

THE FLAMING FALCONS

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. THE MYSTERIOUS FARM

HOBO JONES was a rather pleasant young man who found it necessary to sleep in haystacks, and this was what really started the whole thing. If Hobo Jones had not wanted to sleep in a haystack in a God-forsaken part of Arizona, quite a string of incredible events might not have happened, and a number of persons would have been spared the unpleasant experience of having their hair stand on end, Hobo Jones among them.

Hobo Jones supposed himself to be a bum. His pockets were empty. He had no job. He had—since Mom and Pop died of the flu on the rented farm last winter—no home. That made him a bum, didn't it? He was twenty-four years old.

True, he could go on relief. He could get on the WPA, or the PWA, whichever it was—he had them mixed—and make something out of himself. At least, make twelve dollars or so a week, which was twelve dollars or so more than he was making. But he wouldn't. Not much, he wouldn't.

Hobo Jones was a rugged individualist, and he was going to stick to it. He was going to keep moving, and sometime, somewhere, he was going to find himself a job. He understood clearly that he might belong in the class labeled block-heads, because there was no stigma attached to the WPA or the PWA, whichever it was. He knew some pretty swell guys who were on those jobs. They were all right.

Hobo Jones was a large sunburned young man who could lift the front ends of most automobiles. He had a big, perpetual grin. He had a thatch of corn-husk-colored hair that a mother mouse looking for a nest would have adored. He was nice to children and dogs, and both frequently followed him. As Hobo Jones walked down a road in Arizona, he noticed it was getting dark, and almost simultaneously, he perceived a haystack.

"There," he remarked cheerfully, "is my hotel."

Which was very unfortunate.

HOBO JONES was ever afterward somewhat uncertain about exactly what did happen during the next few moments. Not that his eyes didn't clearly see, and his body painfully feel, what occurred. But the trouble was, his brain refused to accept it as reasonable. Hobo Jones was a very reasonable, level-headed young man. It was hard for him to believe such events as began occurring. There was nothing extraordinary about the haystack, except that as he drew closer, it began to look more like a strawstack. So much the better. Straw didn't have seeds that got down your neck and scratched, the way this Arizona hay did. It was just a strawstack.

The strawstack stood in a dense thicket of mesquite and yucca and assorted varieties of cacti, so Hobo Jones was surprised he had noticed it. Truthfully, he was surprised he had seen anything, because he hadn't observed a house in miles. As a matter of fact, he was beginning to suspect that he had gotten off the road to Flagstaff, and was gandering off into the desert.

Hobo Jones came to a high wire fence. This seemed to surround the strawstack. The fence was of woven wire, but that didn't surprise him, because you probably had to use woven wire to keep herds of Arizona jackrabbits away from strawstacks.

Hobo Jones was feeling good at finding the strawstack, so when he saw a long piece of two-by-four lying on the ground, he picked it up on impulse. He decided to vault the fence, using the two-by-four for a pole. It was just coltish playfulness—Hobo Jones was full of that.

He took a run, vaulted—and didn't make it over. He lit on his feet on the top wire. Things happened. Sparks, mostly. Green ones that sounded like spitting tomcats. He would have sworn some of the sparks were a yard long. They seemed to run up his trouser legs.

Hobo Jones landed flat on his back inside the fence.

"I've been electrocuted!" he thought.

The fall had knocked his breath out. He was tingling all over from electricity. He was surprised. Other than this, he found upon gaining his feet, he was as good as before, except for his dignity, which was distinctly not the same.

He scowled at the electrified fence.

"Well, I got over the thing, anyway," he reflected.

An electrified fence was not exactly the usual item to be found on the Arizona desert, so Hobo Jones looked around to see why and wherefore. He noticed that the fence seemed rather extensive, obviously including more than a mere strawstack. He walked to the top of a small hill on which the strawstack stood, and looked.

A cultivated field was before him. It was little more than handkerchief size. About an acre, enclosed by the electrified fence.

Something grew in the field. Some vegetable, weed or plant, that was unlike anything Hobo Jones had seen before. The stuff resembled cactus somewhat, only it was yellowish, about the color of a frog's stomach, and it couldn't be conventional cactus because it had no thorns.

"Maybe it's good to eat," Hobo Jones mused, and he ambled forward.

The yellow vegetable was as tough as could be, but he finally got one off the plant, set his teeth in it, then found it necessary to take out his pocket knife and scrape his teeth. The interior of the mysterious fruit was a whitish-yellow gummy substance that had the tenacity of glue, and also about the same taste as would be expected of glue made out of a very long dead horse.

"Ugh! Phew!" said Hobo Jones. "Yah-h-h!"

He turned around, and there stood a naked man.

THERE wasn't any swimming hole close. The surrounding country was as dry as a fish's nightmare. It was no logical place for a man who was sans apparel.

This named man was a long brown collection of sinew and bones, and distinctly not lovely. He had eyes as black as ink-bottle corks. Remarkably enough, his teeth were also black instead of white.

"Uh," said Hobo Jones. "Er—hello."

The brown naked man smiled, showing all his black teeth. He bent over, picked up a handful of the sand which composed most of the soil hereabouts.

"Wooley-gooley-guh,"

he said—or so it sounded—and pointed at the fistful of sand.

He obviously wanted Hobo Jones to look at the sand. He walked over, wearing a big, sociable smile, so Hobo Jones, just to be pleasant, bent over and looked.

Next instant, the sand had been slapped into his eyes. And he was flat on his back. And a wild cat was on his chest.

Hobo Jones had been in fights before, particularly of late, but in these scraps he had just stood on his feet and popped the other fellow one on the jaw, then popped him one again if he got up, which he usually didn't. This was different. The brown man was as tough as leather shoestring. He moved like chain lightning. Every place he took hold of Hobo Jones it hurt. The brown man was master of some kind of heathen science. He also had surprise on his side.

Loud howls of pain and rage came from Hobo Jones. He drove his fists like pistons. Some of the blows landed, making his opponent give forth piping bleats of agony. They rolled over and over. Hobo Jones got some of the blinding sand out of his eyes; he began to see what he wanted to hit. It might have had a very different outcome, except that their volcanic gyrations carried them across the sand to a spot where the naked brown man, who could see the better, got his hand upon a large dark Arizona rock. He struck Hobo Jones' skull with this, and the rock proved much the harder. When Hobo Jones opened his eyes and shook the stars out of his head, he saw that he was beside the strawstack. He was being tied hand and foot with quarter-inch rope. The naked brown man was at the moment finishing the tying.

The brown man stood up and dusted the sand off his arms, off his shoulders, and the rest of himself. From the way the sand stuck to the naked brown skin, Hobo Jones decided the fellow was greased all over, which helped explain why he had been so hard to hold.

The brown fellow picked up a piece of white cloth which was lying on the ground, and wrapped it around his hips with an expertness that showed he had dressed that way many times before.

"Help!" Hobo Jones howled, as loud as he could. "Help! Murder! Sheriff!"

He didn't figure it would do any harm.

The brown man came over. He stuck his thumbs in Hobo Jones' eyes. He poured sand in Hobo Jones' mouth.

"Woo-gluhoo,"

he said, approximately.

"Listen, my heathen acquaintance," said Hobo Jones, "I don't understand a word you say. Let me

go! I'll gladly find me another strawstack."

So the brown man, not as naked now, dragged Hobo Jones inside the strawstack.

IT was quite a thing, that strawstack, for it was a strawstack only as far as appearance went, being in reality a two-room shack made out of two-by-fours and boards, fitted with electric lights and electric stove and electric refrigerator, and furnished well enough for comfort, with the straw on the outside, in the shape of a conventional strawstack. There was a faint sound, somewhat like that of a bumblebee which had accidentally landed on a piece of flypaper, and this came from under the floorboards, so it was not unreasonable to suppose that there was a motor-generator down there, and that this furnished current for the electrified fence.

Hobo Jones was becoming puzzled.

"Say," he said, "what kind of a setup is this, anyway?"

He got no answer.

"We're fifty miles from nowhere," added Hobo Jones.

He still got no answer.

"All right, all right," he said. "Have it your own way."

He was seized, dragged into the other room, which had no furniture whatever, but was separated from the first room by a stout door, and deposited upon the floor. The brown man went out, slamming the door and locking it.

Hobo Jones was left alone.

He started to think about the affair, then checked himself. He had a hunch he couldn't make sense out of it, and would only get himself dizzy. And maybe scared, too. Thinking was the stuff that got you scared, wasn't it?—at least, Hobo Jones had discovered that when you didn't stop to think, you didn't have time to get scared.

More sensible thing to do was investigate the ropes that secured him. He knew something about ropes, because he had tied many a knot in halter ropes back on the farm, and he had once sent away for a book on how the stage magicians escaped from rope bonds and strait jackets, although unluckily he didn't recall much that had been in the book. He went to work. He skinned his wrists. He cracked his knuckles. He made his arms hurt.

Then he heard the squeal in the next room. It was a piping kind of squeal, shrill, like a stepped-on rat.

Following the squeal, something heavy fell on the floor.

Hobo Jones lay very still and listened, but the wham-banging of his own heart was the loudest thing around there. He began to work with the ropes again. He got them off. He untied his ankles, then he stood up. The circulation was dead in his feet, so that they felt as if they might be cut off at the ankles. He did a species of clog dance, wincing. Then he went to the door.

The door was locked.

"Open!" said Hobo Jones loudly.

This got no results. He beat on the door, with no better satisfaction.

Backing to the far side of the room he took a running jump and landed with both feet on the door. It ripped open. He alighted on his back on the floor in the other room—and wished he hadn't done it just that way. It had looked all right one time when he'd seen it in the movies. But he'd nearly broken his neck.

The brown man sat in a chair. He did not look up. A splintered fragment of the door fell across his bare feet, and he did not move. His head was tilted forward as if he was dozing, only it wasn't likely that he was dozing.

"Hey!" said Hobo Jones.

Getting no response, he walked over and peered closely at the brown man. The fellow didn't look right. Distinctly not.

Hobo Jones picked up the brown man's wrist and held it, and pretty soon it dawned on him that the brown man was dead.

"Whew!" said Hobo Jones, and dropped the wrist.

It was his first contact with a dead man, and he suddenly had the almighty hope that it would be his last. He went hot and cold. Sweat broke out.

"Gee!" he said.

He wanted to take another look at the dead man to see what could possibly have killed him, but he couldn't bear to do it, and anyway, he knew that there was no mark on the corpse that would indicate a demise as a result of external violence.

"Gosh!" said Hobo Jones, and felt the need of the clean desert air.

He had started for the door when he saw the skull-colored bird.

Chapter II. A GIRL HUNTING MOONDOGS

THE skull-colored bird was such a ghastly looking thing that Hobo Jones emitted a bleat of horror. It was that bad. It was—well, the most hideous apparition it had ever been Jones' ill fortune to see.

The thing was about the size of a small goat. It was almost the same color as a goat, for that

matter, and for a moment, Hobo Jones thought it might be a goat. But a goat wouldn't be sitting perched on the back of a chair in a corner. This thing was a bird. It was foul-looking. Hobo Jones had seen buzzards, and hitherto considered them the vilest-looking things on earth—but a buzzard was as attractive as a love bird along this hobgoblin.

"Shoo!" Hobo Jones gulped involuntarily. "Shoo! Go away!"

The thing batted its eyes at him. It had eyes that were like little blisters full of blood, but the rest of it was all one color—the hue of the skulls in doctors' offices.

To top everything off, the bird smelled. It had an odor of indescribable vileness.

Longing for the open places seized Jones. He made a dash for the door, got it open, and piled outside. It was dark, so dark that he stopped as if he had run up against a solid.

Turning around, he slammed the door. He didn't want that bird, whatever it was, following him.

The first impulse of Hobo Jones was to get out of the vicinity without delay, but then he decided to stick around. He hooked more sweat off his forehead with a finger. There was a dead man inside the shack camouflaged as a strawstack, and a hell hag of a bird, and Hobo Jones' stomach had a feeling as if it had been given a dead cat by accident.

Why not telephone a sheriff? Good idea. Hobo Jones went looking for a telephone. There had plainly not been one inside the strawstack shack. The electrified fence should have a gate, and there might be a telephone at that point, so he searched for a gate.

It did not seem quite so dark, now that his eyes had accustomed themselves to the darkness. About a third of the stars were going to show, but the other two thirds of the sky was full of clouds that were as black as polecats.

Totally unexpectedly, he got a whack on the head with a piece of devil's-walking-stick.

ONE does not walk across Arizona in a day, and so Hobo Jones had spent enough time in the State to become familiar with its vegetation, which to his observation was predominantly cactus, so he knew that devil's-walking-stick was a species of cactus, which grew up in a cluster from a common root-cluster, like young willows. These long shoots of cactus had thorns every half inch or so, and ranchers and Mexicans cut them off, stuck them in the ground in a row, and they grew and became cactus fences.

Hobo Jones fell down. A piece of devil's-walking-stick has some of the qualities of a length of water pipe. The thorns had been cut off this one.

Clutching dazedly, Jones got hold of the shillalah that had laid him low. He twisted. He was surprised at how easily he took it away from the wielder. He instantly reversed it, and took a whack at the adjacent darkness, which proved futile. He tried again.

"Ouch!" said a voice.

Hobo Jones started to land another wallop, but didn't.

"You're a woman," Hobo Jones said.

"If you don't mind, I'd as soon you didn't hit me again," the feminine voice said.

"I won't," said Hobo Jones, "I'm chivalrous." He reached out, got hold of a rather nice ankle, and gave it a jerk. The ankle owner sat down. "You just sit there," requested Jones. "I've got a match somewhere. I want to look at you."

He found the match and struck it and inspected his assailant.

"Gosh!" he said.

The match burned his fingers and went out and left him with a disturbing vision of glorious brown eyes, a perfect little snub nose, lips too delicious for words, and a number of other features that were equally entrancing. She wore riding boots, laced breeches, and a sky-blue sweater which fitted the curves interestingly.

He felt of his jaw, which was furred with a week's whiskers, somewhat cemented together by Arizona alkali dust. "I guess I look like an ape that they had sicked the dogs on."

"That about describes it."

"I'm a pretty good fellow, though," said Jones, "when you get to know me better."

"Heaven forbid. Now, if you'll just excuse me—"

She started to get up. Jones jerked her ankle again. She sat down with a bump.

"After all," he remarked, "you hit me a beauty over the head with that stick, and I think that gives me the right to ask some questions. First, who are you?"

"All right. My name is Fiesta."

"And now, Fiesta, what were you doing out here in the dark night?"

"I was hunting moondogs."

AFTER more deliberation, Hobo Jones asked, "Do you mind describing and defining a moondog for me?"

"Of course not," said Fiesta. "First, moondogs only come out when there is no moon. You would think they would come out when there was a moon, but they don't. Only when there isn't. And—let me see—oh, yes, moondogs have large bushy tails, and the tails are full of sparks like—well—like a cigarette lighter that isn't working. And moondogs always walk backward. Never forward. That's because—"

"I see," said Jones. "Hunting moondog is kind of like snipe hunting. You're a sassy pumpkins. Do you know what is going on around here?"

"No."

"Can you stand something pretty grisly?"

Fiesta was slow replying. "Well, I didn't scream when I saw you a moment ago, did I?" she asked. Then she added, more contritely, "I don't personally guarantee my nerve, although I have been told that it is very brassy."

"Come on," said Jones.

They walked through the darkness toward the strawstack, and Jones, recalling the devil-devil bird that he had left sitting in the shack, carried along the heavy cactus cane. They stuck themselves on cactus thorns. Yucca seeds rattled like rattlesnakes, and gave them bad scares. Small creatures, lizards probably, scampered away from under their feet, and also sounded like rattlesnakes. Jones decided he didn't like Arizona desert at night.

"Why, this is only a strawstack," Fiesta said.

She sounded as if she really thought that was all it was, Jones reflected.

"There's a dead man in here," he said. "Can you stand looking at him?"

Fiesta gasped. She was silent. "I-I'll try," she said. Jones shoved open the door, and there was everything just as he had left it, dead brown man sitting on the chair dressed in a breechcloth, and hideous bird sitting on the back of another chair in a corner. The odor of the horror-bird was stronger in the place, Jones decided.

Fiesta saw the bird. "Ugh!" she said. "How awful!"

"That thing is some rooster," Jones admitted. "Have any idea what it is?"

"No. I never saw anything like it before."

"And I never saw any moondogs, either."

Fiesta shuddered. "There--there is not such a thing--as a moondog" she said.

"Then what were you doing prowling around in the darkness?"

"Oh, now--please! Fiesta sounded ill through and through. "I can't . . . can't answer that."

Suddenly, Hobo Jones remembered a point that might be important. There had been no odor of the evil bird when the brown man had first dragged him into the shack. Therefore, the bird must have come in afterward.

"You know what?" he said.

"What?" Fiesta gasped.

"I'm going to take this club"--Jones shook the long piece of devil's-walking-stick purposefully--"and knock the tar out of that bird, whatever it is. I don't like the looks of the thing."

Fiesta shuddered again, more violently.

"I'm all for it," she said. "Go ahead."

At this point, the ugly bird turned into an incredible sheet of white flame and a cloud of smoke, and vanished.

Chapter III. UGLY BIRD BLAZING

IT did not happen as instantaneously as it could be told, but filled an interval of several seconds, during which there were several bloodcurdling sidelights to the incident.

First, there was the sheet of flame, so utterly white as to be searing to the eyes, and hot enough that the heat could be felt on the face, even at that distance. The flame enveloped the whole bird. It was like old-fashioned photographic flashlight powder burning.

Secondly, there were the sounds of the girl as it went up in flame. The noise lasted only a moment, but it was quite impressive--it was several minutes before Hobo Jones' hair felt as if it had stopped standing on end.

Third, there was the smoke, a spurting cloud of it that jumped upward and swirled around the ceiling of the room, then came drifting toward the door, and poured outside, dense and black, looking so much as if it was alive that Jones made several wild wallops at the stuff with the long piece of devil's-walking-stick.

"Great grief!" he said.

He realized that Fiesta was no longer at his side. She had departed in haste. Hobo Jones raced after her, overtook her, and got her by the arm.

"What's the idea," he asked, "of turning race horse?"

"I'm scared," said Fiesta.

"Did you see what I saw back there?" asked Jones.

"I saw a big gray bird as hideous as a witch's chicken, and I saw the bird turn into fire and smoke. Is that what you mean?"

"Thanks," said Hobo Jones. "I was beginning to doubt my sanity."

At this point it was apparent that the shack inside the strawstack had caught fire, since smoke was pouring from the doorway, and this was reddened by the flicker of flames. Jones ran back, practically dragging a dubious Fiesta, and discovered that the wall was smoldering. Fortunately,

there was a bucket of water in one corner, and he sloshed this judiciously over the flames, extinguishing them. He peered at the charred boards.

"That was sure a hot flame that bird turned into," he muttered.

Of the witch's chicken, as Fiesta had termed the bird, there was not a trace that Jones could find, although it was true some of the ashes scattered about might be the remains of the thing.

"Good riddance," said Jones. He gnawed his lower lip nervously. "However, I would just as soon it had not vanished just the way it did."

"What is your name?" asked Fiesta.

"Hobo Jones. I forgot to tell you."

"Mr. Hobo Jones, does what happened make sense to you?"

"No."

"Me, neither," said Fiesta. "What do we do next?"

Jones considered. "I'm going to have a look at the basement," he decided.

There was a trapdoor in the floor, below this some steps, and then a rectangular concrete room which held some boxes of canned food, and a nationally known brand of motor-generator which was coupled to a Diesel motor that was running in efficient silence, and a tank of fuel for the motor, but nothing else.

"This must supply current for the electrified fence," said Fiesta.

"By the way," Jones remarked, "you were inside the electrified fence when I found you. How come?"

"I crossed with two long wooden stepladders, which I set up on either side of the fence," Fiesta said meekly.

"Good. If things keep on the way they are, I think we shall leave in great haste by that route."

Jones pondered.

"However," he added, "there is one thing I wish you to see before we go—the patch of sticky fruit," said Jones.

AS nearly as Hobo Jones could tell, the small field of strange yellow, thornless-cactuslike vegetables were as much a mystery to Fiesta as they had been to himself. He struck some matches so Fiesta could see the plants, and he tore one open and let her get the pulpy insides on her fingers, so she could see what sticky stuff it was.

Then they progressed through the semidarkness until they found Fiesta's two stepladders, and by climbing one of these and descending the other, it was a simple matter to negotiate the electrified fence without discomfort.

Jones said, "I was hoping there was a telephone around here. It might save a long walk, particularly as I don't know which direction to go to find a sheriff."

"You're going to a sheriff?" Fiesta asked.

"Of course."

Hobo Jones thought that Fiesta seemed pleased by this information, and that thereafter she treated him with a little more warmth.

"There is no telephone," Fiesta explained. "I happen to know."

It had been occurring to Hobo Jones that Fiesta happened to know several things, and she hadn't explained why she knew any of them. He broached the subject.

"Am I your friend?" he asked.

"So far you haven't been so bad," admitted Fiesta, "but it remains to be seen."

"Then why not tell me all?" asked Jones.

Fiesta said, "I've been considering that—"

"Fine. Go ahead. Tell all."

"—and I've decided not to tell you anything," continued Fiesta.

Jones was injured. He said, "What provoked such a decision?"

"A suspicious nature," Fiesta informed him. "After all, I hardly know you."

"We'll let a sheriff introduce us," said Jones, and he took her arm, and they started off.

Fiesta said, "I have a car. That is, it used to be. I only paid nineteen dollars for it. I told the man I would give him a dollar for every year of my age, because it was my birthday, and we made a deal."

"Where is this birthday-cake car?"

Fiesta pointed generally southward. "Over yonder, behind a rock."

There were five or six men waiting behind the rock also, they learned, and these were unpleasant fellows with guns and bad intentions.

JONES thought he'd heard something just before they reached the rock, and he'd stopped to listen, and Fiesta had walked on ahead. This explained how they happened to be separated in the darkness when a deep bull voice roared an order.

"Get your hands up!" said the voice.

Jones stopped, wishing it wasn't so infernally dark. "Sheriff!" was his thought. "Sheriff and deputies. How fortunate."

That this was a misapprehension became evident as the situation developed.

"Shall I shoot 'em?" growled another voice.

"Sure!" said the bull voice. "Shoot 'em!"

A gun roared. A bullet fanned Hobo Jones' face. He was suddenly glad it was so dark.

It wasn't any sheriff and his deputies. Not much. Following the shot, a series of things happened with the speed of a bad automobile accident.

Fiesta threw herself flat on the ground.

"Run, Jones!" Fiesta screamed. "They've seized me! Run!" They hadn't exactly seized her yet, but it looked as if they as good as had done so. "They've got me! Run, Jones!" she shrieked. "Run, you fool!"

She heard Jones go tearing off through the sagebrush, cactus and mesquite. He sounded like a mowing machine. A rifle crashed. The bullet hit a rock, climbed into the dark sky with the howl of a wolf. A sawed-off shotgun turned loose two ear-splitting blasts. Men yelled profanity. A peculiar thing happened—one of those accidents that occur when people are excited and doing things wildly.

Fiesta had informed Jones that she had been seized because she had wanted him to believe that he could not help her, and save himself. Fiesta had made it so lifelike that Jones had believed her. Actually, the bull-voiced man and all his helpers likewise presumed that Fiesta had been seized. It was very dark. They couldn't see one another. Each of them thought one of the others was holding Fiesta, so they went charging away in pursuit of Hobo Jones.

Fiesta was left scot-free. She got up off the sandy ground, amazed, and stood listening to the gun-bangings, yells and other bedlam that accompanied the pursuit of Jones.

She clenched and unclenched her hands, feverishly anxious, trying to think of something she could do to help Jones. There was nothing. She was unarmed. She had never fired a gun in her life, anyway. And there were at least five bloodthirstily determined men chasing poor Jones, all armed—and shooting freely, by the sounds. Fiesta stared at the cloud-cluttered sky and emitted a prayer.

"Let it stay very dark," she said.

It did.

In the course of a few minutes, Fiesta decided that Hobo Jones, as a foot racer, was more than the match for the group of men who had waylaid them. Jones obviously had gotten away. The disgusted swearing of his pursuers must be audible as far as New Mexico.

Fiesta climbed into her birthday-cake car. It was time she was making her own escape. She turned the switch, breathed another prayer, stepped on the starter, and there was a miracle and the motor began running, sounding as if a charivari was in progress. She turned on the headlights, which furnished about the same illumination as lightning bugs, put the car in gear, and drove down the road. She drove fast. If one did not mind noise, the car would go fast, up to forty miles an hour. Fiesta looked around from time to time, and this was how she happened to discover that a bird was following her.

Chapter IV. UGLY BIRD FOLLOWING

HAVING seen the bird—the clouds had parted again and there was some moonlight—Fiesta involuntarily emitted a screech of horror. Then she endeavored to get hold of herself.

"I've got birds on the brain," she assured herself. "Anyway, this is just a little old dinky bird."

She looked backward again.

The bird had seemed small only because it was some distance away, but it was coming closer, and there began to be no doubt about it being a very big bird.

"Oh!" said Fiesta. "Oh, oh!" And she stepped on the gas.

She drove in a frenzy, around a curve, down into a gully and out again, then onto a straight stretch where she dared again remove her eyes from the road long enough to glance behind.

"It's the witch's chicken!" gasped Fiesta.

Back in the strawstack shack, the horrible bird sitting on the chair—if this wasn't that bird, it was its twin brother—had appeared to be about the size of a small goat. Flying behind the car, pursuing Fiesta, it looked as large as an airplane.

The hideous skull-colored thing flew like a bat, silently flapping its wings, malevolent head extended on the end of a long neck.

Fiesta stamped the accelerator.

"Hurry, car!" she said wildly.

Unfortunately, they were just beginning the ascent of a long hill, and one of the things that Fiesta had already learned about her birthday car was that it didn't like hills, often preferring to stop and cool off halfway up them.

Fiesta looked around. After that, she decided not to do it again. She didn't want to faint.

She could smell the flying hag-frightful. Its shadow, limned in starlight, actually fell over her. A cold wave traveled up and down Fiesta's spine.

"Go away!" she shrieked. "Shoo!"

That the bird was after her was absolutely apparent. That it would get her seemed a complete certainty, because its foul odor was choking her, and its great flapping bulk was no more than a

yard above her, and its hideous beak was reaching down, and its blood-sac eyes were contemplating her uncharitably.

And then the car topped the hill, headed down a long slope beyond, and ran like it had never run before. The hill was very long, very steep, and as for Fiesta's old car-well, it was doubtful if Sir Malcolm Campbell could have made better time in the Bluebird.

The bird was outpaced. Pretty soon, it gave up and turned back.

Fiesta was still shaking when she walked into her hotel in the Arizona metropolis where she was staying.

"Did you ever have a bird follow you?" she asked the clerk.

The clerk glanced over her with approval.

"A lot of different kinds of birds must try to follow you," he remarked.

"You've no idea," said Fiesta.

And she shuddered so hard she almost fell.

The room which Fiesta had obtained in the hotel was one of the most economical the hostelry afforded, and it was all right, although the plumbing was of the arm-strong variety—you opened the window and threw the water out after you washed—and the mattress was stuffed, she suspected, with kindling wood.

Fiesta sat on the edge of the bed. She cupped her shapely chin in a palm. She thought deeply.

"This is once," she remarked finally, "that I outsmarted myself."

She considered the statement, nodding soberly.

"I should have called this Doc Savage," she said, "first thing."

FIESTA'S boots, laced breeches and trim sweater were all somewhat the worse for violent contact with the desert, and she had the sickening suspicion that she could detect traces of the smell of the bird on the garments, so she changed hastily into a frock. A neat rust-colored frock, with suitable accessories, that set her figure off particularly. She arranged her hair in the mirror, reflecting that there were now few traces of a violent and incredible night. Hobo Jones would have especially liked her now.

Thinking of Hobo Jones gave Fiesta a wave of worry. Hobo Jones was a young man who had evidenced some capacity for taking care of himself, but she could not help being deeply concerned.

"I should tell the sheriff," said Fiesta.

Then she shook her head at her own remark.

"No. No, that would mess it up," she added. "The sheriff would spoil everything, as likely as not. This is a very mysterious matter, and it requires a touch that a sheriff might not have." She gave her hair a final pat—she had the feminine characteristic of keeping her appearance in mind, no matter how drastic a situation she was in—and went over to sit on the edge of the bed again. Suddenly, she got up, put on her coat, went downstairs and addressed the desk clerk.

"I'm practically broke," said Fiesta. "I have almost absolutely no money, and I want to make a long-distance telephone call to New York City. I want the hotel to stake me, and I will pay back, getting the money somehow."

"Telephone call to New York?" said the clerk. "You want us to pay?"

"Yes. It'll be awfully sweet of you." Fiesta smiled.

The clerk didn't smile. He shook his head.

"What kind of a sucker do you take us for?" he asked. "The answer is no. No!"

"So you're going to be ungenerous," said Fiesta.

"Yes," agreed the desk clerk. "And furthermore, you must pay in advance for your room, or we will have to ask you to vacate."

Fiesta gasped, "But I told you I didn't have any money."

"I heard you."

"But how am I going to telephone Doc Savage?" Fiesta cried furiously, and ran outdoors. Most of the dark clouds had gone away, and the moon had come out. Fiesta gazed at the moon resentfully.

"See what I get," she said, "for being frank."

One of the big transcontinental airlines had a field at this Arizona town, and Fiesta walked—she had no money for a taxi—to the airport, where she confronted the young gentleman whose occupation it was to dispense tickets.

"I'm going to be frank just once more," said Fiesta.

"Eh?"

"I am without funds, and it is very important that I get to New York City, since I cannot telephone," explained Fiesta. "I wish the airline to trust me for a ticket to New York. I will pay back, because I am honest."

The ticket seller batted his eyes several times.

"Do you think," he inquired, "that I came out of a tree?"

"You mean—do I think you're a sap?" asked Fiesta.

"Exactly."

"I will pay back—"

"No, no, NO! Great Scott, the idea is preposterous!"

Fiesta was near tears.

"But how am I going to see Doc Savage?" she cried desperately, and whirled and ran out of the airport waiting room, and hurried back to the hotel, where she got a large pleasant shock. The hotel clerk was all smiles—he had been all frowns when Fiesta left.

"I'm terribly, terribly sorry," said the clerk, bowing very low. "I want to apologize abjectly, most abjectly. You may telephone New York City long distance. The hotel will pay the bill, and you can pay us back just whenever you like, with no hurry, no hurry at all. And as for your room rent, don't worry about that. No, don't worry. And we want you to move into our best suite of rooms. The rent will be the same as you're paying for that little room you're in now."

"Goodness," said Fiesta. "What did you say?"

"You may telephone New York and we will pay."

"And—"

"We want you to have our finest suite of rooms, at the same rent you're now paying, and don't worry about when you have to pay for it."

"Gracious," said Fiesta.

At this point, the ticket seller from the airport rushed in. He was out of breath. He had an envelope in his hand.

"Here's your airplane ticket to New York," he puffed.

"What?" said Fiesta.

"We're giving you a special plane," explained the airport man, "because we have no regular ship scheduled to leave immediately."

"But," reminded Fiesta, "I have no money."

"That's perfectly all right. That's perfectly all right. We—er—trust you."

Fiesta looked at the hotel clerk, then at the young man from the airport. She tapped the floor thoughtfully with one foot.

"Just what," she asked, "changed your minds so quick?"

"You mentioned Doc Savage," said the hotel clerk.

"Yes, you mentioned Doc Savage," agreed the airport man.

"You mean," said Fiesta, "that—well—"

"Yes," said the hotel clerk, "we've heard of Doc Savage."

"That's it," said the airport man. "We've heard a little bit about Doc Savage."

AT this point, a lean brown man who was almost naked, turned from the hotel window and took to his heels. The hotel window was open, the semi clothed brown man had been listening, and had heard what was said. He had also been following Fiesta almost from the moment she arrived in town. The brown fellow, his dark color making him almost indistinguishable in the darkness, scampered industriously to a hiding place where there was a white man waiting, but the white man wore dark clothes and had a black handkerchief over his face, so he was not very noticeable in the night, either.

"She go to New York. Airplane," said the brown one.

"Swell. Good riddance."

"She go see fella name of Doc Savage," added the brown one.

"She—what? Who did you say she's gonna see?"

"Doc Savage."

"Oh, great grief!" groaned the white man. He sounded as if he had just discovered that someone had cut off both his legs.

He began swearing. He swore up and down the scale, and in at least four different languages, and when he finished, he grabbed his brown-skinned cohort and gave him an unjustified shaking.

"You get back to the hotel," he snarled. "You know how to tap a telephone wire, don't you?"

"Yes. Know how tap telephone," assured the brown one.

"Tap it. Get the girl's plans."

"Yes."

"We've got to stop that girl. We can't have her reaching that Doc Savage."

"Who this Doc Savage fella?" asked the brown one.

The white man just swore at him.

Chapter V. DEATH FLIES EAST

THIRTY minutes later, Fiesta settled back in the seat of an airplane that was larger than she imagined they came, and noticing that the little light beside her seat no longer said, "Fasten your safety belt, please," she presumed that everything was now all right, and undid her belt. She felt the need of some good relaxing.

Fiesta was stunned. The machine guns had really gone off, these last thirty minutes. Here she was, the sole passenger on a big airplane, with a pilot, copilot and a hostess at her service.

"Oh, boy!" she remarked.

First, she had telephoned Doc Savage in New York City. She was impressed by the voice of Doc Savage, she was ready to admit. Even over a couple of thousand miles of telephone wire, it had a vibrance, a controlled quality, that had been outstanding.

True, Doc Savage had spoken very little. Mostly, he had listened. After Fiesta had spoken for a while, the unusual voice had interrupted.

"Take the special plane they have offered you, and go to Wichita," he said. "You will be able to make connections at that point with a regular transcontinental plane at four o'clock in the morning, which you will board, and ride to New York City."

It occurred to Fiesta to wonder that he knew the exact time a regular passenger plane would be in Wichita. She generally had questions to ask. For instance, just who was this Doc Savage, anyway? Fiesta pressed the little button beside her seat, the one marked "Hostess." The trim hostess appeared instantly.

"Who," asked Fiesta, "is Doc Savage?"

The hostess smiled. "A man," she said, "who is—well, quite a fellow. You've kind of got me, honey. I don't know how to describe him. You couldn't describe the Grand Canyon, could you?"

"Oh, he's like that," suggested Fiesta. "A great big thing full of empty space."

The hostess shook her head.

"You'll learn, you'll learn," she said.

THE plane flew on and on, over a vast infinity of clouds.

The hours passed—

The plane gave a sudden tilt, dived downward. Fiesta, after almost sliding out of her seat, sprang up in a dither.

"What's happening?" she exclaimed.

"Just take it easy," the copilot advised.

Fiesta pressed her face to the plane window. It was still dark, but bright moonlight, and once again, no clouds. She could see the terrain below. They were going to land in Wichita, she remembered, so this might be Wichita.

But they obviously weren't descending at Wichita. There was nothing below but uninhabited vastness. No lights of a city, or of farm homes. Just a great deserted-looking level country with no fence or house or anything.

"This isn't Wichita!" cried Fiesta.

"No," said the copilot. "It isn't."

Fiesta looked at the copilot's face. When she had boarded the plane, the copilot had impressed her as having the same kind of a face as the pilot, a firm, efficient one, the kind of a face that belonged to a man who was accustomed to, and entirely capable of, holding human lives perfectly safe in his two hands for long hours at a stretch. Now she didn't know.

Fiesta now did what she had felt like doing several times this night.

She fainted.

AT six minutes to four o'clock that morning, the plane which had taken off from the Arizona town with Fiesta landed at the airport in Wichita, Kansas. There was no time wasted. The ship taxied across the runways, stopped only a few yards from the regular transcontinental passenger liner which had arrived, and was due to depart at exactly four o'clock. A small feminine figure sprang out of the Arizona plane, ran to the regular passenger ship, and climbed inside.

The regular passenger ship took off in its scheduled fashion. It was not heavily loaded, less than a dozen passengers.

Shortly the passenger liner was gone into the night, and only its roaring echo remained.

Nothing happened until a farmer near Millard, Missouri, was awakened by a commotion made by all of his chickens flying wildly out of the peach tree in which they had been roosting.

It wasn't a hawk. It was a big plane, and it landed in the calf pasture below the orchard, collided with a hedge fence before it stopped rolling, and halted standing partially on its nose.

"Maw!" yelled the farmer. "Oh, maw! Airplane wreck!"

He put on his pants, rushed to the plane, opened the door, hollered, "Anybody hurt in there?" then climbed inside. He was inside the plane for, at the longest estimate, twenty seconds. He popped out, looking as if he wanted badly to run, like Potlicker, his hound dog, had already done, and hide under the barn.

"Maw," he said to his wife, who had joined him, "maw, they're all dead in there. And there's something else in there—a bird."

His wife sniffed. "I ain't afraid of no bird, paw. Get out of the way and let me look."

She climbed into the plane. She got out again more suddenly than her husband, and wearing about the same expression.

"Oh, my!" she said.

"You see the bird, maw?"

"I—saw—it."

It took some time, but they got up their courage, and looked into the plane again, holding hands like children, because they were scared.

The bird was still there, sitting in the aisle of the plane, down front. It was the size of a small goat, and the color of a skull in a doctor's office, and it had eyes like the blood blisters

that raised on the farmer's hand whenever he pinched it in the mowing machine. It was a horrendous thing.

The farmer and his wife were still looking in at the bird when the bird suddenly turned into a white sheet of flame, emitted squealing sounds fully as awful as its appearance justified, and burned into nothingness, apparently. The heat of the blazing bird was terrific, and naturally the metal skin of the plane melted and the side of one of the gas tanks, and there was an explosion, and an even greater fire.

The plane burned itself into a tangled mass of black metal and awful smoke, while the farmer and his wife ran futilely back and forth from the well with buckets of water.

After the plane had burned, there was nothing whatever to show that there had been a horror bird, and the bodies of the passengers were burned beyond identification.

What happened when the sheriff and the State police were called was exactly what might have been expected would happen. The farmer told his story—everyone dead in the plane, a hag-goblin of a bird sitting there—and it was unanimously decided that the farmer was nuts. Bughouse. Such things didn't happen.

The farmer's part of it ended when he went to the barn, sat on a manger, chewed tobacco, and cussed uneasily. Crazy?

He wasn't sure himself.

Chapter VI. THE UNUSUAL MAN

FIESTA knew nothing about a plane full of dead landing in a farmer's calf lot, and the rest of it, for the very good reason that she wasn't on the plane. She was not quite a thousand miles from the spot. But almost.

Truthfully, Fiesta didn't know where she was. Where she didn't want to be, that was certain. She was not a swearing girl, but she had thought up some appropriate words to describe what she thought of airplane pilots, copilots and hostesses, and had said them as loud as she could. It hadn't seemed to do much good. Except that it had badly scared a jackrabbit which had been under a sagebrush, and the jackrabbit's precipitous leaving had in turn scared Fiesta.

"Oh, Lord," she moaned. "If this isn't a mess."

Except for the jackrabbit, there appeared to be no living moving thing, as far as the eye could reach. Fiesta had climbed a small hill, from which eminence her eye had been able to reach a considerable distance.

"If I just hadn't fainted," complained Fiesta.

She had fainted in the plane. She had revived on the ground, with no plane around, not even a sound of one.

True, there was a parachute spread out on the sagebrush near by. There'd been some fairly disturbing minutes when Fiesta had wondered if they had dropped her, while she was unconscious, from the plane by parachute, but she had dismissed that idea upon examining the 'chute, and finding that it had obviously been spread by hand over the sagebrush—and tied there.

The parachute was there for some purpose. Why, exactly? Time would tell.

It had taken some deliberation on Fiesta's part to decide to leave the 'chute where it was, lashed, all spread out, to some large clumps of sagebrush. She couldn't very well be worse off than she was, could she?

The sun seemed to warm itself from the exertion of climbing in the sky. It became very hot. Some prairie dogs came out of their holes and yipped at Fiesta, jerking their little tails with each yip. A plane appeared. A big plane, roaring like a foghorn. It slanted down in the sky.

"Oh, ho!" decided Fiesta. "That parachute, all spread out, was a marker so someone could find me."

She ran and hid under a sagebrush at some distance, near an alkali flat which she had noticed, and thought at the time that if a plane landed, it would likely land there.

The big plane came down. It was streamlined, Fiesta decided, as no plane she had ever seen. Every curve bespoke fleetness, and every bark of the motor, power.

It landed on the alkali flat. The pilot got out. He wore a plain business suit, and seemed to be a remarkably large man, although Fiesta did not get a good look at his face.

Fiesta crawled to the plane.

She couldn't fly a ship, but she figured she could get inside, sit in the cockpit, and make it run across the ground without taking to the air, and thus escape the man, if that became necessary. With this idea, she grasped the handle to open the plane door. She twisted the handle. The door didn't open. Instead, two metal arms whipped out, encircled her, and clamped her to the side of the plane.

It happened instantly. One moment, Fiesta stood there. The next instant, an unexpected mechanical gimcrack of some kind held her fast against the plane. She struggled. The thing only got tighter. Not tight enough to hurt, but plenty tight nevertheless.

The man came back.

"Hello," he said.

Fiesta knew the voice. She'd heard it over a telephone.

"You are Doc Savage," she said.

FIESTA looked at Doc Savage, and began to understand what the airplane hostess had been talking about, and why the hotel clerk, and the airline ticket seller had undergone such change at the mention of this fellow's name.

Doc Savage was a bronze giant of a man, how much of a bronzed giant you had to be close to him to realize, because he seemed to have a most remarkably symmetrical muscular development throughout. Judging from the sinews noticeable in his bronzed neck, and on the backs of his long, powerful hands, he must possess physical strength somewhat approaching the fabulous.

But the most remarkable thing about him was his eyes, these being of a peculiar flake gold quality, the gold flakes seeming as if they were always stirred by small winds. There was a compelling quality about the eyes. They were friendly, and yet they were the kind of eyes that could make someone mighty uneasy.

"Turn me loose from this--this gimcrack!" Fiesta requested.

"You are Fiesta Robertson?"

"Yes."

The big bronze man went forward somewhere, touched something, and this released the mechanical gadget which held Fiesta. Doc came back and apologized.

"That thing may seem rather simple-minded to you," he said, "but you would be surprised how many times it has caught prowlers who were trying to steal my planes. All of the ships we use are now equipped with them."

"We?" said Fiesta. "Are you twins, or something?"

"My associates," Dr. Savage explained. "There are five men affiliated with me in our unusual profession. Two of them, Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, I might add, are going to assist in this present mystery."

"I see," said Fiesta.

She had not cut a very impressive figure upon this, her first meeting with the bronze man, and she was a little irked. Which, if she had stopped to think, would have surprised her. Usually, she didn't give a hoot what the men thought.

"And what is this profession of yours?" asked Fiesta. "Let's get that straight."

Doc Savage looked uncomfortable. So uncomfortable that Fiesta felt better. Here, she reflected, is a fellow that, even if he does have the darnedest reputation I ever run into, is scared of women. Men who are scared of women are my meat!--she remembered additionally.

"Well," said Doc Savage, ill at ease, "I guess you would call our profession righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, going to the far corners of the earth if necessary."

"That sounds silly," said Fiesta.

The bronze man made no reply to that.

"How much do you generally get paid for a good deed?" asked Fiesta.

The bronze man did not answer that immediately, either. He merely looked at Fiesta. The young lady became uncomfortable herself. She flushed.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That is all right," said the big bronze man. "Our profession is a bit unusual."

"I'm really sorry," said Fiesta contritely. "I'm a sassy thing, and some day somebody is going to knock my block off." She drew a deep breath, and pointed at the surrounding scenery, which she didn't care for in the least. "What am I doing in this--this place?"

"You were left here so I could pick you up."

"I was?"

"Yes. After you talked to me, I immediately communicated by radio with the pilot who was to fly you from Arizona to Wichita. He agreed to leave you in a nice lonesome stretch of desert, and mark the spot with a parachute."

"But why?"

"Precaution."

"I don't get this," said Fiesta. "Was I in danger?"

Instead of responding with words, the big bronze man produced a newspaper--the first edition of a Wichita morning paper--and handed it to the young woman. The newspaper contained the story of the plane that had landed in the Missouri farmer's calf lot.

BY the time she finished reading, Fiesta had become quite pale.

"This is the plane I would have been on!" the young woman said chokingly.

"Yes."

"Who--did someone take my place on that plane at Wichita?"

"Yes, the stewardess on the plane that brought you from Arizona to Wichita."

Fiesta's lip trembled. "That--girl--I talked to her. Oh, she died on my account!" Suddenly Fiesta was in tears. She sank down on the sand and sobbed quietly, and after a time, she dried her eyes and looked up.

"This is terrible, isn't it?" she said in a strained voice. "Somebody obviously tried to kill me."

And there's only one reason. It was because I was on my way to New York to see you."

"That seems logical," the bronze man admitted.

There was a quiet confidence about this giant of a fellow, Fiesta realized, that was definitely soothing. She watched him sit on the sand and take his knees in his arms; he looked into the distance thoughtfully—not looking at her, she thought, in the way that almost all men did. She wondered if he was really scared of young women. It looked as if he was not in the habit of having much to do with them.

"Suppose you tell me," said Doc Savage, "the whole story."

Fiesta nodded.

"I had a brother," she said. "He was older than I. He would be thirty-four now. Four years ago, he went to Indo-China, exploring. We never heard from him again, until—"

She fumbled in the front of her frock and brought out a tobacco sack which had been suspended around her neck by a string. Inside the sack was a paper, which she extracted, unfolded, and extended.

"A week ago, I got this letter in the mail," she said. "Read it."

Doc Savage took the missive, and read:

Sis:

They are holding me. Making me work for them. I do not know where I am being held, except that it is in Indo-China somewhere. But here is how you can find me.

Get a man named Doc Savage in New York City to help you. He is a specialist in such things. Then find a man named Fenter Bain, who is at present in Bowlegs, Arizona, on some kind of secret work. Fenter Bain knows where I can be found.

Be careful. This Fenter Bain is dangerous.

And for the sake of all that is holy, help me. This is the nineteenth letter I have tried to smuggle out.

DAVE ROBERTSON.

DOC SAVAGE finished reading, then scrutinized the missive thoughtfully, and finally carried it to the plane, produced a small metal case which, when open, proved to hold a number of chemicals, which he applied to the letter. He used a microscope. He took some time.

"This letter," he said, "was written about three months ago, with ink made from a type of wild berry which grows in the interior of Indo-China. The paper on which it is written is Siamese, being manufactured in Bangkok. The latter deduction is easy, because of the postmark. It is in your brother's handwriting?"

"YES, the letter is my brother's handwriting," said Fiesta grimly.

"Then it must be genuine."

"I think so."

"It does not tell much."

"I know."

"What is your brother's profession?"

"He is a horticulturist. Specializing particularly in rare tropical plants. It was to collect plants in the Indo-China jungle that he went exploring."

The bronze man nodded and returned the letter.

"And now," he said, "why didn't you call on me in the first place, instead of going to Bowlegs, Arizona, alone?"

"I had only enough money for a bus ticket to Bowlegs, Arizona, and enough left over to buy an old jello of a car to snoop around in," Fiesta confessed. "And I guess I was too self-confident, on top of that. Furthermore, I had never heard of you."

If the fact that she had never heard of him had any effect on the bronze man's composure, it was not evident. If anything, he looked a little pleased.

"Have you learned anything around Bowlegs?"

Fiesta shook her head ruefully. "Very little. I located this Fenter Bain. He is not a nice-looking person. I never talked to him. I just followed him. Every day or two, he would go out into the desert, where there was a strawstack, or what I thought was a strawstack, and a field of some yellowish-looking vegetables, surrounded by an electrified fence. Night before last, I went out there, only I didn't know the fence was electrified, and I got knocked for a loop. So last night, I tried again. I took two stepladders, and got over the electrified fence. I was hardly inside, and I met this young man, Hobo Jones."

"What kind of a person was Hobo Jones?" Doc Savage asked.

"He was nice," Fiesta confessed. "Right nice." She remembered when she had last seen Hobo Jones, racing off through the sagebrush, mesquite and cactus, with enemies in pursuit. Her face paled. "I hope he got away," she said earnestly.

"And this—bird," Doc Savage said. "What about the flaming bird?"

"Ugh!" said Fiesta.

"Describe it," Doc requested.

Fiesta did so, giving a very graphic and lucid description which, however, hardly did justice to the horror of the bird. Words could scarcely do that.

"There is no such bird," Doc Savage announced, when she had finished.

"Just wait until you see one," said Fiesta, "and you'll think differently."

Fiesta was nervous and angry about the whole thing, and she didn't know whether or not Doc Savage had insinuated she was not telling the truth. She walked away a few paces, gave an irate kick at the ground—and broke the heel off her slipper.

"Oh!" she gasped. "My only pair of slippers!"

"I'll fix it," Doc Savage told her in a friendly way. He picked up the heel and took the slipper off which it had come, then held out his hand, saying, "Here, give me the other one, too."

"But the heel is only broken off one slipper," Fiesta explained.

"I'll strengthen the other while I am at it," the bronze man explained. "You wait here in the shade of the plane."

Fiesta gave him both her slippers, and he climbed into the plane, and she could hear him hammering. Maybe he wasn't such an unfeeling individual, after all. Pretty soon, when he brought her slippers back, she smiled at him radiantly. It was calculated to melt ice, that smile; it would have cured rheumatism in a ninety-year-old man.

The smile seemed lost on Doc Savage, however, for his interest in Fiesta became no more personal than before, which meant that it remained not at all personal.

Chapter VII. HOBO JONES MAKES A CATCH

DOC SAVAGE and pretty Fiesta Robertson landed at Bowlegs, Arizona, shortly after dark the following night. They did not come down at the airport, but outside of town about five miles, in the desert, on an alkali flat where the plane was not apt to be noticed.

They had killed time all during the day, which Fiesta had considered a sinful waste of valuable moments, and which she had mentioned. Doc Savage, however, had not been swayed by her arguments that, if he was going to do anything, he'd better be at it. This big bronze fellow, Fiesta had discovered, contained a determined streak.

Doc Savage, Fiesta had learned, contained a number of unusual qualities, among them at least one that she was beginning not to care for. He ignored her. After he had questioned her that morning, he had spoken not more than a dozen words. He had simply stretched out in the shade of the plane and, of all things, gone to sleep. Fiesta was disgusted. Gentlemen didn't usually sleep when they had Fiesta for company.

Ordinarily it would have been perfectly all right with Fiesta if a gentleman had wanted to sleep, but the truth was, she had rarely met a man with the personal magnetism, and the handsomeness, of this big bronze man.

She still had a sneaking suspicion he was scared of girls.

Doc Savage removed a small motor scooter from the plane, a two-wheeled go-devil of a thing, which would carry double.

"You ride on back," he said, "and direct us."

"To the place surrounded by the electrified fence?" asked Fiesta.

"No. To Bowlegs."

"I don't see," snapped Fiesta, "why you wasted all day."

The bronze man did not answer—another irritating habit he possessed, the young woman had learned—and went to the plane, then came back wearing an Alpine type packsack which contained at least two metal cases, similar to the case which had held the portable chemical laboratory with which he had so quickly analyzed the letter from her brother. He got on the go-devil, and started the motor.

"Let us get going," he said.

The scooter, for that was what the thing amounted to, made almost no noise, Fiesta discovered. Moreover, the little thing was capable of breath-taking speed, and the young woman found herself taking a ride through the mesquite and sagebrush that she would always remember. She was more than glad when the bronze man stopped the go-devil on a darkened side street in town.

Fiesta followed the bronze man. Pretty soon, she was very curious about what he was going to do.

THEY reached the post office, stopped at the front door, and Doc removed one of the metal cases from his pack and took out a device which resembled a small old-fashioned magic lantern. This, however, had a black lens.

"What is that thing?" asked Fiesta.

"A portable projector of ultra-violet rays, light which is invisible to the unaided eye. When certain chemicals, which include quite a few common substances such as vaseline and aspirin, are exposed to ultra-violet light, they fluoresce, or glow—in this fashion." The bronze man turned the ultra-violet projector on the right side of the front door of the post office. He moved it around a bit.

"Goodness!" said Fiesta.

"Every town has a post office," Doc Savage explained, "so there is a dependable place to leave

messages."

The bronze man was referring to writing which had appeared magically in letters of faint luminosity on the right side of the post-office door. This printing, evidently put there in haste, read:

We wasted most of day but finally got on trail of something that looks good. Will keep in touch with you by radio.

It was unsigned.

"What on earth is that?" Fiesta asked.

"It is writing put there with a chemical chalk which leaves a mark invisible to the unaided eye, but readily distinguishable by the use of ultra-violet light."

Fiesta began, "But—" and did not finish. Just what she would have said was probably something about being mystified by the message. What she did say rang with unexpected, astonished delight.

"Hobo Jones!" she cried. "Look!"

It was Hobo Jones in person, walking down the middle of the street, with two large six-shooters slung from his hips. He walked in a rather bowlegged, self-conscious way, and turned his head from one side to the other as he strode along, and gave all the dark shadows suspicious glances.

"Hobo Jones!" Fiesta ran out into the street, and embraced and kissed the young man. "Oh, I'm so glad you're safe!"

Hobo Jones, heartily approving of the embrace, and finding the kiss somewhat like a stroke of sweet lightning, began blushing furiously. "Gosh!" he said. "Do that again—er—I mean, I'm sure glad you're safe, too."

"Where did you get the artillery?" asked Fiesta.

Jones adjusted the six-shooters on his hips. They were not quite as heavy as anvils.

"Oh, I found these last night, where those fellows were chasing me through the brush," he said.

"I guess the belt came unbuckled, and one of the men lost the guns in the darkness."

"You got away all right?"

"It turned out to be simple," said Jones. "I just outran them. Then they left. I guess they were scared."

"And what have you been doing since?"

"Looking for you," explained Hobo Jones. He added grimly, "I thought they'd taken you prisoner.

Only I found out in town that you had left by plane. After I learned that, I just walked around looking for them cusses who waylaid us. Only I was a little handicapped, because I never got a look at their faces last night." Hobo Jones took a deep breath. "How do you like it?" he asked.

"Like what?" inquired Fiesta.

"Why, I got a shave and haircut. Didn't you notice?"

Fiesta had noticed. She thought it had made a remarkable improvement, too. Hobo Jones had a firm jaw, which was also nice, and he no longer looked like a hairy ape. Distinctly not. He was handsome in a big sunburned way.

"You look swell," Fiesta admitted.

Hobo Jones scowled. He pointed over her shoulder. "Who is the big guy?" he asked.

"That," said Fiesta, "is Doc Savage."

Something in the young woman's tone, a touch of undue admiration for the big bronze fellow, no doubt, did not escape Hobo Jones' notice.

"I don't like him," said Hobo Jones. "Already, I don't like him."

FIESTA remarked, "But you haven't even met him."

"I can postpone the pleasure," suggested Hobo Jones.

However, Doc Savage was advancing, and Fiesta performed the introductions. She noticed with admiration the quiet self-possession of the bronze man as he met the other fellow, and she also noted with some pique that Hobo Jones did not attempt to carry the introduction off in a sociable way.

"What are you doing around here?" Hobo Jones asked Doc Savage unpleasantly.

"Mr. Savage is helping me," Fiesta explained.

Hobo Jones seemed injured. "I thought I was helping you," he said.

Fiesta was not unacquainted with manifestations of jealousy in the male breast. She recognized it now.

"You can help me, too," she told Hobo Jones soothingly.

"Too many cooks spoil a broth," said Jones grimly.

"Don't be that way," requested Fiesta.

"I'll be any way I want!"

"Don't be silly!"

"Who's silly?" shouted Jones.

"Don't yell at me!" yelled Fiesta.

Hobo Jones hitched his six-shooters around on his hips. His face was miserable, and long. He put out his jaw disgustedly.

"All women are alike!" he said, and walked off.

Fiesta was roiled herself, and more affected than she wanted to admit, so by way of showing Mr. Hobo Jones just how small an item he was in her life, she took Doc Savage's arm, and looked up adoringly at the big bronze man as they walked to the hotel. Not that this was hard to do, however. Hobo Jones threw his hat on the ground and stamped on it. There were holes worn in the hat, just as there were holes worn in his pants, his coat and his socks.

"Darn the luck," groaned Jones, "Fat lot of chance I've got. The big rich guys always get the gals. Dang women, anyhow!"

Hobo Jones picked up his hat, dusted it off, put it on, and stalked gloomily down alleys, and finally sat for a while on a woodpile, where he was barked at by a large amiable dog, which finally gave up and came over and licked Jones' hand sympathetically.

"I've got it!" announced Jones suddenly. "I'll go ahead and solve this blasted mystery by myself." He got off the woodpile, all enthused with the idea. "I'll bet then that she won't go down the street holding to the arms of big bronze guys. It'll be my arm!"

The father of the idea looked at the child with wondrous approval. It was a matter of no more than three minutes' brisk walk to reach a livery stable.

"I want to rent a saddle horse," said Hobo Jones.

"Three dollars," said the livery-stable man.

"That's the trouble, I have no such money as that," explained Jones. "However"--he unholstered one of his six-shooters and put it on the head of the barrel that was between them--"I will pay for the rent of the horse with one of these guns."

"You'll trade one of your guns for rent on a horse?"

"I cannot shoot left-handed, anyway," Jones said.

IT was in the thick darkness past midnight when Hobo Jones reined up his horse in the neighborhood of the electrified fence which surrounded the strawstack shack and a mysterious field full of yellowish vegetables.

Making sure his one remaining six-shooter was convenient for use, Jones crept through the darkness. His goal was the same pseudo-strawstack upon which he had bungled yesterday evening. He wondered if the body of the brown man was still inside.

The cactus thorns seemed particularly sharp tonight, the mesquite unusually thick, and there were apparently more of the yucca seed pods that clattered and sounded like rattlesnakes. Some coyotes were howling in the distance, sounding somewhat like a group of silly girls giggling, and nearer at hand, there was a hoot owl with a deep human-textured voice that kept making Jones uneasy.

The first time Jones heard the groan, he thought it was the owl trying a different note. The second time, Jones halted. He strained his ears. The groan came again. Jones crept toward the sound. There was an open clearing. In this, a man. The man was on his back. His arms were outflung. He was groaning.

It was evident that the man's wrists were tied by cords to pegs which were sunk in the sand. The fellow groaned again.

Jones listened. There was no sound in the night, until the staked-out man moaned once more.

"Poor devil!" Jones muttered.

He rushed forward, holding his gun ready and keeping his eyes on the surrounding sage, mesquite and cactus. But nothing molested him. He stood over the staked-out man.

The man on the sand was small, and dressed for a horseback canter in Central Park, New York City, rather than the Arizona desert. His boots were custom made, with mirrorlike luster, his breeches were cut with swank, and his brown-checked riding jacket had that certain "umph" which expensive custom tailors only get in the models that sell for over two hundred dollars.

Hobo Jones bent down to help the fellow.

The staked-out man took Jones by the throat and they began having a fight.

Chapter VIII. FIELD EMPTY

IT was instantly and distressingly evident that the dapper man, while staked out in the sand, was not at all firmly secured, because the stakes were barely thrust into the soft sand. The fellow grabbed one of the stakes and used it on Hobo Jones' head as they rolled over and over. This enraged Jones. He did some pounding with his fists, some clutching and twisting. He decided to break one of his opponent's arms immediately, and set himself to that task.

"Ouch! Help!" yelled the foe. "Monk! Monk! Come quick!"

Another man came out of the surrounding darkness. This man was practically as wide as tall, had arms so long that he could almost tie his shoes without stooping, and was unusual in other respects. Evidently he was "Monk." He looked it. His mouth was astoundingly big, his eyes amazingly small, and he was undoubtedly one of the homeliest of the earth's children. He was coated with reddish hair, any one of these hairs looking as if it might be pulled and used for a rusty shingle nail.

"Help me, Monk!" the dapperly dressed fellow yelled at this homely newcomer.

Monk showed enthusiastic interest in the fight, but no intention of helping the dapper one. In fact, Monk gave Hobo Jones some advice.

"Tear his pants," Monk suggested. "Ham always hates to have his pants torn."

Hobo Jones tried this tactic, and it succeeded admirably. Monk bounced up and down gleefully. He was enjoying it. Ham was making frantic endeavors to reach an article that lay under a nearby bush, and he finally succeeded, falling upon the thing with a glad yell. It was a cane, an innocent-looking black walking stick. However, when Ham got his hands upon this, and gave the handle a twist, it proved to be a sword cane. Fortunately, Hobo Jones got his chance at that moment, and gave Ham a wallop on the jaw which laid him out in the sand, temporarily stunned. Jones looked at the homely Monk. "Thanks," said Jones. "Tearing his pants sure helped." "Don't mention it," said Monk. "It was a good job. I want to shake your hand." Hobo Jones got up and extended his hand. Monk knocked Hobo Jones stiff with a fist to the jaw.

EVENTUALLY the birds stopped singing and Hobo Jones sat up and bent a malevolent, confused look upon Monk and Ham. Ham had also revived. "So you two clowns are working together," said Jones grimly. "Sure," Monk admitted. "You pick a hell of a way of showing it," Jones grumbled. "I thought you were enemies." Monk looked at Ham as if he was inspecting a worm. Ham in turn glowered at Monk as though the latter was something he was soon going to dissect. "Oh, we have our little differences," Monk said airily. "But they're private." Ham ground his teeth and glared at Monk. "You persuaded me to lay there on the sand for three hours, staked out like a beef." "You was bait for a trap," Monk said airily. "We got something in the trap"—he pointed at Hobo Jones—"didn't we? What are you kicking about?" "And then you stood there and watched me getting beat up," Ham gritted. "You even gave the beater advice." Monk guffawed cheerfully. "Sure," he said. "It was fun." "What are you going to do with me, you fools?" yelled Hobo Jones angrily. "If you don't stay shut up," Monk assured him, "we're going to take turns biffing you in the eye." Monk then ambled—nothing but amble described his gait—into the surrounding mesquite, and came back bearing a small box which was an apparatus—a radio transmitter-receiver, Jones decided. Monk tuned the device, then spoke into the microphone. "We got us a victim," he said. And he gave the exact location of this spot where he and Ham were holding unfortunate Hobo Jones. Somewhat more than half an hour passed. Doc Savage appeared. He was accompanied by Fiesta. "Hey," said Jones, gaping at them. "What . . . what . . . I don't get this." Doc Savage said, "I see you have met two of my assistants, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Monk Mayfair, and Brigadier General Theodore Marley Ham Brooks." Hobo Jones ogled Doc Savage. "Your assistants," he said. "These two clowns?" Monk said, "I'm beginning to resent that word 'clowns.'" Ham pointed at Hobo Jones. "Who is this pants tearer?" Doc Savage explained the status of Hobo Jones in the mystery of the flaming birds and the patch of yellowish fruit, and this caused Monk and Ham to look sheepish and groan in unison. "Here we went to a lot of trouble to trap him," Monk said, "and he's not worth anything." Doc Savage asked, "Have you learned anything that will shed any light on the mystery?" "Nothing," Monk said. "There ain't even no dead man inside that strawstack, and there ain't no field of yellow vegetables."

IT was determined to go at once to the field which had contained—but didn't now, Monk and Ham insisted—the yellow vegetables. They moved quietly, Monk and Ham in particular using more efficiency than was evident. Going by surface appearances, Monk and Ham were apt to give people headaches, or at least earaches, because they quarreled interminably over any subject at hand. No one had overheard Ham speak a civil word to Monk, or vice versa. They acted as if they were always ready for a hair-pulling. As a matter of fact, each one of them had risked his neck to save the life of the other on an occasion or two, which hinted that they were rather good, if strange, friends after all. Fiesta said, "Mr. Savage, I understand why you delayed all day. I'm sorry I said some nasty things about your waiting. I realize now that you had two of your men here investigating, and wanted to wait until tonight to bring me, so that people wouldn't see me and know I was alive." "Alive?" said Hobo Jones. "Are you supposed to be dead?" "Yes," said Fiesta, and she explained about the plane that she was supposed to have been in, and how it had met a weird disaster in which one of the horror birds figured. And she dwelled—much too

lengthily, in Jones' opinion—on the fact that Doc Savage, with tricky foresight that was little short of phenomenal, had saved her life by keeping her off the plane. She also credited Monk and Ham with the ingenious message left on the post-office door for Doc.

Hobo Jones went into another sulk. He was glad that Fiesta was alive. Overjoyed. But if somebody had to save pretty Fiesta's life, why—why the hell—couldn't it have been somebody besides this big bronze man, who was so handsome?

"Damn, damn, damn!" said Jones miserably.

Then he had something else to think about, for they found Fiesta's two stepladders where they had been left, carefully negotiated the fence, which they then discovered was no longer electrified, and shortly stood staring at the field where the yellow vegetables had been.

Where the yellow vegetables had been was right. They were gone.

Chapter IX. THE ANGEL FRUITS

"YOU see," Monk said, "the field is just empty dirt."

He produced a flashlight and prodded the beam around by way of emphasizing his point, and it was evident that the field had been swept as clean as it possibly could be, and that the earth was soft, as if recently dug up. Monk and Ham both went prowling with flashlights, but there was not even a root.

"But the yellow vegetables were here last night," Hobo Jones insisted. "I bit into one. I had to take my pocketknife and scrape it off my teeth."

"I bit one, too," said Fiesta. "It was awful."

"What did it taste like?" Doc Savage asked quietly.

"Think of anything nasty, and you've got it," Fiesta explained. "I don't know what you would call the taste, exactly. Just foul."

Doc Savage produced a flashlight of his own. He vanished in the darkness so silently that it was ghostly, and when they saw his flashlight beam dart, he was some distance away. The bronze man was gone for all of thirty minutes, during which the others crouched in the darkness and had very little to say. Hobo Jones and Fiesta were thinking of the grisly skull-colored bird, and they were too uneasy for words. Monk and Ham were somewhat madder at each other than usual, and so not speaking. Doc came back.

"Last night," he said, "a number of men came and dug up the yellow vegetables, roots and all. The patch is very small, and there were several of the men. They were the same men who waylaid Miss Fiesta and Mr. Jones last night."

"How do you know they were the same men?" asked Jones resentfully.

"Their footprints. The men made tracks when they chased you, and other tracks when they dug up the vegetables."

Jones fell silent, reflecting that the reference to himself being chased might be necessary, but it hardly reflected credit.

"There ain't nothing in the strawstack, neither," said Monk. "I'll show you."

Monk's bad grammar, and his manners, made him seem a homespun fellow who might not be too long on mental acumen, but this was deceiving, for Monk happened to be one of the most noted industrial chemists in existence at the moment. He was famous, in his own right. As, also, was Ham Brooks, the dapper sword-cane carrier, who was a famous lawyer, as erudite a disciple of Blackstone as the Harvard law school had ever turned out.

"Come on, you shyster," Monk said, by way of paying tribute to Ham's ability at law. "Let's go to the strawstack."

The two of them, Monk and Ham, were associated with Doc Savage in his unusual career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, for two reasons. First, they admired Doc. Second, they liked adventure.

They reached the strawstack. They went in.

"See," Monk said. "It's empty."

Only it wasn't.

THE man was tall, and he was thin, and he was happy. The happiness stood out, in contrast to his long thinness. He was so very skinny. He was so extremely happy. He was like a skeleton full of joy, and dressed in a loose gray suit, brown hat and brown shoes.

"Oh, thank everything!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad! I'm so utterly glad you're here!"

"Who are you?" asked Doc Savage.

"Fenter Bain," said the happy thin man.

"Fenter Bain?" said Fiesta.

"Yes."

"Where is my brother?" said Fiesta.

Fenter Bain giggled. He got off the chair on which he had been sitting and snickered happily.

"I'm so delighted to see you," he told everybody. "I never heard of your brother," he informed Fiesta.

"Do you know her name?" Doc Savage asked.

"No," said Fenter Bain.

"Then how are you sure you do not know her brother?" the bronze man asked curiously.

Fenter Bain chuckled. He laughed. He rubbed his hands together as if he had hold of molasses candy.

"If a man of my acquaintance had a sister as pretty as this little sweetkins," said Fenter Bain, "I would know about it, you bet you me."

"Stop calling her sweetkins!" said Hobo Jones.

"I'm happy," chortled Fenter Bain. "Excuse me, because I'm so happy."

Monk said thoughtfully, "I think he's crazy."

"You and me both, brother," said Hobo Jones.

Fenter Bain began laughing, and laughed and laughed. He did look happy. He sat down on his chair again.

"I'm so happy," he said, "because hell was scared out of me until you showed up. You look like such nice people. Gee, I'm glad to see you. My, but I'm full of joy."

Full of loose bolts, was Monk's opinion, and it seemed to be shared by the others, except for Doc Savage, whose metallic features had remained inscrutable. It was rarely that Doc Savage showed what he was thinking. He had trained his emotions, and his face. He had trained, for that matter, every sinew and faculty in his great bronze figure, along lines laid out by scientists who had taken him from the cradle and devoted their skill to making him what he was today, an amazing combination of physical strength and mental genius, devoted to one aim in life—the strange career which he was following. Two full hours each day, without fail, Doc Savage devoted to his scientific exercises, and this accounted to a great extent for his abilities.

"You say you were scared," said Doc Savage.

"Yes," admitted Fenter Bain, "but I am happy now."

"What scared you?"

"The incredible thing that happened to my field of special muskmelons which I have spent years developing."

Hobo Jones interrupted. "Those things were muskmelons?" he asked.

"Yes."

"They were the damnedest tastigest muskmelons I ever tasted," advised Hobo Jones.

"Oh, but they hadn't been perfected," explained Fenter Bain.

Jones snorted. "Oh, that was it."

"And now my muskmelons have all disappeared," said Fenter Bain. "Two days ago I went to Flagstaff to see a rodeo, and I came back tonight, and my poor muskmelons—everyone of them was gone. What on earth happened?"

"What on earth happened is what we'd like to know," growled Jones. "What about the naked brown man?"

"Naked brown man?"

"And the bird?" added Jones. "The ugly bird—that smelled."

"The bird," said Fiesta, "that chased me, and . . . and—"

"And seems to have caused the death of several people in a plane in Missouri," Doc Savage finished grimly. "The bird that bursts into flames."

"I don't know anything about birds," gasped Fenter Bain, "or naked brown men."

"But the naked brown man was here," Hobo Jones reminded.

"So were my Angelfruits."

"Angelfruits?"

"My muskmelons," Fenter Bain explained. "I have named them Angelfruits."

Fiesta stamped a small foot wildly. She was getting desperate, and she had an imperative question that she wanted to ask.

"Do you know Dave Robertson?" demanded Fiesta. "He is my brother."

"Never heard of him," said Fenter Bain. "I am happy, but this is all very mystifying to me."

"It's mystifying to several of us," Monk muttered.

"To me," said Hobo Jones, "it's plain spatterpated. It couldn't happen."

HANDICAPPED by the proclivity of the skeleton-thin Fenter Bain to shout that he was happy at least once each twenty seconds, they conducted an inquiry. The inquisition brought them back out of the same rat hole by which they entered; at the end, they knew exactly as much as when they started. Fenter Bain liked privacy, and he had built the electrified fence, and the shack disguised as a strawstack, and he had been raising a tiny field of vegetable which he insisted was a special muskmelon, not quite developed for market as yet, it was true. He had gone off to the rodeo at Flagstaff, and had come back tonight, and it was all a blooming, infernal mystery to him, and was he happy!

Doc Savage, Monk and Ham conducted a thorough search of the vicinity, leaving Fiesta in charge of Hobo Jones, which was strictly all right with Hobo, because he felt that he had been losing ground fast with the young lady. He was very nice to her, trying to catch up.

Doc and his two assistants found several minor parts of the jigsaw which they fitted into the

picture, principally airplane tracks—evidence that one very large airplane had landed a great number of times on a flat near the electrified fence during the day. There were also tracks which showed indisputably that the "muskmelons," plants and fruit, had been carried to this plane and put aboard. Also, there was a large collection of tracks made by barefooted men, and the tracks were different in size, indicating that there had been more than one brown naked man in the vicinity. Altogether, however, their finds didn't help much.

Monk and Ham led Doc to the small, fast plane via which they had come from New York City. They did not want to show Doc the plane, because he had seen it before; their idea was to free their two pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, which they had locked in the plane.

The pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, were as unusual as their owners. Habeas Corpus was a pig with long legs, ears that might have been built for wings, an inquisitive snout, and a disposition to dislike Ham. Chemistry was a small ape of unknown species—Monk always insisted Chemistry was a what-is-it—and the animal bore a striking resemblance, in miniature, to Monk Mayfair, the eminent chemist, himself. Chemistry did not like Monk, and the feelings were reciprocated.

Monk and Ham invariably took these two oddly assorted pets along, making some of Doc Savage's expeditions into adventure resemble a circus getting under way. Looks, however, were again deceiving. The two pets had their uses—in addition to the apparent one of affording Monk and Ham something to squabble about when they couldn't find anything else. Doc Savage frequently found use for both animals. As for the circus aspect of the bronze man's expeditions, there was seldom anything organized that was more efficient.

Trailed by Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, Monk and Ham and Doc Savage returned to the point where they had left Fenter Bain, Hobo Jones and Fiesta. Monk had been cogitating, and he had formed an opinion, which he now got off his chest.

"What do you make of this Fenter Bain, you shyster?" Monk asked Ham.

"I hardly know, you ignorant baboon," Ham replied in the same spirit. "But I have qualms."

"I didn't know a lawyer ever had those," said Monk.

Ham ignored this. He rubbed his jaw. "You know," he said, "I think the guy is a little touched in the head. I think he should be confined in a hospital for examination."

"Good idea," said Monk.

"Excellent idea," said Ham. "We can confine you at the same time."

The net result of this was that a decision was reached to put Fenter Bain in a hospital in Bowlegs and observe him, to ascertain just what was wrong with him. The man felt too happy. This decision concerning Fenter Bain was unfortunate.

Chapter X. THE SLY MAN

FENTER BAIN astonished everyone by his attitude toward entering the hospital.

"I'll be happy, so happy, to do so," he said. "To tell the truth, I feel rather wan."

He looked rather wan, too, after they got him on a bed in the hospital. In fact, when he closed his eyes, he bore a macabre resemblance to a man who was already dead, and since he began breathing with long rattling sighs, he was the picture of a man who needed to be in a hospital.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Fiesta sympathetically.

"I'm glad, I'm very glad," mumbled Fenter Bain. He opened his eyes. "I am full of joy. Will you come and see me soon, and bring me flowers, and some candy? All-day suckers. I like all-day suckers."

"Of course I'll bring you all-day suckers," Fiesta assured him, and gave his bony hand a comforting squeeze. Poor demented man, she thought.

Hobo Jones noted the squeeze, and found that he was enraged, and it occurred to him to be a little disgusted with himself. Jealous of an old bag of bones like that? He was getting so he was jealous of everybody, wasn't he? This big bronze guy, Doc Savage, was the one to watch. And maybe that overdressed shyster of a lawyer, too—he had been smirking at Fiesta, in what Jones considered a sickening way, although Fiesta hadn't seemed to mind. And that Monk, too—the homely gorilla!—had a way with the girls, it appeared. Monk's system seemed to be to get the young ladies interested in his pet pig, Habeas Corpus, then use ventriloquism and make it appear that the pig was talking. Fiesta thought it was cute. Hobo Jones thought it was nauseating.

"Of course," Fiesta told Fenter Bain again, "I'll bring you some candy. This very morning."

There did not seem to be much that the party could do, not until daylight at least, so they repaired to the hotel and got some sleep.

Fiesta arose early, remembered her promise to take Fenter Bain some candy, including all-day suckers, so she proceeded to do this, leaving the hotel, and stopping at a candy store en route to the hospital.

Fenter Bain's room was on the first floor of the hospital. The window was open. Fenter Bain, a pitifully thin skeleton of a figure, caused Fiesta's heart to give a jerk of sympathy.

"Are you happy this morning, Mr. Bain?" she asked.

"So happy," Fenter Bain assured her. He peered, as interested as a little boy, at the sack of candy she had brought. "What have you there, sweetykins?"

"The candy you wanted."

"Didn't anyone else think enough of me to come?"

"I came early," said Fiesta. "I don't think the others were out of bed yet."

"You're alone?"

"Yes."

"Come here, sweetiekins, and let's see what kind of candy you brought an old man," said Fenter Bain.

Fiesta came close, after which she was grabbed around the neck, choked into silence, and given a blow on the jaw which induced unconsciousness.

"Damn me!" snarled Fenter Bain. "I was getting tired of being happy!"

THE fact that the hour of the morning was very early, hence few persons were about, made it comparatively simple for Fenter Bain to drop out of the hospital window, carrying Fiesta over his shoulder, and dash into the cover of the tall sagebrush.

For a pretended physical wreck, Fenter Bain proved strong and of good durability. He ran a full mile, with Fiesta across his shoulder, stopping only once to pop her one on the jaw again and quiet her, and he was hardly puffing at the end.

There was an adobe hut. Four men came out. Three were brown men with black teeth, and they wore nothing but breechcloths. The fourth was white, a large man, with a hideous purple birthmark on his neck. They looked at Fenter Bain.

"You've got that Robertson girl," one of them said.

"Yes," agreed Fenter Bain. "And a very nice job of getting I did, too. I just acted so happy it didn't look right, and pretty soon—bingo! I had the girl."

"And why?"

"Her brother," said Fenter Bain, "is becoming harder and harder to force to work for us. By threatening to do harm to his sister, we may be able to instill a little more industry into him." "We would have to take her to Indo-China to do that effectively," said the brown man, who spoke a good grade of the English language.

"Exactly."

"But—"

"We are taking her to Indo-China right away!" snapped Fenter Bain.

The other man, evidently a philosopher at heart, shrugged and spread his arms wide, then spat a stream of betel juice—it was the betel that made his own teeth, and those of his fellows, so black—at an inoffensive lizard near by. "The ways of white-skinned men pass all understanding," he remarked. "They are like white cows—one never knows when they will have a black calf."

Fenter Bain ignored the remark, and smacked one bony palm with a fist.

"We're damn lucky to have our necks whole," he said. "You know that very well. You are very calm now, but last night, when the death of the flaming falcon got one of you, the rest of you all ran for your lives. You deserted me."

"You fled also," one pointed out.

Fenter Bain shrugged and spread his arms. "There is nothing for us to do but go back to Indo-China. All of our plans here in the United States have been wiped out. The moment the death of the flaming falcon came, and our enemies managed to remove every last plant from that field, we were ruined. We will have to start all over again. So we are going back to Indo-China, and we will take this girl, because she will be a very convenient club to use over her brother."

"What about Doc Savage?" a dark-brown man asked. "Even in Indo-China, I have heard of that fellow. It is said that the tigers go hungry all the time, from hiding in their caves, when he is in the jungle."

"Hah!" said Fenter Bain. "Doc Savage does not know what it is all about."

TWENTY minutes later, a car pulled onto the flying field at Bowlegs, Arizona, choosing the exact minute when a large and fast airliner was sitting, fueled ready for a take-off, and with the engines running slowly. The pilot was standing beside the steps talking to the copilot, and the stewardess was in the administration building seeing about something or other.

Out of the car sprang Fenter Bain and his brown men dressed in breechcloths. Two of these held Fiesta; the others held rifles. They aimed, and fired a volley.

The pilot and copilot of the plane fell, shot through the legs.

The brown-skinned men began shooting lazily as they made their way to the plane. They broke the window over the head of a staring lunchroom waiter, and they knocked up dust all around a mechanic, sending the frightened greaseball racing into the adjacent sagebrush.

Fenter Bain climbed into the plane. The others started to follow. Suddenly Fenter Bain shouted angrily.

"Hell, there's no map to Canada in this plane!" he yelled.

"Get a map to Canada! Go make 'em give you one!"

Four of the breechclothed riflemen made a flying wedge and raced to the administration building, found the door locked, shot out the lock, stamped inside, fired numerous bullets into walls and ceiling, and profanely demanded and received an aeronautical chart showing the route to Canada.

After staging these wild-West fireworks, Fenter Bain and his men took off, and headed northward toward Canada. Over the wild Painted Desert country, however, they turned west toward San Francisco. There had been no intention at any time of flying to Canada. The commotion to secure a map to Canada had been a flourish of misdirection.

"Good job of fooling 'em," Fenter Bain decided.

"It is too bad," one of the brown fellows remarked, "that we had to steal a plane, and make such an uproar."

"What else could we do? Our enemies took our own plane, and even if they had left it, we would have been afraid to use it, fearing the death of the flaming falcon."

The others nodded. That was logical.

There was plenty of fuel in the tanks, the motors ran like watches, Fenter Bain was an expert flier, and everything was rosy. They encountered a great mass of clouds that seemed to cover the entire western part of the United States, and that made it perfect. They flew high. No one on the ground had a possible chance of seeing the plane and identifying it. They were careful to keep the radio off the air, so that it could not be spotted with a direction-finder.

"Doc Savage," said Fenter Bain, "hasn't a chance of trailing us."

THAT afternoon, they came down on a small, deserted stretch of beach north of San Francisco. No one saw them. Fenter Bain's men alighted, carrying Fiesta Robertson. Fenter Bain himself remained in the pilot's cockpit, busy lashing the controls, and when he got them fixed to his satisfaction, he jerked the throttles open, dashed back to the door and leaped out of the plane just as it was picking up speed.

The plane ran bawling down the beach, lifted a few yards, and raced out to sea. Very slowly, it turned over on one wing, sideslipped and plunged into the sea. It sank. Approximately a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of plane disappeared beneath the ocean waves.

"Too bad," remarked Fenter Bain, "but necessary."

He joined his men on the beach, said, "I will go rent a car. Stay out of sight." He took his departure.

He was back in about three hours—it had been a hard walk to the nearest town—with a rented sedan, into which all of them piled after dressing in the civilian clothing he brought them. They drove toward San Francisco at a leisurely pace, leisurely because they did not want to enter the city until after dark. Everything had been going perfectly to plan, and they saw no sense in taking chances. Anyway, it was Saturday night, and the steamship ticket offices would be open.

At one of the steamship ticket offices, Fenter Bain bought tickets on a boat sailing that midnight—only four hours' time away—for himself and all his men. But not for Fiesta Robertson. They took Fiesta aboard in a large trunk, which they also purchased. Fiesta was drugged. They had engaged a suite of rooms, all connecting, for themselves, and they had the trunk delivered to this suite. As soon as the trunk arrived, they opened it to ascertain that Fiesta was all right. She seemed to be.

"Good," said Fenter Bain.

He and his men were too cunning to go out on deck and watch sailing preparations. There were a number of dark-skinned persons on this liner, which was a large one bound for the Orient, but they still did not think it advisable to take the slightest chances.

There was nothing of particular interest about a liner sailing, anyway, they figured. See one, and you've seen them all.

"Yes, indeed," said Fenter Bain. "Doc Savage will never be able to trail us."

Chapter XI. PACIFIC TROUBLE

THERE might not have been anything of particular interest about the sailing of this liner, but there was at least one unusual incident. This was the incident of the man who seemed to be hard of hearing. At least, he wore a small telephone receiver tucked over one ear, the cord from which extended into a small box which he wore slung over a shoulder.

The hard-of-hearing man seemed to be a harmless soul. His behavior was a bit aimless.

Shortly before sailing time, he got off the ship in a hurry, raced wildly to a telephone, and put in a long-distance call. While he waited for the call to be completed, he stared through the window of the telephone booth and watched the liner back out of its slip and sail out toward the Golden Gate and the far reaches of the Pacific Ocean.

"Damn the luck!" groaned the man. "Why did I have to find it so late!"

The telephone girls were having some trouble putting the man's call through—they got a line as far as Bowlegs, Arizona, without much difficulty, but it seemed the party in Bowlegs did not answer, because the telephone receiver was off the hook.

Monk Mayfair, in fact, had just a few moments before knocked over the telephone with a book. He had intended the book to knock the ears off Chemistry, Ham's pet ape.

Chemistry had collected a colony of fleas the night before in the Arizona desert. However, Chemistry had been catching the fleas, one or two at a time, and putting them on Habeas Corpus, Monk's pet pig, and this was what Monk resented.

"You taught that blasted what-is-it to do that!" Monk yelled at Ham.

"I did not," Ham said coolly. "Chemistry is just returning the fleas to what is obviously their natural habitat."

Hobo Jones stood up and waved his arms. He had listened to these two squabble all day and far into the night, and he was getting tired of it. Jones was on edge.

"Shut up!" he shrieked. "You fools! Why do you sit here? Why don't you find Fiesta?"

"Listen, my arm-waving friend," said Monk, "nobody is more anxious to find Fiesta than I am."

Jones did not like the tone of this, either.

Monk started to say something else, but leaned over instead, and eyed Chemistry. "Can this here what-is-it purr?" he asked.

"Purr?" Ham was puzzled.

"Sure. I heard something. It sounded like Chemistry was purring like a cat."

Doc Savage, who had said very little for some hours—the big bronze man had learned that there was nothing to do but preserve a weary silence during the prolonged verbal gymnastics of Monk and Ham—got up from the chair where he had been seated. He picked up the telephone. It was the buzzing of the telephone, receiver off, which Monk had heard.

"Hello," Doc said. He listened a long time. Twice, he said, "Yes," and then he added, "Thank you, we will take care of the rest by radio," and hung up.

"Who was that?" Monk asked.

"One of our secret agents in San Francisco," Doc Savage explained.

THE organization used by Doc Savage in his strange profession was not composed alone of his small group of personal assistants, of which he had five—of the five, only Monk and Ham were on this adventure, the others being in Europe, at work in their respective professions, one being an engineer, another an electrical wizard, and the third an archaeologist and geologist.

Doc Savage also maintained a far-flung organization of part-time agents upon whom he could call in emergencies. This part-time secret organization had arisen as a result of another of the bronze man's unusual projects—a "college" for curing criminals of being criminals. This "college" was itself unique, and its existence known to only a few. It was located in a remote up-State section of New York, and operated by specialists whom Doc Savage himself had trained. To it, Doc sent such crooks as he captured in the course of his activities. The criminals underwent intricate brain operations which wiped out all memory of the past, after which they were subjected to a course of training, a part of which was a thorough ingraining of a hate for crime. The "students" were also taught trades.

When released from this "college," the criminals had no recollection of ever having followed crime, they knew a good trade, they hated crime for what it was, and they felt that they owed Doc Savage a debt of gratitude. It was upon these "graduates" that Doc Savage frequently called. They had scattered to the far corners of the earth, which made it convenient.

When Doc Savage, Monk and Ham started for their planes, Hobo Jones began following them, and Monk turned around and stuck out his jaw.

"You don't need to go," Monk said.

Hobo Jones began rolling up his sleeves. "I'm going to fight somebody," he announced grimly, "if I don't get to go along. The girl I love is in danger. I think that gives me rights."

There was such genuine misery on Jones' face that Monk relented. They all rode in Doc Savage's personal plane, because it was much faster than the craft which Monk and Ham had employed for the trip from New York. The ship took off after a short run, and Doc cranked the landing wheels into the streamlined fuselage, and cut the motor exhausts out of the silencers, so that no fraction of power would be lost. He set a course for San Francisco.

Hobo Jones grumbled. "Answer me this: Those fellows might have planned to take a ship from anywhere in the United States or Canada, or even take a transoceanic airliner out of the country. How did you happen to hit on San Francisco, and that particular ship?"

Doc Savage explained the point.

"There was more than one of my agents at work," he said. "There were scores of them, in fact. They were covering every ship that sailed, and every plane that left the country. It was a long chance, but there was a possibility of success. For that matter, other agents were watching all the airports, the railways, and hotels, seeking a man of Fenter Bain's description, who would probably be accompanied by some brown natives of Indo-China."

"The way I get this," put in Monk, "we seem to be fighting two different groups of enemies."

"Exactly," Doc agreed. "And those two are in turn fighting each other."

"HOW do you figure we've got two distinct sets of enemies?" demanded Jones.

"Fenter Bain and his brown natives were obviously growing that patch of strange yellow vegetables in the greatest of secrecy," Doc pointed out.

"Yeah."

"And another group of men made a raid, caused the death of one of Fenter Bain's natives and removed the whole field of mysterious vegetables bodily," Doc continued. "When Fenter Bain found

this out, he fled for Indo-China with his natives, taking Fiesta with him."

"Speaking of the death of Fenter Bain's native," said Jones, "what about that? What about the witch's chicken? That hell-horror of a bird?"

Doc Savage seemed not to hear the inquiry, which was another of his traits. The bronze man, as those who came in contact with him soon learned, rarely voiced a theory; only what were in his own mind proven facts. Rather than make evasive answers, or indulge in a long argument about what might or might not be the facts, he simply became deaf to inquiries.

"Oh, all right," grumbled Jones. "But how did your agent find out Fiesta was on that boat in Frisco?"

Doc said, "Shortly after I met Fiesta, she had the misfortune to break the heel off one of her slippers."

"What's Fiesta breaking a heel off her slipper got to do with it?"

"I repaired it. Under the pretense of making sure both heels were secure, I got both her slippers. In the heel of each of them, I inserted a pellet of radioactive mineral. Very strong radioactive mineral, as strong as it was safe to use, because too strong a material might burn her."

"And?"

"My agents," the bronze man explained, "simply used a sensitive electrical detector which would indicate the presence of any radioactive material in the neighborhood. When the agent walking along the deck of the liner in San Francisco located radium emanations with his instrument, he immediately made sure they came from a suite of cabins. A commercial shipment of radium, which would give out similar emanations, would logically be in the ship's safe, and not in a cabin. Moreover, the men in the suite from which the radium emanations came had booked passage hurriedly, at the last minute, and were staying inside while the ship sailed. Now, no ocean traveler, however experienced, is likely to stay inside when the ship first sails. There is something fascinating about sailing time that always draws them out on deck."

Hobo Jones leaned back. His face was strange. He was awed, astounded, and his heart was going downstairs in a series of sinking bumps. This big man of bronze, Doc Savage, had an amazing mind, and a breathtaking way of doing things on a large scale. If it became a matter of rivalry for pretty Fiesta between a man of such capabilities, and Hobo Jones, who didn't have a nickel in the world, it was likely to be just too bad. Jones felt slightly ill.

THE liner which had sailed from San Francisco for the Orient had been out of harbor two hours, when it suddenly turned about and headed back for the Golden Gate. Fenter Bain noticed the listing of the ship as it turned; he peered out of a porthole at the stars—he was a skilled celestial navigator—and he realized what had happened. Alarm seized him.

He called a steward, demanded, "Why are we turning back?"

"There has been a breakdown in the engine room, the captain says," replied the steward.

Bain swore. "You mean we'll have to take a different ship?"

"Oh, no," said the steward. "The broken part will be waiting for us in San Francisco, and will be put aboard, and we will sail again immediately."

Fenter Bain, of suspicious nature, was not entirely satisfied. "This seems like a stinker to me," he muttered. "It's queer."

The liner returned to port, was warped alongside its pier by tugs, and Fenter Bain was on deck, watching suspiciously over the rail.

"If anybody comes aboard that looks the least bit like Doc Savage or his men," growled Fenter Bain, "we'll have to make a break for safety."

But nobody at all got aboard, as far as they could tell. The gangplank was not even put ashore, in fact. A big cargo sling, a net of rope on the end of a steel cable, swung out, and a big box was loaded into this, lifted aboard, and lowered into the aft hold. This, Fenter Bain thought, held the replacement for the piece of machinery that had broken.

"False alarm," he concluded. "We're perfectly safe."

Chapter XII. A FALCON HUNTING

ONCE the big packing case was lowered into the hold, there was some fast work. Doc Savage knocked a plank out of the side of the case, got out, and Monk, Ham and Hobo Jones trailed him, also the two animals, Habeas and Chemistry. They hauled out several metal boxes of the type which the bronze man used to transport the scientific devices which he frequently had occasion to use.

A large piece of machinery, which was all in readiness in the hold for this purpose, was now inserted in the case, and the thing was nailed up again.

The placing of machinery in the case was merely a thorough additional precaution on the part of the bronze man, and not fruitless. For Fenter Bain, still being bitten by the bugs of suspicion, turned up in the hold before long. He looked at the case, which was slowly being opened again. He saw the machinery inside. He was satisfied, and went back to his suite of cabins.

"Let's grab 'im now!" Monk breathed. "Why wait?"

"Let him lead us," Doc Savage suggested, "to the seat of this mystery—and to Dave Robertson, Fiesta's brother. Part of our job is to find Dave Robertson, you know."

Monk admitted that was true.

They went to interview the captain, a grizzled soul with a weathered face, and no little respect for Doc Savage.

"I hope I carried the dang business off like you wanted," said the captain. "On account of having to do everything accordin' to them radio messages you sent, I thought maybe there might be a slip."

"Everything was perfect," Doc Savage assured him. "We are very grateful."

"Anything else you want?"

"No. Simply keep it from being known that we are aboard."

"Very good, sir."

The entire willingness of a liner captain to bring his ship back to port and pick them up in a secretive fashion impressed Hobo Jones. "How come?" he wanted to know of Ham Brooks.

"Well, it's simple," Ham explained. "Doc Savage happens to own part of this steamship line and several others. A year or two ago, when unscrupulous foreign competition was about to break the steamship lines financially, Doc invested some of his money, and some of his time, and put them on a paying basis."

"Ugh!" said Jones. "So he's a rich man, too?"

"Yes," said Ham. "Doc has a secret source of fabulous wealth in—"

"Shut up, you shyster!" interrupted Monk.

Ham became silent, and also red-necked. For one of the few occasions in his life, he had almost made a slip of the tongue. He had nearly revealed the secret of the incredible lode of gold, in a hidden valley deep in the mountains of a remote Central American country, which was watched over by a small group of descendants of the ancient Mayan race. It was from this hoard that Doc Savage secured the funds with which he carried on his work of assistance—it was solely with the understanding that he would use the money to help humanity that he had access to the gold. Whenever the bronze man needed money, he had only to broadcast by radio, on a certain wave length, at a certain hour each seventh day, a few words in the almost unknown language of ancient Maya. A few days later, a mule train laden with raw gold would appear mysteriously out of the mountains, and the funds would be deposited to the bronze man's credit in the capitol of the Central American country.

THE ship sailed from San Francisco the second time, plowed out across the Pacific, encountering perfect weather, and the voyage settled down to one of infinite monotony. Four days passed. On the fifth day out, something unexpected happened.

Doc Savage and his men were occupying secluded cabins, and naturally they had not been seen about the decks. The captain knocked on Doc's door that fifth day.

"Something rather unusual has happened," the captain advised. "A man, one of my passengers, has been making frantic attempts to get in touch with you, Mr. Savage. Here are some of the radiograms he has sent."

The captain spread a sheaf of sent radio messages on the stateroom table. Doc examined them. They were addressed mostly to New York, although some of them had gone to Europe to the three Doc Savage aids who were not on this present adventure. All the radiograms were beseeching attempts to find Doc Savage. All were signed with the name: Court Tottingham.

Monk growled, "Probably a trick by Fenter Bain to find I out just where Doc Savage is."

Doc asked, "What does this Court Tottingham look like?"

"He is a very large, robust young man with a deep voice," the captain explained. "And he talks with a heavy English accent. An accent so thick you could cut it with a knife, as they say."

This did not sound like Fenter Bain, who resembled a skeleton more than anything else. Doc Savage considered the problem, and put it up to his men. Should they, or should they not, see the unknown Court Tottingham, who might have an entirely different problem which he wanted them to take on. The monotony of the past four days of ocean voyaging influenced their decision.

"Send Court Tottingham down," Doc directed.

Court Tottingham was large, but not as much so as Doc Savage. He was well-muscled, but his sinews were the polo type; they didn't appear to have been put on by hard work.

"Really, old fellow, you have no ideah," he said. "I jolly well nev-vah dreamed you were on this boat."

As the captain had said, the man had an accent thick enough to chop with a hatchet.

Doc gave him a chair and an ash tray for the gold-tipped cigarette which he smoked in the end of a long holder, and Court Tottingham sat down. Ham surveyed the newcomer's clothing with interest; Ham was an expert on male garb, and their visitor was wearing some of the best.

"What is your problem?" Doc asked.

"A quite extr'ordinary one."

"Let's have it," Doc requested.

"You may jolly well think I am pipped, you know. But the fact is, I am being troubled with a bird."

"A bird?" gasped Monk.

"A deuced bird," admitted Court Tottingham. "A very much drafted unusual bird, if I may say so additionally. It is as large as-well, as small sheep. It is about the color of a sheep, as well. But

it has none of the other characteristics of a sheep. Oh, decidedly not. By Jove, it's quite horrible, in fact."

Monk and Ham looked at each other, at Doc, at Hobo Jones, then at Court Tottingham. Here was that bird again.

THERE was startled silence in the cabin, except for the faint vibration of some fitting due to the pulsation of the ship's engines, and the ever-present rushing of the sea water past the hull, which came in through the open porthole.

Monk said, "So you're being haunted by a bird?"

"Quite. Oh, quite," the other declared.

"What happens?"

"Three times, I have been pursued by the dratted horror. Twice on the open deck, late at night. And once down the corridor. I assure you, it was infernally alarming."

"You ran from it?"

Court Tottingham nodded with dignity. "I think it shows no lack of courage on my part, however. You should see the grisly thing, you really should."

Doc Savage asked, "And what do you think is the significance of this?"

"I am bound for Indo-China," said Court Tottingham.

"And—"

"Have you ever heard of the death by the flaming falcon?" asked Tottingham grimly.

Doc Savage shook his head. "No, never."

"Well, I confess I'm a bit disappointed. I had jolly well been led to believe that you knew just about everything. However, this matter of the flaming falcon has hitherto been confined to the interior of Indo-China, so that might explain your lack of knowledge."

"What can you tell us about this flaming falcon thing?" the bronze man inquired.

"Very little, oh, very. Just native talk, a part of which is always superstitious muttering, as you know. It seems there is a ruined city—there are several ruins in the jungle there, you know—and anyone who takes anything from the place is pursued by one of these hideous falcons, and slain, and after the death, the falcon always vanishes in flame. Silly, isn't it? I put no stock in it. Until—well, I'm beginning to wonder."

Monk entered the discussion. "Why should this witch's chicken chase you?" asked Monk. "Have you got something from this ruined city?"

"Ah, well, in fact, I have," admitted Tottingham.

"What?"

"This." He produced a picture, which he passed over to them for inspection.

It was a photograph. It showed a typical example of one of the mysterious ruined cities in the jungles of that part of Asia, one of the ruins which, incidentally, a motion-picture photographer had depicted a number of years before in a travel film, with some financial success.

"I took this myself," Court Tottingham exclaimed. "I am an—ah, adventuring photographer, I fancy you would say. I took this picture. That was all. I removed nothing from the city. Not because I was afraid of this dratted superstition, you understand, but because my native porters were."

"Did you make a movie of one of those cities a few years back?" Monk asked.

"Oh, no, indeed. That was an American chap. Rather poorly done, his film was, too. Rather crude chaps, these Americans. That is—ah—some of them."

Monk, not caring for the remark, looked at his own large, hairy fists. "Crude," he advised, "but effective."

Tottingham spoke quickly. "I didn't know," he said, "that a picture would be classed as removing something from the ruined city. But I guess it is. Because the dratted bird is after me."

"What do you wish us to do?" Doc Savage inquired.

"Well, hunt the bird. I imagine you will find it near my stateroom. The dratted beggar seems to have taken to roosting around there." Tottingham looked uncomfortable. "And if you don't mind, it would help my peace of mind if some of you escorted me, as sort of a guard, to my cabin."

This was done, and nothing happened en route. At the door of his cabin, Tottingham thanked them effusively, and they promised to take steps to watch for the horror bird.

Court Tottingham closed his cabin door, and was alone.

"I put that over nicely," he remarked to himself.

DOC SAVAGE and his companions returned to their own suite of cabins. Hobo Jones was walking with his chest out. He had something on his mind, something that caused him to be proud of himself.

"You know what?" he said.

"What?" Monk asked.

"You do—everything—just—right guys got something put over on you," advised Hobo Jones.

"How do you mean?" Monk demanded.

Doc Savage spoke quietly.

"He means," the bronze man explained, "that our late visitor, Court Tottingham, is the leader of the gang that waylaid him and Miss Fiesta on the Arizona desert that night, and also Tottingham is

the fellow who had charge of carrying off that field of yellow vegetables." Hobo Jones looked as if he had been kicked in the stomach. He sat down. His jaw drooped. "How'd you know that?" he demanded. "I only knew because I recognized the guy's deep voice." Doc Savage smiled, which was a rare thing for him to do, and confessed, "I merely guessed. From your manner, I knew he was obviously someone connected with this mystery, and the guess I made seemed the most reasonable one."

Jones looked a little more cheerful, and finally grinned himself.

"I guess I'm in too fast company," he confessed. "Say, what do you figure was the guy's idea?"

"Trap," Doc said.

"Eh?"

"He was probably setting a trap, and getting a line on how much we knew."

The bronze man turned the picture which Tottingham had given him—he still had it, Tottingham having neglected to ask for it—and looked at the back of the print. Drawn thereon was a small map of the interior of Indo-China, and on the map a cross, marked, "Location of ruined city."

"It's funny," Jones remarked, "that he would give us the location of the ruins."

"It'll be a lot funnier," Monk opined, "if that is the genuine ruin, the one where Dave Robertson is being held, if he's being held in a ruin."

Chapter XIII. TRICKS AND TRAPS

SOMEWHAT inexplicably, and to the astonishment of everyone, and to the disgust of Monk and Ham and Hobo Jones, who were craving action, nothing whatever happened for exactly a week. There was no horror bird. There were no mysterious events.

Doc checked the small map on the back of Court Tottingham's ruined photograph with the charts of the Indo-China interior, and the thing seemed to be genuine, which did nothing but further mystify them.

It was true that Monk, Ham and Jones suspected that Doc Savage had formed a theory that would explain Court Tottingham's objective in giving them the picture, but the bronze man showed his characteristic reticence about discussing theories that were not proven facts, and said nothing on the point.

Seven days passed and they were undisturbed, and on the eighth day, which was the thirteenth after departure from San Francisco, they neared the Oriental port which was the destination of the liner. That thirteen-day business got under Monk's skin. The homely chemist was a trifle superstitious, a fact with which Ham was acquainted.

That morning, Monk found that Habeas Corpus, in trying to make a nest in a corner of the cabin, had made exactly thirteen scratches on the varnished woodwork. When he opened his bag to shave, he found his mirror to be broken. A little later, the ship's cat, which was black, walked into the stateroom and crossed Monk's path.

"Blast you!" Monk told Ham. "You're responsible for this. You're trying to hoodoo me."

"Hoodoo you?" Ham snorted. "My homely fellow, you were hoodooed at birth. You are a hoodoo."

The liner pulled into the mouth of the harbor, then dropped anchor, and waited for the pilot.

Things did not move too efficiently in the Orient. It was early morning, but very dark. The air was warm, dankly oppressive.

Court Tottingham came into Doc's suite. Tottingham wore a loud blue-and-gray checkered coat, emphatic blue sport trousers, a midnight-blue shirt, and blue sport shoes. To a connoisseur of clothing, he was probably the last word, but Monk disgustedly curled what upper lip he had.

"I am worried," Tottingham confessed. "If you do not mind, I think I shall go to my cabin, get my bags, and stick close to you gentlemen."

"Very well," Doc agreed.

Court Tottingham departed, and the bronze man and his party resumed the slight task of getting their gear together for departure, and almost began making plans about how Fenter Bain should be trailed. It was decided they would take no chances. Fiesta had obviously been brought aboard in a trunk, they had concluded by now, so Monk and Ham were assigned to keeping track of the trunk. Doc himself, and Hobo Jones, would follow Fenter Bain.

Suddenly, loud knocking sounded on the door. It was a steward.

"Mr. Tottingham!" gasped the steward. "He is in his cabin, shrieking for me to bring you at once!"

They raced to Tottingham's cabin. The door was locked.

"Tottingham!" Doc rapped.

There was no answer, and the bronze man called sharply again, then threw himself against the door and burst out the lock. They stumbled into the cabin, only to stop instantly.

They stared at the man in the blue sports outfit who sat in a chair on the other side of the cabin.

They stared also at the bird that sat on Tottingham's shoulder.

THE combination of the man sitting in the chair—his head was twisted back in a grotesque fashion, his mouth was open, and there was plainly something horribly wrong with him—and the hideous

skull-colored monster of a bird sitting on his shoulder was a grisly picture. It was arresting, even to Doc Savage, who was no stranger to the fantastic and terrible.

"He's dead!" Monk croaked. "Tottingham is dead!"

Hobo Jones tried to speak. He made croaking sounds, and had to clear his throat with a strident barking which would have been comical under other circumstances.

"That bird!" gasped Jones. "I'll swear to blazes it's the same witch's chicken that was in that strawstack shack on the desert."

It seemed that they stood there for a long time in the door, frozen by incredulous astonishment, although it was probably no more than a second or two.

Then the skull-colored bird turned into white flame. It made its ratlike squeaking sound that was so frightful. The flame which the thing became seemed to behave like liquid fire, for it ran down and enveloped the body of the man on whose shoulder the horrible bird had been perched. So that abruptly both bird and man were flame, white and searing.

Monk lunged forward. Doc stopped him. "Fire extinguishers!" the bronze man rapped.

It was only a few yards down the corridor to fire extinguishers. They got two of them, leaped back, turned the chemical streams on the horror in the cabin. Smoke billowed, spread, grew thicker. The terrific heat turned on the automatic fire sprinkler in the center of the cabin, and water began flying out from it in all directions. The water, hitting the flaming thing, became hissing steam.

Ham came running with a fire hose, and they turned that on. The steam, the smoke, the odor, drove them back out of the cabin, but no farther than the door, where they remained playing the streams of extinguisher chemicals and water.

Gradually the white flame died in the thick smoke until it vanished entirely. The heat subsided.

"You stay at the door," Doc told Monk. "Ham, you go make sure that Fenter Bain does not hear about this commotion and come here and discover us."

Ham departed on his errand. Monk and Jones remained in the corridor. Doc Savage went into the room.

The bird had burned, and the body was seared and consumed to the point where it was recognizable only as a human being.

Doc searched briefly, then went to the porthole, feeling his way through the smoke. He put his head out, but there was nothing but the warm dank darkness of the deck.

The belongings of Court Tottingham were spread out on the bed, where he had been packing. Among the stuff was a good thirty-five-millimeter movie camera, a sixteen-millimeter camera, and the usual gadgets used with cameras, telescopic lenses, filters, and that sort of thing.

There was nothing to show that Court Tottingham was anything other than he claimed to be—a wandering photographer who had taken a picture of a ruined city in Indo-China, and drawn upon himself the curse of a skull-colored bird of fantastic death, known as the flaming falcon.

Doc Savage left the cabin.

"This is fantastic," croaked Hobo Jones. "Horrible."

"Utterly," the bronze man agreed grimly.

FENTER BAIN left the liner boldly, presented a passport that seemed in order, and went through the customs in the conventional way. Doc Savage and Jones kept on his trail, but at an unobtrusive distance.

"There's no sign of Fiesta!" Jones wailed. "Maybe they . . . maybe—"

He meant that maybe they had murdered Fiesta and thrown her body overboard while at sea, but he could not bring himself to word the possibility.

"Take it easy," Doc suggested gently. "They will smuggle her ashore, Monk and Ham are keeping track of that end of it."

Monk and Ham, as a matter of fact, were at that moment swimming in the none-too-clean harbor water. They were following a small boat, a sampan, into which a trunk had been unobtrusively lowered from the offshore side of the liner.

The sampan landed in the darkness, and the trunk was promptly loaded into a waiting ricksha and carried into a decrepit building.

"Shall we go in after it?" Monk asked. "I'm in favor of that. Let's go in and start knocking heads off. Probably Dave Robertson is in that building."

"Listen, stupid," said Ham, "Dave Robertson is in the interior of Indo-China, as far as we know. You just want to fight."

A cry reached their ears. Feminine. Agonized. It was very short, and ended abruptly. Both men involuntarily lunged forward, then stopped.

It was important, both of them realized, to trail Fiesta Robertson to her brother.

A moment later, the trunk was carried out of the old building, and again loaded into the ricksha.

"They're taking the empty trunk away," Monk decided.

Ham was silent—he also thought it was an empty trunk, but it was against his policy to agree with Monk.

The coolie who was pulling the ricksha had lighted an oil lantern, and this dangled on the shafts

as he trotted along. The swaying light spread a glow over the trunk, which lay on edge in the ricksha.

The conveyance passed very close to Monk and Ham. Both saw the gory scarlet leakage that had crept from the edge of the trunk.

"Great grief!" Monk breathed. "They murdered her!"

The homely chemist would have plunged out and leaped upon the ricksha coolie, but Ham stopped him.

"The blood doesn't necessarily mean she is dead," Ham whispered. "Let's follow."

They trailed the ricksha and the trunk.

Their quarry did not waste time. He made for the harbor, reached a deserted spot, calmly unloaded the trunk, opened it, lifted a large rock off the ground and placed it in the trunk, then closed the lid and rolled the trunk into the water.

Monk and Ham yelled, rushed forward. The coolie ricksha man saw them, emitted a yell of his own. Terror-stricken, he fled.

Monk and Ham could chase him. But that would mean letting the trunk sink. They didn't want Fiesta to drown.

Charging to the water, they dived in, and managed to get the trunk out on shore.

"Poor girl," Monk said grimly, and they opened the trunk.

The trunk was empty.

"Oh, blazes!" Monk snarled.

The homely chemist raced back through the native streets to the old building into which the trunk had early been carried, then brought out again. Ham pounded on his heels. They were distraught, and they'd had enough of caution. They plunged into the old building, itching for conflict. They were disappointed.

There was no one in the evil-smelling old building, no one whatever. There was no trail that they could follow.

AT the same moment, Doc Savage and Hobo Jones were also somewhat irked, although for an entirely different reason, and one not as serious. Fenter Bain was killing time, plainly, and the delay was aggravating.

Fenter Bain had assembled his brown-skinned natives, and here it was Bain who looked strange in the surroundings, not the brown men. The streets were full of brown men who did not look a great deal different.

"I'm in favor of walkin' up and bustin' that skinny guy's neck!" Jones snarled.

A native approached Fenter Bain, and spoke at some length. Bain, for a moment, was visibly uneasy. Then he regained control of himself.

Doc Savage said, "Monk and Ham ran into a little trouble. It is known that they were following the trunk, and they lost track of the girl."

"Huh?" Jones stared at the bronze man, open-mouthed.

Fenter Bain was speaking to his men. They were seated in a café that was open upon the street, and their faces were unpleasant under the bluish lights of the place.

Doc Savage said, "Come on. We've got to move fast."

The bronze man dashed back to the pier checkroom, where he had left his baggage, and hurriedly secured two of his metal equipment cases.

"Hurry," he urged.

They ran through the streets, ignoring the commotion they created.

"But we're leaving Fenter Bain!" Jones complained. "Dang it, he's our only chance of finding Fiesta."

The bronze man said nothing, kept going. They found a taxi. There was a short argument, an exchange of money, and Doc Savage took the wheel. He drove very fast.

The bronze man did not explain that maintaining a familiarity with cities in the far corners of the world was a part of his business, and that furthermore, he had visited this one on a number of previous occasions.

They reached the edge of the town, drove furiously for a short distance, and turned onto a road which penetrated thick jungle. Shortly, the bronze man stopped the car and sprang out.

"Why're you doing this?" Jones demanded desperately.

"Because of what that native told Fenter Bain back there, and also because of what Bain told his men a moment afterward," the bronze man explained patiently.

"You know what they said?"

"Yes."

"How come?"

"Lip reading," Doc said.

Chapter XIV. THE JUNGLE AND BAD LUCK

HOBO JONES had heard of lip reading, and believed it was possible and all that, but encountering it in this unexpected fashion took his breath. Furthermore, he was still puzzled. Before he could

get explanations, however, Doc Savage plunged into the undergrowth beside the road. Jones followed. He nodded when the bronze man made gestures indicating silence.

They came, unexpectedly to Jones, upon the bank of a river.

"Hey, there's a seaplane!" Jones grunted.

Doc Savage did not seem surprised, only interested in whether or not the craft was occupied. His flake gold eyes searching, discerned two men, both natives, stationed on the river bank near the plane, obviously on guard.

The bronze man opened one of his equipment cases and took out a box which was not much larger than a shoe box, and equipped with a switch. Doc threw the switch.

He said, "Jones, you stay here and watch. When you see me alongside the plane, create a commotion by yelling and screaming. Do not let them see you, however. And do not yell English words. Just screech."

Doc Savage moved to a point where brush grew down to the edge of the water, and entered the river. The box, which he carried with him, was waterproof. He sank beneath the surface. It was downstream to the plane, so swimming was an easy matter. He kept close to the bank, which had been cut slightly by the water, and offered some concealment. When finally he came to a spot opposite the plane, he ducked, swam out, came up behind the pontoons of the ship.

He lifted an arm. Jones saw the signal. Jones began to squall and howl and thrash around in the brush. The two seaplane guards riveted their attention on the sound.

While the guards were distracted, Doc worked at one of the plane floats. There was a waterproof hatch in the top of the thing, for there was emergency storage space for supplies in this particular type of float, as he had known there would be.

Doc got the float hatch open, shoved his small box inside, far back where it was not likely to be noticed, and replaced the hatch.

The bronze man sank under the water, swam swiftly, gained the overhanging bank, moved along this, and eventually came out on shore.

Jones had stopped his squabbling. As a matter of fact, one of the plane guards had come to investigate, and Jones had taken flight. Doc followed. He did not molest the guard, who soon gave up and went back to the moored seaplane.

Eventually, Doc rejoined Jones.

"We will stay in the neighborhood," the bronze man said. "Fenter Bain will arrive shortly with Fiesta."

Jones muttered, "You learned that by lip reading, too?"

"Yes."

THEY settled in the brush to wait. Jones was silent. He had thought he'd been a trifle confused for several days, but the mental involvement was getting worse. He tried to get it all straightened out in his mind.

"Let's see, now: Fenter Bain had been growing a mysterious field of yellow vegetables secretly in Arizona. Another gang had come along headed by Court Tottingham and made away with the yellow vegetables. Fenter Bain, frightened, had headed for Indo-China, after seizing Fiesta Robertson, and carrying her along. Fenter Bain wanted Fiesta, probably, to use as a club over her brother, Dave Robertson, who was a mysterious prisoner somewhere in the jungle. An ugly skull-colored bird had murdered different people, the last one being Court Tottingham.

Even when you rounded it all up in your mind, it was still confusing, Hobo Jones thought. There seemed to him to be only one really clear objective about the whole thing, which was: They were trailing Fenter Bain, and his prisoner, Fiesta, to the spot where the girl's brother, Dave Robertson, was held.

"Quiet," Doc Savage warned abruptly.

They could hear sounds of men at the seaplane. They crept to the river edge, some distance away. Fiesta was being loaded into the seaplane. Fenter Bain waved his arms, gave orders. It was evident that supplies were being loaded aboard.

A man stood on the floats, began working at the hatches. They were going to store supplies in the floats. Doc's small box would be certain to be discovered.

"Have you a gun?" Doc asked abruptly.

"I've got that six-shooter I collected in Arizona," said Jones.

He handed the gun to Doc Savage, and the bronze man aimed briefly. The gun exploded. Frightened waterfowl flew up off the river's peaceful surface. Men at the plane yelled. Doc shot again. A small geyser of water lifted beside the plane, where the bullet struck.

Fenter Bain's men returned the fire, but the slugs went wide. Doc and Jones were concealed. Doc continued shooting deliberately, putting the bullets very close to Fenter Bain, but making no effort to kill the man, which he might have done easily.

Fenter Bain's nerve slipped.

"Cut the plane loose!" he rapped. "Let's get away from here!"

They scrambled aboard the seaplane and took the air—without having opened the float hatches.

The plane, once it was off, came banking back. Men leaned out of the cabin windows with rifles,

hunting grimly for the sharpshooters who had fired upon them. Doc and Jones lay under a thickly foliated bush, hidden. After circling a few times, and sending down a few fruitless bullets, the seaplane arched off toward the interior.

The ship became a noisy speck in the distance, and since the morning air was gray with misty fog, the craft was lost to view before the sound of its motors became inaudible. Finally there was only the faint lapping of the river waves against the bank.

Doc said, "It was fortunate for our purpose that they did not look in the float and find that box."

"What was in the box?" Jones asked, puzzled.

"A small radio transmitter which puts out a continuous signal that can be located by a direction-finder," the bronze man advised.

"I didn't know radios came that small."

"They are quite common. For a long time, commercial broadcasting companies have used the small 'beer-mug' type of transmitter, as they are called, to broadcast special sports events where it was not feasible to be bothered with a long microphone cord."

"Can we trail the signal of that little radio?" Jones demanded.

"Barring accidents."

MONK and Ham were remarkably silent when Doc Savage and Jones joined them in town. Monk and Ham were deflated. They had flopped on an assignment, the way they looked at it, and their ego had received a bad puncturing.

Doc Savage, it developed, had radioed ahead from the liner, and secured an amphibian plane, just in case they would have a sudden need for one upon arrival. They certainly needed it. The craft was moored by springlines between two piers on the water front. The fuel tanks were full.

They got aboard. Monk and Ham had picked up Habeas and Chemistry at the steamship pier. Doc's cases of mechanical devices were placed on the ship.

"What'll we do about food?" Jones asked.

"We'll live off the jungle," Monk said.

"Living off a jungle is the best thing Monk does," Ham explained, indicating Monk's distinctly apish physical construction. "You can tell by looking at him that he is equipped by nature for it." Doc Savage opened the throttles, the plane raced across the river, pulling widening fans of foam behind its floats, then went on step, and finally stopped touching waves. They were headed upriver, because the wind came from that direction, and after a time, they came to the spot where Fenter Bain's plane had been, and Jones pointed it out.

"Doc," explained Jones, "read Fenter Bain's lips when he told one of his men to go and get Fiesta, and they would all meet at this spot. Bain described exactly where the plane could be found, so Doc and I got there first, and Doc managed to put a little radio transmitter in one of the plane floats."

"I'm surprised at your modesty," Monk grumbled. "You took a big part in it, I'll bet."

"At least, I wasn't jumping into the harbor after empty trunks," said Jones smugly.

THEY flew inland, and leaving the coastal region that was cooled by the sea, encountered hot, damp air that was about as pleasant breathing as oil vapor. The mist continued to hang over the jungle, like steam, although the sky was cloudless and the sun a burnished disk of heat.

"Monk, you fly her," Doc suggested. "I will work with the radio direction finder."

The art of direction-finding by radio was an old one, ships at sea having secured their bearings in that fashion for many years, but it was an initial experience for Hobo Jones, and he watched with intense interest. He watched Doc Savage spread a chart, make lines thereon with a protractor. The bronze man produced the photograph which Court Totttingham had given him, and compared the location of the ruined city marked thereon with the course being taken by Fenter Bain's plane.

"Fenter Bain seems to be heading for the same spot that is marked on the photograph," he remarked. "I expected as much."

"Expected what?" asked Jones.

"That the map on the photograph would be genuine," the bronze man said. "However, there was a chance that it wasn't, so we had to put the radio in Fenter Bain's plane to have a sure way of trailing him. But the photograph map is genuine. This proves the whole thing."

"Proves what?" prompted Jones when the bronze man fell silent.

Doc Savage did not seem to hear, and he said nothing more on the point, although Jones was itching to have more.

In disgust, Jones finally went back and dropped in the seat along Ham. He frowned, cupped his chin in his hands, and scowled through the window at the steaming jungle that scudded below the plane.

When a dark plane came up out of the jungle ahead, Jones thought at first that it was a crow. But he soon saw that it wasn't.

MONK yelled, "There it is! Look!"

Jones thought the homely chemist meant the black plane.

"I see it," Jones said. "Boy, if ever there was a mean-looking airplane, that's it."

"Not the plane—our ruined city," Monk shouted. "Over yonder!"

Jones saw it, then. He peered intently. "Aw, shucks," he said. He was disappointed. He had expected a great spectacular ruin, with deserted streets stretching for miles, tall white minarets and battlements glistening in the sun, with possibly a jewel-incrusted tower in the center, and an air of romance and mysterious breathtaking beauty overspreading the whole. But what he was seeing was a bust, as far as he was concerned.

First, almost the whole thing was furred over by jungle. Secondly, the entire ruin occupied only a few acres. The stones weren't white; they were a disappointing shade of brown, about the same hue as a muskrat's fur. It all looked like—well, a ruin that had been in the jungle a long time, Jones decided.

Then, suddenly, he was looking at his hands. Doc Savage had shoved a parachute in them.

"What the heck?" gulped Jones.

Doc pointed below. "See that?"

What the bronze man meant was a number—four, to be exact—of long threads of what seemed to be gray vapor which had appeared mysteriously below them.

"Tracer bullets," the bronze man explained gravely. "That black plane is a military type, half again as fast as this old ark we have rented. We do not stand a chance."

This plane they were in had seemed very fast to Jones, but staring at the black craft, he changed his mind. The dark ship had the aspect of a killer hornet.

"Do you know how to put on a parachute?" Doc asked.

"Me?" gasped Jones. "Listen, I don't want—"

"I'll show him," Ham said grimly.

Doc Savage lunged forward, carrying an equipment case, took the controls, said, "Monk, you and Ham get Jones overboard, and get over yourselves. Take the equipment, all but this case. I'll try to keep that black fellow from machine-gunning you on the way down."

Monk nodded, dived back into the cabin, snatched a 'chute and began buckling it on. Hobo Jones was arguing loudly, and becoming a little pale. He didn't want to jump in any parachute, he insisted. He didn't like airplanes any too well to begin with.

"Look," Ham said, pointing. "I think I see Fiesta down there."

Jones really knew better, but he looked involuntarily, and Monk smacked him on the jaw, rendering him limp. They strapped a 'chute on Jones.

"I'll jump with Jones," Monk said. "I'm beginning to kind of like the cuss."

"Give me your machine pistol," Doc said.

Monk handed the weapon over.

The homely chemist went overboard instantly, holding Jones in his arms. When he had counted ten, Monk pulled the ripcord of Jones' parachute, a mushroom of silk swooped into being, and Jones was snatched away. After another ten counts, Monk yanked his own 'chute ripcord. Ham came tumbling down—he had lashed Habeas Corpus and Chemistry to himself—and Monk had a terrible moment or two when he thought Ham's chute had refused to open, but Ham was just playing safe, and falling as close to the jungle as was advisable before he opened his silken life preserver.

Monk and Ham and Jones sank slowly toward the jungle treetops.

As Doc had surmised, the black plane promptly dived for the men in parachutes. Doc put his own slower crate over, went down. In the bronze man's hand was the machine pistol which Monk had handed him. Doc himself never carried firearms, but he had perfected this particular weapon for the use of his men, although not for killing. The pistol fired different types of cartridges—mercy bullets inducing unconsciousness, explosive slugs, gassers, smokers.

Doc leaned out, aimed, pulled the trigger. The gun made a deep bull-fiddle moan, and a wisp-thread of tracer ran out from the muzzle. Every fiftieth bullet was a tracer, and the little weapon loosened slugs faster than most military machine guns.

The pilot of the black plane saw the tracer. He banked, avoiding the dangerous threads. He decided to let the men in parachutes alone. And he came up in a sudden looping maneuver. His four machine guns protruded tongues of red, and tracers crawled around Doc's ship like cobwebs. Doc rolled. Jacketed lead trip-hammered his plane fuselage. Then he got clear.

The two ships jockeyed in the sky. The black plane had a skilled pilot, but it was instantly evident that the bronze man outmatched the skill of the other by many times. But it was also apparent this would not help. Plane to plane, he was outmatched. It was the same thing as an expert lancer mounted on an ox, pitted against a fair lancer on an agile Arabian steed. Only luck would save the bronze man, he knew perfectly well. And he had learned that luck was a very fickle wench upon which to depend.

Doc delved into the equipment case, brought out three smoke bombs, plucked the firing pins, and held them until they started smoking. He dropped them, all pouring black vapor together.

Flying tensely, preserving his life only by skill, he managed to circle the spot where the smoke bombs had dropped, and dump others. The sepia pall spread in the sky. He flew back and forth through

it, dodging the black ship.

The smoke from the bombs stood, great awkward columns in the sky, and in the jungle where the bombs had fallen, they were pouring out more smoke that spread. They were like darksome, boughless trees that reached upward. And in and out through and between the smoke pillars, the two planes dodged, playing a game of hide and seek with death as the stake.

Until suddenly Doc Savage dived out of his plane.

THE bronze man had calculated expertly, chosen a moment when the black ship was behind one of the tree-things of smoke. He was not seen. He fell into the thickest of the columns of smoke, and began counting grimly, one bronze hand fast to the ripcord of his parachute. He could not see the earth, yet he wanted to fall as close to it as was safe before he opened the 'chute. He had only his sense of timing.

Finally, he yanked the cord. The webbing harness wrenched at his body, and he floated—almost immediately to be carried, by some last-moment fault in the parachute's filling, out of the smoke. He saw his own plane, far away in the sky, beginning to spin earthward.

The black killer ship had been deceived into following part way; the black craft had turned back. But it was too far away. Doc did not even trouble to sideslip his 'chute back into the smoke. He picked a tree that looked soft—there was nothing but treetops to choose for landing—and came down. Tree limbs gouged him; some of them broke. Then he was clinging to a bough, and struggling with the windgorged 'chute, which wanted to drag him. He got out of the harness.

Overhead, the black plane slanted, guns drumming. There was sound of loud leaden hail in the jungle. Leaves floated loose from their stems. A few heavy tropical fruit fell, bumping from branch to branch.

Doc dropped a dozen feet, caught a stout bough with his hands. He calculated briefly, swung, and clamped his hands to another limb. He ran along that one, using the agility and confidence of an anthropoid at home in the forest lanes.

It was probably only when he chose to travel in this fashion, in the open upper ways of the forest, above the tangle of creepers and brush that matted the earth itself, that the full extent of his physical development became evident. His movements were so free as to seem effortless, and the spaces that he spanned were dizzying, where a slip would have meant crashing to death or serious injury far below.

There was a distant crash as the plane which Doc Savage had deserted fell into the jungle.

The black ship moaned angrily overhead. Its guns continued to clatter, frightening forest creatures, causing the jungle birds to set up raucous clatter.

Until finally the pilot of the dark craft became disgusted at the futility of trying to inflict death, and swept away with an ugly, defeated groan of his big engine.

"Monk! Ham!" Doc called loudly. "Jones!"

There was penetrating power in his great voice that made it echo through the thick tropical tangle.

"Over here," Monk yelled faintly. "Help, Doc! Help!"

"What's wrong?" Doc Savage shouted.

"Help!" was all Monk could manage, "They're killing me!"

IN trying to land, Monk had obviously picked a large soft-looking tree—then miscalculated. He had missed the tree, but his parachute had hooked a great extending branch, so that Monk hung suspended in space, a full forty feet above the ground, much too far to drop.

Doc Savage heard the bedlam—Monk's howling, and the furious snarlings and chatterings of many other peculiar voices—long before he reached the spot. When he came in sight, he stopped.

The branches of trees surrounding the unfortunate Monk were laden to bending with monkeys. There were large monkeys, small monkeys, fat ones and thin ones, hundreds of them. The jungle at that point was profusely filled with a species of fruit about the size of an orange, but much harder. The monkeys were pelting the unfortunate Monk with this ammunition. Monk had tried to climb his parachute shrouds, and some of them had broken, so he was afraid to try again. The hurled missiles hit him by the dozens, making loud thumpings.

"Help!" Monk roared. "They're killin' me!"

Ham lay on the ground, holding his stomach. Ham looked as if he was about to die, as indeed he was—from laughing.

Hobo Jones stood near by, staring in bewilderment. Monk floundered angrily. There was a ripping sound, and three more of the parachute shrouds broke.

Ham suddenly sobered. In a flashing moment, he became wildly anxious.

"Hey!" he exploded. "He's in real danger! He may fall!"

Ham made a rush to climb the big tree. But Doc Savage was far ahead of him, already negotiating the upper branches with flashing speed. The bronze man reached the 'chute shrouds, pulled them together, and hauled Monk to safety.

"You hurt?" Doc asked anxiously.

"Of course I am!" Monk snarled. "My temper is shattered!"

The homely chemist descended the big tree in rushing bloodthirsty haste, and landed on the ground. He glared about belligerently.

"Where'd Ham go?" he demanded.

"He said," Jones explained, "that he thought he'd better take a walk."

Chapter XVI. SINISTER RUIN

HOBO JONES tramped along behind Doc Savage and Monk-Ham trailed them, but at a safe distance—as they set out for the ruin they had sighted from the air. Jones was still bewildered. He could not quite make out the characters of Monk and Ham, who, it was becoming obvious, were as likely as not to pick the middle of the most dangerous kind of an adventure to stage some personal clowning. However, Jones had a growing confidence in the bronze man, and in Monk and Ham, for that matter, in spite of their zany behavior. He found Monk and Ham entertaining, although at the most unexpected moments. He also found himself in increasing awe of Doc Savage, and the apparently unlimited abilities of the big bronze fellow.

When they stopped abruptly, Jones realized that they had covered a considerable distance through the steaming, insect-infested jungle, and must be near the ruin.

"Wait here," Doc Savage directed.

Without more words, the bronze man grasped a trailing vine, climbed hand over hand without the least apparent effort, swung to a limb, ran along that, and jumped—to his death, Jones thought, gasping involuntarily—and grasped another tree bough safely and disappeared into the twilight of the tropical growth.

"How long do we have to wait?" Jones asked impatiently.

"Maybe three days, maybe three seconds," Monk said. The homely chemist found himself a soft rotting log, examined it to make sure there were no stinging insects, then sat down. "Doc has gone ahead to look around. He always does that."

Doc Savage kept to the upper lanes of the jungle, traveling silently, and with a knowledge of woodcraft that it had taken many patient days of study to attain. Once, when he encountered a gang of the noisy little monkeys, he bounced up and down on a bough and made a lifelike imitation of the angered cry of a bird of prey of which the simians had a mortal fear. Every monkey became as quiet as a leaf, and remained that way until the bronze man had gone on.

At intervals, the bronze man crouched in silence, listening, straining his sensitive hearing for some sign of those he sought. There were no noises except those of the jungle.

He came suddenly upon the ruin. Its crumbled stone outer limit was below him, and before him, the brown rock ramparts stood, many of them higher than the giant tree in which he crouched. It was much larger than it had appeared from the air.

He waited and watched for a long time. Then he dropped down and began crawling among the rugged, tumbled stones.

THE bronze man possessed an extensive knowledge of the branches of archaeology dealing with what was known of the ancient races which had constructed this ruin and a number of others in this section of Asia. Very little, in fact, had been proven about the ancient builders. Where they had come from, why they had abandoned their cities in the jungle, were unfathomed mysteries.

Doc had visited other similar ruins, studying their enigma, and he noted that this one was similar in architectural aspects, the most noticeable of which was the profusion of carving on the stone. Every face of stone had originally borne a design of some sort, although many of these had weathered away during the centuries since the occupants, for what reasons were not known, had vanished.

He worked his way through passages that had been streets, crowding between the trunks of trees, and worming through the tangles of vines, that now gorged the thoroughfares. He edged past huge blocks of stone, stone he believed not to be found anywhere in this vast jungle, but brought from some unknown quarry.

There seemed to be a central palace, he perceived, and stretching before that, a great lagoon which contained water, and had once, no doubt, been a floating garden.

The lagoon had been cleared of water plants. On it rested two planes. The ship that Fenter Bain had used, the craft in which Doc had planted the little radio transmitter. And the fast little black ship that had forced Doc and his men to quit their own plane. Both aircraft rested on the lagoon. No human was in sight.

Doc Savage flattened on a rock and pondered. This silence, the lack of life, were unnatural. It portended, something, and doubtless what it meant was unpleasant, and aimed at Doc and his party. It seemed logical that there should be guards about, but there were no guards. No searching parties had been abroad in the jungle. It was queer.

The planes were a little too much like bait. Doc did not approach them. Instead, he worked to the right, where there was a series of terraces, surmounted by some kind of structure at the top. The terraces, he discovered, were huge. Each of them was fully thirty feet in height, a great encircling wall, filled level with earth, and on top of that, another smaller wall crammed with earth, and so on.

When the bronze man topped the second wall--there were rents and rifts through which he could climb, and still remain concealed--he came to a stop.

The terraces were planted with strange yellow vegetables.

DOC SAVAGE crawled among the strange things, and investigated. Hobo Jones' description of them had been remarkably accurate. They were unusual. The leaves had a distinctive shape. The plants themselves were not exactly vines, but more like bushes, and the fruit upon them were large and yellowish, although on some of the plants the melon-shaped things were green, like any other growing vegetable.

Doc tore open one of the fruit with his hands, then spent several moments rubbing his hands with earth to remove the incredibly sticky pulp that composed the interior of the things.

The soil here on these terraces, since it was not irrigated, and exposed to the terrific heat of the tropical sun, was very much like the soil of Arizona. There was even, he saw, a great deal of sand mixed in with the dirt.

It looked as if these terraces had been converted into experimental gardens.

The bronze man began retracing his steps, and it was then that he saw one of the skull-colored birds.

The horrible thing was flying. Always before, except on the occasion when one of the witch's chickens had pursued Fiesta, the things had been roosting. But this one flew. It was making slow circles, great outspread wings flapping lazily.

But the bird's hideous head was extended on the end of his vile neck, and the blood-sac eyes seemed to be looking for something.

Doc Savage became very still. Also, for one of the few times in his life, he showed an emotion.

The emotion was not exactly fear--it was certainty that if that flying thing saw him, he stood small chance of living.

He remained frozen. He knew that many wild creatures have difficulty discerning a stationary object, and that predatory birds were among these--that being the instinctive reason for chickens flattening motionless in the barnyard when the shadow of a hawk passes.

But--the infernal bird saw him. It swung toward him, and he knew suddenly that there was not the slightest doubt.

Doc whipped into the nearest crevice, dropped swiftly down it. He gained the level of the surrounding ground, while the infernal grayish bird coasted around in the hot air overhead, cocking its ugly eyes to examine the rocks in a way that might have been comical under other conditions. The thing had lost trace of the bronze man. But it was persistent. It kept hunting. And suddenly it made a slashing dive off in a false direction, evidently misled by some bush that had moved in the breeze.

Doc took that chance. He raced, endeavoring to reach the surrounding jungle.

But the bird popped up into view again, saw him, and came winging. Awkward though the thing looked, it was actually fast. Doc looked backward. The bird was going to catch him. He remembered that Fiesta had said the bird that had chased her had flown over her head while her old car was traveling at least fifty miles an hour. No man could run that fast on foot.

Doc veered toward the lagoon. It might offer safety. He reached the edge, looked back, saw the grotesque aerial hobgoblin was actually extending its neck for him, and dived into the water.

He came up for air, after swimming to a point several yards from shore.

The hideous bird was flying around only a few feet above, watching him. It lunged at him.

Doc sank again. The bird continued to fly around over the water, but the bronze man did not again rise to the surface.

HIGH on the pyramid, Fenter Bain came out of a narrow cleft in the stone which was closed by a door. Bain was pale, and obviously horrified.

"Doc Savage is dead," Bain muttered. "When he came to the surface that last time, the bird killed him."

Fenter Bain stared at the slowly circling devil-bird. He was too terrified to feel relief at the death of Doc Savage, who had followed him all the way from Arizona. Nothing would have given Bain relief, not while that bird was in sight.

He did not dare venture out of the narrow cleft of stone; he kept one foot within, ready to dodge back.

The devil-bird flew around for several minutes, then winged over and alighted on Fenter Bain's plane. It sat there, perfectly motionless, about the size of a goat, with its wings folded. Utterly hideous.

Suddenly, it burst into flame. White, sheeting flame, that seemed to dissolve the bird, and melted almost instantly through the wings of the plane to the gas tank, the fuel contents of which caught fire.

There was an explosion, and the plane came apart, and burning gasoline spread over that part of the little lagoon.

The flaming gasoline reached the black plane, licked at the pontoons, lunged high, and the kapok

wood which had been used to build up the streamlining of the struts took fire, and shortly that plane also became a bundle of flame, then exploded, scattering gasoline and smoke.

"Oh, oh," groaned Fenter Bain.

Two of his brown men had come to the opening, and were looking over his shoulder. Now one of them barked in horrified astonishment, pointed.

A devil bird was winging along the side of the pyramid, making for them, its long evil neck outstretched. It looked exactly like the bird that had just turned into flame down there on the lagoon. It might have been a reincarnation of that bird.

Fenter Bain gave a shriek of terror, so piercing that it was like a whistle. He ducked back, dragging the door shut.

Chapter XVII. DEVIL BIRDS

THE shriek of Fenter Bain, being high and piping like a whistle, reached Monk where he sat on the rotting log. Monk sprang up in alarm, because there was a definitely grisly quality to the shriek.

"What was that?" gulped Monk.

Monk had been holding a number of the small, hard orangelike fruit in his lap, and these fell unheeded to the ground. Monk had been hurling the fruit at Ham with great violence, whenever that individual dared thrust his head out of the surrounding jungle. He had even lobbed a few at Chemistry, Ham's pet, but Chemistry was an experienced dodger and remained unhit.

Ham now came out of the jungle. Their squabble was temporarily postponed. That sound had been grim.

Hobo Jones looked around dubiously. He said, "I always wanted to visit a jungle, but, brothers, you can have my part of it from now on."

The silence about them was utter. The jungle birds, they suddenly realized, had become mysteriously quiet. There was no stirring, none of the shrill cries and chirpings that had furnished a kind of background bedlam throughout.

"Queer," Ham breathed. "I wonder what's happening to Doc?"

Monk and Ham exchanged looks. In their association with Doc Savage, it was understood that they should use their own brains whenever they saw fit. Doc had told them to wait. On the other hand, if they didn't deem it advisable to do so, it was their privilege to take any action they wished.

"I move we look at that ruin," Monk muttered.

"Seconded," said Ham, and Hobo Jones nodded. Jones had drawn his big six-shooter and was spinning the cylinder, nervously looking to make sure the gun was loaded.

They advanced through the jungle. They did not make it nearly as smoothly as had Doc Savage, in the upper pathways. Ham and Jones, while beyond average strength, lacked the physical power to swing from one branch to another. Monk was fairly adept at it, but the uncomplimentary remarks made by Ham and Jones about the probable nature of his immediate ancestors kept him on the ground.

They did not chop their way with the short heavy knives, having blades about a foot in length, with which they had equipped themselves from their supply cases. That would have been too noisy. Their eyes discerned the column of dark smoke that came from the burning plane.

"Hey, look!" Jones remembered the dull explosion which they had heard prior to the strange shriek. "I bet you Doc set fire to their planes."

"I bet you that he didn't," Monk said. "If he burns those planes, how're we gonna get out of here?"

Ham suddenly gestured for silence. They could see the ruins through the jungle ahead.

But more than that, there was a brown man crawling furtively toward them, and looking back over his shoulder in the most fear-stricken fashion.

MONK had picked up a caveman-sized club en route. He held it lifted, ready to bring down on the approaching native. But the native saw them first.

The brown-skinned native gave a violent start, and his face showed plainly that he was far from enthusiastic about meeting them. Then he did an unexpected thing—he put a finger to his lips, admonishing silence.

Monk blurted, "Say, what—"

"Sh-h-h!" warned the native.

Monk thought it was some trick. He stepped back warily, and exchanged his club for his machine pistol, which Doc had returned. The exchange was evidence of how seriously Monk took the situation; in all ordinary fights, Monk preferred a club or his fists.

The brown native came close.

"Please do not make any noise," he said in excellent English. "There will be the devil to pay, if we are heard."

"Listen," Monk whispered, lowering his voice involuntarily, "you are one of Fenter Bain's gang."

"Have I denied it?" asked the native. He repeated, "Don't make a noise. We've got to escape."

Jones, lunging forward, demanded, "Is Fiesta all right?"

"Yes," said the other.

Monk told the brown native, "Escape! You had better be thinking about escaping us, my friend."

We're enemies, you know."

The native shook his head.

"When the lions are about, the sheep and the goats forget their differences," he said. "We shall be fortunate if any one of us escapes with our lives."

"Huh?"

"Fenter Bain sent me to see if it was possible to escape by this route," the brown fellow explained.

"None of you are going to escape," Monk said. "We're going to grab you. I wish you'd get that through your head."

The native looked disgusted. "You do not understand. We all face an infinitely terrible danger."

"Yeah?" Monk was skeptical.

"Doc Savage has already met his death from the danger," the native said.

The effect of that statement on Monk and Ham was pronounced. First, they stared intently at their informant to see if he was lying to them. Obviously, he wasn't. Monk and Ham became tense and lost color.

"How did it happen?" Monk asked grimly.

The native gave them a vivid picture of what had happened to Doc Savage. He had been one of those who peered over Fenter Bain's shoulder and watched Doc's frenziedly futile flight from the horror bird. He did not use fancy words or embellishments; he spoke plainly, and it had the ring of truth. Monk and Ham were thoroughly convinced.

"What is this flaming falcon thing?" Monk asked.

The native shook his head.

"We do not know," he said.

"But the thing is supposed to haunt this particular ruin," Monk told him.

That plainly astonished the native, and he immediately shook his head again.

"You are mistaken," he assured Monk. "No flaming falcon was ever seen in this neighborhood before today. I should know. I have lived at this ruin off and on for four years."

"But a fellow named Court Tottingham told us the flaming falcon haunted this place."

"I do not know a Court Tottingham, but it is not true. I have been here four years."

"You've lived around here?" Monk scowled at him. "What doing?"

"Conducting experiments for Fenter Bain," said the brown-skinned fellow.

"What kind of experiment?"

"That," said the other, "is something I do not think I will reveal."

"In that case"—Monk fell upon him suddenly—"I think we'll just tie you up."

THE native made no outcry. Indeed, he even seemed to cooperate with them in avoiding noise, extending his wrists with a resigned sigh to be bound. They removed part of the long cloth from about his middle, cut it in strips with the thick bush knives, and used these to tie him. As they finished the job, they realized their prisoner was trembling from fright.

"Say," said Ham, "this beggar is in earnest."

"I am," insisted their prisoner. "I know how terrible this death of the flaming falcon can be."

"I thought," said Monk, "that you had never heard of it until today."

The brown man shook his head. "No, no, I said it had never appeared here until today." He peered at them intently. "It has been heard of in Indo-China for some years, however. Men have been found dead, with a horrible bird sitting in the room. The bird invariably bursts into flame before long." The captive fell to trembling again, so that there now remained no doubt in the listeners' minds that he was in genuine terror. They looked at each other. They had been whispering throughout. The abnormal silence still gripped the jungle, as well.

"Notice," said the native, "that every living thing in the forest is still from fear of the flaming falcon."

There was another silence. To say that the situation was on the nerves of Monk, Ham and Jones was putting it mildly. In order to get their minds back on something with some resemblance to sensible reality, Ham put a question to the prisoner.

"How come you speak such good English?" Ham asked.

"I attended Harvard University, in your United States," the native explained.

"You-what?" Ham blinked. "So did I. Listen, I don't believe . . . what courses did you take?"

"I specialized in horticulture," explained the brown-skinned man.

"Who taught it?"

"Professor Everett Dane Algiers."

"That's right," Ham admitted.

Hobo Jones said, "Say, Fiesta told us her brother Dave was a horticulturist, too."

"A very good one," said their brown prisoner. "One of the best in the world, Fenter Bain and myself are convinced. Of course, he has been handicapped in his work recently," the man added, and smiled thinly. "Yes, Dave Robertson has been—er—handicapped."

"You've got him a prisoner," Jones accused.

The native nodded. "You know that already, so why should I deny it?"

"What have you been making Dave Robertson do?"

The native only shook his head stubbornly.

Monk picked up the prisoner. "We'll just take you along," he said. "If any skull-colored bird gets to fooling around us, we'll feed you to him."

HAVING voiced his own determination to go ahead to the ruin and see what all the fright was about, Monk looked at the others to get their opinion. Ham merely nodded. Jones drew his gun and shoved forward. "I'm not leaving here without Fiesta!" he declared.

Their prisoner was a fatalist. Having failed in all his arguments, he resigned himself. However, his skin slowly turned to somewhat grayish color, which indicated how terrified he had become. They shoved, as quietly as they could, through the few remaining yards of jungle, and came out on the edge of the ruin. Jones looked it over. "I guess it's more of what a ruin should be than I figured," he admitted.

They lay there, watching, seeing nothing whatever.

Their prisoner spoke. Judging from his words, he was trying to get his mind off his present predicament. "Will you tell me something?" he asked.

"Maybe," Monk said. "What do you want to know?"

"Did you capture and kill one of our men on the boat coming across the Pacific?" he asked. "A white man. We have a few white men working with us."

"No," Monk said.

"But one disappeared."

Monk growled, "Maybe it was Court Tottingham, whom you said you didn't know. Was he a large man with an English accent?"

"He was fair-sized," said the native. "But he had a large purple birthmark on the left side of his neck, extending up under his ear. It was very distinctive."

"That was not Court Tottingham," Monk declared.

The native shook his head in a puzzled way. "It is very strange. We could not figure what happened to him. Perhaps he fell overboard at night."

Problems and mysteries of the past did not appeal to Monk. They had plenty on their hands for the present. The homely chemist shook his shoulders impatiently.

"Habeas," he called, and when the pig came to his side, Monk ordered, "Go look around. Scout, Habeas."

The pig had been trained to do this, an operation that had taken a great deal of Monk's spare time—time that Ham always insisted had been wasted. However, the pig came back shortly, unexcited, and Monk let out a breath of relief.

"We're safe," he said.

They crawled into the ruins.

Chapter XVIII. WEIRD FIGHT

SMOKE still arose from the lagoon where the planes had burned, for a part of one of the ships had been hurled onto the bank by the explosion, and it smoldered there, pouring up lazy wisps of black. Other than that, as far as appearances went, the ruin might have been exactly as it was during any day of the past centuries.

The sun was now directly overhead, and it poured down baking heat. Except at brief intervals, minutes apart, when a wayward breeze shook its leafage, the tropical jungle was utterly still. The crawling men could hear their own breathing, taste sweat on their lips.

They thoroughly surveyed the lower part of the ruin, and were about to start for the upper terraces of the great pyramidlike central structure when the bird appeared.

"Look!" Ham gulped.

The great, hideous, skull-colored thing was some distance away, over toward the far edge of the jungle. It flew slowly, back and forth, his neck extended downward, its head turning from side to side as it searched the ground.

The native prisoner began to tremble violently. "Lie very still!" he croaked. "It may not see us!"

Jones drew his six-shooter.

"Listen," Jones said, "I believe I can pop that thing one from here. Paw used to have an old pistol, and I got plenty good with it."

The native emitted a gasp of horror. "Shooting it will not save us!"

"Listen, I don't believe in spooks," Jones said. "I can shoot that bird plenty dead."

The native tried to answer, but his fright made him inarticulate.

"Look," Monk said uneasily, "our friend here seems kinda in earnest to me. Maybe we better just lay still."

They remained frozen among the tumbled ruins—they were almost completely hidden anyway—and eventually the great bird flapped lazily away and disappeared into the jungle, to the definite relief of the watching men.

"Where did Doc sink in that lagoon?" Monk asked grimly. The homely chemist bit his lips, and his

voice became husky. "I—I'm gonna—aw, blazes!" Monk was near breaking down. "We've got to get Doc's body," he blurted.

Unwillingly, the native pointed out the spot, and they crawled toward it. Since they did not think it advisable to untie their prisoner, they hauled him along with them as they moved. Both Monk and Ham were very grim. They had been associated with Doc Savage for a number of years, and so frequently had the bronze man narrowly escaped death that they had probably arrived, subconsciously, where they took it for granted that he was invulnerable. It came as a grisly shock when they were told that he was dead. And the fact that the manner of his dying was utterly mysterious added to their grief, somehow. If Doc's death had come in a manner they could understand, it would have been something they could grasp, although it probably would have been no less terrible. Recovering the bronze man's body had suddenly assumed a great importance to them. They did not reach the lagoon, however, before the bird appeared again. The horror came winging straight toward them.

"It's seen us!" Monk exploded. "Run for it!" And the homely chemist, with a quick slash of his bush knife, freed the legs of their native prisoner.

But they stood no chance whatever of reaching shelter before the bird overtook them, unless something interrupted its somber progress.

JONES, who had been itching to try his six-shooter, lifted the weapon, aimed, and fired. The skull-colored bird flopped wildly to one side, as if the bullet had gone close, but it came on. Once more, Jones shot. Again, he missed.

"Whew!" he said.

"The way your hand is shaking," Monk growled, "I don't ever feel safe standing behind you." Jones shot again.

"Got 'im!" he yelled.

The big skull-colored bird turned into a disorganized bundle of wings, legs and snaky neck, in the air. It hit the ground with a loud plop.

Jones, proud of himself, said, "Boy, am I good!" He started forward. "C'mon. Let's have a close look at one of these roosters, for a change."

They advanced a few paces, and Ham suddenly rapped a warning that brought them up short. The dapper lawyer leveled an arm, and said, "You see that lizard!"

The lizard, rock-colored, had been clinging to a stone between themselves and the spot where the skull-colored bird had fallen.

The lizard slowly became rigid at the end of extended legs, then fell off the rock to which it had been hanging.

A moment later, they saw another lizard—this one closer to them. It did the same thing.

"Death!" their native prisoner croaked. "It approaches!" Suddenly the brown man lifted his voice in a maniacal scream. "Run, you fools!" he shrieked. "Run!"

They ran. They couldn't help it. They turned and dived away from that spot, scrambling over rocks and smashing through underbrush.

Behind them, there was a great burst of white flame, brilliant even in the sunlight, and they knew that the bird was blazing.

And almost at once, another of the skull-colored horrors came winging out of the jungle, and flopped lazily through the hot air toward them.

"Great snakes!" Monk gasped. "The place is alive with 'em!"

Their prisoner wailed a suggestion. "There are passages into the pyramid. Come!"

Ordinarily, Monk and Ham would have thought several times before barging blindly into a place of refuge about which they knew nothing. But this was no moment for dallying. They were convinced that the skull-colored birds did carry death. They wanted to get under cover.

So they rushed to a stone door which their prisoner pointed out, wrenched it open, and crowded inside along with the two pets. They closed the door. It was very dark.

A flashlight beam blazed into their eyes.

Fenter Bain's voice said, "The thing for you to do is get your hands up. All of you!"

THEY had just come in out of bright sunlight, so the flashlight beam did not blind them as much as it might have. Moreover, suddenly coming up against human foes had an unexpected effect. The fantastic bird menace had unnerved them. But the reality of a voice making threats spurred them into taking chances that they might not have taken otherwise.

Hobo Jones fired from the hip. He'd practiced that with his paw's old pistol, and he was pretty good. Also, possibly he was a little lucky. He smashed the flashlight, made a man scream.

Monk and Ham pitched forward, arms outspread and groping. They found plenty of foes. Furthermore, most of the bodies were seminaked and oiled, so that they were harder than fish to hold.

"No more lights!" Fenter Bain yelled. "Their eyes are not as used to the dark as ours!"

That was true, and it was their downfall. That, and the fact that their enemies had clubs. Monk went down first, having been slammed over the head. Ham, dancing about, was tripped, and kicked on the temple with a bare heel, and stunned. Then Hobo Jones had his revolver knocked out of his hand,

and he was borne down by a mass of native bodies. Until finally, he was helpless, and someone struck him in the face until things swam in blackness.

When they got themselves organized again—it could have been no more than a few minutes later—they were in a room with Fiesta Robertson and a tall young man, a stranger, who had a suffering-grooved face and almost completely white hair.

Monk said, "You're Dave Robertson?"

The young man with the grooved face and the white hair nodded. "Yes," he admitted gloomily. "I am Dave Robertson. I've caused a hell of a thing to happen, haven't I?"

Monk looked around. The room was of stone. There were no windows, only one door, and that barred. The air was not too good, although dry enough. The cell, for a prison cell was what it amounted to, was furnished with a cot, and there was a lighted gasoline lantern and a bookcase containing—Monk looked closely to see the titles—books on tropical plants and branches of horticulture. Dave Robertson's prison, this must be.

Ham went to the barred door and pounded it. A brown face immediately appeared on the other side. The face of their late prisoner.

"How about letting us out of here?" Ham asked.

The native who had gone to Harvard smiled vaguely. "Quite impossible," he said. "Oh, quite."

Ham tried to grab him through the bars, but the brown man stepped back, so that the seizure attempt was unsuccessful.

Ham turned to Dave Robertson.

"Did I hear you say a minute ago that you had caused all this to happen?" Ham asked Dave Robertson.

DAVE ROBERTSON nodded slowly, his face grim in the light from the gasoline lantern, and looked at his sister. Fiesta, still very pretty, although bearing traces of her long role as a prisoner, was looking at Hobo Jones, who in turn had eyes for no one but the young woman. Monk and Ham, who had both harbored some amorous ideas about the young woman, felt a little empty. They knew, from the way Jones and Fiesta were looking at each other, who was in love with whom.

Dave Robertson nodded again. "Yes," he said, "I suppose I am responsible. Indirectly."

"Indirectly?"

"I developed, here in this jungle, the new type of plant that will grow in arid, desert country, and yield rubber," he explained.

"Rubber?" Monk ejaculated.

"Exactly."

Monk digested this. Rubber? At first, it struck him as a very small thing to cause so much trouble. Then the magnitude of the thing began to dawn upon him. Rubber? There were millions and millions of dollars involved in the industry, billions. All of the world's supply of crude rubber came from the tropics, and nothing had ever been developed that would successfully displace the tropical rubber tree. The great American inventor, Thomas A. Edison, had spent most of the last years of his life trying to develop a plant that would grow in the United States and produce rubber. Such a plant, if developed would be worth—well, millions and millions.

"Some of those yellow vegetables were growing in Arizona," Monk said grimly. "You mean to say they will produce rubber?"

"Yes," said Dave Robertson.

"You mean that the rubber plants will grow in the Arizona desert?"

"Yes."

Monk's mouth fell open. This was tremendous. He thought of the great desert waste lands of Arizona, New Mexico, and the other Western States. If that land could produce rubber—

"Great dollars!" Monk gulped, and looked at Ham.

Ham asked, "Robertson, how did this thing get so involved?"

Dave Robertson shrugged. "It is simple. I got my rubber plant partially developed, and ran out of money. I went to Fenter Bain to finance me. He not only financed me—he made me a prisoner, for he realized how important the thing was."

"And then?" Ham prompted.

"Fenter Bain took some of the plant roots to Arizona to grow a test field. The test had to be grown in great secrecy, of course. Later, if it was successful, the American tire companies and other concerns that buy rubber would be willing to pay a tremendous price for the plant."

"But this trouble that developed?" Ham asked. "What is it?"

"Simple, also. Some of the great rubber producers in the tropics learned about the plant.

Naturally, they would be ruined if rubber could be grown all over the western United States. One of the rubber companies was unscrupulous enough to hire a professional killer to wipe out Fenter Bain and the secret of the new rubber plant."

Ham rubbed his jaw. He repeated the thing, just to get it straight in his mind.

"An unscrupulous rubber producer hired a killer to get rid of Fenter Bain and the rubber-plant secret?" he said.

"Yes."

"And the killer is this--this flaming falcon thing?"

"Yes."

"What is the flaming falcon?"

"I don't know." Dave Robertson shook his head. "None of us know."

Ham said, "The flaming-falcon menace has Fenter Bain and all the rest of you besieged here now?"

"Yes," said Dave Robertson grimly. "That's it."

A LONG time later--they knew by their watches that darkness had now fallen over the jungle--there was a rattling of the door lock, and the door itself opened. Several menacing rifle muzzles poked inside.

Fenter Bain spoke from behind his men. Harshly.

He said, "We can't be bothered worrying about you fellows." Obviously, he meant Monk, Ham and Hobo Jones. "We're going to take you out, one at a time, and shoot you."

Fenter Bain's brown natives came inside. They seized Ham, and dragged him out while the others were held helpless by the menace of rifles.

Chapter XIX. RAIDERS

OVER the jungle and over the ruin lay darkness, not lightened in the least by moonlight, and because it was very early in the night, very little of the heat of the day had been dissipated as yet. The jungle itself was quiet, unnaturally so, as if all the wild things were still and in hiding because of some greater danger that was about.

Doc Savage, when he climbed out of the lagoon, did so silently. He sat on the edge and let water drain from his great metallic body, and began slowly taking off his clothing, except for his trousers, which he wrung out carefully, then rolled the legs above his knees.

He was weak. Weaker than he had expected, for he had been under the water a long time, and that, and the suspense, had sapped some of his enormous reserve of vitality.

He had worn, for the first three hours, a small gas mask-- a nasal clip and a mouthpiece attachment--which was effective also as an underwater "lung," being equipped with a small oxygen tank. He had removed the "lung" finally, knowing that the chemicals therein were close to exhaustion, and wanting to retain some of them, so that he might use the "lung" for a gas mask later.

After removing the "lung," he had breathed through a small telescoping metal tube, one end of which he had thrust above the surface, after which he had blown out the water.

It had not been easy. True, he had found a large rock on the bottom of the lagoon, and placing that on his chest to hold himself down had simplified the thing somewhat. Now it was dark, and he was ready to go into action.

Having stripped himself to trousers alone, the bronze man went through his clothing and removed such mechanical devices as it seemed likely he would need, and could be conveniently carried. He heard a small sound. Men, he realized after he had listened. They were creeping silently, and converging upon the pyramid. A bit later, there were voices.

Doc crept close enough to hear.

"We will make it an open raid," one of the voices was saying. "And a jolly complete one it must be, too. We do not want them creeping away in the darkness."

"They will not dare flee," suggested another voice. "They are scared. They fear the birds."

"Nevertheless, we take no chances. Come on. You say you know one of the entrances to the interior of that pyramid structure?"

"Yes."

The raiders moved forward, exercising the greatest of stealth, and the bronze man trailed them. The small amount of clothing that he wore increased his ability to travel with silence.

Whisperings came to his ears. Evidently they had reached the entrance. There was a grating noise. Then a grunt of disgust.

"Jove," said the voice in charge. "They have fastened the thing on the inside. Where are those grenades?"

"Here."

"Righto," said the leader. "Now stand back."

A moment later, there was a crash, sheeting flame, and the air was full of flying rock fragments. They had blown open the door.

The raiders charged inside. Doc followed them.

THERE was a shot, then another, and a yell. Powerful flares--gasoline-soaked rags, to which matches were applied; lights that could not readily be extinguished by bullets--blazed up. The raiders charged forward. They did not glance behind; their attention was only for what was ahead. The stone passage was high, arched and short. It terminated against a flight of steps which led upward. The men mounted these. Someone fired at them from the top, and they drove bullets back. The blasts were deafening, and somewhere, a rock fell off one of the ancient walls, dislodged by the concussion.

Doc Savage kept out of the fight. This was ideal stuff. Two gangs of enemies working on each other.

The bronze man chose a moment when comparative silence reigned. He raised his voice, shouted. He used the old Mayan language, a tongue which was understood by few persons in the civilized world besides himself and his aids.

"Where are you?" he roared in Mayan.

Then he dived into shadows and waited for an answer. But there was little danger of his attracting attention in the confusion of the raid. His Mayan words were probably mistaken for the strangled cry of someone badly injured.

An answer came. Monk's voice.

"Here we are, but darned if I know where," was the essence of Monk's shout. And he added, "What the heck is going on?"

The raiders had topped the steps, had separated, going down various passages. The big pyramid interior was honeycombed with rooms and corridors, although the roof of not a few of these had fallen in.

Doc leaped the last of the steps, turned left. Monk's voice had come from that direction. Someone stepped out of a side passage, turned on a flashlight, and struck with a knife. The bronze man, twisting, avoided the blade. He got hold of the wrist, turned with it, bending; there was gritting of breaking bone, and the knife wielder slammed against the stone wall, then sank to his knees, screeching.

"Monk!" Doc shouted.

"This way," called Monk.

It was a left turn, this time. Doc made it, found a barred door. There was no guard—he had gone to fight the attack.

The door was secured with a ponderous bar-and-chain arrangement which required no key, although it could not possibly be undone from the inside. Doc worked with the chain, gave the bar a shove, then shouldered the door open.

"All of you here?" he demanded.

"Yes," Monk said. "Including Dave Robertson."

"All right," Doc rapped. "Jones, get Fiesta and her brother outdoors. Hide in the jungle. Monk and Ham, you help me."

Jones rushed away with Fiesta and Dave Robertson, the latter needing help, because he proved to be very weak.

"What's going on?" Monk barked.

It was a fight, obviously, because shot sounds were exploding repeatedly, and men were yelling. But who was fighting whom? That was what had Monk puzzled.

Doc said, "The killers who were hired to wipe out the new rubber plant are making a raid."

Monk gasped his astonishment.

"So you had it all figured out!" the homely chemist muttered.

DOC SAVAGE took from his trouser pockets several small grenades. He divided these among Monk, Ham and himself.

"These are gas," he said. "The gas works through the pores of the skin, as well as by being inhaled, so masks would do us no good, even if you two had any. Scatter these grenades. Then get out. The gas will do the rest. The stuff produces unconsciousness in a short time. Also, it is very irritating. Painful enough to take the fight all out of these two gangs."

They worked their way to the head of the stairway which the bronze man had ascended. They threw the grenades in all directions, Monk lighting matches—Jones, Fiesta and her brother had taken the gasoline lantern from the cell—to furnish light.

Then they ran. There were shrieks above them, piercing cries. The shooting became more sporadic.

"Hurry!" Doc ordered. "They will try to make a break from the ruin, probably."

Ham stumbled, fell the last few steps, got up saying things he had not learned in Harvard, and they dived outside.

Doc ignited flares. They were small magnesium affairs, not as large as shotgun cartridges, but for a few minutes they would give an intense white light. The bronze man tossed one of the flares down in front of the opening. He handed others to Monk and Ham, directing, "Scatter them around the pyramid!"

Monk raced one direction, Ham the other, scattering the flares. Light that rivaled the daylight sun grew, casting fabulously grotesque shadows.

Men began diving out of the pyramid. Raiders and defenders. Some of them barely got beyond the opening when they collapsed, screeching, and slowly became unconscious from the effects of the gas on their skin. Many others must have dropped inside, because hardly more than half a dozen escaped into the open air.

Of that half dozen, four dropped. But two of them, one the leader of the raiders, apparently had been affected very slightly. These two fled.

Doc Savage followed them.

Chapter XX. THE BIRDS THAT KILLED

THE bronze man, nearly losing his quarry in the wilderness of stone that was the ruin, surrendered sufficient control of his emotions to rage inwardly at the way immersion in the water had sapped his physical strength. For moments, the two fleeing men were out of sight. Then he discovered them, just entering the jungle, and raced toward the spot.

Sounds told him that the two men were fighting their way through the tropical growth, and simplified following them. Doc endeavored to climb into the maze of entwining boughs of the upper forest, and travel in that fashion, but after narrowly missing one bad fall, he gave that up. Shortly, however, there was a path, crudely hacked through the tangle. He made better time. But so did his quarry.

Their destination was not far away. It was a river. Not a large one, but wide enough that, with the wind from the proper direction, a plane could be landed upon it.

There was a stockade of thorn brush, and in the middle of that, several small tents and one very large one, all camouflaged by coverings of green boughs lashed to frameworks of poles. The two men had lighted a gasoline lantern that hung in the stockade, and this threw illumination over the scene.

Light from the gasoline lantern barely touched the plane that was lashed to the river bank. The plane had been covered with fresh-cut boughs and leafy vines to hide it from the air.

The two men were madly at work tearing the camouflaging off the plane.

Doc Savage, conscious of his own depleted physical strength, made no effort to close with them. He had two of the gas grenades left. He hurled them both, one after the other, onto the bank beside the plane.

The gas poured out of the grenades, distinctly visible stuff—it had a vile, greenish hue—and spread in a cloud that slowly enveloped the plane.

One man screamed. Then the other. They tumbled off the ship, and beating at their chests, pounding other parts of their bodies, they stumbled about. Suddenly gripped with the same hope for escape, they plunged into the jungle, fighting their way through the thorny bushes and matted creepers.

After a while, both collapsed and stopped shrieking.

Doc Savage went to them. With a stick, twisted into the clothing of each in turn, he dragged them to the river and immersed them, washing away the gas that might be in their clothing, to some extent.

Then he bound them, using their belts, and strips ripped from their clothing.

He left them lying there, because he did not feel up to carrying them, and went back to the thorn stockade wherein stood the small tents and the large ones.

Later, Monk and Ham came out of the jungle.

"DON'T go near the plane," Doc warned. "There may be some of the gas around it still."

Monk nodded. He said, "We can use that plane to fly out of this place. I think everything is cleaned up back there at the pyramid. We left Jones and the Robertsons to watch things."

Ham asked, "Say, where were you all afternoon, Doc?"

The bronze man told them. "I might have overdone it," he admitted. "But those skull-colored birds were certain death, and I wanted to take no chances. So I remained in the lagoon."

"How come they didn't use the birds in that raid?" Monk countered.

"They are falcons. Large ones, but falcons, nevertheless," Doc explained. "They cannot see when a night is as dark as this one, any better than a man can."

Monk looked about uneasily. "Are them birds around here anywhere now?"

Doc said, "We might see what is in the big tent."

Ham, a queer expression on his face, lifted the gasoline lantern off the peg on which it hung, and sidled over to the big tent. He cast the light inside, then dropped the tent flap and jumped back.

"Whew!" he gasped. "The tent is full of them!"

Monk said, "I think I'll leave here."

"The birds are in cages, you homely baboon," Ham explained, although he sounded somewhat nervous himself.

"In cages, huh?" Monk swallowed. "Well, let's look."

They entered the big tent.

The cages, larger than chicken coops, but of about the same construction as the native coops that were made of rattan and bamboo, stood stacked one on the other. A very few were empty. The others held falcons.

Doc Savage spoke quietly. "Falcons, as you know, can be trained," he said. "They are used for hunting, falconry being a fairly well-known sport. These particular birds, however, were simply trained to go to a human being and alight upon him or her, if it was possible."

"I don't see how that would kill anybody," Monk said.

"Furthermore, these are ordinary falcons. They're not that skull color—"

Ham interrupted, "Down at this end! Here's some of them that are the gray color."

Doc Savage and Monk went to the coops that Ham had found. On the floor nearby stood a container of metal. Monk opened this. It was full of grayish substance, obviously the compound into which the bird had been dipped.

Monk examined the gray stuff.

"Some kind of thermit compound!" the homely chemist explained.

"Thermit?" Ham muttered. "You mean—"

"The same stuff the munitions makers use in incendiary bombs," Monk advised. "The stuff was originally compounded out of powdered aluminum and a metallic oxide, although that's been improved. It burns with terrific heat. But"—Monk scratched his head—"how was the stuff set afire?"

Ham picked up one of a collection of tiny watchlike contrivances that lay in a box close at hand.

"Would these do it?" he asked.

Monk examined the gadget. "Sure. Sure it would. This is a timer, with a tiny firing device that will go off whenever it is set."

Ham said, "Then that explains how these infernal birds came to burn up. But what was the idea of them burning? It seems like a fantastic precaution to take."

Doc Savage answered that, speaking in a low voice. "No doubt it was to destroy evidence and add a note of mysterious horror to the murders committed by the birds. Such a murder method would be highly effective among superstitious natives."

"It was kind of effective on me," Monk admitted gloomily. "Only I don't see yet how the birds killed anybody."

"Gas," the bronze man said.

"Eh?"

"Let's look around. We may find the device."

The gas container was made of aluminum, so that it did not differ greatly in color from the falcons, once they were smeared with the thermit compound and released. It was larger than they had expected, and ingeniously equipped with a wire trip, so that, once the falcon alighted, the gas would be released.

The gas itself was an almost instantaneously lethal variety—they found it in bottles, in a suitcase padded with cotton—and a type that was used to some extent in warfare. (When the descriptions of poisons and deadly gasses which appear in the Doc Savage stories seem incomplete, it is done deliberately. There are always such gasses and poisons in existence, but naturally we do not identify them. We have no desire to aid criminals with such information.)

"Naturally," Doc reminded, "since the victims were burned after death, except for the one case of that native in the strawstack shack in Arizona, whose body was spirited away, the fact that it was a gas death remained unknown."

THEY went back to the ruin, joining Hobo Jones, Fiesta and her brother. The gas which Doc Savage had used had cleared out of the exterior portion of the ruin, but the stuff still made the interior of the pyramid untenable. The flares had burned out, of course, but Jones had gathered dry brush, and lighted a number of fires, which furnished illumination.

Hobo Jones was sitting on a rock beside Fiesta. It appeared that Jones, who was a young man that acted upon an idea when he got one, had lost no time. There seemed to be an understanding between Fiesta and himself.

"We'll wait for the gas to clear," Doc said. "Those fellows inside won't be regaining consciousness soon."

Because there was nothing else to do at the moment, the bronze man climbed to the upper terraces, where grew the vegetables with the yellowish fruit—the new rubber-producing plant. He was interested in the plants.

Dave Robertson accompanied him, and pointed out the fact that he had a small laboratory in a stone chamber that opened off the terrace. They retired to this to discuss the rubber-producing development.

Doc Savage went over the record of Dave Robertson's experiments, studying the processes that had been used. The bronze man became thoughtful. He did some experimenting with the retorts and chemicals with which the sticky pulp of the plants were to be refined into rubber.

Then Doc did some figuring on paper.

"I'm afraid," the bronze man said thoughtfully, "that this is going to be somewhat disappointing. Here are your refining cost estimates"—he indicated his penciled figures—"as compared with the actual cost of producing crude rubber in the usual fashion. Your rubber is more expensive to produce."

Dave Robertson nodded grimly. "Yes, but we believe we could develop cheaper refining methods."

"You might," the bronze man admitted. He considered the subject. The moon had come out, and he walked out on the terrace and stood contemplating the tumbled vastness of the ruin.

Then, abruptly, the bronze man explained that he would furnish funds for further experiment. "But you will need at least one able-bodied assistant," he advised.

Dave Robertson grinned. He pointed at Hobo Jones, who was sitting on the rock, suspiciously close

to Fiesta.

"How would that fellow Jones do?" Dave Robertson asked.

"Fine," Doc said. "Hobo Jones has a job, although he doesn't know it yet. From the looks of the situation, a job is exactly what he is wishing most that he had."

MONK came climbing up to them. Monk had something on his mind.

"There's one thing about this that I can't make jell, Doc," the homely chemist explained. "That's the murder back there on the liner, when we were crossing the Pacific. The murder of Court Tottingham."

"That," Doc said, "was a device to mislead us."

"Eh?"

"Court Tottingham wanted us to find Fenter Bain and wipe him out. That is why he gave us the photograph of this ruin with the map on the back."

"Yeah, but—"

"Court Tottingham," Doc explained, "was playing perfectly safe. He wanted us to finish Fenter Bain off, then Tottingham no doubt figured on stepping in and getting rid of us, or at least destroying the secret of the new rubber plant."

Monk scratched his bullet-shaped head. His homely face was a study.

"I'm still without savvy," he declared. "Court Tottingham was murdered."

"No."

"Eh?"

"Court Tottingham murdered one of Fenter Bain's men, and made it appear to be himself so as to mislead us," Doc said.

"What makes you so sure," asked Monk, "that you ain't wrong?"

Then the bronze man led Monk to the spot where lay the two men who had fled from the pyramid, and pointed out to the homely chemist the undeniable fact that one of them was Court Tottingham.

THE END