see what it gets you!"

Chapter XIII. WITHIN THE VAULT

OPENING a front door in the face of a leering gunman in the middle of the night is something to think about. When there are three more men standing with guns behind the caller, it is enough to start knees knocking.

Alvin, the frail-looking butler in the Mortimer Knight residence, stood frozen, opened his mouth, closed it, then finally managed to blurt, "Mercy!"

By that time two men had pinioned his arms, tied them behind the butler's back.

They marched him back through the hallway. The other two stockily built partners moved, as though by prearrangement, to a position just within the library archway. Each of the four gunmen was cool-eyed, grim, deadly calm. They weren't the kind of excited mobsters who get hopped up on dope and commit one or two spectacular robberies and then get caught. These fellows, it was evident, knew their business.

The two holding the butler pushed him toward the hall stairs. One snapped, "There are three more servants, in the house. They are asleep in rooms at the rear of the third floor. You will knock on each door, call them one at a time."

The speaker raised the gun in his fist threateningly. "Or maybe you want us to do it for you!" Alvin stammered. "I-I'll do it!"

They took him upstairs. Shortly they returned with three other persons, all gagged and with their wrists tied behind them. Along with Alvin, the three sleepy-eyed others were marched into the large library.

Already the other two rodmen had drawn shades over the high windows and turned on the room lights. Not the brightest ones, but two or three soft-glowing bridge lamps that cast sufficient glow for their work.

The large vault, the door closed, was exposed. The painting that automatically slid before the vault when its door was closed, had been moved to one side.

One of the gunmen—a fellow a little taller, a trifle uglier-looking than the rest—ordered, "Lie down!"

The servants lay on the floor. Then their ankles were tied with cords pulled from some heavy drapes. Alvin, the skinny butler, was the only servant not gagged. To him, the leader growled, "O. K., friend, spill it. What's the combination of this crib?"

Alvin's teeth were chattering. It took him moments to get out words. He stammered, "D-d-don't know it!"

"The hell you don't!" The speaker kicked the prone man in the face.

Blood dribbling from his mouth, the butler cried, "Lord help me, I swear I don't know! Only—Mr. Knight himself has the combination, and—and he's in the hospital—"

"You're telling us!" one of the gunmen snapped.

The leader—whose face looked like nothing more could ever happen to it—jerked his chin toward the vault door, said to one of his men, "Nick, see what you can do."

Apparently Nick knew his business. The way he started reaching for the knob with slender, sensitive fingers attested to this. But suddenly he paused, gripping a dog arm used for pulling open the heavy door.

He announced, "Hell, it ain't even locked!"

Nick's three partners moved quickly to his side, in front of the vault.

Someone swung open the door.

Doc Savage, a giant framed by the blackness of the vault behind him, said, "We figured you would be looking for Dawn."

THE startled gunmen remained stock-still for perhaps ten seconds. They were the kind of men who did not scare easily. But the appearance of the giant bronze figure was something quite different from any other kind of surprise they'd ever faced.

Doc, when standing apart in the center of a room, did not look big. This was because of his symmetry of development. But framed in the vault opening, it could be seen that his great shoulders reached from one door edge to the other. His head scraped the top of the vault, and the storage chamber was eight inches over six feet high.

Ten seconds—and then the four thugs clawed for guns. But that brief interval had been their doom. For something more blinding than ten flashlight bulbs going off at once suddenly hit them in the eyes. A sheet of blue-white brilliance. Each man's hands involuntarily flung up to protect his vision.

Doc Savage had thrown a small object containing a special form of magnesium. The dazzling light followed.

And in the instant of hurling the bulb, Doc's own eyes had closed. He was not blinded, and he swung forward with smooth, precise movements.

There was no commotion, no terrific struggle. Two gunmen, upon being able to focus their gaze on various objects again, found themselves lying helplessly on the rug. They could think, but were temporarily paralyzed.

Two others never recalled getting back their sight. They were out cold.

Doc stooped to release the house servants. Alvin, the frail-looking butler, gasped, "Oh, thank you, sir! Mr. Knight spoke of you once. You—you're Doc Savage, aren't you?"

Doc nodded, explained, "I was almost too late. These men"—indicating the thugs on the floor—"are part of a very clever organization. A gigantic ring that plans to clean up millions. They planned to steal Dawn."

Alvin stared. "Good heavens," he asked, "is—is it all right?"

Doc indicated the vault room. "You might take a look," he offered.

Shortly, with the help of other servants, Alvin had carefully brought a huge painting from the vault. It was uncovered. A strange silence fell over the room as the servants looked at the work of art.

Dawn was one of the world's greatest paintings. It was the canvas of a child looking toward the rising sun at daybreak. The coloring of the painting was a thing that had never been duplicated. Something about the expression on the boy's face, the painting as a whole, seemed to give it life. Looking at it, the canvas held the observer spellbound.

In the seventeenth century, Dawn had once been stolen, to be sought after for many years by wealthy collectors throughout the world. Doc Savage knew that only recently Mortimer Knight had located and acquired it—at a price rumored to be well over half a million dollars.

Few persons knew of the finding and the purchase of Dawn. Apparently no one had known where it had been kept. Yet an attempt had been made to steal it tonight.

To the butler, Doc said, "Replace it in the vault until tomorrow. Then your master can decide where he wants to keep it."

Alvin looked worried. "But, sir," he exclaimed, "Mr. Knight is in the hospital! Besides, another attempt might be made to steal it and—"

The bronze man had moved toward a desk phone. He said to the butler, "Your master will be home tomorrow, cured. Tonight there will be a police guard for the vault."

Doc called police headquarters. Mentioning his name, he was immediately put through on a private line to the home of the police commissioner. Moments later he had explained about the painting and given his request for its protection.

Doc also mentioned the four helpless gunmen, asked that three be held at headquarters. The fourth, Doc was going to take with himself, to try to make the man reveal who was the brains behind their organization. This was the one of the ugly face.

Fifteen minutes later the police had arrived and taken over. The crook leader with the ugly face was still unconscious. This was merely a temporary condition induced by the bronze man's pressure on certain nerves in the neck.

As Doc explained, "There is no time to question him now. We are due at the airport within fifteen minutes."

A sergeant had already explained that a police car had been placed at the bronze giant's disposal. A few minutes later Doc was being driven rapidly toward the East Boston airport. The unconscious crook was being guarded by another officer in the rear seat.

The police driver ever after that talked of how he broke all records in driving Doc Savage to the bay-front landing field.

DOC SAVAGE had figured that he would catch the waterfront airport ahead of his cousin Pat. But he was mistaken. Pat was there first.

She stepped from the passenger waiting room as the police car skidded to a stop. As Doc stepped from the touring car, Pat said, smiling, "You're late!"

It was hardly two o'clock, and moonlight.

The bronze man glanced off to where an all-metal craft stood out on the flying field. It was a single low winged job of streamlined construction. Three radial motors were housed in gleaming cowlings. This was the speed plane of Doc Savage.

A police officer, staring at the fast-looking plane, whistled. "I'll bet that baby can step!" he breathed.

To Pat, Doc said, "Let's hope the motors are still left in that ship."

Pat had made the trip from New York in an hour.

The police driver was already lifting the unconscious gunman from the car. He was having a time handling the dead weight, and Doc stepped forward. He hefted the gunman to his shoulder as though he might have been a grocery package, said to the car driver, "Thanks for your aid. We are taking this fellow in the plane."

"If there is anything else we can do—" the officer started.

Doc paused, Pat at his side. "There's one thing," the bronze man said. "If you pick up any more bewitched men—such as Mortimer Knight—broadcast the fact on your usual police short wave. This plane will pick it up. It is quite important."

"Yes, sir."

Doc climbed into the cabin of his speed ship, deposited the helpless gunman on the floor, motioned lovely Pat forward. Controls were at the front of the cabin. Two mechanics were waiting outside and aided in getting the plane started. Two moments later Doc was in the air.

Pat, her face bright with excitement, exclaimed, "It must be a dream. Usually I have to crash these adventures of yours, my fine cousin. You might explain."

Most men would have been willing to explain anything to Pat Savage. A tall girl, gracefully slender, she had the unusual bronze hair and complexion of the bronze man himself. The same flake-gold eyes. She was quite striking.

Doc merely said, "Apparently your friends Monk and Ham have tangled with some witches. Also Johnny. They—"

Pat giggled. "Were they about twenty-two and blondes?"

"It is not as funny as you think," said Doc quietly.

Something in the bronze man's tone quieted Pat. She fell silent, studying the coast line visible beneath them through the cabin windows.

Oddly, the plane made little sound, for the three motors were equipped with silencers; there was lack of the usual air scream. Under two hundred miles an hour the speed plane was practically noiseless.

This worked to Doc's advantage now. For he suddenly dropped low, barely skimmed the water along the edges of big Massachusetts Bay. The bronze man sought out the more lonely sections away from summer colonies and beaches.

He was seeking the missing yacht *Spray*, the boat on which June Knight was still a captive.

Switching on the speed plane's short-wave transceiver, tuned to a specific wave length as were the radios in all Doc's mobile equipment, the bronze man tried to contact Renny.

There was no reply.

PAT watched quietly. Once she pointed a slender hand over her shoulder, asked, "Who's the awful-looking menace you are dragging along?"

Doc explained, "We hope he will tell us something about the witches."

The girl gave Doc a sharp, puzzled look. "You really sound serious about that," she commented.

All Doc said was, "It's serious enough to mean millions—unless we can stop it."

Suddenly he was peering intently downward. Plane motors had been slightly idled, and the ship skimmed like a silent comet over a particularly desolate, broken stretch of shore line. A sleek white yacht, without lights, lay at anchor in a sheltered inlet.

Soon Doc had set the ship down in a small field slightly inland. He adjusted the throttle until the motors idled silently, slowly.

He said to Pat, "You wait here. In case anything should happen, get away from here as fast as you can. Take the prisoner back to the Boston police."

Pat looked exasperated. "Darn!" she cried. "I might have known. Every time there promises to be excitement—"

She stopped. Doc was gone. Pat was talking to the empty air.

Moments later Doc took off his coat at the water's edge. He retained his equipment vest, which was waterproof. A little way offshore was the yacht, and moonlight whiteness distinctly outlined the ship's name.

It was the *Spray*.

Soundlessly, smoothly, Doc's powerful arms cut the still water in long, easy strokes. When he reached the yacht's side, he trod water a moment, listening. He heard no voices, saw no lookout. And yet he knew that a gun could be easily trained from a darkened porthole.

He swam silently to a ladder and climbed to the deck. Silence brooded over the darkened yacht.

As though the boat were his own, the bronze man moved unerringly into a cabin, through a saloon, out on the deck again and past shuttered cabins. Quickly, as silent as a wraith, the bronze figure covered the ship from stem to stern.

He found it absolutely deserted. No crew, no girl, no menacing gunmen aboard. Nothing!

Chapter XIV. MONK IN TROUBLE

ONLY one detail about the priceless yacht puzzled the bronze man. This was a scene he had found at the ornate bar of the main deck cabin. He returned there now.

The place looked as though a sniper had gone to work on the back bar with a machine gun. Not a bottle remained intact. Cocktail glasses, shelves, fruit bowls and everything else was smashed to bits. A huge plate-glass mirror behind the mahogany bar lay about like pieces of a mammoth jigsaw puzzle.

There was only one person in the world who could accomplish such complete havoc.

Doc thought of hairy Monk.

He examined the ruins closely, was ready to give up and depart when some vagary of the moonlight, angling in through the cabin windows, drew Doc's sharp gaze to a single piece of plate glass that had not been smashed entirely.

The glass lay on the deck, and there was blood smeared over part of it. But there was something else. Any other person would have overlooked it, but the bronze man's unusual senses, his marvelous eyes, brought him up tense.

Then he was bending down, at the same time removed an object shaped like a small lantern from his special vest. He focused the object on the piece of broken mirror.

The lantern employed an ultraviolet light, and when focused on writing made with a special

invisible chalk of Doc's own invention, the words became as clear as though written with ink and paper.

Scrawled words leaped up before Doc's gaze now. A message that read:

DOC- GIRL TAKEN TO No. 22. LOOK OUT FOR THE GUY WITH THE WHITE-

The message was uncompleted, though the writing was Monk's own. Doc's metallic features were thoughtful. Two things in the urgent sprawl suddenly tied together two separate incidents in the bronze man's mind. Two facts that made definite a supposition which Doc Savage had hit upon. He returned to shore as quickly as possible. First, he must find Monk and the girl. That was urgent. Then there was something else-

PAT was still in the plane, but she was far from sitting tapping her foot impatiently. She was seated in a chair of the cabin, a small gun in her fist, her eyes cool and sharp as she talked to the figure at her feet.

The ugly-faced gunman had awakened. His ankles were bound, his wrists still tied-but vivacious Pat was taking no chances.

She looked up as Doc entered the cabin, said disgustedly, "He won't talk!"

The man took his sneering gaze from Pat's face and looked at the bronze giant. He said, "What's the idea?"

Doc said quietly, "It will save a lot of trouble if you'll tell us who is behind all this. Not the figurehead, but the real brains."

"The hell with you!" rapped the captive.

Doc watched the man silently a moment. Finally he said, "No. 22 would be as good a place as any to start, would it not?"

Something flickered for a fraction of an instant in the man's cold eyes. Then he pretended ignorance of what Doc was driving at. He clamped his lips tight.

Doc said as though satisfied, "We thought so too."

He got behind the controls and soon they were in the air again. It was only a matter of a few moments' flying time back to the ghost town. Circling the old village once, Doc saw no signs of life whatsoever. The place was a drab, gloomy place in the white moonlight.

Yet the bronze man thought of Monk's note, of the house known as No. 22. He himself had visited the house after his escape from the jail. And Doc, too-as Renny had when first driving through here at night-had found this one in the row of old frame houses, mysteriously boarded up with steel-shuttered doors and windows-a veritable fortress that defied admittance.

Doc set the speed plane down in a field beyond the weed-filled main street, made certain that their captive was bound securely, and hopped out.

Pat followed.

The bronze man said, "There perhaps will be trouble."

Pat grinned. "Trouble? Looks like the only thing that could worry you around here are the spooks of old Salem."

"That's the trouble," stated Doc. But he said nothing further when Pat trailed along.

He located house No. 22, climbed the rickety steps of the old house which Renny himself had found so impregnable. Doc sought one of the unusual steel shutters-

And found, instead, broken windowpanes, a door that sagged open on rusted hinges.

A slight breeze whispered through the wide-open house like a goblin's sigh. It was empty.

AND yet there were occupants in the old house known as No. 22. For one, there was attractive, dark-eyed June Knight. The place where she was being held prisoner was similar to the queer-looking cellar of another basement in this old town. There were the same rows and patches of rare flowers, tropical fruit trees, orchids and what not.

At one end of the room was a heavy steel door that seemed to lead to some kind of office. The door was closed. But from time to time men went inside, stayed a moment, came out again.

The men were the grim-faced partners of Willie, the tall fake constable. Willie was standing over June Knight now as she lay bound and helpless on a cot along one wall of the basement room.

"Know why we're holding you?" demanded Willie icily.

The girl did not answer, but merely glared.

Willie's eyes hardened. "You're goin' to mail this box of candy to that rich girl friend of yours-with a personal note inside. That dame named Eve Anderson, the one with all the jewels! Savvy?"

June Knight struggled against bonds, said in a steady voice, "That's what you think!"

Enraged, Willie bent swiftly forward and smacked the girl's face with a heavy palm, snarling, "You defiant devil!" He turned to one of the men, ordered, "Slug, untie this dame."

Slug was the one with the flashy clothes and pale eyes. He grinned and replied, "It's a pleasure, boss, a pleasure."

Across the room, in a knot of burly thugs that suddenly swayed and struggled, there was sound. Bellowing oaths. Yelps of pain as shins got kicked.

The other captive was Monk.

The hairy chemist, hearing the resounding slap on the girl's cheek, went berserk. The men-it took five to hold the chemist-had been tying Monk down.

And now, abruptly, they found a raging gorilla in their hands. Monk's massive arms came up, elbows out, and the cords holding his wrists suddenly parted with a snap. His ankles were tied, but smashing out with his rock-like fists, Monk bowled over two thugs, fell forward, rolled, at the same time twisting his powerful legs furiously. Cords broke and the chemist reared to his feet.

With a yell that shook the basement walls, Monk broke free of the group, picked up a length of water pipe lying in the dirt, and started smashing heads. A grin suddenly spread over his homely features. Monk yelled, "This is where I'm gonna get even for gettin' hexed!"

Two thugs went down. Another, Lanky Willie and his aide known as Slug leaped in to help their partners. The quarters were too close to use weapons. The crooks might shoot each other. Racket, yells, filled the basement hothouse.

It was only June Knight, left alone, who noted the strange thing at the heavy, vaultlike steel door that was the entrance into this room. Somewhere near the bottom seam of that steel door, there was a flash of intense light. A short strip near the casement seemed to burn away. There followed the appearance of a puff of almost colorless gas. It wafted into the room, spread quickly, enveloping the fighting mêlée of men. Others went down. Soon Monk was all by himself, whirling in a circle with the heavy pipe in his huge fists. He let out a disgusted roar.

"Blazes!" he said. "Just a bunch of sissies!"

June Knight screamed, "Monk, look out! It's going to get you. Gas!"

The chemist saw the mistlike gas, jumped back, leaped toward the slender girl and picked her up swiftly. He went rushing toward the office door near one end of the room, brought up against it with a thump.

The door was locked from the other side.

And behind them there was another flash of the intense light. It moved along the steel-door edge, across the top, down the opposite side. The steel door started falling inward.

Monk, his small eyes wide, yelled, "That's thermite. It could burn through any steel!"

The heavy door hit the floor, knocked up clouds of dust, and the bronze man, followed by Pat Savage, stepped into the room.

Doc said quietly, "Changing numbers on these houses was hardly an original idea."

MONK yelled, "Doc!"

And then, seeing Pat Savage, he set down June Knight and grinned. The hairy chemist liked the bronze man's beautiful cousin immensely.

Monk said, "Pat, I been wondering how you were—"

Pat had taken in the situation of Monk-holding-girl and her words were chiding. "You look like you've been wondering," she said to Monk. "Or do you call that just keeping in form?"

Monk's face reddened. He blurted, "Now look, Pat, you got me wrong. This is—er—June Knight. I—" Introductions were finally made after Monk got words past his thick tongue.

Doc was holding tablets of deep-blue in his hand. He passed them around, suggested, "These counteract the effects of the anaesthetic gas. Better take one."

Then Doc Savage turned to look at the sleeping men. The gas Doc had used was harmless, generally taking effect for about fifteen minutes. Administration of one of the large blue tablets then would bring the victims completely back to normal.

While they were waiting, Doc tried the closed office door that he had seen Monk slam against as he entered the basement. The door was not as solid as the one which Doc had unsealed with thermite powder. He merely moved slightly away from it; then, with flashing speed, slammed against it with his shoulders.

The door caved inward and Monk followed Doc inside.

It was an office, and lining every wall were shelves with small glass jars containing hundreds of types of seeds. Doc studied various labels on the bottles, then turned to charts lying on a desk top. There was also a stack of reports. These the bronze man scanned through briefly.

One sheet in particular held his attention for several moments. When he put it back down, his flake-gold eyes were quite thoughtful.

Monk, poking around the room, looked puzzled. Finally he grumbled, "Doc, there was someone in here before, because those mugs out there kept comin' in and out, and there was talkin'—"

Doc nodded, motioned overhead. "Yes," he said, "but whoever it was must have escaped through that ceiling trapdoor."

The chemist stared. He had completely overlooked the emergency exit.

From the doorway, June Knight said worriedly, "My father—"

"—is all right," Doc explained. "He will be at home sometime today. Dawn is safe, also."

The pretty girl came swiftly forward, eyes bright, a slender hand touching the bronze man's arm.

"Oh, thank you!" she breathed. "How you ever escaped from a death in the ocean is beyond me, but you did—and I think you're wonderful!"

For once, Doc's metallic features showed other than a bronze color. All women fell for the bronze giant, but Doc never reacted to this emotion. He respected women; he was always first to aid a woman in distress. But because of the adventurous life he led, because of the continual danger, he had once vowed never to ask a woman to share that danger with him.

Monk, grinning, commented, "Dangit, what's wrong with me?"

Dryly, Pat put in, "You're too anxious!"

They went back to the large outer room.

WILLIE and his partners were stirring on the floor. One man sat up, rubbed his head, asked vaguely, "Wh-what happened?"

Monk, in his squeaky voice, said, "What's gonna happen to you birds is more important!"

The chemist, looking around, found a roll of baling wire, then helped bind the victims as Doc administered one of the large blue tablets to each man. All except Willie were trussed up. The sandy-haired fake constable was dragged to his feet by Monk and shoved before the bronze man. Doc said, "You men are going to be sent to a place where special brain operations will make you forget the past. You will no longer lead lives of crime. If possible, you will be fitted for a life work of some value."

Willie sneered.

"Another group in your organization has been seized in Boston. When the police are through with them, they will receive similar treatment. Perhaps, then, you would prefer to talk."

Willie did not look scared. Obviously he had never heard of the bronze man's "college," in upstate New York. At the "college," criminals were given a special brain operation that wiped out all memory of their past lives. They were fitted for worth-while work. Hundreds of crooks had already been treated there.

But Willie only stuck out his jaw and rapped, "Hell with you! You ain't stoppin' this outfit, bronze guy. I'm only a small part of it. Hell, the big boss has everything. An' he works from a place you'll never guess. Has fast boats, planes, cars—" Willie shrugged. "Al Capone was a piker compared to this guy. Just wait'll he gets rollin'! He—"

Monk was suddenly gripping Doc's arm, his own forehead wrinkled as he said, "Doc, there's something I've been tryin' to remember. It musta happened while those dang pixies had me hexed. It's something about a guy with a car—"

"Carnation?" Doc finished.

"That's it!" Monk piped. "If I could only remember who that bird was." He looked menacingly at Willie.

The crook was no longer sneering. He seemed to be standing strangely tense, almost worried about something.

Doc, surprisingly, said, "It won't be necessary for this man to talk."

From the doorway that Doc Savage had burned down with the thermite, the voice said, "You're damn right it won't!"

Gun blast knocked against the walls.

Chapter XV. HANNAH AGAIN

THE shot missed the bronze man's head by inches. It probably would have struck had not Doc Savage moved with flashing speed in the moment before the weapon blasted. Some instinct of his trained senses had warned him. He had whirled and pushed the two girls to the floor, out of harm's way. Then he whipped toward a figure that had leaped toward the exit.

The man was Willie, escaping, and the one covering that escape from the broken-down door was the ugly-faced captive from Doc's own speed plane.

Monk howled and ran after him also, only to be intercepted by Doc and thrown to one side. Seconds later, both crooks had vanished outside into the night and nearby surrounding woods.

"Let him go," said the bronze man quietly.

"But—"

"We should have thought more about the one who escaped from the small office downstairs.

Obviously, he is the person who released the captive in the plane."

Still the hairy chemist looked upset.

"But," he protested, "that mug Willie can tell us who the big boy is. He can also—"

Doc nodded quietly. "Willie is probably headed for that place now. He can be captured there—later."

"But where—" started Monk.

"There is one man," explained Doc, "who has known the movements of each of you since the beginning. He probably also is responsible for the disappearance of Miles Billings, the engineer. In fact he was right with you, Ham, and Johnny for-a short time, and obviously knew almost your exact plans. It was quite natural, then, that he should lead you right into his trap."

Suddenly Monk's eyes were wide. "I remember now!" he piped shrilly. "The guy with the carnation in his—"

"—lapel," finished Doc. "That man is Jesse Benedict."

THE girls had come from the basement, were beside Doc Savage. It was June Knight who exclaimed, "Not Benedict! Why, he's worth millions. He's a leader in society there at Marblehead. He has that beautiful coast estate, and is—"

Doc nodded, his face calm. "And he is also a crime king extraordinary. That estate of his veils a mammoth crook ring operation that has fooled even the Federal men. It must be smashed."

June Knight, lovely dark eyes puzzled, stood with a hand over her lips. "It's unbelievable," she whispered. "It does not make sense. Why should Benedict, therefore, want to stop such a project as a

superhighway through this lonely section? Also, why should—"

But Doc seemed impatient to get started. He said briefly, "That is the part that puzzled us for a while too." He made no further explanation.

Doc directed Monk to place the wired victims in the plane. Then he questioned Monk about the disappearance of his own roadster.

The chemist said, "Doc, after Ham disappeared along with the pets and June, I was looking around that Witches' Hollow for some trace of 'em. I met that cocky little squirt Hyacinth, and we found the car. Later I got Renny in Boston on the short-wave set, and you know what?"

"Yes?"

"A whole danged army musta landed on my neck! That's all I remembered for some time, until I woke up on that yacht with June there too." Monk gave the dark-eyed girl a warm smile.

Then his face screwed up. "Wait until I get my hands on that little runt Hyacinth. He said you'd been killed."

"And you didn't find Ham?" queried Doc.

Monk looked worried. Oddly, whenever the chemist and the dapper lawyer were together, they fought like two alley cats. But when one or the other got into trouble, each worried himself sick about the other's predicament.

Monk said forlornly, "No. He's completely dropped from sight." And then, quickly, "Doc, there's a bog back there at Witches' Hollow, and I'm thinking maybe Ham—"

Pat Savage gave a startled little gasp. Her eyes misted. "No!" she exclaimed. "Not Ham!"

June Knight put in tremulously, "He was so nice, too!"

They had Monk almost in tears, until Doc Savage said, "Ham wouldn't stumble into a thing like that. He is probably being held captive at Jesse Benedict's shore stronghold. It might be a good idea to get started there, Monk."

Doc motioned toward the dusty old road. "You'd better first walk the girls into Salem Corners. They can stay there. Round up a posse. Storming Jesse Benedict's mansion is going to be harder than you think."

Monk nodded. He said sadly, "Poor Habeas. I wonder where he—"

Just then, nearby, came a familiar grunting sound. Monk was suddenly squinting through the grayness of early dawn, for it had started to get light. Then he suddenly piped shrilly, "Here piggie, piggie, piggie!"

And out of the gray gloom walked Hannah, the witch, with Habeas the pig in her frail little arms. She put the pig down and said with a crackle, "Hey, hey! I found him down at the Witches' Church. He's been rooting around there with the spooks, and he—"

But Monk wasn't listening. He jumped forward to meet his beloved pet, crying, "Poor Habeas! What happened—"

And then Monk stopped.

For Habeas the pig, long legs spread stolidly apart, had paused. The pig's snout went down close to the ground and the animal snorted. Snorted and blew up dust like an infuriated bull. Abruptly he wheeled about and ran. Ran as though the very devil were after her.

Monk stood as though petrified. Then he let out a howl and started for Hannah, the little witch.

"Blazes!" Monk squalled. "You bewitched Habeas!"

He grabbed Hannah roughly.

And a spectacular thing happened. Monk's rough clutch had pulled loose the black cape. His forward dive had knocked over the frail figure and suddenly the stringy black hair seemed to fall loose from Hannah's head.

Revealed before Doc and the others was a figure in a patched old coat three sizes too large. The figure's face became suddenly hard; the whole attitude changed to that of a strutting little bantam rooster.

It was Hyacinth, the former hobo!

Hyacinth stared coolly at Monk, then said in his hardboiled, natural voice, "O. K., dope! Now you know. But I'll bet a damned fin you still believe in Santa Claus!"

ONLY for Doc Savage, cocky little Hyacinth would have been torn apart by the hairy chemist.

Doc, ordering Monk merely to guard the hard-boiled little man, said, "Jesse Benedict does not miss any opportunities."

Hyacinth grinned. "Brother, that guy's got everything. I been making it both ways. I sure fooled that farmer, Cotton. Cotton still thinks witches pass through keyholes."

Doc motioned his head toward the plane. Monk, quickly tying up Hyacinth, placed the bantamlike little fellow in the crowded cockpit with the other captives.

"What I'd like to do to that guy!" he said, returning.

"What you're going to do," advised Doc, "is prepare things for the raid on Jesse Benedict's fortress home. I shall join you later."

Pat, stamping her foot, complained, "And I thought I was going to see some excitement!"

But Doc had climbed into the plane and shut the cabin door. Motors picked up speed; wind cut a swath through tall grass beyond Monk and the girl. The chemist, suddenly remembering something, leaped toward the plane.

"Hey, Doc," he bawled. "You didn't say where—"

But the plane started rolling; the triple propellers created a hurricane behind the ship, and Monk was enveloped in great clouds of dust.

He came back choking. Finally he managed to squeak, "Blazes, I know Doc's gonna take care of those prisoners, of course. But he's also up to something else. Funny—"

Monk broke off, mumbling, and June Knight said, "This place gives me the horrors. How far do we have to walk to town?"

Abruptly Monk was grinning through his dirt-smearred features. He moved between both trimly slender girls, linked one burly arm through one of their own. He exclaimed happily, "This is gonna sure burn him up!"

"Burn who up?" June Knight asked, as they started walking toward the lonely road.

"That shyster Ham!"

"But—" Pat started.

"Because I'll have to probably end up carryin' you two darlings into town. It's two miles!"

Chapter XVI. MASTER OF CRIME

THE quick-thinking Ham Brooks wasn't exactly burning up, but he was in a mighty uncomfortable position. He was a prisoner in the home of the very man he had thought was trying to help them. Jesse Benedict.

The rotund, pompous board member was presiding over a strange meeting now. And in a strange-looking room.

The room was in a basement three floors below the main ground level of Benedict's rambling, expansive shore estate near exclusive Marblehead. The place was not unlike a huge radio studio. Walls and ceiling were of sound-proof construction. Oddly, there seemed to be no doors. Yet the air of the underground stronghold was fresh and clean. It came, with a slight blowing sound, through an opening hidden by a huge circular panel suspended a few inches below the ceiling.

The room was similar to a modern business office. There were big desks, modern chrome-steel chairs. In one corner a man sat at a switchboard. About midway in the room, apart from everything else, the king of crime himself sat behind a massive desk that must have cost a small fortune. Dapper, well-dressed, he stared coldly at the well-tailored figure of Ham Brooks. Ham was not seated in a chair. He was hardly in a comfortable position.

He was in irons against one wall facing the master of crime. Ankles were through loops that fastened into that wall; arms were spread-eagled and Ham's wrists were secured in similar manner. Jesse Benedict sat looking queerly at Ham, and he said with the faintest of smiles, "My friend, the bronze man is a fool."

Ham was weary. Before being subdued and finally dragged down here, he had put up a terrific fight. Yet his clothes looked hardly mussed. He had gone without sleep. But his words, his voice had snap.

"No one fools Doc Savage," rapped Ham.

Jesse Benedict was wearing a fresh white carnation in his lapel buttonhole. He took a casual sniff of the flower, continued, "But he has never run up against me!"

Ham gave a crisp laugh. "Others have thought as you, mister. And they learned that crime does not pay. Doc Savage hates crooks. In the end, he wins out over them."

Again Benedict laughed softly. It was like ice tinkling in glass. "But not over me!" he repeated. "Look!"

The pompous crime lord indicated a man at a large desk in the room. There had been complete silence as the big shot talked to Ham—there were perhaps two dozen hard-faced men at various desks in the room—and now one of these assistants moved, flicked a switch on a boxlike affair on his desk. Ham had seen a red light glimmer high on a wall of the room. There was a long row of varicolored lights.

The assistant said, "Yes?"

A grating voice came from the speaker. "Chicago reporting," said the voice. "Everything here set. Bewitched millionaire, Thomas Briggs, found walking on Michigan Avenue last night. We learned what we wanted. We strike tonight!"

The voice carried distinctly throughout the room. The assistant looked up at Jesse Benedict, waited until he got a nod of approval. Then he said into the box. "Fine! Report again later." The red light went out.

ANOTHER man got up from a desk, walked to a larger chart hung up beneath the wall lights. He made a notation. He turned to Benedict and said, "We should hear from Detroit soon."

The stout man stared coolly at Ham. "You see?" he said. "That gives you some idea. Tonight, in Chicago, we make a quarter-million-dollar coup. This thing of mine isn't little. It's big—the biggest thing that ever happened."

"And you'll fall that much harder," said Ham almost tauntingly.

Benedict smiled smugly. Abruptly, on his own desk, one in another row of tiny lights flickered. The millionaire flicked a switch on an intercommunications system speaker.

"Yes?"

"Sir, we've got that New York racketeer, Skeets Martin, down here at the beach hangar. We've

worked him over and he still refused to join up. Says he's gonna squawk."

The crime boss took a brief sniff of his carnation. He said matter-of-factly, "Then kill him!"
"O. K."

Benedict shut off the speaker.

He lifted a phone at his elbow, said to someone else, "Bring down the other Doc Savage men." Shortly, without sound, a wall panel slid open and figures were dragged into the room. Figures that were bound hand and foot, almost in rags, looking as if they had put up a terrific battle. Ham stared. He saw gaunt-looking Johnny Littlejohn; massive two-fisted Renny with his great fists bruised and bleeding; and another man—one looking almost child-size against the giant height of the towering engineer.

This last Ham had once met. It was the young and good-looking engineer, Miles Billings, the fiancé of lovely June Knight. Billings' red hair was ruffled, his clothes torn. But his jaw stuck out defiantly and he snapped, "Damn you!"

Benedict smiled, nodded toward more wall irons. The new prisoners were quickly shackled.

Lean Johnny stared at Ham, said somberly, "You too?"

Renny, the giant engineer, added, "Holy cow! Ham!"

Jesse Benedict rapped, "Where's the others? That one called Monk, and the girl—Mortimer Knight's daughter? Also that cousin of the bronze man?"

A guard answered, "Doc Savage trapped Willie at No. 22, chief. We just got word. Willie escaped, but—"

Benedict's face flushed. "Fool!" he cried. "Get every man available. Round them up at once. Doc Savage and his organization are to be wiped out tonight!"

Still raging, Jesse Benedict got up and stamped toward one of the secret panel exits. He turned to men working in the room, ordered, "You all better come too. We'll need you."

Guards examined the shackled captives, made certain that there was no possibility for escape.

Everyone else left the room. From somewhere, indirect lights were turned off. The captives were in complete darkness.

There was only the weird sighing sound that air made coming into the ceiling ventilator.

A VOICE spoke. It was scholarly Johnny. He said gloomily, "I'll be superamalgamated! What a set-up here! You think we have a chance, Ham?"

The lawyer, for the first time a touch of weariness in his voice, said, "I don't know. I'd hate to gamble on it."

In the darkness, Miles Billings spoke up. "Just what the devil is this all about? Bewitched, someone trying to keep a man from building a highway in an old dump that isn't worth ten cents, then being grabbed by this outfit—I don't get it."

It was Johnny who tried to explain logically. "I have a few ideas," he said, using small words so as to be clear to the others. "First, Billings, you arrived in that town and ended up apparently bewitched. That was a gag."

"Gag?"

"Yes. It also happened to Renny and Monk. Don't you see, someone wanted to keep you out of that town!"

"You mean Benedict?"

"Partially, yes," continued the gaunt geologist.

"But I've heard them talking about bewitched, talking men appearing in other cities. Wealthy men, too!" Ham sounded puzzled. "What connection has that with—"

"It has something to do with strange plants," offered the geologist. "But don't ask me why. I'll bet Doc has it figured."

"Holy cow!" put in Renny. "A hell of a lot of good that's doing us! I'll bet Doc's captured, too."

"I wonder," said Ham sadly.

The men fell silent. Time passed, they did not know how many hours. Each man was half starved, in a weakened condition. After a while they even lost interest in thinking of a good meal. The time seemed endless—

IN the village of Salem Corners, however, two miles north of the ghost town, time was passing only too swiftly for hairy Monk Mayfair that bright and warm morning.

Monk had made a speech. First to the townspeople. Then at the sheriff's, before every law officer that could be found. At first no one would believe the truth about Jesse Benedict. But the chemist named incidents, tied them in with mysterious things that had happened.

And lovely Pat Savage and June Knight helped. They did some barnstorming on their own part. Men did not have to be tempted to listen to two such lovely girls. Soon they were departing to gather others. The posse slowly grew. At eight that night it numbered over a hundred armed men, machine guns, even a short-range cannon located at an armory a few miles away.

Trucks and flares were obtained. It was after nine by the time the shouting advance of men got under way. The girls, too, went. Monk could hardly argue them out of it now—

And in Detroit, many miles away, another scene of action was taking place.

On the St. Clair River, near the scattered shore homes of wealthy millionaires, a plane swooped

down, skimmed the water, landed near a darkened dock. Men came running to meet the plane. The man who climbed out was the tall, ill-kempt-looking Cotton Mather Brown. There was still a piece of straw in his mouth. He even wore the farm overalls and flopping straw hat. The only alert thing about the farmer was the eyes, keen and sharp.

One of the waiting men asked, "How come, Cotton?"

The truck farmer said, "Trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Yep. At Benedict's. Someone's got wise. The whole danged town is up in arms and there's a gonna be a raid on Jesse's estate. He needs every man."

One of the men in the listening group must have been fairly new to the organization. He asked a crook near him, "Who's the hayseed, bud?"

The other gave the questioner a withering look. "Hayseed?" he said. "Look, brother, that guy is the brains. What he's invented is really something. He's the guy responsible for the talking men—and us being able to pull the jobs worth plenty grand. Like the one tonight at the banker's place. Hell, we lifted the Mayfair diamond!"

The new recruit whistled. "The Mayfair! Hey, bud, that's worth a mint! But how did you find out where it was? I mean, how—"

The other laughed coolly. "The talking men tell us everything," he said.

Just then an order was given. Someone in the vague, shadowy group of crooks was apparently in charge. He rapped, "Pile in the plane. You all got gats with you?"

Every reply was in the affirmative.

"Then we're goin' with Cotton back to Marblehead. There's going to be hell poppin' tonight! We'll return here later."

Inside the plane, the swarthy thugs saw another figure. Little bantamlike Hyacinth, Cotton's tough helper. Hyacinth grinned and nodded to some of the former pals he knew.

Someone asked, "Say, pal, where you been?"

Hyacinth stuck out his little jaw. "Small fry," he said cockily, "I just accomplished me a real job."

"Eh?"

"You ever meet that Doc Savage?"

A crook spoke almost fearfully. "Damn right! He's a rough baby to deal with."

Hyacinth laughed. "The hell he is! He grabbed me this morning with some of the boys. Was takin' us all into that 'college' of his. Only I talked him into lettin' me string along with him. I told the dumb guy I was ready to break off with Benedict, that he'd done me dirt. Offered to help that bronze mug."

"And so?" someone prompted. The plane was in the air again, making fast time back toward the Atlantic seacoast.

"So I told Doc Savage we'd better pick up Cotton. Said Cotton could help us perhaps. We landed there at the farm and I sent that bronze guy in to get Cotton."

"Well?"

Hyacinth grinned again. "But I led Doc Savage into a trap. Cotton nailed him when he entered the house. Told me later he knocked him cold and has him chained up in the basement in a room that's barred. You guys can just guess what we're gonna do to that bronze guy when we get through helping Benedict."

Somebody whistled.

"Imagine," another said, "a little squirt like Hyacinth here fooling Doc Savage!"

The plane continued at fast speed toward the stronghold mansion of Cotton Mather Brown's partner in crime.

Chapter XVII. THE MOON AND MONK

AT eleven that night, honest men, led by burly Monk Mayfair, struck at the mansion of crime. With flares burning, machine guns mounted on rumbling trucks, and with well over a hundred men armed and grim, the attack moved across the green, smooth lawns of Benedict's shore estate.

Ahead loomed a castle of a home that was in complete darkness. Oddly, it looked like a peaceful shore home temporarily closed.

But suspecting what was ahead, Monk had finally convinced the girls, Pat and June Knight, to wait some distance behind. They were parked in a car in a safe spot.

Suddenly, on the right, a rifle cracked. Not in the midst of the advancing posse—but from the darkened mansion itself. It was a signal. Immediately other guns racketed and hell suddenly broke loose there on the shores of the Atlantic.

Monk howled, "Now you know. Let's go!"

The siege started. Some of the farmers and townsmen went down. But many more continued. Up to the very steps of the huge mansion. Grim-faced men, brave fighters all. And at the doors, at the windows of the huge house, close beneath the continual firing from upper floors and darkened windows, they paused.

Stopped and stared. As someone said in awe, "This isn't a house—it's a fortress!"

It was true. Windows, doors, every means of entrance had been closed off by great bulletproof

steel shutters that had slid downward.

Monk himself stared. He knew that pals of his were in there. A terrible horror shook him. He ordered his men to stop shooting.

Just as he did, a loud-speaker atop the high house crackled. Then a voice spoke.

The calm, cool voice of Jesse Benedict. The voice said, "There is no way to get in. If the one who looks like an ape does not retreat with his followers, those being held captive in this house die!"

Hairy Monk cursed. He let out a bull roar. He craved nothing better than to get at the speaker behind that voice with his massive hands.

The loud-speaker crackled again. "Just in case you think we are kidding," said Benedict, "listen!"

Another voice blasted on the right. Renny's booming tones. They carried across the broad lawns, down to the woods some distance away.

Renny said, "I guess this bird isn't fooling, Monk."

That was all. There followed a tense silence.

Monk, flabbergasted, stood trembling. Here was a situation for Doc Savage—and the bronze man had completely disappeared.

Suddenly, over the tense silence, came another sound. The distant buzz of powerful plane motors. Coming closer, at tremendous speed. Then out of the sky the silver rocket streaked, swooped down close, circled, landed close by on the wide smooth lawns and rolled to a stop.

Apparently Jesse Benedict had been in radio contact with someone on the plane, for the loud-speaker came to life again and Benedict said, "Stand back, everyone. One person shall leave the plane and enter this house. If he is molested, captives in here die at once!"

Cotton Mather Brown climbed out of the plane.

THE tall man in patched overalls and big straw hat moved through a lane that opened up for him. There were gasps as other farmers recognized one whom they had always believed a simple crackpot on witchcraft. No one dared touch Cotton. To do so would have meant death for the Doc Savage men and Miles Billings, within the mansion.

On the porch, before a steel door, there was a sudden soft click. Monk was nearby, not daring to move. The steel, armorproof shutter slid silently upward and Cotton disappeared within. The shutter quickly moved back into position again. Men whispered. Stalemated, they knew not what to do. Moments later a peculiar thing happened. The crackling sound of the loud-speaker located somewhere on the house roof split the silence. Then other noise.

There were yells, struggling sounds, cursing, a terrible din coming from the loud-speaker. The noise became a jumble of racket.

Seconds later the front door steel shutter slid up, a man with a gun in his hand staggered from the house. Eyes watering, the man was clutching at his throat, gasping. He stammered, "G-g-gas!" Noise on the loud-speaker diminished. Other men boiled out of the house, to be covered by Monk and the farmer posse. A voice suddenly said from the roof-top device, "Watch those in the plane. They are armed. Monk, you can now enter the house. Use a mask."

The voice was that of Doc Savage!

LATER—members of the quickly organized posse talked of the battle for months—the bronze man gathered his men in the great secret room of the man of crime, Jesse Benedict.

The man who had entered that house as Cotton had really been Doc Savage. Doc had grabbed the real Cotton Mather Brown when he had returned to the fake truck farmer's home with Hyacinth. Cotton was later found tied to a bedspring in a second-floor bedroom.

Crooks had tried a hasty escape from Benedict's fortress after the bronze man's trick. Doc, upon entering, had released powerful tear gas mixed with a quick-acting anaesthetic. Beneath his flopping clothes had been gas masks for Renny and the other captives. They had been released, as gunmen, blinded and choking, poured out of the house and through secret tunnels toward a beach hangar. But there they had been trapped.

As Doc explained later that night, "Yes, Benedict was in charge of the crook bands. He planned robberies in wealthy homes throughout the country."

"But that talkin' business?" queried Monk, puzzled.

"Quite simple when you understand it," said Doc. "Cotton is really a botanist. Sometime ago a large electric company patented a new seed process used on lilies. With certain X-ray treatments, an entirely new type of flower was obtained.

"However," continued Doc, "in this process, the experimenter never knows exactly what he is going to obtain. It might be a tropical plant that can never be duplicated if it is not nursed carefully and new seeds obtained. And with this process, it is possible to develop seeds that grow oranges in your own back yard."

Monk stared out of bright little eyes. "I'll be danged!" he piped. "You mean like those crazy plants in that cellar in the ghost town, Doc?"

The bronze man nodded patiently.

"But the form of poppy plant was most important to Cotton Mather Brown," continued Doc. "Treating the seed of that plant, Cotton obtained a new drug, a drug that affects the senses. It retards the

speed of nerve impulses in the ear, and at the same time makes the victim an apparently talking idiot."

Miles Billings smiled. "I can well appreciate that. That's what it did to me."

"Yes," said Doc Savage. "You got the drug in an apple you ate from Cotton's truck. Renny, here, got it in griddle cakes he had at Cotton's house for breakfast. And Monk—"

The homely chemist looked sheepish. "I get it, Doc," he put in. "I ate a carrot there at Cotton's farm."

Doc nodded. "I checked and learned that each of you ate something from Cotton's place. You see, Cotton had learned of the potency of his plant invention. He had a drug that would make men talk, against their wills, and if the person giving the drug listened long, at some point in the victim's conversation, secrets, truths would come out."

Doc picked up a newspaper, the headlines of which told of Mortimer Knight's bewitching in Boston.

"Knight answered questions for me about his valuable painting, Dawn," said the bronze giant. "In Detroit, a millionaire banker revealed the whereabouts of a priceless diamond. And so it went. Cotton made a deal with Benedict, a crime leader, to sell him the drug. In the hands of crooks, you can see that they could learn the whereabouts of any treasure—merely by giving the drug to the owners of that treasure and waiting for the persons to talk."

Monk had told his partners about Hyacinth posing as the witch, Hannah. He said shrilly, "But why was that danged little bantam rooster in skirts trying to pull that witch stuff, and scaring everyone off?"

Doc said quietly, "Charts in Cotton's basement laboratory explain that. He has been raising those X-ray seeds in cellars of some of the old deserted houses. And even in the basement of the factory. You overlooked that. Disturbing some of the plants, trying to transplant them yet, might have ruined any chances of obtaining more of the unusual seeds."

Miles Billings agreed. "So they had to keep out the superhighway project, and in a manner that would not draw suspicion to themselves."

"Exactly," said Doc. He started toward the secret passageway leading to Benedict's shore airport, saying, "Our cars and the small plane are down there. Benedict will be sent to Alcatraz. The others, including Willie and the one who escaped with him, have been captured. That about cleans things up. I have phoned Mortimer Knight that work on the highway project can now begin. We might stay to help get things started."

Doc went out to attend to details of the handling of the crooks. State police had arrived.

SEVERAL days later, activity gripped the town that had once been supposedly hexed.

Equipment came into town on truck and trailer. Great steam shovels, tractors, workmen and machinery.

Monk and Ham pitched in to help. Both aides were happy again. Their pets had been located roaming Cotton Mather Brown's potato patch. Habeas, luckily, had gotten over the "bewitching." The pig had eaten one of the carrots meant for Monk.

Lovely Pat Savage and dark-eyed June Knight even helped, stopping by at noon one day with sandwiches for Ham and the homely chemist.

Monk, in the steel bucket seat of one of the giant "cats"—a tractor of one used for snubbing tree stumps—was squabbling as usual with his dapper partner. Just then the two girls arrived and Monk, half famished, dived into the sandwich.

Habeas, the scrawny pig, scrambled up beside the hairy chemist and stuck up his long snout for a bite of the sandwich. Monk grinned at the girls. "Smart, ain't it?" he said, beaming.

Ham, coming up alongside the tractor, looked sour. He glanced at the pig, then at homely Monk.

"Look, you hairy mistake," he queried, "how many hairs are there on a pig's face?"

Monk shrugged, smiling at June Knight. "Blazes!" he said around a mouthful of food. "How should I know?"

Ham said dryly, "Then the next time you look in a mirror to shave, count them!"

Monk's eyes narrowed for a moment, then he grinned. "Nope," he piped, "I'm not gem' to get sore today." He took a deep breath of the balmy air, sighed.

"You know," Monk continued, "it must be the gypsy in my soul." He looked at slender, attractive June Knight. "There's a dance in town tonight, and it's going to be—er—moonlight. I was thinkin'—"

The dark-eyed girl smiled bewitchingly. "Sorry, Monk," she murmured. "I'm going with Miles Billings."

Hopefully, Monk turned toward Pat Savage, only to hear her say, "And Ham has already asked me, Monk!"

The chemist groaned, put his burly arm around Habeas. "Guess Habeas and I will just take a walk in the moonlight," Monk said sadly.

Ham added, "You'd better watch out, Romeo. Because in the light of the full moon the pixies dance, too!"

Monk growled something that sounded like, "Jeepers!"

THE END