THE GOBLINS

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. GOBLIN NUMBER ONE

YOUNG Parker O'Donnel awakened one morning in his small apartment and found a green man, about a foot high and with a very big grin, in the living room.

Park had been up bowling the night before. He had bowled on the local team against the team from Madcat, Idaho, a town about fifty miles distant. Park had gotten to bed late, slept like a log, and the alarm clock had awakened him. He damned the alarm clock, and got up and stumbled into the living room to hunt for his socks, which were always getting misplaced.

In fact, Park was so drowsy that he didn't at once realize that he'd seen a little green man about a foot high with a big grin.

He stumbled into the bathroom, then it dawned on him.

Park jumped about a foot straight up, and gasped, “What the blazes!”

He dashed back into the living room to look, and it was still there. It certainly was. Park's eyes protruded.

The little man was standing perfectly still in a corner. He was a rather plump fellow, and if not a foot tall, surely his height was no more than fourteen inches.

His green was the green of rich grass, and he was green all over, except for a breechcloth which was the

color of some kind of skin. The little man came near being disgracefully naked.

“Hey!” Park said. “Who the dickens are you?”

There was no answer.

Park's next impulse was to snort at himself, for now he didn't believe that it was a man at all. The thing must be some kind of statue.

Maybe a gag. Maybe some of his friends were pulling a little trick on him. He had some friends who went in for gags.

Park walked toward the little man, then Park jumped a foot in the air again, and stopped. His mouth hung open in amazement. For the little man had moved.

Unquestionably, the little man had skittered a foot or so across the floor.

Park took a close look. It was early in the morning, and not fully daylight, but there was enough light that Park could tell he didn't care for the little man's expression. It was still a grin. The same grin, in fact. But it was a sinister, devilish, distorted kind of grin.

Bothered by the conviction that his own hair was standing on end, Park backed away.

“I'll just get the broom,” he announced, “and push you around and see what you are.”

He retreated toward the kitchen. The last he saw of the small man, the latter was standing exactly where he had been, but his eyes seemed to have followed Park. At any rate, they were still looking at Park, apparently.

Park found the broom. He had a little trouble locating it. The broom, like his socks, was an article he frequently misplaced.

“Now,” Park announced, brandishing the broom, “you grin at me again like that, and I'll swat you one.”

He went back into the living room, but now the small green man with the grin was gone.

YOUNG PARKER O'DONNEL gave his apartment a quick going over. He searched the place as if there was a five-dollar bill lost somewhere about. He found a fountain pen, a book, necktie and other articles he had misplaced weeks ago. But no grinning little green fellow.

Park sat down and considered the matter. “The little man who wasn't there,” he said foolishly.

Parker O'Donnel, aged twenty-four—no, he was twenty-five, for today was his birthday—was a lean, brown young man. His height was almost six feet, and he had run the high school mile in five minutes and five seconds. He could ride a bronc, bulldog a steer, and give a girl quite a line of talk.

He was manager-operator of the telegraph office in Sandersonville, which had a population a little over two thousand. Towns did not come large in this part of Idaho.

His parents were dead. He did not remember his mother at all, and his father was dim in his recollection. His father, Sandy O'Donnel, had been a roaming, eccentric man who was lawyer, cowboy, prospector, adventurer, and about whatever other profession had come handy, as far as Park knew.

Park had learned to telegraph, and he had been operator-manager here in Sandersonville for about a year.

He had joined the U. S. air force nearly eight months ago. He had not been called. He was very aggravated about this. It seemed the air force was short on training facilities, and had not yet gotten around to him. Or at least that was the explanation he kept getting.

Now, sitting in the living room of the small apartment which he occupied alone, Park went over these points about his past. He was also healthy, agile, unmarried and not in love, although open to possibilities in the latter.

"This," he remarked to himself, "is the first indication that I might be crazy, too. A fine present for a man's twenty-fifth birthday."

He knew darned well there wasn't anything wrong with his mind.

Still, there *had* been a little man. Then there hadn't.

Park made coffee, fried an egg and baked a waffle. He could put together a mean waffle. He considered himself not a bad cook.

Still without finding a trace of the little green man with the grin, and still puzzled, Park went down to the office to go to work.

HE was late. The relay operator was calling him on the wire, and giving him hell. "We're stacked up with 99 stuff for you," said the relay man. Telegraphers traditionally called urgent or important messages "99" messages. Park sighed, put carbons in a bunch of blanks, and gave the relay man the GA signal.

Park was all set to copy a mess of stuff for the new defense plant south of town, the new factory that had sprung up overnight. Because of the plant, Park's telegraph job had been ruled an essential one, and he could have stayed out of the army on the strength of that. But he hadn't. He'd joined the air force.

But this stuff wasn't for the defense plant. Not the rush messages, anyway.

The "99" telegrams were all for someone named Clark Savage, Jr. They were from various dignitaries in the war department, high officials. They were somewhat indignant and firm in tone.

Park gathered that this individual, Clark Savage, Jr., had been insisting that the war department assign him to duty in the army where he would see some shooting action. The brass hats were refusing. From the tone of the messages, Park decided that Clark Savage, Jr., had sent some pretty blistering telegrams to the war department. The brass hats were still insisting that he continue the same work he was doing, and they'd had their feelings hurt.

Park couldn't help grinning as he copied the wires from Washington. He sympathized thoroughly with this Clark Savage, Jr., whoever he was. Park felt that he had a bond in common with Clark Savage, Jr. Like Savage, he was trying to get into the war, and not having much luck.

Park gathered that Clark Savage, Jr., had told the war department about the same things that he, Park, would like to tell them. Where did they get off, telling a guy he couldn't get into a place where he could shoot Japs and Germans!

The text of the messages told Park that Clark Savage, Jr., was in Sandersonville with some assistants,

giving some technical advice to the new defense plant.

He rather liked this Clark Savage, Jr., without even knowing who the man was.

Park sent the messages off by taxicab. Park's delivery boy had quit to get a defense job, and it was either deliver the messages by cab, or deliver them himself. When he could find a cab, it was O. K. But most of the time there was no taxicab.

The day progressed, and was not much different from other days, until late that afternoon.

During the day, of course, Park did some thinking about the little man he had seen. Or thought he had seen. The thing was so ridiculous that he did not know what to think.

Park's general inclination was to decide that the thing actually had been a joke, a gag, pulled by some of his friends. He couldn't see the point of the gag. Maybe someone knew it was his birthday, and the gag had some connection with that. He didn't know what it could be, though. Park concluded to keep his mouth shut about the whole thing. If it was a gag, he wasn't going to bite on it.

A little before five, the girl came in.

WHEN the girl first came in, Park was busy on the wire again—more messages from the brass hats to Clark Savage, Jr.—and he didn't really notice her. He did vaguely note that she was a small girl who came through the door. Small girls weren't particularly his dish.

The brass hats in the war department were more indignant than they'd been that morning. Park gathered that this Clark Savage, Jr., must have been on the long-distance telephone during the day, and given them a further blistering. They were certainly hot under the collar, the brass hats. However, they were unusually apologetic, for brass hats, to this Clark Savage, Jr. Park gathered that Clark Savage, Jr., was somebody important. The fact that he was important depressed Park, because if somebody with some pull couldn't get into action in the war, how was an unknown brass pounder like Parker O'Donnel going to do any good?

“Hello,” the girl said.

“Write out your message on a blank,” said Park. “Be with you in a few minutes.” The relay operator was pouring it on Park, and he didn't have time to fool around with the counter service.

The girl waited patiently until Park had cleared the wire.

“Hello,” she said.

Park looked up. His impulse was to fall over backward. Because this wasn't just a girl. She was very extra. She was special. She was small, but she had no other drawbacks that Park could see.

“Wow!”

Park said, and took his pencil out of his mouth so he wouldn't swallow it. “Excuse me,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Parker O'Donnel?” she asked.

“Yep,” said Park. She had blue eyes and blond hair and the kind of skin you didn't think really existed.

The young woman handed him a card.

“Miss Martha Colby, Attorney at Law,” said the young woman, repeating what the card said.

She was also, according to what the card said, from Boise, Idaho.

“I am,” said Park sincerely, “pleased to meet you. In fact, I know I am going to consider it one of the high points in my life, like the time I had the mumps and the time a bronc stepped on me.”

If the young woman appreciated the compliment, she did not show it. She seemed to be too serious for such a pretty girl.

“You are Mr. Parker O'Donnel?” she asked.

“Yes, I agreed to that once already,” Park said.

“And this,” said Attorney Martha Colby, “is your birthday.”

“It is.”

“Your twenty-fifth birthday?”

“Right again.”

“And your father was named, or called, Sandy O'Donnel?” asked the girl lawyer.

“That information is correct.”

The young woman sighed. She examined Park with what seemed to be some considerable doubt and perhaps some apprehension.

“I am your new legal guardian,” she said.

“THAT'S fine,” Park said fatuously. Then he blinked. “Wait a minute, gorgeous. What do you mean, guardian?”

“Guardian,” said the girl. “The legal term guardian. You know what it means as well as I do.”

Park felt distinctly foolish.

“You mean,” he said, “you look after me?”

“Yes.”

“But I'm over twenty-one! I'm not crazy! What the hell—I beg your pardon—do I want with a guardian?” The young woman attorney apparently had expected some such objection. She was all ready with her brief case, which she opened.

She said, “It is in your father's will. I presume you have not read the will?”

“I didn't know dad left a will,” said Parker O'Donnel. “It's news to me.”

“The will,” said Attorney Martha Colby, “states that I am to be appointed your guardian.”

“Holy cats!” said Park.

The young woman removed a document from her brief case, a document which showed signs of age. She indicated this legal article.

“It is,” she said, “right here in the will. You may read it.”

“Gosh!” said Park. “Does the will say what I am to do with you, now that I've got you?”

“As guardian,” said Attorney Martha Colby, “it is I who will tell you what to do. Not the reverse.”

Park became somewhat indignant. “Oh, it does, does it! I may have something to say about that!”

Attorney Martha Colby frowned severely. “The first thing I am to do with you,” she said, “is to take you to visit a man named Tom Brock.”

“Tom Brock,” said Park, “was dad's old partner. I don't know him, but I've heard he was the only man who was a bigger screwball than my good old dad was.”

“I am to take you to Tom Brock,” said the young woman lawyer. “And he's to give you a good talking to.”

“Oh my goodness!” said Park. “I never heard of such a foolish thing!”

Chapter II. DEATH ISN'T FUNNY

THE relay officer operator was on the wire with more “99” messages. They were overworked at the relay office, and the relay man called so angrily that his dots and dashes threatened to shake the tobacco can out of the sounder box.

Park opened the key and said, “Min, you lid,” over the wire. Min meant minute, or wait a minute. And the word lid was a telegrapher's bit of slanguage implying the other fellow was a species of goof who had no head on his shoulders.

The relay man sent six or seven explosive words. He was evidently the chief operator sitting in on the wire.

Park's ears got red.

“I've got to copy this stuff,” he said, “or be in the market for another job.”

“Go right ahead,” said the pretty lawyer.

“Stick around, wonderful,” Park requested. “I want to hear more of this strange stuff you've been telling me.”

The messages were still more stuff for Clark Savage, Jr., from the war department. More people were respectfully and tactfully, but absolutely, denying Clark Savage, Jr., the privilege of getting into a plane and personally chasing the enemy.

Park was a good operator who could copy, mark off messages, get blanks ready, and also think about subjects not related to telegraphy, all while he was copying a message.

When he had the wire cleared, he sent an O. K., then closed the key and asked, “Does the will say anything about the little green man?”

“What?” asked Attorney Martha Colby blankly.

“Man. Small. Green. Kind of a gremlin.”

Attorney Colby blinked at Park. “Maybe you *do* need a guardian.”

“That,” said Park, “is a snide crack.”

“What do you mean, green man?” asked the young woman. “What's a gremlin?”

“You should read a newspaper or a magazine sometime,” said Park. “A gremlin is a little he-witch, kind of an imp. They walk around on airplanes when they are in the air, and they make the cylinders miss, or the compass go haywire, or things like that.”

Attorney Colby became frosty. “Are you implying I am a gremlin? Well, that's just fine!”

“Hold on there, wonderful!” said Park hastily. “I didn't imply anything of the kind, and you know it.”

“Then what were you talking about?”

“Never mind, skip it,” said Park. “I'm sorry I mentioned it. And you aren't a gremlin, I hope not.”

Park glanced at the clock. The office was supposed to close at five, and it was five now. This was one afternoon, Park resolved, when the place was going to close on time.

He put the by-pass plug in the wire box so he wouldn't hear the sounder if they called him again. He got his hat.

“This guardian talk of yours interests me unusually,” he informed the young woman. “How about us taking ourselves hither to the nearest drugstore soda fountain, and you talk to me while we slug ourselves with a couple of malteds. Or does your taste run to something stronger?”

“Malteds make you fat,” she informed him. “I'll take a limeade. But it is a good idea.”

Park put the telegrams he had just copied in his coat pocket. There was quite a sheaf of them, and they were all for Clark Savage, Jr.

He locked up the office.

Out on the sidewalk, he looked in vain for a taxicab. There wasn't a cab. Park glanced at his watch, saw it was now after five, and knew there wouldn't be a cab. The taxi was always out at the defense plant at this time of day, doubling as a bus and hauling defense workers.

“Oh, shucks!” Park said. “I'll have to deliver these telegrams myself. But I'll do that later. They just tell the guy the same thing he's been getting all day, so he won't mind.”

“Which direction is the drugstore?” asked Attorney Martha Colby.

“This way,” said Park.

They did not get to the drugstore, however.

WHERE they got to was somewhere entirely different, and it was not their choice. It was very troublesome, in fact.

The difficulties began when Parker O'Donnel climbed into the truck. It seemed to him at the moment that he was doing a most natural thing when he clambered into the truck.

The truck was a big yellow moving van, and it was parked at the sidewalk not far up the street from the telegraph office. Or rather, it was down the street, and it pulled to the sidewalk and halted, and a man sprang out. He was a lengthy and rather seedy individual.

“Hey!” he called. “Hey, are you Park O'Donnel?”

“Sure,” Park said. “Why?”

The man jerked a thumb in the direction of the inside of the truck body. “He keeps calling for you,” he said.

“Keeps calling for me!” Park said, puzzled. “What are you talking about, a little green man?”

The other looked dumbfounded, and said, “Your pal. Harry, your pal, I guess he is. He keeps calling for you.”

Park had a pal named Harry. Harry Waters, who was on the same bowling team.

“What's the matter with Harry? Calling for me, you say!” Park blurted. “Is he hurt? Great grief, is Harry hurt?”

The long, seedy man registered sadness. “I'm afraid he is.” He pointed at the van. “He's in there, lying on some canvas.”

So Park scrambled into the truck body, which was as gloomy as a cave. He was doing a perfectly natural thing. If Harry Waters was hurt, Park wanted to help him.

The man on the canvas in the truck was about Harry Waters' size, but his face was indistinguishable underneath a crisscross of bandages.

“Park!” the man said. His voice, hoarse, didn't sound like Harry's. But that, Park thought at the moment, could be because he was hurt. “Park,” the man said. “Get the girl in here.”

“Girl?” Park exclaimed. “What girl?”

“The girl lawyer.”

Park was worried, and he turned quickly and called, “Attorney Colby, this fellow wants to talk to you.”

“To me!” said Martha Colby. “Why me? Who is he?”

“Harry Waters is his name.”

“I don't know any Harry Waters,” said the young woman.

“Doggone it, will it ruffle your dignity too much to climb in here and talk to a man who may be dying?” demanded Park indignantly.

Martha Colby hesitated. Then she climbed into the truck. The long man helped her.

Then the long man slammed the truck doors, and bolted them, locking Park and Martha in the truck body.

Simultaneously, the man Park had thought was his friend, Harry, sat up and showed them the business end of a large revolver.

“One bleat,” he said, “and I'll blow you two to pieces.”

He was obviously not Harry Waters.

THE truck started moving. It got going with a yank, which made Parker O'Donnel stumble wildly and caused Attorney Martha Colby to sit down with a dignity unbecoming a member of the bar.

“I'll blow you to pieces,” repeated the man who had been bandaged. “People will just think the truck is backfiring.”

Park stared at the big revolver.

“Then you would have a couple of bodies on your hands,” he told the man in a shaky voice. “It might be inconvenient. So keep your shirt on.”

The man with the gun snorted. He stepped back. There were some piles of canvas in the forward end of the truck. Now that the vehicle was moving, these canvas piles underwent upheavals and became more men with guns. Four of them. They were unsavory-looking fellows.

“Somebody,” said Park, eyeing them, “must have made a raid on the State pen.”

The remark did not make Park popular.

“Shall I shoot them now, Jerry?” asked the bandaged man.

“Naw, the blood might leak out of the back, and somebody might notice it,” said Jerry.

Park grinned at them foolishly. For a moment, he thought it was another gag. The talk was too bloodthirsty to sound real.

But after Park examined the men intently for a few moments, his hair began to have an absurd sensation of wishing to stand on end. The talk was real, and they meant it.

Park was just beginning to get thoroughly scared when Attorney Martha Colby kicked him on the shin.

“You big clown!” she said.

Park jumped, barked in pain, grabbed his shin. It was a wonder the involuntary behavior didn't get him shot.

“Ouch! What's the idea?” he blurted.

“I am not in the mood for practical jokes!” Attorney Colby informed him. “I came here on serious business.”

“This,” said Park, “is no joke.”

Attorney Colby stamped a foot. “I know better. I knew you were an irresponsible specimen the minute I saw you. No wonder your father willed you a guardian.”

“Oh, my, oh, my!” said Park. “It's real, I tell you.”

“Don't be silly.”

Two of the men with guns laughed loudly. One of them said, “Hey, the dame doesn't know which end is up, does she?”

Attorney Martha Colby stared at the speaker. It dawned on her that the thing was no prank, no practical joke. The guns were real, and the unpleasant intentions of the men were real.

Martha became quite pale.

THE men, five of them altogether—the long one must be up front driving the truck—and all with guns, now went about the business of searching Park, and looking at Martha appreciatively and remarking that probably she did not have any lethal weapons hidden under her frock. Martha's frock fitted her rather flatteringly. The young woman became red with indignation.

From Park they took fifteen dollars and eighty cents, what was left of last week's check, and they sneered at the sum as if a fellow who had no more than that in his pockets didn't rate very high.

“At least,” said Park, “I don't earn it in a way that gets you in jail.”

He was sworn at. He was threatened with death on the spot.

Apparently, Park realized with horror, they really meant the death threats. There was no undertone of kidding, nothing in their ugly voices that held out hope. They were a group of assassins, and they were keyed up to do murder, and they didn't seem to mind where they did it.

They took the telegrams out of Park's pockets and, naturally, read them.

The effect the telegrams had on the men was astonishing. The first man to read them turned as white as his face, which was dirty, could possibly have turned.

“Doc Savage!” he croaked. “Look! These messages! For Doc Savage!”

The others stared at him. “Savage is in town?” one asked.

“Sure.”

“Is he mixed up in this—”

Another man, less stricken by uneasiness, stalked over and snatched the telegrams and read them. “Oh, hell!” he said. “Savage is in town. But these are just telegrams that this guy, as telegraph operator, has copied for him. They're just messages from Washington telling Doc Savage that he is too valuable doing the work he always has done, and that his application for active service with the army is denied.”

Parker O'Donnel was startled himself. He had heard of Doc Savage. He hadn't connected the name of Clark Savage, Jr., with that of Doc Savage. But Doc Savage he had heard about.

Doc Savage was supposed to be an unusual man, a fellow who followed the strange profession of taking a hand in other people's troubles. Doc Savage was reported to be a remarkable man, in that he was a combination of physical ability and mental genius that was a little superman. Park had read this in some magazine article about Savage. The Man of Bronze, Doc Savage was called.

Doc Savage had five associates, a group which worked with him, the aids being skilled in various

professions—chemistry, electricity, law, engineering and archaeology and geology, if Park remembered their professions rightly.

Park remembered, from what he had copied in the messages, that Doc Savage's associates were here in Sandersonville with him.

Doc connected with the present mystery? Not likely. The telegrams had indicated that Doc was here giving advice on technical points to the new defense plant.

The thug who was reading the telegrams discovered this point for himself.

"Hell, Savage is just here working at the defense plant," he said.

He put the telegrams back in their envelopes, however, and put them in Park's pocket again. "We better find out how to deliver them, so Savage won't get his attention called to this," the man said.

PARKER O'DONNEL was not an impressionable young man, but as he stood there and thought about Doc Savage, he underwent a change. Or maybe it was rage which wrought the change. But at any rate, Park became so overheated he could not control himself. He began to behave as he had heard Doc Savage behaved.

Park hit the nearest man a terrific blow on the jaw with his fist. The man fell over backward. Park pounced on him and grabbed up the man's gun.

"I'll show you, you lugs!" Park yelled.

He shot at a man. The man ducked, and Park's bullet missed the target, went on through the dividing wall between the driver's compartment and the part of the van where they were. The bullet evidently nicked the truck driver, because the vehicle swerved off the road.

Most of the roads around Sandersonville were mountain roads. So it was not a safe thing for a car to swerve off the highway. But this time, they were lucky. The truck swung off, it was obvious, and hit a sheer cliff of stone on the inside.

The truck hit the cliff a glancing blow. But it was a tremendous impact. The truck bounced, straightened itself, kept the road, and went on. The driver had recovered.

But the crash of the van body against the cliff had wrenched loose the rear doors, and they flopped open like a pair of big leaves.

The way was open to escape.

Park had the sense to use it.

He snatched up Attorney Martha Colby bodily, and jumped with her out of the truck. They rolled end over end, because the truck was traveling about twenty miles an hour.

When Park stopped rolling, he flattened out on his stomach and aimed the gun, which he had managed to hold on to, at the back of the truck. He put two bullets into the truck. He decided to keep the other three cartridges—the gun held six—for future defensive operations, if they became necessary.

But the truck kept going. It went very fast. Some bullets came flying back from it, but they were not very well aimed.

Park could hear the men in the rear cursing the driver, telling him to stop. They told the blankety-blank-blank driver to stop, because then they could get Park and the girl. But the driver kept going. Park knew then that the truck driver had actually been hit by the wild bullet, and the man wanted no more fight. He was getting himself out of the mess, and taking the others, who were unwilling, with him.

The truck went out of sight.

Park sat up and grinned at the girl. He was proud of himself. He had extricated them neatly. A good job. He felt that pretty Attorney Martha Colby would appreciate his prowess.

But Attorney Colby glared at him.

“You!” she said. “You got me into that truck in the first place, you idiot!”

Chapter III. GOBLIN AGAIN

TRYING hard to be calm, Parker O'Donnel began to count slowly. “One, two, three, four,” he said, “five, six, seven. You know, I usually only have to count to fifty to keep from hitting a woman. But this time . . . well, a hundred anyway. Eight, nine, ten, eleven—”

“You stop being an idiot!” said Attorney Martha Colby. “Or I'll kick your shin again!”

Park looked at her thoughtfully.

“That's another thing I'll never forgive you for,” he said. “Didn't you know that when I jumped, they almost shot me dead?”

Martha winced. “To tell the truth, I didn't realize they were in earnest.”

“They were.”

“I know that now.”

“Why,” demanded Park, “were they in earnest?”

“They wanted to kill us.”

“Why? That's what I'm asking you.”

Martha frowned at him. “I don't know. I have no idea. Haven't you any notion why?”

Park sighed, and said, “I guess they were just mad at me for meeting such a pretty girl as you.”

Attorney Martha Colby's dignity gave way, and she laughed. “You know, you're quite a fellow,” she said. “I didn't like you at all at first, but now I don't know.”

“Why didn't you like me at first?” Park asked.

“You talk too much,” Martha informed him. “And you began calling me beautiful and gorgeous.”

“I'm sorry, Attorney Colby,” Park said.

“Oh, call me Martha,” said Attorney Colby.

“Sure,” Park agreed. “But I like gorgeous and beautiful better. And wonderful, matchless, peerless, priceless, comely, sublime, and words like that.”

Martha laughed some more, then shook her head and tried to be severe. “Stop it. I'm your new guardian, you know,” she said. “And aren't you going to do anything about that truckload of thugs?”

Park tilted his head to one side and regarded her. “You know, I believe you're trying to run a shenanigan on me. I don't believe a grown man in his right senses can have a guardian foisted on to him unless he agrees.”

“Could you prove you are in your right mind?” asked Martha.

“Maybe not while I'm looking at you, gorgeous,” Park admitted. “But I'll ask the judge to keep you out of the courtroom while they're having the sanity hearing, and then I'll bet I fool 'em.”

She threw up her hands. “Oh, stop it! Aren't you going to get the police after that truck?”

“Sure.” Park looked around. “Only it's about a five-mile walk back to town. And those high heels of yours weren't made for these rocky ways we call roads around Sandersonville.”

AN elderly Indian gave them a lift. The Indian, known as Cedric, was a college graduate, and something of a humorist. He dressed like a backwoods Indian from deep in the reservation, but he was far from being one. He was driving a team of horses attached to a buckboard.

“How, Dots and Dashes,” he said to Park.

Park said, “We've just been kidnaped and almost murdered, Cedric. How about a ride into town?”

“Been smoking loco weed, eh?” said Cedric, not believing it.

“Nuts,” Park said. He helped Martha into the spring wagon. There was a board in the back. They put this across the spring wagon bed and sat on that. Cedric did not offer to let them use the spring seat while he sat on the board.

Cedric examined them, particularly Park, thoughtfully.

“You look,” said Cedric, “as if Pocopoco had had hold of you.”

“Sure,” said Park. “Pocopoco and two wild cats and Hitler and Mussolini.”

“Who,” Martha asked Cedric, “is Pocopoco?”

“Little man,” said Cedric. “Giddap, horses!”

Park stared at Cedric and his eyes popped. “What did you say about a little man?” he demanded.

“Some squaw,” said Cedric, looking at Martha and making admiring clucking noises.

Park yelled, “What's this about a little man? And quit acting like a Piute medicine man? I know you went to Yale.”

“Piutes!” exploded Cedric. “Piutes traditional enemy of mine! I resent that!”

Park gave it up. “Never mind,” he muttered. “Skip it.” He settled back to sulk and to wonder about the

strange things that had happened to him on this, his twenty-fifth birthday. There was nothing from Attorney Martha Colby, because she appeared to be wrapped up in her own thoughts. Park watched her slyly, and thought: The loveliest girl I ever saw. But more cantankerous than ordinary women. The idea, her blaming me because she got into the truck!

They drove about a mile in complete silence, then the Indian driver, Cedric, spoke unexpectedly.

“Pocopoco is little green man,” he said.

“What!” Park screamed, jumping up.

Park's yell scared the horses, which were half-wild broncs anyway and had been waiting for a chance to run off all day, probably. So they ran off now.

The runaway was quite lively. The team took out across the sagebrush flat which happened to be handy. The buckboard lived up to its name, pitching from one sage tuft to another, in the air more than half the time. Park and Attorney Colby fell off the board into the bottom of the buckboard bed, and bounced around there in discomfort, and anything but dignity.

Cedric finally got the team stopped.

Attorney Colby looked as if she wanted to kick Park on the shins again.

“I didn't dream that being guardian to you would be so much trouble,” she said.

Park ignored her. He was wrought up about the little green man, Pocopoco. He grabbed Cedric and shook him. “Who is Pocopoco?” Park yelled.

“My ancestor,” said Cedric.

“Which one?”

“First one.”

“Oh, nonsense!” snapped Park. “Your ancestor was probably Adam, the same as mine. Don't give me that line of red-man talk you pull on the tourists.”

Cedric became indignant and demanded, “You want to know about Pocopoco, or don't you want to know about Pocopoco?”

“I want to know,” Park told him. “Shoot.”

IT was a long story, and Cedric seemed to tell it all with one breath.

Cedric said: “In the beginning of time, all things were one thing, and that one thing was the hot breath of the Great Spirit. One day the Great Spirit got tired of seeing his hot breath alone in cold space, so he cooled it, and made it hard, and lo, it was the earth. The Great Spirit became interested in the earth, which had been his hot breath, and he changed it some more, making trees and flowers and rivers and things. He made men, too, but after a long time, he did not like the men he had made. They were Piutes and Hopis and Navahos and Cheyennes and other Indians, and the Great Spirit was not happy about them. So he decided to make a man he would like, and one day he thrust his finger into the solid rock of the earth, making a small round hole. Out of this hole came Pocopoco, a small, green man with a big smile. The Great Spirit liked Pocopoco, because he was always smiling. But the other Indians, the Piutes

and Navahos and those others, were jealous, and they began to chase Pocopoco. He was little, so he had to run. The other Indians chased little Pocopoco all over. And the Great Spirit was wrathful. So he changed Pocopoco into a big, fierce Indian, and he begot a race of big, fine, fierce Indians, who were my tribe, of course. That is how my tribe got started. So now we chase all the other Indians."

Park looked at Cedric thoughtfully. "That's an Indian legend hereabouts, eh?"

"Sure," said Cedric. "Haven't you heard it before?"

Park realized that he had previously heard part of some such legend, but had paid no attention to it. Cedric was telling the truth, then.

"Does anybody," asked Park thoughtfully, "ever see this Pocopoco around any more?"

"Are you kidding?" said Cedric, staring at him. "Say, you have been smoking loco, haven't you?"

"A lot of sympathy I get from you," said Park.

Cedric whipped up his winded broncs. "In a hurry to get to town," he said. "Hear there is a great man there. Want to look at him."

"Take us by the sheriff's office," requested Park. "We want to get him after some guys in a truck who kidnaped and were going to murder us."

"No time for sheriff," said Cedric. "Got to see this famous man. Just want to stand and look at him. Name is Doc Savage."

"Why," said Attorney Martha Colby, "I have heard of Doc Savage. Is he in Sandersonville?"

"Sure," said Cedric. "Very big fellow, this Savage. So great a man, I figure he must be an Indian, direct descendant of Pocopoco."

Parker O'Donnel remembered those telegrams he had in his pocket for Doc Savage. He'd better not forget to deliver them.

THE Indian, Cedric, let them out at Park O'Donnel's apartment, which was on his way. Parker intended to telephone the sheriff, using his own phone.

The apartment was called in the local vernacular, light housekeeping rooms, and it was located in a private dwelling. Attorney Colby looked at the place and asked, "What is this?"

"Where I live," Park explained. "My apartment."

"Well," said Attorney Colby, "I am not going in."

"Why not?"

"I have my reputation to think of," said Attorney Colby.

"Why, you're only my guardian," said Park, grinning. "What have you got to be scared of? But suit yourself."

"Wait a minute," said Attorney Colby. "Have you thought of any explanation of what happened to us?"

“Not an explanation,” Park admitted.

“Why were you so interested in questioning that Indian about a little green man? And you had mentioned a little man to me before, too.”

“Oh, I saw him this morning,” said Park, “and I was just curious.”

“You saw Pocopoco?”

“Apparently.”

“That,” said Attorney Colby, “is silly.”

“Sure, it's silly,” Park agreed. “You coming in with me, or are you going to stand out here in the sun?”

“I'll sit on the porch,” said Martha, “and wait for you. What are you going to do?”

“Call the sheriff,” Park explained. “And I better be doing it, too, or the sheriff will be irritated. He irritates easy, does Sheriff Brander.”

“All right,” agreed Martha. “I will wait out here for you.”

Park strolled into the house.

Almost immediately, there was a tremendous rumpus. There was one shout from Park, an astonished one. The other noises seemed to be furniture upsetting, furniture breaking, furniture being thrown against the walls. At the end of it, a door slammed.

The door slam, rather, was a punctuation. It marked the end of one paragraph in the uproar, and the beginning of another. The second paragraph consisted of Parker O'Donnel tearing around in the rest of the house, the part that was not his apartment, and yelling.

“Mrs. Smith!” Park yelled. “Where's the shotgun? Mrs. Smith! The shotgun!”

Mrs. Smith, the owner of the house, was not at home. And Mrs. Smith's shotgun did not seem to be in a spot where Park could get his hands on it.

“Park!” screamed Attorney Martha Colby. “Park, what is it?”

“My apartment,” shouted Park, “is full of prowlers! Where on earth does Mrs. Smith keep that shotgun?”

Chapter IV. DEATH AGAIN

THERE was now some indignant kicking against the inside of the door of Parker O'Donnel's apartment. The prowlers acted as if their feelings were hurt.

“Why didn't somebody tell us this was a house with a crazy man in it?” one of them said angrily.

Martha Colby stepped closer to the door, and called, “Who are you fellows?”

“We're two innocents,” said the angry voice inside, “who came out here to find a telegrapher named Parker O'Donnel, and find out why he isn't delivering telegrams to Doc Savage.”

“You are connected with Doc Savage?” Martha asked.

“We,” said the angry voice, “are two of Doc's assistants.”

Martha looked at Park. “Why, they aren't prowlers,” she said.

Park was sheepish. “I guess I was thinking of what happened in the truck, and didn't stop to ask them who they were,” he admitted.

“Unlock the door,” ordered Martha, “and let them out.”

Park felt in his pockets vainly, then muttered, “I must have dropped the key somewhere in my excitement.”

He soon found the key, though, and got the door unlocked.

The first man out of the apartment was a large, short fellow who was really remarkable for homeliness, pleasant grin, rusty red hair, and practically no forehead.

He was followed by a pig, an unusual kind of pig with long legs and ears which looked as if they could serve in an emergency for wings.

“I am Monk Mayfair,” he said.

He indicated the pig, and added, “This is Habeas Corpus.”

The second man was a wonderfully dressed fellow with a thin waist, the mobile mouth of an orator. His clothing was really outstanding, and not in a loud sense. He carried an innocent-looking cane.

“I,” he said, “am Ham Brooks.”

He pointed at a small animal, dwarf ape or chimpanzee, which followed him out of the room. “This is Chemistry,” he said.

The four of them, the two men and the two animals, immediately regarded pretty Attorney Martha Colby with what seemed to be about equally divided awe.

Park O'Donnel suddenly discovered that when other men looked at Martha, he was going to be indignant.

“Push your eyes back in your heads,” he told the two men sourly, “and I'll introduce you. This is Attorney Martha Colby, my guardian.”

Ham, the dapper man, bowed quickly and said, “Why, I am delighted to meet a fellow member of the Bar. I am Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, as a matter of fact, and a lawyer myself.”

Martha was impressed. She seemed to be so impressed that she almost fell over.

“Not,” she exclaimed, “Ham Brooks, the famous New York attorney?”

Ham smiled at her, and said, “Thank you.”

The homely man said hastily, “I am Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, the chemist.”

Martha didn't seem impressed.

Monk looked disappointed. He also looked at Ham as if he was of a mind to haul off and hit him. Park looked at Monk and Ham both as if he would like to join the lambasting. The pig and the chimp got the general feeling, and looked at each other as if they were about to start a fight.

"My, my," Martha said. "It's certainly a surprise to meet you, Mr. Brooks."

PARKER O'DONNEL asked indignantly, "What were you two birds doing in my apartment?"

"We were waiting for you," said Ham, "in hopes of finding out what happened to the afternoon batch of telegrams which Doc Savage was to get from Washington. You were not here, although we were told you lived here, and we were also told you should be in shortly. So we went in and were waiting."

"That was trespassing," said Park. "If I had found that shotgun, I would have filled your hides full of lead."

"You did plenty the way it was," Monk put in with some indignation of his own. "Didn't you know you hit me over the head with that little end table?"

Ham said, "Yes, and if you had hit Monk anywhere else but on the head, it might have damaged him."

Monk said, "You keep out of this, you overdressed shyster!"

Park looked at the two men and the two animals.

"The circus has sure come to town," he remarked.

Whereupon Martha became indignant and snapped, "You treat these men with some respect! Mr. Ham Brooks happens to be one of the most noted lawyers Harvard ever turned out."

Now everybody, thought Park, is indignant. We are acting like a bunch of clowns, at that, he reflected. He resolved to set a good example, and try to be sane and sociable.

Park indicated Martha, and said, "This is Attorney Martha Colby, my guardian, as I told you. I am Parker O'Donnel, the local telegraph office manager."

"You got any telegrams for Doc?" Monk asked.

"Yes, I have, and I am very sorry," said Park. "You see, my messenger boy quit to join the navy, then I hired an older one, and he was so old he got the rheumatism, so I tried a middle-aged one, and he got a defense job. So I guess I'll have to give up, and deliver them myself. I was on my way to deliver them when I ran into a little trouble."

"Yes," said Monk Mayfair, "and you are liable to run into a little trouble now for not delivering them."

Park lost his temper slightly and said, "Listen, you homely ape, next time I will hit you with something more solid than Mrs. Smith's end table. And if you get funny with me, the next time may not be very far distant, either."

"Hah!" Monk said. "A Commando!"

Attorney Martha Colby told Park, "As your guardian, I order you to shut up. Stop getting into trouble with everybody you meet. And call the sheriff."

“The sheriff!” Monk said indignantly. “Haven't you got it through your silly head that we're not prowlers?”

“So I've got a silly head!” Martha said indignantly.

“I didn't mean you,” Monk disclaimed hastily. “I meant the rough boy, here, the one you're guardian for.”

“Some men in a truck,” said Martha, “just kidnaped us and tried to murder us. We want to tell the sheriff about it.”

Monk and Ham brightened up noticeably. “Look here, judge Colby,” said Ham. “Why not tell us about it. Trouble is our business.”

“Judge Colby!” Park said, snorting.

Monk said, “All lawyers call each other judge, didn't you know that?”

Attorney Martha Colby looked at Ham Brooks with awed admiration. “It would be wonderful if you would help us,” she said. “So we will tell you the story, then call the sheriff.”

“I say call the sheriff now,” snapped Park. “I tell you, Sheriff Brander gets irritated easy.”

“Tell Mr. Brooks the story, Park,” ordered Martha.

AT this point, a man crawled out from under the house. That he had been under the house, and that he had crawled out, of course, was unknown to Park, Martha, Monk and Ham, because they were inside the house.

Mrs. Smith's house was typical of the dwellings in this western mountain town of Sandersonville, in that it had been erected in casual fashion from lumber sawed out of the thick timber in the surrounding country. The fashion at the time was to erect all the houses on stone piers to make sure that the sills and plates remained dry, so there was a space, usually between two and three feet in height, under all the houses. To keep the local dogs and chickens out from under the houses, it was customary to put a grillework of laths around the foundation, and in the course of the years most of the grillework collapsed at a point or two. Mrs. Smith, like almost everyone else, had neglected to replace the grillework. The man had crawled under the house through one of these gaps.

He made a dash for the nearest brush, and reached it without being observed.

He worked his way up the mountainside about two hundred yards, where he found the men who had been in the truck which had kidnaped Martha Colby and Parker O'Donnel.

“Now we're in a hell of a fix,” panted the man who had been under the house.

“Didn't O'Donnel and the girl come to the house?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then go ahead and get rid of them—”

“Hold on now,” said the man from under the house. “There's two other guys there now.”

“Then get rid of them all.”

The other waved his arms. “Listen, these two are Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, two of Doc Savage's associates.”

His words caused consternation. Everyone was too shocked to speak. The stupefied silence lasted several moments.

“How did Doc Savage get involved in this?” a man muttered nervously. “Hell, if I had dreamed such a thing, I would have cleared out of here and gone to the north pole or somewhere.”

“Personally,” said a second man, “it's not too late for me to get out. Boys, I think you've seen the last of me for some time.”

The man who had been under the house waved his arms again. “Hold it,” he said. “Look, it's too late. Young O'Donnel and that girl lawyer are now telling Monk and Ham about that business with the truck.”

“What I want to know,” said another, “is how Doc Savage got mixed up in this? How'd he get wind of it?”

“It was an accident. Those telegrams. Doc Savage was expecting the telegrams, and when he didn't get them, he sent this Monk and Ham to see what had happened to the messages. So Monk and Ham came to the telegrapher's house. It was just a natural accident, I tell you.”

“But Monk and Ham now know about the truck thing?”

“By now they do.”

“Then,” said a man, “Doc Savage is after us.”

“Not,” said the other, “unless Monk and Ham tell him about it. That's the point I'm trying to make. If we can get rid of Monk and Ham along with O'Donnel and the girl, we'll be safe.”

“That's just what you think. I tell you, this Doc Savage is nobody to monkey with.”

“Savage won't have a thing to go on.”

“You mean—wipe them all out?”

“Sure.”

“I wish,” said the other, “that we could get some orders from his nibs about this.”

“There's no time.” The man who had been under the house eyed them grimly. “I'm going to blow them all up. O. K.?”

Their system was a simple one. At their feet stood a generator for detonating blasts, a device of the conventional time-honored type, one which was operated by shoving down hard on a handle. This spun the generator and made current, and the current flowed along wires to the electric blasting cap which then exploded.

The wire was small in diameter, although it would serve the purpose, and they planned to haul it in after the explosion, if they had time, and take it away with them, along with the generator.

The explosive was under Mrs. Smith's house. It was dynamite. A lot of dynamite. Four cases of the best new eighty-percent stuff, which they had stolen from a mine some time previously in anticipation of just such an emergency as this.

All was in readiness.

The man who had been under the house said, “I want to do this. I'll shove down on the damn generator. Getting two of Savage's men should give a guy a reputation.”

He made something of a ceremony of it. He stood straddle-legged over the generator. He looked at the other men. He took a deep breath. Then he bent over, set himself—and shoved the generator handle down hard.

Nothing happened.

Chapter V. THE BRONZE MAN

DOC SAVAGE had always believed that it was unfortunate that he happened to look like Doc Savage. His appearance was quite distinctive, so no one who had as much as heard him described would have any difficulty recognizing him. This was embarrassing. More than once it had been dangerous. He was not a detective, but his profession had some of the same aspects, and the best detectives are those who do not look like detectives.

In size, Doc Savage was outstanding. He stood out immediately—a giant of a man with a skin bronzed by tropical suns—in a crowd. When standing alone, away from anything to which his size could be compared, his giant proportions were not as evident.

He had bronze hair a little darker than his skin, and eyes that were like pools of flake gold, always stirred by tiny winds. He was not pretty, but he was handsome. And his manner, his voice, his carriage, gave an indication immediately of the power of the man, his tremendous physical ability and his mental equipment.

Doc was obviously what he was, an unusual product of a period of many years of intensive scientific training.

(As regular readers of Doc Savage magazine know, Doc was placed in the hands of scientists in babyhood for intensive training to follow the career which he is following, that of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers in the far corners of the earth. Exactly why his father did this, Doc Savage does not know, has never had the least inkling, although it must have been the result of something far in the past. At any rate, these years of intensive scientific training in the hands of specialists in many parts of the world accounts for Doc Savage being the unusual individual he is.)

He had come out of Mrs. Smith's house to find out what had become of his two assistants, Monk and Ham, and the telegrams.

Doc had heard the voices inside, and heard enough to know that something unusual had happened.

Before going inside, or making his presence known, Doc Savage had circled the house. He did this as a matter of habitual precaution.

He found the wires. They were fairly conspicuous. He noted that they were not telephone wires, and not wires which small boys would likely be using for an experiment, because it was fairly expensive wire.

He traced the wires under the house, and saw where they led. The cases of dynamite were plainly labeled.

Doc broke the wires.

Then he followed them back, very cautiously, until he discovered the group of several men crouched in the bushes.

The men were having an argument.

"Damn you!" said one—the one who had been under the house earlier, although Doc had no way of knowing this—"I put the dynamite under the house. I think it's up to somebody else to go back and see what's wrong."

"You wouldn't just be afraid of Doc Savage's men?" asked one of the others.

"And it was you," said another, "who frizzled up the job of wiring the dynamite so it won't explode. It's up to you to fix it."

"I'm damned if I will!" said the first man. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll draw lots with all of you to see who goes."

They got into an argument about who would hold the straws during the drawing. They did not seem to trust each other.

Doc Savage, not showing himself, and moving with the ghostly silence which was his particular ability, went hunting for the conveyance in which the men had arrived.

He found it. A station wagon. A large one, with a paneled body, and a legend painted on it after the fashion of marking station wagons used on dude ranches and estates. The legend said:

CRACKED SKULL RANCH

One man, apparently the driver, was walking nervously around the station wagon. He was a long, seedy individual who was having trouble with an arm.

Doc Savage discovered later, although he had no means of knowing at the moment, that this man was the driver of the truck who had earlier been nicked by the wild bullet from the gun which Parker O'Donnel had fired.

The nervous man stopped frequently to fumble with his bandaged arm, and to grimace and swear. He used his handkerchief about once a minute to mop at his forehead. He walked away from the station wagon toward the spot where the other men were standing, and stopped and listened. He would stamp back to the station wagon, then go listen again. He was very nervous.

The next time the man walked away from the station wagon, Doc Savage doubled down and reached the vehicle. He kept low, moved silently, took advantage of the brush and weeds. He got to the gas tank, slipped off the cap.

The pills Doc put into the gas tank were about the size of moth balls, but not the same color. These were yellow, a particularly villainous shade of yellow. He put a fistful of the things into the tank, replaced the cap on the tank, and got away from there.

HE did not molest the station wagon driver, who obviously had been left behind as lookout.

He returned to the group of men.

The cluster of men was where he had left them. All of them were looking pleasant but one, and he was

glaring at the others. Evidently the drawing of straws was finished, and the goat selected.

“Go on!” one of them told the victim. “Go on, get the job done.”

“Hell, I'll need some help,” pleaded the unfortunate.

“We'll cover you. We'll hold off the enemy if they attack,” one of the others told him. “You'll need some protection if Doc Savage's men happen to discover you.”

The victim lost some color.

“Cut it out!” he snarled. “This is tough enough, without you guys ribbing me!”

He prepared to follow the wire and see why the dynamite hadn't exploded.

Doc Savage took a small grenade out of his clothing. He invariably carried two or three of them, each of a specialized type. They were quite small, some smaller than pigeon eggs, and good only for specialized jobs.

He flicked the firing lever, and heaved the thing not far from the group. It was a straight explosive. Its smallness did not mean that it didn't make a loud noise.

A dozen shotguns, simultaneously, would have about equaled the report. The shock dislodged some rocks on the steep hillside, and these rolled downward, sounding like different things running through the brush.

Doc used ventriloquism. That is, he used the ventriloquist's trick of making a voice which had the sound of a voice coming from some distance. A distance of perhaps a hundred yards, and a yell.

“There they are, sheriff!” he said. “Don't let 'em get away, boys!”

The group of men left. They didn't bother about generator, wire, dynamite, anything. They didn't bother to go around the brush that got in their way.

They reached the station wagon, and the station wagon took off. It took itself and its noise out of sight and hearing with remarkable speed.

MONK, Ham, Park and Attorney Martha Colby came out of Mrs. Smith's house. Monk was far in the lead, because he seemed to think there was prospect of a fight, and he did love a fight.

Monk and Ham discovered Doc and stopped. Park, full of enthusiasm, started to rush forward and seize Doc, but Monk tripped him.

“Hey, impulsive,” Monk said. “That's Doc Savage.”

“Yes,” Park told Monk, “and you trip me again, and they're going to point at you and say, that was Monk Mayfair.”

Martha looked at Doc Savage. She was impressed.

“Mr. Savage!” she exclaimed. “We're so glad to see you!”

Ham explained, “Doc, there is something strange going on around here. They were just telling us.”

“Who,” yelled Park, “went away from here in that car? And what was that explosion?”

Without waiting for an answer, he dashed off up the hillside, toward the spot where a cloud of dust, lifted by the grenade explosion, still hung in the air.

Monk asked curiously, “Doc, how did you get out here?”

“The car they furnished us at the plant,” Doc said.

“Why, I mean?”

“You two,” the bronze man explained, “had been gone for some time. And I needed some fresh air, so I came hunting you.”

Monk consulted his wrist watch and said, “Blazes! We have been gone from the hotel quite a while.”

Ham said, “We came out here, Doc, to see about the telegrams. And then we stayed to listen to a remarkable story which Martha and Park O'Donnel have to tell.”

At this point, there was a howl from young Parker O'Donnel. They could hear him making amazed noises, then he came rushing up to them and exclaimed, “The house! Under the house, there's enough dynamite to blow up the town.”

THE car which the defense plant had furnished Doc Savage was a large, plain touring model, with a top considerably the worse for wear, and tires which offered no encouragement.

Doc Savage went around to the gas tank. He put some pills into the gasoline tank. These were the same size as the ones he had used earlier, but a different color, and soft looking. He also added the contents of two small bottles, and a greenish sticky-looking liquid from a larger bottle.

These pills and various bottles he was not carrying in his pockets. They came out of a metal equipment case, one of an assortment of cases which he and his aides usually carried with them when they traveled.

“Miss Colby and Park will ride with me in the lead car,” he explained. “Ham, you and Monk follow in the other car. It is getting dark enough now that you will have to use the headlights.”

“Right,” Ham agreed. Neither he nor Monk were enthusiastic about the following job, although their expressions indicated they would have felt differently had Attorney Martha Colby been riding with them.

Doc added, “You will need to keep at least a half mile back to give the black pigmentation time to form.”

Park and Martha didn't understand exactly what he was talking about.

They got into the machine. Doc drove. He had a little trouble with the car motor soon after it started, and finally got out, a slight expression of disgust on his bronze face, and put more stuff from a bottle in the gas tank.

“What is this? Making your own gasoline?” Park asked.

The bronze man explained quietly, “The behavior of the chemicals, their reactions to each other, varies according to atmospheric pressure. This is mountain country, a fairly high altitude. I seem to have miscalculated.”

This didn't seem to explain much to Park. He looked puzzled, but kept his mouth shut.

The car motor ran better now, although it lacked some of its usual power.

Doc drove in silence, taking the same direction as the station wagon, which by now had been gone more than ten minutes. Martha Colby consulted her watch and saw that it had really been no more than ten minutes. It had seemed longer.

Martha glanced backward. “Why!” she exclaimed. “The exhaust seems to be smoking terribly.”

Doc had adjusted the rear-view mirror to watch.

“You will notice,” he said, “that there is no evidence of the smoking, as you call it, close to our car.”

“There isn't!” Martha agreed.

Doc said, “Monk Mayfair, who is one of the world's greatest chemists in case you were not aware, did most of the job of developing the stuff. Unfortunately, we have not been able to stabilize the effect sufficiently to make it practical for use in the war effort.”

Martha, suddenly understanding, said, “Oh! You put something with our gasoline! Something that causes the exhaust vapor, when it mixes with something hanging in the air along the road, to take on a black color!”

Doc told her, “The substance with which it mixes is the exhaust vapor from a station wagon carrying the men who were trying to kill you and Parker O'Donnel by blowing up the house.”

“You put something in the station wagon gasoline tank, too?”

“Yes.”

Martha exclaimed in surprised admiration. “I've heard about these miracles you work with gadgets. So this is a sample!”

Park said, “Pretty slick.” He didn't sound happy, and he wasn't. He thought Martha sounded more interested in Doc Savage than such a short acquaintance warranted. What chance does a brass-pounding telegrapher have?—Park wondered.

THEY trailed the station wagon carefully, yet as rapidly as possible. The night came, and it was not dark, for there was a moon, and stars were a multitude of bright points in the clear sky. But the moonlight was not bright enough to follow the darkly reacting chemical vapors, which resembled smoke, by that light alone.

Doc said, “Do you mind telling me your story?”

“Of course not,” Martha Colby said. “But I do not see that it does anything to explain this mystery.”

“You are an attorney?” Doc asked.

She nodded. “My father, judge Colby, was a lawyer, too. When he was a young man, one of his clients was a man named, or called, Sandy O'Donnel. That is, dad was young when Sandy O'Donnel first became his client. Through the years, they were fast friends. As I understand it, Sandy O'Donnel furnished dad quite a lot of business, because Sandy was sort of a carefree chap.”

“Scamp,” interrupted Parker O'Donnel. “I've heard them call dad that. But he wasn't. He was just an

adventurer at heart."

"Park, I called him carefree," Martha said severely.

Park looked at her gratefully. "That's the way I always thought of him."

Martha sighed.

"Here," she said, "is why I came to Sandersonville. Sandy O'Donnel died many years ago, and left a will. The will was to be held until his son, Parker O'Donnel, reached his twenty-fifth birthday. Then the will was to be read to Parker O'Donnel."

Doc Savage said, "That seems an unusual way to handle a will."

"Unusual!" Martha exclaimed. "Wait until you hear the provisions of the will. First, I was to be appointed guardian for Parker O'Donnel. Then I was to take Parker O'Donnel to a man named Tom Brock, who would give Parker O'Donnel a good lecturing to. Now, isn't that a strange will?"

Park snorted, and demanded, "How could dad put it in his will that you were to be appointed my guardian? Young lady, I don't believe you are old enough to have been born when my dad died."

"Your guardian," Martha told him sharply, "was to be my father, Judge Colby, or such a person as he should name for the job. Dad named me. My father, incidentally, passed away three years ago."

Park nodded slowly. "I'm sorry," he said. "The thing just puzzles me, is all."

Relenting somewhat, Martha told him, "I can imagine how you feel. And you can be sure I am making allowances."

Park looked at her, and wished she wouldn't make allowances. He wished she would start thinking about becoming Mrs. Parker O'Donnel. He wished these other guys, Doc Savage and Monk and Ham, weren't around.

"So," finished Martha, "I came here to Sandersonville to carry out the provisions of the will. I met Parker O'Donnel at the telegraph office. We started for the drugstore to have malted milks and—"

"You said malteds were fattening," said Park. "You said you wanted a limeade." He grinned at her. "I remember every word you've said to me," he added.

Martha continued with her story. "We were kidnaped. Some men decoyed us into a truck. Men I had never seen before, and Park says he had never seen them before. They were going to kill us. Park got us away from them. He was very brave. Then an Indian gave us a lift to town. We were going to use Park's telephone to call the sheriff, but Monk and Ham were there. We started telling them the story. That brings us up to the time you appeared."

Park smiled at Martha. He was glad she realized he had saved their lives in the truck. She hadn't acted very appreciative up until now.

Doc asked, "You do not know the motive these men had for killing you?"

"I do not."

Doc turned to Park. "You any ideas?"

Park shook his head. "I don't suppose the little green man would have anything to do with it."

FEELING sheepish and silly, Park gave Doc Savage a full description of his encounter with the little man. “I sound like a goon, to talk about such a thing,” Park said. “But he was there. I'll swear he was there.”

“You are sure,” asked Doc Savage, “that you saw him move?”

“Yes. Not very far. But he moved.”

“Did you notice whether he swung his arms in a normal fashion when he moved?”

Park scratched his head. He didn't remember. “I suppose he did. I'm not sure. The fact that he even moved was so astonishing.”

“The description you give of him,” Doc said, “fits Pocopoco.”

Park jumped. “So you've heard that Indian legend, too.”

“It is part of the mythology of the tribe of Indians which happens to be most numerous in this part of the country.”

Martha Colby said, “Then there is really such a legend! I sort of had the idea that the Indian, Cedric, was kidding us.”

“Who is Cedric?” Doc inquired.

“Cedric? Oh, he's a college Indian, sort of a character around here,” Park explained. “Works as a deputy sheriff now and then. He does the tracking for Sheriff Brander whenever somebody the sheriff is after takes to the hills.”

The road they were following was mounting into the hills. It became narrow, and there was no gravel, nothing but rocks and loose dust which jumped up under the wheels of the car as if it was something alive.

Dust made the black vapor trail difficult to follow. In fact, the stuff was practically lost in the dust for considerable distances. In the low places, whenever the road descended into a valley, the black stuff practically disappeared, due to some temperature or moisture differential in the air.

Monk and Ham, who were doing the actual trailing in the car behind, kept using the radio. The radio, operating on micro-waves, was not practical beyond horizon distance. But the very short wave-length made the use of extremely small power practical. The transmitter-receiver apparatus which they used, for instance, was not much larger than a cigar case. The loud-speaker diaphragm served as microphone diaphragm as well.

(A commonly used method. The PM speaker in any home radio, for example, can be utilized as a passably efficient microphone by employing the proper hookup. In almost all inter-office communicator set-ups, the loud-speaker is so used, and the tone value is not bad.)

They had covered about forty miles when Monk spoke excitedly to Doc over the radio.

“It turns off here, Doc,” he said.

“The Rabbit Farm!” Park exclaimed.

Doc glanced at him. “Rabbit Farm?”

“A ranch,” said Park, “that an old fellow went busted on a few years ago.”

“Abandoned, you mean?”

“Except for prairie dogs and coyotes, yeah.”

Monk, over the radio, said, “They've holed up, Doc. Kind of a ranch. I can see a light around the house.”

Chapter VI. THE RABBIT FARM

IT was a kind of ranch. “A poor kind,” Ham muttered. “What are these things that stick into you? Cockleburs?” They were crawling on hands and knees. A great up-shoot of mountains in the west had shut off the moonlight, so that the night had suddenly become much darker than it had been before.

The ranchhouse was ahead of them. It was an old-fashioned house, a product of the days when they built their houses high and fancy. The place had the aspects of a castle without any of a castle's apparent permanence. There were lights in some of the windows, or what had been windows, but which were now holes with gunny sacks tacked over them, or wads of old sacks and clothing shoved into holes where panes of glass were missing.

Doc Savage stopped the others.

“Lie perfectly still,” he said.

The bronze man crawled a few yards away, and attached a gadget to the little radio. The gadget was not as large as a pocket watch, and it was equipped with a small rod which drew out to a length of about a foot, telescope fashion. He pushed this rod into the hard earth. He plugged the wire attached to the gadget into the tiny radio case.

The gimmick was a microphonic pickup that was as sensitive as some seismographs. In practical use, it would pick up the sound, or rather the vibration of a footstep, and it would come out of the radio amplified into something impressive.

By turning the microphone carefully on its rod, the thing had a fairly dependable directional effect.

The thing was one of the gadget-and-attachment assortment of devices which Doc had worked out so that he seemed to carry a device for any and every occasion, whereas the actual number of his pieces of apparatus was very small.

The tiny radio, for instance, was radio receiver, radio transmitter, amplifier for microphone-collected sound, apparatus for a capacity-operated burglar alarm, sensitive pickup equipment for taking a telephone conversation off a telephone line without tapping the line, and a couple of other purposes, all in one.

Doc listened for a while. For almost fifteen minutes, in fact, changing the direction of the pickup repeatedly.

He went back to the others.

“Someone, a man or a heavy woman, is circling around and around the house,” he said. “You had better wait here while I investigate that.”

“That means,” said Attorney Martha Colby, “that they have a guard posted.”

“You stay here,” Doc said.

He did not say anything beyond that.

THE bronze man moved away a few yards and attached himself to the tall shadow of a piñon tree. To appearances, he became part of the shadow and remained there permanently. Actually, he went on, with such little noise and such small evidence of movement that his going was unnatural, ghostly. The art of silent movement, which was a part of his strange specialized scientific training, had been taught him by jungle natives in Africa, men of a fierce tribe who were always hunting and being hunted by their neighbors, men to whom stealth was insurance of life.

Doc had not told the others that the skulker, the single man or heavy woman who was prowling around the house, was not a guard; not a lookout.

A lookout, a sentry, would have stood and watched the open spaces, would have gone where he could hear and see anyone who did not want to be seen. This prowler behaved differently, behaved so that it was obvious the house was being examined, not protected.

Doc began to stalk the skulker.

The bronze man had a good idea of the prowler's location, and he made for the spot. It was a thicket of small piñon trees which grew, together with sagebrush, in a long tongue that reached down from the nearby hills to the abandoned ranchhouse.

It was plain that the skulker intended to follow the tongue of undergrowth to a spot very close to the ranchhouse.

Doc set a course so as to head off the man, intercept him. It was always easier to lie still in a man's path and let him crawl to you, than to do the crawling yourself.

His plan did not work too well. There was a bed of cactus in his path, an enormous bed. The cactus was low stuff like mule ears, and the thorns were as long as needles and hurt much worse. Doc detoured. The prowler got ahead of him.

Then the thing got out of hand.

First, there seemed to be a guard around the house. And the guard encountered the prowler. A few words were said, all of them loud profane ones. Both speakers could be identified by their voices.

The prowler had the deep, heavy voice of an elderly man who was accustomed to howling loudly at people or things. His voice was a voice that howling had hoarsened. The other man had a brisk, hard voice, and the quick way of speaking of a professional boxer.

Two revolver shots banged, starting echoes gobbling around in the hills.

The guard—the fighter voice—screamed in agony.

Then Doc saw a little green man about a foot high. The little green man seemed to be heading for the door of the house.

MONK MAYFAIR and Ham Brooks naturally heard shots and howls. Both were itching to show off in front of Attorney Martha Colby. Park O'Donnel shared the itch. All three of them had—although they would have fought somebody rather than admit it—the same wish when they saw the young lady. They wanted to walk on their hands, or do something Galahadish.

"The man who yelled is badly hurt!" Ham exploded.

"Must have been Doc who yelled," said Monk.

"Come on," Ham said.

Attorney Colby gasped, "Wait a minute. What on earth makes you think Mr. Savage is shot?"

"Doc never uses a gun," Monk told her. "Therefore that scream must have been Doc, because the man who yelled was shot."

Park lit out for the house at a reckless run at this point. Monk and Ham, not wanting Park to outdo them, took after him.

Attorney Martha Colby cried, "You idiots! Mr. Savage told you to stay here!"

Probably they didn't hear her. If they did, they were too excited to answer. They were engaged in a race to see who would be first to reach the house. There seemed to be a mêlée of some proportions in progress at the house.

Attorney Martha Colby found a tree and got behind it. She was disgusted. "I wonder why I always turn men into idiots," she said.

She remained there, convinced she was doing the sensible thing, which she was.

The uproar at the house, instead of subsiding with the shots and the shrieking, proceeded to take on volume and tempo.

Monk, Ham and Park arrived at the ramshackle old building full of a rather senseless desire to come to blows. Their charge for the house had not been good judgment. But they had not realized this. They were full of the same goofy impulse which animals have to show off in front of the female of the species.

They were thwarted. They didn't get to strike a blow.

They got, instead, a scare that was something, really something, to experience.

They saw the small green man, the little man about a foot high, the one with the big smile, burn a man to death. The little green fellow just sidled up to a man and touched his leg, and suddenly there was as much hot blue flame as hell could hold, and screams containing more pain and horror than the ear could accept, and the certain odor of the substance of a man burning. This was what scared Monk, Ham and Park. It did a thorough job. Nothing would ever startle or scare them more.

DOC SAVAGE was so astonished he stood and stared for a few seconds. Actually, it was impossible to tell just what had happened.

Of course, a little green man appeared to have walked up to a full-sized man and burned him to death. But it was not a thing which a rational mind would accept as true.

There were other oddities. The small green man, for instance, had disappeared.

Apparently he had gone up in the smoke and the fire as he burned the man to death.

The victim's clothing was still smoldering. But the victim was fully dead by now.

Doc heard footsteps. Running feet. One man, who seemed to be going away from there in much haste. It was the skulker. The skulker was running away.

Doc chased him.

The pursuit was active. Cactus, mesquite, sagebrush, Spanish bayonet, made the chase painful. And it was an ignominous race, too, one which Doc was just as pleased that no one saw, for the quarry got away.

The quarry had a saddle horse out in the piñon trees. The skulker piled aboard the animal, and left in a drum-roll of hoofbeats.

Doc Savage stopped. He was fast on his feet, but not fast enough to help now. It was a fact which he knew that a man in good condition could kill off a horse in a long-distance footrace. But a short race was something else again. He made sure of the direction taken by the skulker on the running horse.

Then Doc went back to the old ranchhouse.

He heard a car attempt to leave the ranchhouse. The machine started off in roaring haste.

There was a shot. The car that was trying to flee angled off the road. It hit a small piñon tree, knocked it over, climbed up on the tree a few yards, then turned over. The tree, relieved of the car weight, came up almost straight again.

Attorney Martha Colby stepped from behind a tree, holding a small revolver.

“I hope I didn't shoot anybody!” she said anxiously. “I shot at a tire.”

“Where did you get the gun?” Doc asked.

“Park gave it to me,” she explained. “He said that I might need protection, and not to tell anybody.”

Doc approached the upset car. He could hear men running away from it, taking to the surrounding hills. He was not surprised when he found no one there.

In the ranchhouse, Monk and Ham and Park O'Donnel were having their fight. Doc joined them.

THERE were three unconscious men and the burned-to-death man in the rickety ranchhouse. Two of the enemy were still on their feet and fighting. The others had fled, taken to the darkness and the mountain foothill underbrush.

Of the two survivors, one was being besieged by Monk and Park. This one had been clipped by someone, and was so nearly out on his feet that Monk and Park had paused to quarrel about who was going to dispose of him. Monk and Park were elbowing each other, and calling each other unpleasant names.

The second survivor, with a long knife, was giving Ham Brooks a hair-raising time. Ham had a chair. A

stout chair, as Ham knew, is one of the most efficient makeshifts for fighting a man with a knife.

The knifeman maneuvered and stabbed. Ham fended and danced.

When Doc came in, the knifeman turned to look. Ham hit him on the head with the chair.

Monk and Park settled their squabble by both piling on the dazed survivor, and hammering him to the floor.

Then everyone ran through the ranchhouse looking for more enemies. There were none.

Ham told Monk indignantly, “I heard you guys wasting time debating about who would knock that fellow out. And while that guy with the knife was after me! A fine brotherly thing!”

“The others got away!” Park yelled.

“We got five, anyway,” Monk said, and began collecting the unconscious prisoners, using a small flashlight for illumination.

A small fusillade of three bullets hit the house. Monk put out his flashlight.

Attorney Martha Colby said, “Several of them got away. They still have their guns. If they are going to besiege us, we had better find out if there is a basement. A modern rifle bullet will go right through this house.”

Monk said admiringly, “Say, you sound calm. You sound as if you had this sort of thing for breakfast.”

“Nonsense,” the girl said. “I feel as if I had taken gas or something, and didn't feel any of this. Don't get me to thinking about it, or I know I'll fly to pieces.”

Outdoors were more shots.

No bullets hit the house.

The shots seemed to cause more shots. There was quite an uproar for a few seconds, then it all settled down.

Ham said, “Sounds as if they got excited there for a minute, and started shooting at each other.”

Now there was silence. Not comfortable.

“DID anybody,” Parker O'Donnel muttered finally, “see the little green man? Anybody but me see him, I mean?”

Monk cleared his throat. “I was wondering about that myself.”

“You saw him?”

“Well,” said Monk, “I've got more confidence in my common sense than to admit that I saw such a thing. But I was sure under the impression I saw it.”

Doc Savage said, “You fellows did not start for the house until after the shots.”

“That's right,” Ham admitted. “And we saw what seemed to be a little green man. He went through the

door. He went straight to a man, moving rather slowly, and the minute he touched the man, the man burst into flame."

Martha Colby said, "So we all saw the thing. Park wasn't making silly talk about Pocopoco, after all."

"So you thought my talk was silly," Park complained.

"Where'd the little green guy go?" Monk demanded. "Anybody see?"

"Went up in flame, seemed to me," Park said.

They were not just standing around talking. They had taken up cautious positions at the windows. Monk was guarding the prisoners. Doc had gone to learn whether there was a basement under the ranchhouse. There was none. The house seemed to be open underneath, after the local style, so there was no sense in trying to crawl under it.

"Park," Monk said.

"Yeah?"

"When the little green man disappeared when you saw him this morning, did he do it by turning to fire?" asked Monk.

Park snorted. "I told you what happened. I went to get a broom to push him around and see what he was. He was gone when I got back."

Suddenly there were more shots. Some of them were the loud blunt speech of sawed-off shotguns. Lead hammered the house.

A voice hailed them.

"Come out," said the voice, "while there's enough left of you to hang!"

"Gosh!" Park gasped. "Oh, gosh!"

"Who is it?" Doc asked.

"Sheriff Brander," said Park. "The one I told you irritates easy. And he sounds as if we had him upset."

Chapter VII. IRRITATED

SHERIFF BRANDER looked at the burned dead man, and inspected the five who were unconscious. He examined the latter to see whether they were alive.

He pointed at Doc Savage, Monk, Ham, Martha and Park, leveling his finger at each individually. "You and you," he said, "and you and you and you are all under arrest."

"What charge?" Ham Brooks demanded.

"There is only one dead man," said Sheriff Brander. "So the charge is only one murder."

The sheriff was a very large fat man who looked as if he belonged behind the cash register in a cowtown restaurant. Certainly he did not look the part of sheriff—although he tried to dress it. His star was an extra large special-order job of silver with the word "Sheriff" inlaid in gold, and various curlicues

engraved in gold around the edges, and a small pearl set in each tip of the star. It was quite a sheriff's badge. He also wore two large pearl-handled engraved single-action six-shooters, very Hollywood. But mostly he was just fat.

He wore a business suit and a white shirt, cowboy boots with the trousers stuffed in the boot tops, and spurs attached to the boots. Great silver and gold spurs with mother-of-pearl inlay and jingle-bobs. Although his shirt was white, there was a colored cowboy handkerchief tied around his fat neck, and leather cuffs on his arms.

"Ps-s-s-t!"

said Parker O'Donnel. "Don't let his silly looks fool you."

Sheriff Brander heard that. He seemed pleased.

"Tsk, tsk,"

he said. "What the kid is trying to tell you is that I've shot sixteen men in gun fights. None of them in the back."

One of the sheriff's deputies, who was standing to one side, said, "Whirlwind should be ashamed to blow when around cyclone."

Park O'Donnel and Attorney Martha Colby glanced quickly at the speaker, and recognized him.

"Hello there, Cedric," said Park to the Indian who had hauled him into town earlier in the day.

Sheriff Brander frowned at Cedric. "Cedric, what did you just say about a whirlwind?"

"Shoe fits, eh?" said Cedric.

"Meaning," said the sheriff, "that I'm a whirlwind?"

"Whirlwind," said Cedric. "That's right."

"Now that's real nice of you to call me a whirlwind," said Sheriff Brander. "And I must say it makes as little sense as most of the things you say, Cedric."

Cedric snorted.

"You whirlwind." Cedric pointed an arm at Doc Savage. "He cyclone."

Sheriff Brander chuckled. "Oh, so you were insulting me, Cedric," he said. "That's a fine redskin reward for me making you a deputy at three dollars a day while you work."

"Worth six dollars," said Cedric. "This fellow is Doc Savage, sheriff. Don't you read your newspapers, magazines, or talk to the crooks you catch? Doc Savage is an important fellow."

"I know who he is," said Sheriff Brander. "I just arrested him, didn't I?"

Ham Brooks interrupted angrily, "We are entitled to some sensible explanation as to why we are being arrested."

"What you are entitled to around here, and what you get," said Sheriff Brander casually, "are sometimes different things."

SHERIFF BRANDER ignored the prisoners and gave some orders. He appeared to have several deputies along. Four of these he dispatched outside the house to look around, explaining that he thought he had heard some men running off into the brush, and he wanted to know about that. The sheriff ordered the unconscious men examined, and found, or was told, that they would survive.

“You city slickers,” he told Doc Savage, “come out here and try to run circles around us country boys. We kind of resent it.”

Doc said nothing.

The sheriff himself made an inspection of the burned body. He studied the corpse as thoroughly as he could without touching it. He straightened and stood scratching his head, puzzling and thinking.

“Somebody remind me to telephone the nearest F. B. I. crime laboratory,” was his verdict.

“Sheriff,” said Attorney Martha Colby, “that man was burned to death by a little green man with a big grin.”

“How little?”

“About a foot high.”

“You're a very pretty girl,” said Sheriff Brander, “to tell such a lie.”

This made Parker O'Donnel indignant, and he yelled, “She's not lying, you fat comic strip of a sheriff! It was a little green man about a foot high with a big grin!”

Cedric, the Indian, grunted loudly.

“Pocopoco,” he said.

“Oh, you know the little man?” said Sheriff Brander.

“Sure. Pocopoco,” said Cedric.

“Very interesting, Cedric,” said the sheriff. “Where did he come from? Could you tell me that?”

“Sure. Out of ground about a million years ago,” said Cedric.

The sheriff cleared his throat disagreeably. He spoke to one of the other deputies.

“Remind me,” he told the deputy, “to telephone the State institution for the insane to send a doctor down here to examine this silly Indian and this very pretty girl.”

Monk, indignant himself, shouted, “We all saw the little green man! All of us!”

“Remind me,” said the sheriff, “to have all of you examined.”

Sheriff Brander then walked off, leaving them. They could hear the floor grunting under his enormous weight as he examined the ranchhouse.

Cedric, looking disgusted, gave his trousers a hitch.

“Heap mistake,” said Cedric. “Heap mistake I made telling sheriff something was going on.”

Park snapped, “Cedric, so you told the sheriff about us. That's how he found out.”

Cedric shrugged. “Told him about you talking kidnaping. Then he got report about heap bang-bang and wow-wow around Mrs. Smith's house. So he got interested.”

“But,” said Park, “how did you trail us out here?”

“Just got to Mrs. Smith's house in time to follow you,” said Cedric.

“Cedric,” said Park, “you are a snake in the grass.”

“Sure,” said Cedric. “But how did I know you were going to murder a man by burning him?”

Park waved his arms angrily. “The burning,” he said, was done by a little green man, the one you call Pocopoco.”

Cedric shrugged again.

“That craziest damn story ever told to Indian,” he said.

IN the course of their first real adventure together, Doc Savage and his associates had learned the language of the ancient Mayan civilization. They had learned the language at the time because it had been necessary in saving their lives, but immediately it had occurred to them that the lingo was perfect for conversation when they did not wish to be understood.

(The Man of Bronze)

Probably no one in the civilized world except Doc Savage and his group of five aides spoke the Mayan tongue. The language, with its muttering sounds and vowels, lent itself to slurring into apparently meaningless mumbling, particularly if the sounds were delivered to an obviously musical tune.

Doc made a little speech in Mayan.

“Be ready,” he told Monk and Ham, “to make a break when I start it. And be prepared to take the girl and Park along. Monk, you will see that the girl doesn't become confused, and Ham, you will do the same for the young man.”

Ham let enough time pass for it to look innocent, then hummed in Mayan, “What's the idea of turning the girl over to this homely clunk, Monk? He'll just scare her into hysterics or something.”

Monk grinned at the ceiling. “It's all right with me if you forget to bring Park along. I think we could do without him.”

Doc said, more sharply, “Bring Park with us. He happens to be the key to what is happening.”

This silenced Monk and Ham. They examined the bronze man thoughtfully, wondering if Doc had figured out what was behind the mystery. It would not surprise either of them later to discover that already Doc knew most of the answers.

The bronze man, they knew now after long association with him, was uncannily accurate in forming theories. He did so well, in fact, that sometimes they suspected him of having dark powers. Clairvoyance, or something like that. They knew all about the unusual scientific training which was supposed to give him all his ability, but now and then it struck them that Doc went a little beyond such capacity.

Sheriff Brander came back from his search. He had a notebook in which he seemed to have made some

jottings. He read from the notebook.

“Ranchhouse abandoned three years a known fact,” he read. “Indications are that it has been occupied by half a dozen or so men for less than a week. Condition of garbage indicates about a week's occupancy. Also rained a week ago, and no tracks were made in mud, indicating men were not here then. One man dead, burned. Five still unconscious.”

“Sheriff,” said a deputy, “one of them is awake. I think he's been awake a few minutes.”

“Which one?”

“This'n,” said the deputy, pointing.

Sheriff Brander walked over to the indicated man, jabbed the fellow in the ribs with a toe, and asked, “Hey, stranger, what was going on around here?”

The man pointed at Doc Savage.

“He tried to kill us.”

“There's a dead man here,” said Sheriff Brander. “What about him?”

The man pointed at Doc again. “He killed the man.”

MONK and Ham showed no emotion, but Park looked horrified, and Attorney Martha Colby screamed angrily, “Oh, you nasty liar, you!”

Sheriff Brander chuckled.

“Be still, you lovely girl,” he said. “We'll find out who all the nasty liars are before this is over.”

“Not the way you're going at it!” snapped Martha.

Sheriff Brander sighed. “I need a glass of milk,” he said. “Nothing like milk to settle a man's nerves.” He waved at his deputies. “Load everybody in the cars,” he ordered. “We'll take them to town, where I can get my milk.”

There was a stir of movement. The prisoners were marched out.

Monk and Ham had expected Doc to make the escape attempt somewhere en route to town, so they were surprised when he began it while they were being loaded into the cars, before they even left the ranch.

In Mayan, Doc said, “Hold your breath.”

Monk and Ham knew what that meant. They held their breath.

A few seconds later, Sheriff Brander's deputies began going to sleep. Going to sleep was about the only description which fitted their behavior. In most cases, their eyes were shut before they reached the ground. One or two of them, who happened to fall on cactus, did not seem to feel the cactus, so it was not sleep.

Sheriff Brander went down with them.

So did Attorney Martha Colby and Parker O'Donnel. Monk scooped up Martha. Ham took young Park O'Donnel. Doc helped with Park.

Not all the deputy sheriffs—there was quite a posse all told—had been overcome by the unexpected sleepiness.

But Doc and his group got into the piñon thickets before there was any shooting. The shooting came later, but the bullets did nothing except make them feel very uneasy.

Monk and Ham both whistled several times. This was to call their pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry.

The pig and the runt chimp joined them shortly. They kept going. Doc set the course, choosing a way that led upward sharply toward a black fur of piñon growth on the mountain foothills. It was no coincidence that the route he chose was the same one taken by the skulker who had fled on horseback.

The shooting behind them died down.

"That sheriff," Monk said, "is going to be slightly wrought up."

Ham grunted. "I'm wrought up, too," he said. "Do you have to hold that girl so close? Aren't you afraid of breaking her ribs?"

ATTORNEY MARTHA COLBY and Parker O'Donnel regained their senses about the same time. The awakening was almost the same as coming out of ordinary sleep, with the mind perhaps just a little less fuzzy. They had no idea what had happened.

Martha did something that pleased Ham enormously.

She immediately jabbed a finger into Monk's eye. She must have thought that Monk was getting fresh or something. Monk dropped her.

"That," Monk said, "is a fine sample of gratitude."

Martha got herself organized, and decided she had been mistaken. "What happened?" she asked.

"I refuse to talk to you," Monk informed her.

Ham took over, depositing Parker O'Donnel on the ground not too gently. Parker, who was conscious, growled an angry complaint about the cactus while he got up in haste.

Ham said, "Attorney Colby, you have been unconscious for a while. But it will not be harmful."

"Listen," said Martha. "I never fainted in my life."

"You didn't faint. It was a gas. An anaesthetic gas which is odorless and colorless, which produces remarkably quick unconsciousness when you inhale it."

"But why didn't it overcome you?"

"That," said Ham, "is the trick to the stuff. You just hold your breath to escape it. Pretty soon it mixes with the air and becomes ineffective. The oxygen in the air nullifies the effective agent in the gas."

Martha breathed inward deeply as if to learn whether she had fully recovered. "But I didn't see any gas

bombs exploding."

"Doc carries the gas," explained Ham, "in little glass globules which he either crushes by hand in his clothing, or tosses away and they break."

Park O'Donnel had been listening. "How did we get away from the sheriff?"

"Walked away," Ham told him.

"The gas get the sheriff?"

"That's right."

"Sheriff Brander," said Park, "is going to be ready to eat tacks."

"The big lard bucket," said Ham, "shouldn't have barged in and arrested us the way he did."

"The way Sheriff Brander does it," Park explained, "is to arrest everybody in a case. Then he lets the innocent ones go after he is sure they are innocent."

"Well, he got his system changed for him."

Park shook his head. "Sheriff Brander," he said, "is an impulsive fellow. He wasn't fooling when he said he had shot sixteen men. I heard once that he had only counted the left-handed men he had shot."

Ham snorted.

Doc Savage had gone ahead. The bronze man was using a flashlight in a gully where it could not be seen from the direction of the ranchhouse. Monk and the others joined Doc. They saw that he was interested in tracks in the sandy bottom of the gully. The tracks of a horse.

"Our job," Doc said, "is to trail this fellow."

Monk stared. "Who is he?"

"The skulker," Doc explained. "And the skulker is the man who was responsible for causing the man back at the ranch to be burned to death."

"But a little green man burned the fellow!" Park blurted. "We saw it!"

"The prowler," Doc said, "brought the little green man."

Chapter VIII. THE DEVIL SAVED THEM

BY daylight, they had covered ten miles, and by ten o'clock in the morning, they had made at least twenty. This was airline distance. Counting up and down the hills, they had walked considerably farther.

Martha and Park did not seem very tired. Whereas Monk and Ham, to their embarrassment, were puffing and dragging in virtual exhaustion.

"It's the altitude," Monk kept muttering. "Ain't used to being way up here with the eagles."

If the altitude was making Doc Savage uncomfortable, he did not mention it. Certainly his strength and agility did not seem to be hampered.

The two pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, were plainly disgusted with the whole thing. Both animals dragged behind about as far as they could without being shouted at or having rocks thrown at them.

The chimp and the pig seemed to have a first-class knowledge of just how far they could push the patience of their owners before Monk or Ham lost his temper.

However, a little after ten o'clock, a stalking coyote made a sudden run for Habeas, the pig. The coyote, after the curious fashion of coyotes, had been following the party. The coyote didn't get the pig. Habeas managed the remarkable simultaneous feat of squealing until he sounded like a railroad engine, and outrunning the coyote in a flat footrace.

That cured the pig and the chimp of loitering.

“What on earth kind of a pig is he?” Martha asked. “He can outrun a jackrabbit.”

“Habeas,” Monk explained, “is a very rare Arabian hog.”

Monk grinned at Habeas. The pig had thawed out Martha, who in Monk's opinion had been giving too much attention to Ham Brooks. Pretty soon, Monk thought, I'll pull the gag of Habeas talking.

The pig couldn't talk, of course, but Monk had a gag where he used ventriloquism, and he had taught Habeas tricks to go with the routine. Monk had worked up the act until it was sure fire with the ladies. He winked at Ham, who scowled.

The mountains were shoving up higher around them now. They were, in fact, out of the mountain foothills and in the mountains themselves.

Abruptly they came to a crest from which they could look down at a winding concrete road. The highway had been heavily traveled at one time, as indicated by the dark grease stains on its surface. It was primarily a tourist highway, but now, because of the gasoline rationing and the war, it was seldom used.

Doc Savage had been forging ahead. Doc was doing the actual trailing of the saddle horse. Half the time Monk and Ham and Park and Martha had been able to distinguish no sign whatever of a trail. But the bronze man had gone ahead as if he were on a road.

Doc came back now.

“Trail leads down toward the tourist camp,” he said.

Park O'Donnel craned his neck. “That's the Jumping Toad Dude Ranch. Closed about six months ago, when tourist trade blew up on account of the war.”

THEY worked down toward the dude ranch, which had few physical aspects of a ranch. It was more of a tourist camp. There were many cabins with attached garages. There was a large swimming pool. The pool was full of water which steamed in the crisp morning mountain air, so evidently it was a pool fed continuously from hot natural springs.

“Who owned the place?” Doc asked Park O'Donnel.

“Man named Stevens. But he joined the army. Left a caretaker here. The caretaker was called Honesty.”

Martha Colby said, “Honesty, eh? The way we nickname people out here, that probably means the

caretaker is a first-rate crook."

Doc Savage followed the tracks of the skulker's horse carefully. The prints obviously led toward a corral and a log stable.

"Wait here," Doc told the others. "I will go ahead and look over the ground."

Martha nodded approvingly, looked at Monk, Ham and Park, and said, "I hope they do not disobey orders the way they did last night."

"What did we do last night that was wrong?" Park asked her indignantly.

"If you hadn't charged the abandoned ranch like wild men," said Martha, "you wouldn't have been accused of murder. And Mr. Savage might have caught the killer."

Park, feeling sheepish, glanced at where Doc Savage had been standing, but the bronze man had gone. He had faded into the piñon undergrowth with that remarkable silence of which he was capable.

"O. K.," Park said. "We stay here. But don't forget. We rushed in last night because we thought Savage had been shot."

"You didn't follow orders. None of you did."

Monk said, "Look, young lady, you don't understand how we work with Doc."

"How do you work? Don't you follow orders?"

"We work on the principle that all of us have a few brains," Monk informed her. "If you'll notice, Doc never gives us a direct order. Take a minute ago, the way he sounded. He wasn't giving an order. He was making a request, a suggestion."

"I think," said Martha sharply, "that you should do what you are told."

A new voice joined them.

"STAY with 'em, sister," the newcomer said.

Then the new arrival showed himself. He was a tall man with a grim face and an impressive revolver in each hand.

"Don't one of you as much as take a deep breath," he growled. To someone concealed behind him, he said, "Come on out, you guys."

With popping eyes, Monk watched men crawl out from behind a nearby rock in which there was obviously some kind of a natural cleft or cave. They kept crawling until there were eight of them. All armed like commandos.

Keeping out of sight, the men studied the slope of the hill toward the dude ranch.

"It's Savage, all right," one muttered. "How we going to get him?"

The tall man with the grim face said, "I got an idea." He wheeled on Monk. "Call Savage back," he ordered. "Call him back quick. Tell him everything is all right."

“Are you crazy?” Monk said sourly.

The man wheeled to Park. “Call Savage.”

“Nothing doing,” Park snapped.

“O. K., brothers. You don't think much of the girl, then.” The man cocked one of his revolvers, studied a spot between Martha Colby's eyes, then aimed the gun at the spot. “I'll shoot her if you don't,” he told Park.

“Nuts,” Park said.

The man with the gun licked his lips. His face seemed to be getting turgid. “Think I'm kidding, eh?”

Monk Mayfair, his voice suddenly hoarse, gasped, “Call Doc, Park! Call him!”

“Damned if I will,” said Park angrily. “If I call Mr. Savage, he will come back and they will capture him.”

Monk said, “He's going to shoot Martha.”

“Don't be foolish,” Park said. “Men don't shoot women in this country.”

Monk, in a voice that was more hoarse, asked, “Hey fellow, O. K. if I call Doc?”

The face of the man with the gun now had a deep purplish hue. He aimed his gun carefully. One of his companions barked, “Ned! Hell, Ned, don't do a crazy thing like that now!” The man sprang forward and seized the man's gun arm and wrestled it down.

“Call Savage!” gasped the man who was doing the wrestling. “Go ahead.”

Parker O'Donnel suddenly realized he had almost made a horrible mistake. The man had intended to kill Martha. He would have shot her in cold blood without more argument. The knowledge made Park sick from head to foot.

“Doc!” Monk yelled. “Doc! Come here, quick! There's nobody around. Come here!”

The bronze man heard, wheeled, and came back up the hill.

The men with the guns took cover. When Doc was quite close, they stepped out and showed him the business ends of their weapons.

“This is all there is to it,” one of them said.

THE armed men had circled them. But now they looked at the flushed, smoldering Ned, and he said, “Snig and Jim and One-ear, get away from that side.”

The three named men hastily sidled clear.

Martha Colby saw what they intended to do, and she screamed. “They're going to kill us!”

Her voice was so loud, with such a rip of fear, that it came back shrill and ghastly in echoes from a stone cliff about two hundred yards to the west.

Probably the echo actually saved their lives.

“Ned!” one of the men barked. “Somebody might hear the shots! Now and then there's some traffic on the road. Somebody might hear.”

Another man said, “Punk is right. We better do it in the cabin down there.”

Ned, in a voice straining and almost inarticulate, said, “O. K., but there's too damned much common sense around here.”

Doc Savage looked at Ned. He knew what had happened then, why Monk had called him back. Monk had done the smart thing in calling him.

Ned was obviously a mental case when he became excited.

They went down the hill, all of them being very careful. The men who had captured them kept their guns leveled, and most of them were sweating from nerves.

The dude ranch—or tourist camp—was a pleasant place. It represented an investment of probably seventy thousand dollars. But it showed the neglect of six months.

A man met them, a tall, seedy man with a shotgun. Park O'Donnel recognized him.

“Honesty Reynolds,” Park said. “So you're in this thing, too.” To Doc, Park explained, “Honesty is the caretaker Mr. Stevens left here when he closed the place and joined the army.”

Honesty was so unnerved that his lips were twitching.

“We'll use the big cabin,” Ned said. He indicated the cabin he meant, one larger than the others. “There. Go inside.”

Honesty croaked, “You're not . . . not . . . Ned! Oh, Ned, please don't!”

“Shut up!” Ned said. “Or we'll put you in there with them!”

Doc and the others approached the cabin. A man went ahead and opened the door.

Ned ordered, “Go inside ahead of them, about three of you. Get ready to burn them down if they try anything.”

Three went inside. They stood with drawn guns. Doc and the other prisoners marched inside. The rest of the captors followed.

“Close the door,” Ned said. “And if they try to rush us, don't get excited. Just shoot them down.”

Then the small green man came out of the other room—the cabin had two rooms, apparently—drifting slowly across the floor, toward one of the armed men. It was dark in the cabin with the door closed, for the windows were boarded up. But Doc saw the small green man, and Park O'Donnel saw him. The small green man had a big grin.

He reached one of the gunmen and the gunman burst into flame.

THE flame was hot and blue and it seemed to leap upward suddenly, in a swishing puff, and envelop the victim. The flame was such a violent thing that it roared like a blow-torch.

The little green man had become the flame; after the flame appeared, there was no little green man.

The burning man screamed once horribly and went down to the floor and the floor took fire. It was fantastic. It was flame that was not like fire, but like hideous magic.

“Look!” a man shrieked.

He pointed at the door to the other room.

The small green man had appeared again. He came through the door from the other room. He came slowly, but definitely, as if he had a purpose.

He did the same thing as before, went to a man, and turned into flame as soon as he touched the man. The blue flame roared and gushed and covered the victim and killed him as swiftly as a man could be killed.

There was a pandemonium in the cabin. There was not going to be any murdering of prisoners now. Nothing was in anybody's mind but flight.

They milled, yelled, stampeded and shoved. The door was shut, and they piled against it. Everybody yelled to get the door open, but at the same time they shoved to be first through, so that the door could not be opened.

It was like all panic pile-ups. It seemed impossible that such a thing could happen. The door was there, and it was an amply large door. All they had to do was open the door and run outside.

But they jammed up and fought each other with mad frenzy.

For the third time, the small green man appeared. He came through the door as before, and as before he had a big silly grin and was about a foot high, possibly a couple of inches more.

Doc Savage and the other prisoners had not joined the mess at the door. They were standing back, watching the flight, too fascinated by it to think of doing the sensible thing, which would be to attack the men who had just been going to kill them.

Doc noted one strange point about the behavior of the small green man this time.

Martha Colby was standing very close to the little man's path to the door, but the little man ignored her, and went on toward the struggling men at the door. The small man went slowly and with dignity, very slowly, not pausing or changing his course.

This time, however, the small green man did not get a victim.

They burst the door down. They literally blew it out of its frame as if it was a cork. And they ran. They had seen that the small green man was there again. No one paused or said anything or tried to use a gun.

The men piled out of the cabin and ran toward a shed, taking the direction toward the shed only because there was a wide road which made the running easiest.

The little green man pursued them. He kept his wide grin, and did not increase his speed. They outran him. In fact, the frightened men covered about fifty feet to the small green man's eight or ten.

The small green fellow stopped. He stood there a few moments, bobbing up and down, so that it ridiculously seemed that he was so mad that he was up in the air most of the time.

Then the little green man turned to flame. There was nothing to burn. The flame just appeared, and the small green man was gone.

The rocks where he had been standing became white hot and the earth smoked for a while. There was almost no breeze, and the smoke from the earth lifted upward lazily and slowly disappeared.

Park O'Donnel took his head between his hands.

“We're crazy,” he said. “We've got to be crazy. This couldn't happen.”

Chapter IX. THE WIDE MAN

DOC SAVAGE lunged out of the cabin, trying to prevent the escape of the frightened men.

They began shooting at him. He got under cover, taking shelter around the corner of the cabin. The shooting was wild, but there was a lot of it.

The frightened men piled into a truck and an automobile and careened down the driveway to the paved road. They took the downhill route, and went fast.

As nearly as Doc could tell, all of them except the two who had been burned had gotten away.

The bronze man got up and went around the cabin. He searched the vicinity, listened, studied the ground under the cabin windows. His particular interest was in the windows of the room from which the little green man had come so repeatedly.

He did not at first find a trace of tracks under the windows. But one of the windows was open. And there were stepping-stones, a sidewalk, around the cabin and passing close to the open window.

Doc swung into the cabin for a moment. Monk and the others were in the back room.

“I don't see anything,” Monk said, “to show why the little green man should keep coming out of here.”

Doc sank to his knees, and turned a flashlight beam across the floor. There were tracks in the dust, to and from the open window.

“Any of you walk across the floor and make tracks?” Doc asked.

“No,” Monk said.

“All right,” said the bronze man. “Someone was in here. Apparently he just left.”

“Was it the guy we trailed here?” Monk demanded.

But Doc was already out of the window, and running along the stepping-stone walk, watching for some trace of a man's trail leaving.

The earth was hard and sun-baked, so that following a man would be difficult. Trailing the horse had been a different matter. The horse had been shod.

Monk and the others came out of the cabin. Park O'Donnel was more excited than any of them.

“The two burned men!” he shouted excitedly. “They're dead!”

Ham yelled, “Doc, did that whole gang get away?”

“Yes.”

“If that little green man had just stayed away,” Ham said disgustedly, “we'd have had the whole gang in another minute or two.”

Martha Colby stared at him unbelievingly. “Are you insane! They would have killed us if the little man hadn't come!”

Ham shook his head. “Anaesthetic gas,” he said. “Doc was just getting ready to turn the stuff loose. He carries it in an armpit container, and he actually had hold of the container when the excitement started.”

Martha was not convinced.

“It looks to me,” she said, “as if the little man saved our necks for us.”

NOW a fat man came out of a thicket of mountain chokecherry, an enormously fat man. A man who was fatter by far than Sheriff Brander, who was no sylph. This man's fatness was a softness and a roundness, so that he looked like a bunny rabbit, somehow. His face was most of all like a rabbit's face.

When he smiled, his lips seemed to lift straight up off his teeth, rather than pull out pleasantly the way most people smile. He gave Attorney Martha Colby his smile.

“I'm glad,” he said, “that you at least think I saved your lives. Because I myself had such an impression.”

Monk had found a gun somewhere. He showed it suddenly, not pointing it at the fat stranger, but letting the man see that he had it.

Doc Savage came back.

The hugely fat man looked at Doc. He seemed perplexed. He put a hand to his forehead for a moment. Then he smiled.

“Why, of course, I recognize you,” he said. “I should feel stupendously flattered, shouldn't I, to have had a chance to save your life?”

“Who are you?” Doc asked.

“Names aren't very important, I always say,” said the fat man. “But mine is Wide. William Wide, since you have asked.”

Doc indicated the large cabin. “You were in the back room?”

“That is right,” said William Wide.

“You released the small green man?”

“Men. More than one,” Wide said. “There were three of them, in fact. I turned them loose one after another, as you may have noticed.”

Monk Mayfair, his eyes practically popping from his head, bounced forward. “Men!” Monk shouted. “You mean to tell me those things are really men?”

William Wide looked uncomfortable. “I realize how silly I sound,” he said. “I am afraid it is going to seem more silly before I get done, too.”

“Men!” Monk waved his arms. “Why you big tub of lard, who do you think you're kidding? There is no such thing as a man a foot high, and a green man at that.”

“You saw them, didn't you?” asked William Wide.

Monk yelled, “Brother, nobody believes all he sees.”

Showing some indignation, William Wide said, “My dear fellow, I would look at you and I wouldn't believe what I saw. Now what do you think of that?”

Ham Brooks chuckled.

Doc Savage had gone into the chokecherry thicket where the enormous man had been hiding. There Doc found a carrying case. It was a box about ten inches wide, fourteen high and three feet long. The case was fitted with a shoulder pack harness, and one end closed with a lid.

Doc brought the case out of the thicket.

“This yours?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” said the fat man. “But it has lately been in my possession.”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you gentlemen please not interrupt,” William Wide said, “and I will tell you my story.”

Fat men do not, as a rule, have faces that show emotion, but the face of this fat man was exceptionally mobile and expressive. Too, he had the unconscious habit of using the gestures and twitchings of eyebrows, nose, lips, even hair and ears, that actors use to show their feelings.

Just now he looked very concerned and eager to tell them his story.

“Go ahead and talk,” Doc said.

THE fat man said:

“I am William Wide, a retired actor, a gentleman of leisure, a lover of the great outdoors. In San Francisco some months ago I encountered a man, one named Thomas Brock, but commonly called old Tom Brock. He suggested I come to his home in these mountains as a guest, and do the two things I love most to do, which are to walk through the countryside, and to sit and observe the same countryside. I demurred at first, not really knowing this old Tom Brock, hence seeing no reason for his invitation. But upon being pressed, I accepted, and have been at his home since. I have found the countryside quite satisfactory, for it is interesting as you can see by looking about—”

Monk interrupted, saying, “And we are finding your story quite long-winded and quite unsatisfactory. How about zipping it up?”

He was ignored.

Parker O'Donnel said, “Old Tom Brock! Say, he's dad's old partner.”

He also was ignored.

William Wide said, “Now my story stops being believable. It seems to step outside the bounds of reality, yet it did happen, I must insist. Old Tom Brock gave me a case. It is the case Mr. Savage just found in the chokecherries. He told me to come here, and to wait. He told me to show myself to no one, only to him when he appeared. He said that if I was in danger, or if anyone else seemed to be in danger, I should simply open the box and step back. I did as he said.”

The fat man looked at them. Horror was on his face, and it increased, grew stark and dreadful.

“I did not know,” he said, “that I carried death in that case.”

“You knew what was in the case?” Doc asked.

“I did not. I assure you I did not.”

“You told us it was little green men.”

“I saw them come out after I opened the case. Naturally I saw them.”

Doc Savage said, “They burned two men to death.”

The horror got worse on the fat man's face. “Don't you think I know that?”

“You did not do it deliberately, you maintain?”

“I maintain,” said William Wide, “exactly what I have told you, no more. I was told that if anybody was in danger to open the case. I did so. I did not know two men would die.”

“You say,” Doc persisted, “that you are only a guest in Tom Brock's home?”

“The place Tom Brock lives, yes. You would hardly call it a home.”

Doc said, “In the house on an abandoned ranch nearer Sandersonville, another man was burned to death tonight.”

“Last night, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I had no hand in it. I have been here all night.”

“We trailed the skulker who released the small green man at the old ranch,” Doc said. “Trailed him here.”

“I know nothing, can say nothing, of that,” William Wide said.

“Who would you say the skulker was?”

“My guess, if you want it, is that it was the man who is really responsible for these murders.”

“Who would that be?”

“Old Tom Brock,” said William Wide.

THEY went back to the cabin, for there was smoke coming from it. The floor was afire. They found buckets, and ran to the hot-water swimming pool for water. They put out the fire, which had started when one of the men was burned.

There was not enough of the clothing of either burned man left to tell them anything of value.

There was no one else around the dude ranch which was actually nothing but a de luxe tourist camp. Even the caretaker, Honesty Reynolds, was gone.

Doc found a car, a small machine with good tires and some gasoline, in a shed. He drove it out.

"Ham," he said, "you and Park O'Donnel might stay with Martha and William Wide, while Monk and I see what we can do about overtaking that gang."

William Wide said, "You might have some time to talk while you drive. Suppose I go along?"

"Come ahead," Doc invited.

Doc drove. The fat man rode beside him. Monk rode in the rear and looked back sourly at Ham, who was standing unnecessarily close to Attorney Martha Colby, as they drove off.

"That overdressed shyster," Monk muttered. "I hope he gets in a fight with Park, and Park cleans his plow for him."

Doc took the direction which had been taken by the frightened men when they fled.

"Wide," Doc said. "Have you any idea what is behind this thing?"

The fat man spread his hands. "The whole thing reeks of a madness, of an evil dream," he said. "I cannot see sense to any of it."

"Ever hear of Pocopoco?"

"Pocopoco? No. What is it?"

"A local Indian legend about a small green man who came out of a hole in the stone, and was really the first Indian of the local tribe."

William Wide grimaced. "As mad as the rest of it, isn't it?"

The road descended sharply. It followed the inner edge of a canyon. Down in the canyon, a stream rushed and gurgled.

A truck came into view, and they stopped the machine. The driver, an agreeable man of about fifty, said that he had not seen the car and the truck which Doc Savage described. He went on.

Doc drove more slowly, watched the sides of the road.

He said, "Describe this Tom Brock."

"A strange old devil made of leather and bones and tricks," said William Wide instantly. "How old, I do not know. Sixty. Maybe eighty. The temper of a buzz saw and the predictability of a flea. But that doesn't make sense, does it?"

"Not too much," Doc admitted.

“Perhaps,” said the fat man, “I can best describe old Tom Brock by describing where he lives and what he does. He lives in an abandoned mining camp, a ghost city they call it. It is not a city. It never was. It is ten or a dozen tumbledown buildings. Tom Brock lives in what was once the saloon. He has kept it probably much as it was when it was really a saloon. It is the only two-story building in the ghost city. No one, as far as is known, has ever been upstairs. Tom Brock lets no one go there. He keeps it locked, spends a lot of time there. He tells his guests that he has his memories locked upstairs, and wants no one to bother them.”

Monk interrupted, “That sounds foolish.”

“It is foolish. Tom Brock is a foolish old man.” William Wide frowned. “I realize now that he is also a murderer.”

“What,” asked Doc, “does Tom Brock do to earn a living?”

“Nothing. He does not seem to need to earn one. He just lives there.”

“With his guests?”

“Yes.”

“How many guests?”

“The number varies. Four or five. There has been as high as twenty.”

“Why so many?”

The fat man shrugged. “I make no pretense of understanding Tom Brock.”

Doc Savage stopped the car suddenly. He pointed.

Tracks, fresh tire prints, led off the road. Some distance away, fifty yards, they saw the truck and the passenger car they had been seeking. The machines stood in a thicket of birch beside the road. Abandoned.

THE fat man started to get out of the car, but Doc put a hand on his arm and restrained him long enough to ask, “You ever hear Tom Brock mention a man named Parker O'Donnel?”

Wide said, “O'Donnel? Sandy O'Donnel you mean? A man named Sandy O'Donnel was once Tom Brock's partner, I think I have heard him say.”

Doc made no comment. They left the car, and advanced cautiously. There was no sign of an ambush.

The frightened men had deserted the car and the truck and had taken horses. The horses, they could tell from the way the grass was stamped down, and the presence of empty oat sacks and filled ones, had been kept there for at least two or three days.

“Took to the hills,” Doc said.

Monk scratched his head. “You know, Doc, this thing is organized. They had two hide-outs, the abandoned ranch and the tourist camp. They had these horses ready for a getaway. Whoever is behind this isn't without brains.”

Doc Savage located the trail the horses had made in leaving. The trail led immediately into the river. The river was wide, shallow, with a stone and gravel bottom. It was impossible to tell whether the horses had been ridden upstream or downstream.

Monk watched Doc. He was not surprised when the bronze man said, "They will not be easy to trail this time."

"I bet I can guess your next move," Monk said.

"Find Tom Brock and question him?"

That's it. Am I right?"

"You are," Doc agreed.

They got into the small car, turned it on the road, and drove back to the tourist camp. Park and Ham and Martha were standing on the porch. They did not wave or say anything.

Doc stopped the car.

Sheriff Brander came out of a cabin.

"All right, boys!" the sheriff yelled.

His deputies came out of the other cabins.

Ham, looking miserable, said, "They just got here a few minutes ago, Doc. Arrested us again."

Martha Colby added, "They have other deputies posted on the road, and they have a machine gun. We didn't dare to try to warn you."

Sheriff Brander gave his pistol belt an angry hitch. "Two more dead men," he said. "That makes three murders." He scowled at them. "I wish I wasn't sheriff. If I wasn't sheriff, I would vote for a mob to lynch you all right now."

The educated Indian, Cedric, looked at Doc Savage thoughtfully.

"How you going to get out of this?" Cedric asked.

"He's not," snapped Sheriff Brander.

"Bet you two bits," said Cedric.

Chapter X. OLD TOM BROCK

THE fat man, William Wide, now looked dumbfounded and turned loose a volley of words on the sheriff. "Do you mean that I also am under arrest?" he demanded by way of preliminary.

"Sure, you were with them," said the sheriff.

"What is the charge?"

"Murder."

William Wide pulled in a deep angry breath. He said, “Now that is, I must say, the very height of the ridiculous, and not in keeping with sane thinking or common sense, nor with the facts. I can see that it is of no use to mention the word fact to you, because you would not know a fact if you saw it. However, for the benefit of all witnesses present, I wish to point out that no logic has been exercised and no investigation made which would warrant—”

Sheriff Brander drew one of his six-shooters suddenly and did a wild-West shooting act. He fired a bullet which knocked off the fat man's hat. He fired another bullet which knocked up dust under the fat man's toes.

“Too many words makes me impatient,” said Sheriff Brander.

The fat man did not jump. He did not look frightened. Instead, he gave the sheriff a level-eyed inspection which contained the most complete ferocity.

Sheriff Brander for once looked uncomfortable.

Doc Savage, taking advantage of the sheriff's discomfort, asked, “How did you happen to come here, sheriff?”

Sheriff Brander gave an answer, something he undoubtedly would not have done had the fat man not just scared him by looking at him.

“The truck,” the sheriff explained. “The truck that was used by the gang who kidnaped Park and the girl, here. We had its description. Somebody reported seeing the truck around the tourist camp here within the last couple of days. So we came out to investigate.”

“Have you,” asked Doc, “the least idea what is behind the mystery?”

“No,” the sheriff said. “Have you?”

Doc ignored the question and turned to Cedric. “Do you know anything that might be interesting about Pocopoco?” he asked the Indian.

Cedric jumped. “What you mean?”

“Apparently,” Doc said, “Pocopoco burned to death these two men here, also.”

Cedric's aplomb was disturbed.

“Talk about Pocopoco crazy talk,” he muttered. “There ain't no Pocopoco.”

“The little green man is part of your legend, is he not?”

“Santa Claus,” said Cedric, “is part of white man's legend, too.”

Doc Savage turned to Sheriff Brander. “Sheriff,” he said, “would it hurt your feelings too much if we escaped the same way we did before?”

The sheriff recovered his aplomb. He grinned.

“Not my feelings,” he said. “But it might hurt yours.”

He wheeled, waved an arm in a signal. Instantly, four men armed with stubby machine guns appeared from the brush where they had been concealed.

They wore gas masks.

“Go right ahead and try your gas again,” said Sheriff Brander. “As soon as one of us upsets, they got orders to turn loose on you.”

NO one said anything. The sheriff looked at Doc, at the fat man, and chuckled. “They'll shoot the instant me or one of my deputies falls to the ground. For a pretty, I'd fall over now and see the excitement.”

Doc Savage, in Mayan, said, “Take it easy. We had better delay the escape somewhat.”

Sheriff Brander herded them into a group with his six-gun. “Stand still,” he said. “We're going to search you.”

The officer and his deputies stared with interest at the assortment of gadgets which Doc Savage's clothing yielded. Brander, chuckling, said, “I'll bet you are twenty pounds lighter.” When one of his deputies was inclined to handle the stuff, Brander warned, “Better not touch it, Spence. Some of it looks too scientific for guys like you and me.”

An hour and twenty minutes later, they were in jail.

“Sorry there's only two cells,” said Brander. “One for the young lady and one for the rest of you.”

He locked them in. They could hear him sit in a creaking chair in the sheriff's office which adjoins the jail, and start telephoning.

Monk walked around the cell, yanking at the window bars, testing his weight against the door, estimating the thickness of the walls.

“Strange they'd build their houses so darned rickety in this country,” he remarked, “then turn around and build a jail as solid as this.”

William Wide waddled over and gripped Doc Savage's arm. “Mr. Savage,” he said. “We've got to tell the officials that Tom Brock is at the bottom of this.”

“Tell them if you want to,” Doc said.

William Wide went over and kicked the door. “Sheriff,” he bellowed. He had a voice which, when he lifted it, could shake things. He kicked the door some more.

Sheriff Brander came back complaining, “Here, here, now! I don't like that noise.”

“Sheriff,” said Wide. “Arrest Tom Brock. He is the man who actually committed those murders. We will testify to it.”

“Old Tom Brock, eh?” asked Brander.

“That's right, sheriff. Brock is your man.”

The sheriff scowled. “Known old Tom Brock for thirty years,” he said. “Never done a sensible thing in his life.”

“Brock is your murderer,” said the fat man.

“Know him thirty years,” repeated Brander. “Old coot never did a crooked thing in his life.”

The sheriff then turned around and walked off.

William Wide seemed dumbfounded. “He didn't believe me!” he exploded.

“The sheriff,” said Park O'Donnel, “is a character.”

The fat man waved his arms and bellowed, “An outstanding example in public servants!”

For the first time, the fat man seemed genuinely alarmed.

DOC SAVAGE got them out of jail half an hour later. He had waited, he explained quietly, until the noon-day lunch crowd was out of the street.

Martha Colby and Park O'Donnel, watching the bronze man work, were amazed. It had not entered their heads that he could get them out of the cell without much trouble.

The bronze man wore a belt which was two pieces of leather with a powder between the leather layers. The leather parts of the belt were not sewn together, but cemented, so that anything less than an examination with a sharp knife or a magnifying glass would not have shown the construction.

There were two powders, really. One, yellowing, was in greater quantity than the other, which was white streaked with red.

He piled the yellow powder on the door lock, then dumped on a pinch of the varicolored powder, and retreated quickly.

“Get back!” he warned.

The powder burst into white heat as suddenly as if an electric light bulb had been switched on. It glowed, did some hissing, and seemed to melt the lock completely out of the door. The molten metal that had been the lock leaked onto the floor.

Monk told Martha, “Thermite. The stuff they put into incendiary bombs. Aluminum powder and iron oxide. Doc has improved the stuff a little, but it is still basically the same thing they drop in incendiary bombs.”

Doc kicked the cell door. The remains of the melted lock tore out and the door swung open.

There had been almost no noise except the hissing of the thermite-type powder. And, of course, the tremendous light and heat.

Doc stepped across the corridor to the cell in which Martha was locked, staring at them through the bars.

“Stand back,” he said.

He used the powder again.

Monk and Ham had gone swiftly toward the office at the front of the jail. They passed through the door. There was a short, violent scuffle.

The heat worked on the door of Martha's cell, and Doc began kicking the thing. He had a little trouble. For a time it seemed the thermite was not going to melt enough of the lock that the door would open. But he got it open.

“Miraculous!” said William Wide admiringly.

They ran into the office, paying no attention to the other prisoners, three in number, who shouted at them excitedly, demanding to know what was going on, but not asking to be released.

In the office, Monk and Ham were sitting on Sheriff Brander. They had interrupted the sheriff in the midst of a midafternoon snack, and slammed him on the floor.

“Shall we tie a knot in his leg and leave him?” Monk asked. “Or tie knots in both legs?”

“Take him along,” Doc said.

Monk was astonished, none too pleased. “He should be interesting company.”

Doc told Sheriff Brander, “You are going along.”

THE sheriff's private car was sitting in front of the jail and office. The machine was a large touring model which would hold all of them. Fastened to the back was a special tank for extra gas.

The sheriff's driver was sitting in the car, absorbed in something he was reading. He looked up, did not realize anything was wrong, said, “Away we go again, eh?” and went back to reading. Monk walloped the man's jaw, making him unconscious.

Then Monk picked up the book the man had been reading. Monk laughed. “A book on electrolysis phenomena which Doc Savage wrote,” he said.

Sheriff Brander looked uncomfortable, said nothing.

Doc asked the fat man, “You know where Tom Brock lives?”

“I certainly do,” said Wide.

“Can we reach it in the car?”

“Not easily, but we can reach it.”

Ham Brooks emitted a loud exclamation, whirled and ran back into Sheriff Brander's office. He came out with the two pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry. He put them in the car.

“Might as well make the exodus complete,” Ham said. “If we left that hog behind, he might bite somebody and poison them, and Monk would get sued.”

There was one more delay.

Doc Savage left the car suddenly. He went into the jail. Doc had seen Cedric, the Indian, sneaking in the back door of the jail. He cornered Cedric unexpectedly, and took the Indian's gun.

“Want some advice, Cedric?” Doc asked.

Cedric grinned sheepishly. “Good time for advice. Sure.”

Doc Savage talked to Cedric for a while.

The Indian nodded.

“Heap good advice,” he said. “Fine. Will do.”

Doc went out to the car, and drove away with Monk and the others.

Chapter XI. THE ECCENTRIC MAN

IT was a wild mountainous road, and before long there wasn't much of any road at all. Alarmed time after time, everyone but Doc piled out of the car while they passed some spot where it appeared they certainly would not make it. Doc drove.

The hair-raising road was actually on the roadbed of a narrow-gauge railway which had been abandoned, probably, forty years ago. Rails and ties were gone. The grade nowhere was very steep; the narrow-gauge road had cost a lot to build. In many places it had been wiped out by landslides and washouts. It was at these points that their hair stood on end.

There was much talk about the various aspects of the affair as it had developed this far.

Doc started the talking. The others realized the bronze man wanted the sheriff to listen to them and understand the whole thing clearly. So everyone spoke freely.

Sheriff Brander at first did nothing but grunt and snort to show that he didn't believe anything. The rest of the time, he scowled at Monk, who was wearing the sheriff's two ornate six-shooters with much swagger.

But the sheriff showed more interest as he listened.

Ham Brooks said, “There is a logical and sensible explanation. I am sure of that.”

Park, more skeptical, said, “I don't see anything logical or sensible about those little green men. Especially after I heard Cedric say that there was a legendary Pocopoco who resembled such a small green man.”

Attorney Martha Colby frowned at Park. “You do not believe such a thing?” She sounded as if she doubted Park's good sense.

“Of course not,” said Park. “I just said I don't see anything logical or sensible about it.”

Ham told them, “Don't misunderstand me. I do not see the answer yet. But I do believe there is one, and it won't be anything as wild as it appears to be.”

Park frowned at the lawyer. “On what do you base such a statement?”

“Too many men,” said Ham, “involved in it. The men who seized Martha and Park, the men who tried to blow up Mrs. Smith's house, the men at the abandoned ranch, the men at the tourist camp. That's a lot of men and—”

“Some of them were the same men,” Park interrupted. “The gang who grabbed Martha and me in the truck were the same ones who tried to blow up Mrs. Smith's house. Then they turned up at the ranch and the tourist camp with some others.”

“But,” said Ham, “they all added up to quite a gang.”

“That's right,” Park admitted.

“My point,” Ham insisted, “is this: That many men wouldn't be involved in anything too fantastic. They're the kind of men who would only understand dollars and cents gain. They're hired thugs. You got a good look at them. Draft dodgers and crooks, all of them. Men like that don't work for legends, or for ideals. They only work for dollars. Therefore, when we find what makes this thing tick, we'll find out that it's a lot of dollars.”

Monk muttered, “What I want to know is all about them little green men.” He scowled. “Somebody kindly explain them to me.”

No one had a word of explanation to offer about the small green men.

“What about you?” Monk asked William Wide. “You carried them around in a box.”

The fat man licked his lips. “I have told you I did not know what was in the box.”

“How heavy was it?”

“The box? Not very heavy.”

The car followed the narrow road in silence. Doc Savage, after starting the conversation, had taken little part in it. The driving required most of his attention, and he watched the sharp mountain slopes around them.

Parker O'Donnel grunted explosively.

“This is my twenty-fifth birthday,” he said. “I wonder if that has anything to do with it?”

“Or the unusual will Park's father left,” Martha contributed.

No one had any ideas.

“If you people are telling the truth,” said Sheriff Brander unexpectedly, “this thing is too crazy for me.”

DOC stopped the car suddenly. He got out and examined a sandy section of the road where tracks and hoofprints were plainly retained. The sand was damp due to a spring seepage, and it held the characteristics of tire prints almost as well as plaster.

“How far,” he asked, “to Tom Brock's place?”

“Three miles or so,” said fat William Wide.

“Two miles,” interrupted Sheriff Brander. “Not more than that.”

The fat man began, “Really, sheriff, I think I—”

“Shut up,” said Brander. “I grew up in a cabin in that ghost town where old Tom Brock lives. I know the place.” He scowled at the fat man. “I'll bet I know more about the place than you know about your own feet.”

Doc Savage said, “All of you had best wait here, or the nearest spot where we can hide the car.” He got

in the machine and drove possibly a quarter of a mile, then pulled off on a flat covered with high mountain grass. He stopped the car among some willows. “This will do,” he said.

The sheriff scowled. “What's the idea?”

“The truck,” Doc said, “that carried most of the gang who has been giving us trouble, is ahead of us.”

“How you know it is ahead?”

“Tire tracks. The way the sand particles are thrown show the direction the truck was going. And, too, the rear tire prints are the same prints that showed back at the tourist camp.”

“This road,” said Sheriff Brander, “don't lead nowhere but to old Tom Brock's ghost town.”

“The more reason,” Doc said, “for one man going ahead and looking over the situation.”

DOC SAVAGE did not follow the road. He did not even take the same direction, in leaving the others, which the road took. He went back the way they had come, then climbed up the sharp uplift of the mountainside.

He kept a close watch on the road, on the mountainside, as much of it as he could see. He traveled rapidly, watching the footing.

The valley turned abruptly, widened out, and there was an unsightly sprawling collection of weather-beaten cabins and unpainted frame buildings.

The ghost town. It had been built on a single street which followed the small rushing stream that had made the valley.

The place had been a gold mining center. Placer mining for the most part, as was shown by the remains of a flume or a sluice box here and there. Now everything was overgrown with brush, and the stream ran clear and clean, undarkened by placer tailings.

Doc watched the ghost town for a while. Then he went down, moving cautiously. He had spotted the one two-storied structure with an ancient sign that said “SALOON.” That was supposed to be Tom Brock's dwelling.

Reaching the building was easy. The brush grew thick and enormous. Even the weeds were higher than a man's head.

The building, although two-storied, was made of logs. Doc lay beside it for a while, listening. Then he lifted cautiously and looked in a window. Disturbed houseflies buzzed away.

The one large room had a bar and tables and chairs, all very old. There was a piano at the far end, and a small stage with a canvas curtain on which, with paint curling, was a picture of a young woman of the gay nineties in a ruffled outfit of tights that were more revealing than some of the dresses worn by modern girls.

A man, a long, leathery old man with a rifle, was looking out of another window. He was, Doc decided, Tom Brock. And he was uneasy in a tight, restrained way.

Tom Brock went to another window, and watched from it for a while. It was evident that he was keeping a lookout from each of the windows in succession.

Doc removed the laces from his shoes, then tied them together, making one long string. To the end of the string he tied a stone that was somewhat smaller than a baseball.

He moved away from the window a few yards, then stood very close to the side of the cabin, so that the old man, when looking out of the window, could not see him.

He waited. He wrapped his handkerchief around his right hand. The flies which he had disturbed returned to the window.

The houseflies were around all the windows. At this season of the year, the flies were thick around any human habitation here in the mountains.

Doc watched the flies, and when they flew away from the window in a frightened flurry, he knew that the man had come to that window on the inside, and was looking out.

The bronze man spun the rock on the string, swung it around and around. His job was to get it over the roof of the cabin, beyond the ridge, on to the other side of the cabin, or the other slope of the roof. And he could not step out far enough to throw it over the roof without being seen from the window. Swinging the rock on the string, he got it done.

The instant he let go the rock, Doc moved. He reached the window a moment after the rock hit the roof on the other side.

The noise served its purpose. It alarmed the old man, caused him to wheel.

Doc smashed through the pane of glass with his handkerchief-protected hand and got the old man's rifle arm.

THERE was not much of a scuffle. Doc twisted the man's arm, got the rifle to drop, then seized the man's right thumb with his own thumb between the other's thumb and forefinger, fingers under the palm of the man's hand. He twisted, had luck, and got the thumb hold that he wanted. The man inside, pain bringing him around until his back was to the window, squawked in agony.

(This is a judo grip and, like so many judo holds, almost impossible to describe clearly with words. It is simple, one that is not easily applied, however, but extremely efficient, slight pressure holding the victim agonized and helpless. It functions on the basic principle that both thumb and wrist are very sensitive to too much bending *in the same direction they normally bend.)*

Doc knocked the sash out of the window with several blows of his left hand, brushed away the glass, and climbed inside. He put his foot on the rifle and released the man.

Tom Brock backed away. He rubbed his thumb and wrist, staring at Doc Savage.

The bronze man listened, but heard nothing to indicate anyone else was in the building, or that anyone had seen what had happened, or been alarmed by it.

“Tom Brock?” he asked.

“That's right,” the old man said.

“I wanted,” Doc said, “to talk to you about some small green men.”

Tom Brock's leathery face twisted quickly in a derisive, unbelieving grin. There was no humor in the grin.

It was more grimace.

If he had grinned that way to hide any other expression that might have come over his face, he was a good actor. And not slow to think, either.

“So you're him,” Tom Brock said.

“Who?”

“That crazy sheepherder I heard had took to the mountains,” said Brock.

“That is evading,” Doc said.

“Ain't evading nothing.” The leathery old fellow frowned at Doc. “You don't look like a sheepherder, I'll admit.”

“My name,” Doc said, “is Savage. Doc Savage.”

“Supposed to mean something to me?”

“Not necessarily,” Doc admitted. “But I happen to be endeavoring to help a young man named Parker O'Donnel, whose father was Sandy O'Donnel.”

Tom Brock watched the bronze man. If what Doc had said meant anything to Brock, he did not show it. “Sandy was my partner,” he said. “Died a long time ago.”

“Today,” Doc said, “or yesterday, rather, was young Park O'Donnel's twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Was, eh?”

“Mean anything to you?”

“Might.”

Doc said, “It might help clarify things if you told me what is behind the whole thing.”

“Ain't figuring on doing that,” Tom Brock said briefly. “Sure ain't.”

“Park O'Donnel,” Doc said, “found out on his twenty-fifth birthday that his father had left a will. According to the terms of the will, Park was to have a guardian.”

“Good idea,” snapped Tom Brock. “Sandy O'Donnel didn't have a lick of sense and his son is probably like him. Sandy O'Donnel was the only man I ever met who was crazier than I am. That was going some. Guardian was a good idea.”

Doc continued:

“The second part of the will directed that Park be brought to you, and receive a good talking to.”

“Nice idea. I could tell him some things.” Old Tom Brock looked pleased.

“Tell him what things?”

Brock creased his leathery wrinkles in a grin. “Look here, feller. I'm going to tell you something, instead.”

“Tell me what?”

“That I'm all fixed for you fellers,” Brock snapped. “You can't do a thing to me and get away with it.”

“You are mistaken. We are not—”

“Watch this!” Brock interrupted.

He seemed to do nothing but bring his heel—he was wearing high-heeled cowboy boots—down on a loose knot in the floor. But the knot depressed. It was obviously a pushbutton. There was an immediate whirring of mechanism.

Doc glanced in the direction of the other windows, the doors. There were knots there, too.

Overhead, in four different places around the room, planks had dropped down in the ceiling. The opening of these small trapdoors let down a shower of little green men.

IT was not a very big shower of small green men. Two from behind each trapdoor, eight in all. They were almost identical in size and appearance. There was nothing to mark them from the other small green horrors which had burned three men to death already.

They did not fall to the floor. They settled. Settled slowly, lightly, and two of them did not even touch the floor, but hung in the air lazily for a while, then lifted up again, and rested gently against the ceiling.

Old Tom Brock looked at the two which had rebelled and gone back to the ceiling.

“Damn!” he said.

He sounded utterly disgusted.

The other small green men, the remaining six, touched the floor. They bobbed about, began to move around the room.

Tom Brock wheeled and looked at Doc Savage. “Now, you see what you got into!” he yelled.

But when Doc said nothing, and did not look disturbed, only curious and interested, Tom Brock's face lost its fierce and desperate expression. The wrinkles in his face changed their shape slowly as he became startled.

“Hell!” Brock said. “Hell's bells! You don't know what they are, do you?”

Doc Savage's voice was composed.

“On the contrary, they seem to be exactly what I thought they were,” he said. “But that does not make them less interesting. They are remarkable. One of the most remarkable pieces of work I ever saw.”

Brock shouted, “You aren't afraid of them!”

“I am in no more danger from them than you are,” Doc said.

The small green men were not very active. Two of them were not moving at all. Another stirred lazily, came in Doc Savage's direction, but not to him. The little green thing passed about two yards away, seemed to grow tired, and stopped.

Old Tom Brock groaned.

“Brother,” he said, “I've made a hell of a big mistake about you. It begins to look like you might be a friend, after all.”

Chapter XII. THE DEVILS DINNER

THE group Doc Savage had left behind with the car—Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Parker O'Donnel, Attorney Martha Colby, William Wide and Sheriff Brander—were having a sociable wait. They were not quarreling. It was the first time they had been alone with time on their hands without getting into a fuss.

Everybody was on his good behavior trying to convince Sheriff Brander that they were misunderstood, that Park and Martha were two innocent people on whom an unexpected murder attempt had been made, and that the whole thing had gone on from there.

If Sheriff Brander actually believed what they were telling him, he was not admitting it. He was not, however, calling them liars. He was not, in fact, saying anything about what he believed.

William Wide sighed and said, “Gentlemen, I do not think we can tell this officer of the law anything that will fully convince him.”

“We're wearing him down,” Monk decided.

“Well, keep at it,” said Wide. “Me, I am about to collapse from lack of sleep. A fat man needs much sleep. I got none last night. I think I shall take a nap.”

He went over behind a nearby stone, in the shade, and lay down. The rock he had picked was the size of a truck, but they could see his feet sticking out, and very shortly, the snoring of a fat man.

“Hey!” Park called. “Stop the bugling! If these guys we're trailing don't hear you, that noise will call an elk, or something.”

Everybody laughed, and the fat man stopped snoring. They went on arguing quietly with the sheriff.

The fat man, William Wide, had not gone to sleep, and his snoring had been part of an act. He turned over a time or two. He carefully pulled one foot out of sight of the others. Later he withdrew the second foot.

Wide got up then, and ran. He traveled fast, and for a fat man, most silently. The noise of the little stream which rushed through the canyon helped cover such sounds as he accidentally made.

He kept under cover. Later, he got down on the road where the going was easier, and sprinted. He began to puff. He shed perspiration.

About a mile from the ghost town, he turned sharply off the road, and worked into a thin rocky crack of stone, where there was a spring and thick undergrowth.

He went to a cache.

The cache was hidden under stones, and consisted of a wooden packing box, rather long, in which there was a bundle wrapped in an old oiled slicker. Inside this, there was another wrapping of greased paper.

This bundle held two automatics, a revolver, a few sticks of dynamite, a fruit jar containing a paste that looked like corn-meal mush.

The fat man took the fruit jar and the revolver. There was also ammunition. He took some of that, left some, and loaded the revolver.

He hid the other stuff in the cache again, and ran back to where Monk and the others were waiting.

He got back of the big rock where he had been sleeping, ostensibly. He listened. Apparently his absence had not been discovered.

Ham and Monk were bragging about the abilities of their pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry. The two animals had been prowling around the vicinity at Monk's and Ham's direction, apparently, in search of anyone who might have been skulking in the neighborhood.

Wide burst out in a cold perspiration that was not caused by his running. Suppose the two animals had found him going or coming, and had given the alarm?

He took the revolver and the fruit jar in hand and stepped out from behind the rock.

MONK looked at him, said, “Have a good nap?”

Ham frowned. “Say, you're sweating! And you look kind of worked up.”

“Have a nightmare?” asked Park.

The fat man sucked in his breath and cleared his throat.

“Nightmare is right,” he said. “And it ain't over, either.” He showed them the muzzle of the revolver. “Believe me, I don't want to shoot you,” he said. “But I will.”

Monk jumped, but kept his hands away from the sheriff's two six-shooters, which he was wearing. Of the five of them, probably Sheriff Brander showed the least surprise.

Brander, in a quite calm tone, said, “Away we go again! Another whirl of the goofy wheel.”

“Wide!” Ham yelled. “What's the matter with you, you fool!”

“Don't move!” Wide snarled. “And quit shouting! Don't you know we are in deadly danger?”

“What do you want us to do?” Attorney Martha Colby asked.

“Sit very still,” said Wide. “I would disarm you if I dared. But I am afraid to take that chance. But do not grab for your weapon. I am an excellent shot, I assure you.”

Parker O'Donnel snorted grimly.

“You're a crook!” Park said. Park then told the others, “He is a crook! Wide is a crook! I told you he was!”

“You never told us anything of the kind, you delayed mastermind,” said Monk, who was irritated at being caught flat-footed by the fat man.

William Wide very carefully placed the fruit jar on the ground in front of them.

“Too bad we do not have a spoon,” he said. “But we can use that flat chip there for a spoon.”

“Spoon?” Ham said.

“You are going to eat.” The fat man indicated the jar with its contents which looked like corn-meal mush. “About the equivalent of three tablespoonfuls. Each of you take that much. Use the chip to measure it out in your hands, then eat it.”

Ham stared at the jar. “What is the stuff?”

“Never mind.”

“I won't eat it,” Ham said.

“You want to die of bullet poisoning?” the fat man asked.

Ham looked at the fat man. William Wide was wearing an expression somewhat similar to the one that had been on his face much earlier when, just by looking at Sheriff Brander, he had scared the officer.

“All right,” Ham said. “If it's not poison.”

“It's not poison,” said the fat man.

THE stuff was not bad. It wasn't good, either. But they had expected it to be terrible, poison or something, and so it wasn't bad. It had a strong chemical taste, like medicine. It was potent, and got worse with each mouthful. Three tablespoonfuls proved to be a lot.

“Keep it down,” warned the fat man. “Won't hurt you. Won't poison you, I mean. May make you feel kind of drunk.”

They finished eating.

William Wide was relieved. He calmly tossed the revolver on the ground.

“That's all,” he said.

Then, on a sudden afterthought, he scooped up the gun again quickly. “Don't want you getting the stuff out of your stomachs,” he said.

Everyone was looking a little sheepish, a feeling that came from not knowing what they had eaten. And also from the generally silly situation of a man forcing them to eat anything.

“I don't understand this,” Monk growled.

Sheriff Brander said, “Don't worry, homely boy, it's no more foolish than lots else that's happened in this mess.”

“You say,” Monk demanded of William Wide, “that it is not poison?”

“No.”

“What is it?”

“I've had it hidden,” said the fat man, “for three or four weeks. Had a cache down the road a piece. I got to thinking when I went over there to take a nap, and it occurred to me that I could get it, and I would make you eat it, and then everything would be all right.”

“What you mean—everything would be all right?”

“You will be safe.”

“Safe! Safe from what?”

“From the little green men,” said William Wide.

Sheriff Brander glared at the fat man and yelled, “This fat guy hasn't been telling us all he knew! I figured his story had phony angles! And now look at what's happened!”

“Ps-s-t!”

said Wide angrily. “Bellowing like a bull, you will attract attention—“

He went silent.

The pig, Habeas Corpus, had come snorting and pounding through the brush. The animal reached them. Monk sprang up in alarm, said, “The pig found somebody—”

The pig had, but it was now too late, because at least half a dozen men appeared at different points around them. The men were not close, but they did not need to be close because they had modern hunting rifles which would shoot through a foot or two of solid oak.

Some of the newcomers had been in the truck which had first kidnaped Park and Martha, and the others had been variously at the tourist camp and Mrs. Smith's house. They were the enemy.

“Nice of you,” one of them called, “to show us where you were with all that loud talking.”

They approached, keeping the rifles ready.

One of them seemed to be in charge, and he said, “Disarm them. And then we will go take care of Doc Savage and old Tom Brock and wind up this mess.”

Chapter XIII. HIGH ON A HILL

DOC SAVAGE had stood by and watched old Tom Brock recapture the small green men.

“You stay back,” warned Brock. “These things are all right as long as you don't touch them!”

Then he proceeded to touch them himself. But he did it carefully, and with a slender length of steel which he took from his pocket. There were nails and a pocketknife and a key chain stuck to the steel bar, so that he had to remove them, pulling them off the bar and placing them back in his pocket.

“Magnetized,” Doc said.

“That's right,” said the leathery old man. “Not ordinary steel, though. This is a crystallized type which has a very high capacity for permanent magnetism.”

He proceeded to work on the small green men, touching them in first one place then another.

Doc said, “The igniting mechanism locks magnetically.”

“That's right. Ingenious touch, don't you think?” Brock said. “The igniting mechanism works on contact, is very simple. Just a touch does it. Just a shade of a touch. The impact of the little green men against any

object, even an object like the leg of a pair of trousers, sets it off. And there is a little steel ball which the magnetic force pulls up in place and jams the igniter, so it is safe."

He proceeded to recapture one small green man, then another.

"Have to work them over a bit before I use them again," he said. "But I have plenty of them made up."

"Who," Doc asked, "molded the bodies?"

"Friend of mine."

"He did a good job."

"Sure did. Can't tell you his name because this may get him into trouble, although he didn't know what I was going to use the things for when I made them up." The old man grinned slyly at Doc Savage. "My friends made a business of designing odd-shaped carnival balloons for years, and making things of different shapes out of rubber. So he was good." He chuckled. "Good thing I got these made up before the rubber shortage."

Doc said, "The design and coloring is excellent."

Tom Brock recaptured another little green man and put him in a box which he brought from under the stage at the far end of the old barroom.

"Slick idea, using Pocopoco, wasn't it?" the old man said. "Or do you know about Pocopoco? Indians in these parts have a legend that he came out of the ground as a little green man, and the other Indians heckled him, and he became a great big Indian and chased them."

Doc said, "I had heard the legend of Pocopoco."

Brock worked over a green man with his magnet. "I've always liked that legend about Pocopoco. Fascinated me. Gave me the idea of making up these things in the shape of a little green man with a breechcloth and a great big smile."

Doc Savage said, "One of us should keep a watch from the windows, don't you think?"

"Good idea."

THE bronze man moved to a window. The afternoon—it was now late in the afternoon—was clear and bright. The mountain air had a crisp and a snap that was pleasant. Rushing and gurgling of the stream made an agreeable undertone.

Old Tom Brock said, "I've been working on this thing for almost three years."

"It obviously took time," Doc said. "And a good laboratory."

"Upstairs," Tom Brock said. "You should see the lab I got upstairs. There are two or three better, for general work, but for what I've been fooling around with, there just ain't its equal."

"No one," Doc said, "mentioned anything about your being an electro-chemist."

"Chemist. Straight chemist."

"Well, chemist, then. No one mentioned it."

Tom Brock looked at him. “You know, there's something about you that I like,” he told Doc. “I guess I might as well tell you. It may come out when they try me for murdering those guys, anyway. That's what they'll call it, murder.”

“Possibly,” Doc Savage admitted.

“Well, here's my secret. I'm known as an eccentric old goof of a fellow who lives here in the mountains. But twenty-five years ago, I was a doctor. I was a big-time one. I was one of the first who did any specializing in electrical therapy and X rays.”

Doc Savage, for the first time showing emotion, looked startled. He examined the other. “When I first saw you,” the bronze man said, “there was something vaguely familiar. You were Dr. C. Pembrock Thomas.”

Tom Brock winced. “That's right. You're a doctor yourself, so you would know that. Doc Savage. I've heard of you all right, even if I did say I hadn't. But I don't know much about your work. You've come along since my time, and I don't pay any attention to medicine any more. You know why.”

Doc nodded. He did know. He knew simply because some of this old man's early work in electrical therapy had been so good that it was still studied by modern doctors. And that was saying something, considering how fast the field of electrical therapy was changing.

The end of C. Pembrock Thomas' career as a doctor had been caused by a simple and sordid thing. A fight over a woman. He had shot a man. At the trial, it had been proved fully that he shot in self-defense. But C. Pembrock Thomas had given up his career and disappeared.

Because the bullet he had fired at the other man had accidentally killed the girl with whom he was in love.

TOM BROCK captured the last of the little green men. He put it in a case.

“A wonderful job my carnival friend did on them,” he said. “Even as close as a few feet, in daylight, you can hardly tell they are nothing more than little rubber balloons in the shape of Pocopoco.”

He looked at Doc eagerly. “You can see what a wonderful military weapon they would be. That is what I intended them for.” He grinned. “A devil-chaser, de luxe.”

Doc did not seem impressed. “Is it practical?”

“More practical than a lot of the gadgets I hear you use.”

“That,” Doc reminded him, “is a different proposition. My gadgets are specifically designed for my own use, and most of them in the hands of the average user would be useless, particularly if they were intended to cope with conventional situations.”

“This will work.”

“That has been demonstrated. But how about the method of making some persons attract the little green men—although in the case of military use, you would just employ balloons—while other men do not attract them.”

Brock winced.

“That,” he admitted, “is the hitch.”

“Suppose,” Doc said “you explain it in simple terms.”

Brock stowed the cases containing the small green men under the stage. He locked the trapdoor and pocketed the key.

“I found two chemicals,” he explained, “which, even in small quantities, would attract each other for a distance of ten or twelve feet. Two chemical mixtures, rather. The effect is something like magnetism. In fact, I think it is magnetism, although there is no metal involved, and this magnetism is not affected by an ordinary magnet of the electromagnet type.

“One mixture of chemicals is a gas, which happens to be lighter than air, and also violently inflammable when air reaches it. It burns with almost the heat of thermite for a few moments, and will make quite a mess of a man.

“The other chemical,” he continued, “if a man takes it as food, or in food or water, will remain in his body some time. It is absorbed by the body tissue—and it will still attract the other mixture, the gas. In fact, spread out through a man's body, the attraction seems to be greater.”

He spread his hands elaborately. “You can see,” he said, “what a military weapon it would be. Feed the enemy the stuff which makes their bodies attract the other mixture, then release a lot of balloons, such as these little green men. The moment an enemy comes within ten or twelve feet of a balloon, he is finished.”

Doc said, “A man can outrun them.”

“Not at night. He wouldn't see them in the dark.”

Doc said skeptically, “Under the right conditions, it would work. But a war weapon has to be a little more practical, does it not?”

Brock looked slightly indignant.

“Feed a man some of one chemical,” he said, “then fill a balloon with the inflammable gas, and turn the balloon loose.”

“Just how,” Doc said, “would you feed the enemy the chemical?”

“You're too damned practical!” Brock yelled. “Everybody is so damned practical.”

“Their water supply?” Doc asked.

Brock nodded. “That's what I'm working on. That's the hitch. You have to have quite a lot of the chemical the way I have it now—at least three spoonfuls—in your body before the thing will work. I've got to find another chemical, a minute quantity of which will function. Odorless, colorless and tasteless. Yes, water supply, or food. Saboteurs could plant it in the enemy water supply or food supply. Think what a supply put in a few of their flour mills would do.”

Doc Savage was silent for a while.

“What,” he asked, “about young Parker O'Donnel?”

TOM BROCK picked up his rifle. Doc Savage made no effort to prevent him doing so.

“That is the other part of the story,” Brock said. “Come on. I'll show you what's behind that part of it.”

Brock got a case from a spot where he had it concealed behind the bar. “Fresh little green man,” he explained. “The igniters are all set on this one.”

They went outdoors, via a window. They took cover in the brush, used a great deal of caution, but saw no one, and crossed the creek.

They waded the rushing mountain stream. The water was very cold, hard with its swiftness, and pulled at them like an animal.

Once across it, they began to climb the mountain.

“What I'm going to show you,” Brock said, “was found twenty-one years ago by Sandy O'Donnel, Park's father.”

Brock found a trail, evidently once a burro trail, but long disused.

“Sandy was a good mining man,” Brock added. “He prospected the deposit thoroughly. There isn't much of it. That is, there wasn't enough to pay to build a railroad in here and put in the kind of a plant that would be needed.”

He grimaced. “Back in those days, any kind of an ore deposit needed to be worth umpteen million dollars before it was worth working. And this wasn't worth that kind of money—in those days. But now it is.”

Brock slipped. He would have fallen had Doc not caught his arm.

“Getting decrepit,” Brock muttered.

He did not seem embarrassed. They continued to climb. The burro trail got poorer, and was washed out in many places.

“Sandy O'Donnel was a wild young man,” said Tom Brock, resuming his explanations. “So he decided that his son, Park, wouldn't be fit to inherit this property until he was twenty-five years old, instead of twenty-one. And because old Sandy remembered his wild youth, he figured his son might not have any sense then, so he arranged for Lawyer Colby to appoint a guardian for Park on his twenty-fifth birthday.”

They left the burro trail, turning sharply, climbing.

Brock added, “Park was twenty-five years old yesterday.”

“That,” Doc suggested, “set off this mess.”

“Yeah,” Brock agreed. “But the mess got stewing several weeks ago.”

The going got very steep. Brock needed all his breath for climbing, did not talk for a while. In order to quicken their progress, Doc took the box which contained the little green man.

They came to easier going, and Brock said, “I got drunk. I know it's a bad habit, but I'm an old dog and that's one of my tricks. I get pie-eyed periodically. Usually it's when I get to thinking about my past.”

He glanced at Doc.

“I got tight,” he said, “and I told all my guests about Sandy O'Donnel's legacy to his son when the son reached twenty-five, and I told them what the legacy was.”

He swore and kicked a rock. “That,” he said, “was my mistake.”

THEY reached an abandoned mine tunnel, a prospecting tunnel which slanted into the face of the mountain. Nearby stood the ruin of a log cabin, the sod roof of which had caved in, and even some of the logs had tumbled.

Old Tom Brock pointed at the tunnel and the cabin. “There used to be Sandy O'Donnel's claim,” he said. “He was looking for gold, of course. But it wasn't gold that he found. And what he found is up higher.”

“Much farther?” Doc asked.

“Not much farther,” the old man said.

They went on.

Doc asked, “Your guests started out to get Park's legacy for themselves? That it?”

Brock nodded. “That's it exactly. Of course, now with the war, the little deposit is danged near priceless.” He glanced at Doc. “Only one in the United States like it, far as I know.”

“How come,” Doc asked, “that you had such guests?”

Old Brock shrugged. “Because I'm a silly old coot, I reckon. Ordinary people don't interest me, somehow. The ordinary people around here are the nice ones. The ones I like are the unusual ones, and the only unusual ones you run on to in this neck of the wood are nuts and crooks. The unusual ones with good sense go to the cities and get rich.”

Doc made no comment. The old man's liking for unusual people was understandable. Many persons had the same failing, if it was a failing.

“What happened then?” the bronze man asked.

“Oh, my guests didn't fool me,” Brock said. “I realized something was going on, so I eavesdropped on them. And I heard that they intended to get rid of Park and me and grab the legacy for themselves. So I took me some measures.”

“What measures?”

The old man chuckled. “I fed them some of the chemical that attracts the gas. I was wanting to try out my new gadget anyway.”

“You,” Doc told him, “should have reported it to the police.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why didn't you?”

Brock shrugged. “Told you. Wanted to try out my new devil-chaser gadget.”

THE bronze man handled the case in which the small green man reposed with considerable care. Privately, he did not have too much confidence in the arrangement which held the rubber man in the box.

This was a hook at the top and another at the bottom, with the small man-shaped balloon stretched between them. Almost any contact would set the thing on fire. He had seen how terrific the blaze would be. There would not be much chance to escape it if it took a sudden notion to burn.

“Park O'Donnel awakened yesterday morning and found a small green man in his living room,” Doc said.

“I put it there,” Brock admitted. “I figured Park was in danger. I put the little man in the living room as a kind of a sentry. If one of the gang came in, the little man would take care of them.”

“The little man disappeared.”

“Didn't disappear,” Brock corrected. “When Park ran into the other room, I just reached in the window and took it out. Park didn't see me.”

“What about the man who got burned at the abandoned ranch?” Doc asked.

Tom Brock was silent. He looked distressed.

Doc added, “We trailed you to the ranch, in case you do not know. We even saw you release the balloon, or I did.”

Brock groaned. “I knew them devils had tried to kidnap Park and the girl, intending to kill them. Idea of men killing a girl just kinda made me loco. So I turned one of my little devil-chasers loose.”

“And at the tourist camp?”

“Same thing,” Brock admitted. “I was out after them, the whole gang. Like I say, the idea of a gang of men trying to kill a girl, just for what money—”

He stopped, grunted, and pointed. “This is the place. This is what old Sandy O'Donnel found some twenty-odd years ago, and left for the kid.” He moved forward and sank to his knees. “Here, I'll show you what it is.”

He began to lift stones and put them aside.

Doc said, “This is a mining property owned by the Sandy O'Donnel estate. That right?”

“Sure. Of course the estate owns it.”

“Then how,” Doc asked, “did your guests plan to take it over? Killing Park and you wouldn't give them the property, would it?”

Old Tom Brock stopped digging. He lifted his face. “You know, I've wondered about that,” he said.

DOC SAVAGE shoved Brock then, shoved him violently. And Doc fell down beside the old man.

A moment later, the first of a series of bullets arrived. They came first from above, then from the right, and again from the left. About a dozen shots in all. The lead knocked up rock dust and rock fragments and clipped leaves off the brush. But the slope was rocky, and Doc and the old man were safe enough from gunfire, if they kept down.

The shooting stopped.

They knew better than to move around until they had the riflemen spotted.

The mountainside on which they lay concealed had a slope of about forty-five degrees. That made it steep. Higher up, about a hundred yards away, there was a low cliff, but that was not high enough for a gunman to locate them from the top.

Doc asked, “Your guests knew about this spot?”

“Didn't think they did. But guess I was wrong.” Old Tom Brock's face, when he turned it toward Doc, was disgusted. “Hell, they must have watched me the last time I came up here, about two weeks ago.”

Doc said, “We are in a bad spot.”

“No, we ain't,” Brock grumbled. “Just kinda inconvenienced. We can crawl to a safe place.”

“You see that cliff up there?” Doc asked. “The chances are that they have dynamite behind it. If they have, there would not be a chance in a thousand of our escaping the rock slide the explosion would start.”

Brock snorted, started to say, “Heck, they ain't—”

But he was wrong. From somewhere farther up the slope, apparently beyond the cliff rim, a voice shouted down at them.

“This dynamite,” the speaker yelled, “is connected to an electric blasting detonator. It'll go off right now, if you move.”

Old Brock bellowed back at them. What he shouted was mostly profanity.

“You two fellers stay where you are!” the man above warned.

There was silence then. Doc Savage studied the sharp slope. The cliff, he decided, was closer than he had thought. The stone was of a type which would shatter under a blast. He knew the speed with which the rock avalanche would travel.

They didn't, he realized, have a chance of outrunning the rock fall, if the explosive was set off.

The man above bellowed at them again.

“We're gonna shoot four times,” he yelled. “Don't get excited. We won't be shooting at you. We'll be signaling some friends of ours.”

The four shots, coming from a revolver or pistol, barked out and sent sound crashing across the wide valley to the cliff's on the other side, and back again, in a violent orchestration.

Chapter XIV. THE SLIDE

GOBBLING and barking, the shot sound and echoes reached Park and Martha and Monk and the other prisoners, where they were being held in the brush beside the road.

They had been disarmed, searched thoroughly. More captors had appeared, until there were ten of them, all armed like Commandos.

The sheriff had even lost his ornate official star, the gaudy gold-inlaid affair with the pearl star points.

Sheriff Brander seemed to be more indignant about that than anything else. He spent most of his time glaring at the man who had taken it.

The shot echoes died away.

“Four times,” one of the men said. “Four shots. It's O. K. They got Savage and old Tom Brock up at the claim.”

A man nudged Ham Brooks with a rifle muzzle. “On your feet, pretty pants,” he said. “That signal was our cue to bring you in.”

“How'd they get Doc?” Ham demanded anxiously.

“Landslide rigged with dynamite, a trap,” the man said. “They've got him cornered where he can't move without they'll be able to get him.”

The prisoners were marched up the road. They made, with their captors, quite a cavalcade. Sixteen in all, counting the fat man, William Wide, who had not said a word.

As they walked, Monk nudged Wide in the ribs, demanded, “Why did you feed us that goo?”

A guard cocked a lever-action repeating rifle, pointed it at Monk, and said, “Shut up! If you think we won't shoot you, you're as simple as you look!”

Monk had sized up the guard, and he knew exactly what the man would do. The fellow would shoot. Monk was quiet after that.

They walked in silence. Once Sheriff Brander snarled, “A hundred twenty-five dollars, that star cost!”

Eventually they left the road, taking a path that lifted them up the mountain slope. The path rounded an angle in the valley, and the flat meadow was spread out below.

The ghost town looked forlorn on the meadow, like something that was lost. The evening sun sparkled on the surface of the rushing stream. Two eagles were circling in the distance, but these, and the innumerable grasshoppers everywhere, were the only signs of life for a while.

One of the guards put two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. He got an answer. Four sharp whistles.

“It's really O. K.,” the man said, grinning.

They traveled faster.

Then they saw the sharp rocky slope, the cliff above it. They were to the north of the spot, and in a position where they could see Doc Savage and Tom Brock, as well as the men who had them trapped.

Nothing was said until the two groups were in shouting distance of each other.

“You get them?” a man yelled down from the cliff rim.

“Yeah.”

“All of them?”

“Sure. Sheriff and everybody.”

“Wide, too?”

“He's here,” the guard shouted back. “What about Savage? And Brock? What do we do now?”

There was not an immediate reply. Apparently the man on the cliff rim was conferring with another man behind him.

THE conference lasted probably two minutes, after which the shouting started again. This time, it was directed at Doc Savage and Brock.

“Savage, Brock!” bellowed the man on the cliff. “We got a proposition for you. You're helpless. You can see that. You try to get away, and we can blow this cliff down on you before you can do anything.”

Doc called, “What is the deal?”

“You know about the little green men—know what they are?” the man demanded.

“Yes.”

“O. K. You know they need some more development before they're worth much as a military weapon. We want you to work on them. Develop the things. Then we'll let you go.”

“That,” Doc Savage shouted back, “is out of the question.”

“Hell, we'll let everybody go,” the man yelled. “You can save all their lives.”

“Nothing doing,” Doc shouted back.

What followed astonished and horrified Monk. Because Doc Savage and Tom Brock leaped from their places of concealment, and started a spring across the face of the cliff. They were trying to escape. They did not show themselves often enough to be shot at effectively. But what they were doing was no secret.

“They're escaping!” bellowed a guard.

The man ran back from the cliff rim. There was a pause, not more than ten seconds, while nothing happened.

Then with a great cough and a jump, the cliff sprang outward. The explosive charge was tremendous; there must have been half a dozen shots planted.

The whole surface of the cliff seemed to spring up and out. It went as a great solid body in the beginning. Then it began to come to pieces, and the larger chunks flew ahead of the smaller ones. Some of these big boulders seemed actually to reach Doc Savage and Tom Brock before they hit the sharp mountain slope and started rolling.

Doc Savage and Brock behaved strangely. They did not continue running the way they had first taken. They seemed to change their minds. They wheeled, raced back to where they had been.

Then the avalanche overtook them. The big stones first. Rocks the size of small houses. Then the smaller ones, the ones like trucks and automobiles and barrels and washtubs. After that, the pouring débris, although there was not much small stuff. Very little, considering the volume of the avalanche.

Doc and Brock were lost in the leaping, squirming river of stone.

The avalanche poured on, thunderously, bounding and squirming, upsetting trees, rubbing out whole thickets of trees that were forty feet in height. Scrubbing them off the slope as if they were grass.

A few of the larger rocks reached the stream, and one even bounded into the ghost town, and smashed down a rickety cabin.

Monk and the others said nothing. They couldn't speak. They were stupefied.

Chapter XV. THE GHOST

IT was probably five minutes before the avalanche stopped tumbling. The time seemed longer.

A man appeared on the cliff, and bellowed, “All right. Take the other prisoners down to the saloon.”

The prisoners, except for one incident, were like stunned sheep on the trip down the mountain slope to the ghost town. The one exception came when Ham Brooks, about halfway down, seemed suddenly to lose control. He yelled, and sprang at a man with a rifle.

Monk, seizing Ham, forced him down and held him kicking and struggling. “Cut it out,” Monk said hoarsely. “Stop it, Ham. They'll just shoot you.”

Ham subsided finally.

“Shucks,” Monk told him, “it's usually me who blows his top in a situation like this. What's the matter with you?”

Ham sat there, his face white. “They killed Doc,” he said. “We stood there and watched. There have been other times when we thought Doc was dead, but it wasn't like this. It didn't happen to him in front of our eyes.”

Monk, with difficulty, said, “Don't get yourself killed over it.”

During the rest of the trip down the mountain slope, Monk and Ham walked close together. There had been other times when dire misfortune had had this same effect on them, causing them to drop the pretense of a continual quarrel which they had carried on for years.

They reached the old building that was marked “SALOON.”

“Get inside,” a man said. “You sit down.”

The place was dark and clammy. It did not smell at all like a drinking place, and that was grotesque.

They sat at the tables. The prisoners sat at the tables rather, and the others stood around, grim-faced. Some of them talked loudly, made silly bets about what had happened to Doc Savage, and just how, or made remarks to or about Martha Colby. Some were just pale and silent.

Park O'Donnel, with difficulty, said, “I do not see why Mr. Savage did such an insane thing. He must have known he had no chance to escape.”

William Wide, the fat man, grunted and said, “I got it figured out. You know the men who had him cornered couldn't see him well enough to shoot at him. Well, he must have thought he could sneak clear. He forgot about our group being farther away, and being in a position where we could see everything he did.”

Sheriff Brander snorted. “Savage wasn't that dumb.”

Monk, looking at the two men fiercely, said, “Shut up! What is done is done, and let's don't mull over it and taste it.”

Everyone was silent.

Later half a dozen men came in. They were the men who had been on the cliff, who had done the blasting, who had killed Doc Savage.

The newcomers were not elated. One of them was suffering from a nervous collapse. He was having a giggling hysteria, a shrill and unnerving noise that was not very human and not at all sane. The hysterical man's name seemed to be Joe, and one of the others said, “We're going to have to shoot Joe, if he keeps on this way.”

A man asked, “Savage and Tom Brock are dead?”

“Sure.”

“Then,” the man said, “there is no chance of them going ahead and developing this little green man thing into a military weapon?”

“No chance at all.”

William Wide, the fat man, sighed loudly. He stepped away from the prisoners.

“I guess,” he said, “there is no need of me continuing the show any longer.”

Monk gave the fat man a pop-eyed stare. “So you're the brains behind it!”

“That's right,” Wide said, grinning. “I seem to have gone to a lot of trouble that wasn't necessary. You see, I wanted to keep from being suspected, and keep in touch with what you were doing. So I joined you. Neat, eh?”

Sheriff Brander glared at the fat man. “You crook!” he muttered. “I know now why I didn't like you at any time.”

SOMEHOW the thing was not yet at a dramatic peak in their minds. They knew, of course, they were going to be killed. There was not much hope of anything else. These men had made too many murder attempts, and had killed Doc Savage and Brock. They wouldn't stop now. They couldn't. There was nothing for them to do but wipe out the other prisoners.

But somehow the thing wasn't at its peak. The horror had not drawn out to its bitter end.

So it was a completely unexpected thing when Doc Savage popped into the saloon. Appearance of Doc would have been unexpected under any circumstances. But now, somehow, it was completely unreal.

The bronze man showed himself at the front door. He did not come inside.

Doc said, “The sheriff's posse has the place surrounded.”

The silence in the place was complete.

“You can see for yourselves,” Doc added, “if you care to look out of the windows.”

Still there was silence.

Then, quite suddenly, the pandemonium broke. Three bullets went through the spot where Doc had been standing. But at the first movement, Doc had flung himself back and to the side, outdoors. He got clear of the door. The log walls were thick enough to stop ordinary revolver bullets.

In Mayan, Doc shouted, “Get down on the floor and lie still!”

Monk and Ham flopped, pulling Park and Martha with them. Sheriff Brander, enraged, made a jump for the man who had stolen his ornate star.

Brander got hold of the man. He just took hold of him, and froze to him. He fell to the floor with the man, and after they were on the floor, Brander hardly moved. He was choking his victim. He was like a snake swallowing a mouse, in his intentness on his purpose.

Guns roared outside and glass blew out of the windows.

There was a posse around the place, all right.

Cedric, the Indian, seemed to be in charge of the posse, and he was yelling orders.

“Pick off all of them!” Cedric called. “Take your time. Get them through the windows.”

The fat man, Wide, barked, “Get upstairs!” to his men. “Get upstairs! Shoot from the windows!”

There was a rush for the stairway.

Almost immediately, Doc Savage saw old Tom Brock swing out of an upstairs window, hang by his hands, and drop. There was evidently a back way to the upstairs, and Brock had gone up that way.

“Brock!” Doc called. “What did you do upstairs?”

Brock said, “They won't have any luck up there!” and ran away from the building.

Doc, knowing what the old man must have done, lifted his voice in a shout of warning to Wide and his men.

“Don't go up!” Doc shouted to Wide. “Keep away from the upstairs!”

They paid no attention.

THE upstairs must have been shaded and dark, because one of the little green men balloons—Tom Brock had released nearly twenty of them, it developed later—touched one of the men and ignited before the fellow knew what was happening. By that time, most of the gang must have been upstairs.

Only five of them, in fact, escaped.

The dying of the others, burning, was not pleasant. In the screams and the flame and the heat, it was like the other deaths.

Probably no more than four or five were actually burned to death by the devices which Brock called his devil-chasers. The terrific flame and heat, of course, set the upper part of the saloon afire. The others

died in the smoke and fire that resulted.

Five got downstairs. The posse took them immediately. Cedric, who seemed to have a great armload of handcuffs stowed in all his pockets, handcuffed the captives. Then Cedric walked around foolishly, carrying the rest of the handcuffs.

“I brought too many,” Cedric kept saying.

Monk and Ham, Park and Martha, came out of the burning buildings. They had to go in and get Sheriff Brander. They dragged Brander out, and Brander kept hold of the man he was choking. They took the man away from Brander as if they were taking a rabbit away from a fat bulldog. The man lived. That made six who escaped.

The rest burned. Laboratory, men, everything, went up in flames. The store of little-green-men balloons popped and added to the burning heat.

MONK collared Doc Savage while the blaze was hottest.

“Doc, how did you and Brock escape that landslide?” the homely Monk demanded.

“Prospect hole.”

“Huh?”

“Years ago, when Sandy O'Donnel prospected the extent of the tin deposit, he dug vertical holes,” Doc explained. “We were standing by one of these when we were trapped. The hole was covered by timbers and rock, and Brock was in the act of uncovering one to show me the tin.”

“Oh,” Monk said. “You just crawled in the hole and let the slide go overhead?”

“That is right.”

Monk scratched his head. “Tin?”

“Yes.”

“How much tin?”

“Enough,” Doc said, “to be a great deal of help in this war, when we have no tin. But it is not a large deposit.”

“I didn't know,” Monk said, “that there was tin in this part of the country.”

“A freak deposit,” Doc said. “Like the diamond mine in Arkansas.”

Monk was puzzled by one more thing.

He went over and confronted the Indian with the handcuffs, Cedric.

“Cedric,” Monk said, “how the devil did you get out here so quick with your posse?”

“Heap Johnny-on-spot, eh?” said Cedric.

“Cut out that red-skinned Indian talk,” Monk growled. “You went to Yale, they tell me. How come you

got here?"

"Remember back at jail?"

"Sure."

"Remember Doc Savage came back in the jail after all of you had escaped?"

"Yeah."

"Doc told me you were coming here," Cedric explained. "Said he figured fat man, Wide, was head bad hombre. Said for us to follow and hang back until he signaled us to come in and clean up the mess."

"Oh."

Cedric looked at the flaming building. "Old Tom Brock went up and turned loose a lot of little Pocopocos," Cedric said. "Did all right, didn't he? A great little guy, that Pocopoco."

"Pocopoco nothing!" said Monk. "That was a fake. A gimmick made out of rubber and some new and unusual chemicals."

Cedric was indignant. "Go away, you unbeliever!" Cedric yelled. "Don't tell me there is no Pocopoco. All good Indians know better."

Monk walked off.

Cedric jangled his handcuffs and complained, "Brought too many handcuffs. Ain't that a hell of a note?"

THAT afternoon, in the sheriff's office, Sheriff Brander came in with an added bit of information. The six survivors were locked up in cells, and Brander had been questioning them. Judging from the howls coming from the cells, the sheriff was using his own methods, and still smarting a little from the theft of his ornate star.

"You all noticed something queer about this mess," said Brander. "I mean, we wondered why the fat man was trying to get the tin deposit, whereas he couldn't get it legally because it was in the O'Donnel estate."

Doc said, "That was a peculiar angle."

"He wasn't trying to get it," said Brander. "He was trying to keep the United States from having the benefit of the tin."

The sheriff then spread some documents on the desk. "Look," he added.

There were only two papers. But they indicated that William Wide had contacted a Japanese agent, and had received the sum of one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for his services in keeping the existence of the tin deposit secret until after the war.

Monk said, "That explains a lot of things."

A FEW moments later, Cedric the Indian, nudged Monk Mayfair. Monk was talking to pretty Martha Colby at the time. Monk had spent most of the day promoting himself with Martha, blatantly neglecting

his share of the clean-up work in order to make hay.

Cedric nudged Monk, said, “No Pocopoco, eh?”

“Of course not!” Monk snapped. “Go away, red man. Leave me alone.”

“What's that, then?” asked Cedric, pointing.

Monk wheeled. A small green man had come into the room. Even now, the little green man did not look as if he was made of rubber and filled with a new type of inflammable gas. Monk stared at the thing.

“Heck, that's just another balloon,” he told Cedric.

Cedric looked very innocent.

“Didn't fat man feed you some of chemical that attracts Pocopoco?” asked Cedric.

Two things dawned on Monk. First, it was true what Cedric said. Second, the small green man was heading for Monk.

Monk howled in terror. His howl frightened horses so that they broke away from the hitching rack in front of the post office two blocks away. Monk went out of the nearest window. He took most of the sash with him.

Cedric recovered the small green man.

“Souvenir,” said Cedric. “Tom Brock gave him to me. Heap fine souvenir, Pocopoco. This one harmless.”

Cedric went out, laughing at the joke he had pulled on Monk.

Pretty Attorney Martha Colby sighed. It was a small, distraught sigh. She accompanied it with a smile, which she directed at Parker O'Donnel.

“Park, I'm sorry I've been snappish with you,” Martha said. “I want you to forgive me.”

“Huh?” said Park, astonished. “Why this sudden change in heart? All along, you've been insinuating I was as nutty as a pet coon.”

Martha sighed again. “After being around this Monk and Ham,” she said, “I've changed my mind.”

Park grinned from ear to ear.

“Now that,” he said, “is the way a guardian should talk to her ward.”

They went out, arm in arm. Ham Brooks, disgusted, picked up an ash tray and threw it at Monk, who had come back and was cautiously peeking in the window.

THE END

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THE SECRET OF THE SU

What was it? Deep within the Everglades, the tremendous swampland of Florida, rested a strange secret; one that science had never even dreamed of. If it were true; if this thing could be gotten, it might save civilization. But if the wrong people got it, it would mean the end of the world as we know it!

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