SATAN BLACK

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I

The bronze man finally found a piece of rope. He had a worse time locating one than he had expected, and toward the last he searched with a haste that was near frenzy.

The rope was three-quarter-inch stuff about fifteen feet long, and it smelled of the anti-rust off the tools and the pipe. He found it on the fourth pipe-truck which he searched, although he had supposed there would be rope on every truck. Rope and chain were necessities on the big multi-ton pipe-trucks, one would think.

He clutched the rope, and he ran for the loaded pipe-truck that had broken an axle that afternoon. He ran desperately.

Early summer darkness lay over Arkansas, warm and amiable, and there was enough breeze to bring a slight odor, but not an unpleasant one, of the slough to the south.

The river was farther east. One couldn't say the river was a sound, but it was distinctly a presence and a fierce power. It wasn't a fierce-looking river. It was referred to more often as a ribbon of mud. Yet it was no ribbon, because a ribbon is something soft, something for a lady. This river was something for garfish that tasted of carrion, mud-cats, water-dogs; it was a repelling river, unlovely to look at and heart-breaking to deal with. It was a nasty, muddy, sulking presence in the eastern darkness.

The bronze man with his rope reached the pipe-truck with the snapped axle. He crawled under it. He knew exactly the spot he wanted, not under the truck itself, but under the pipe-trailer, beneath the mighty lengths of twenty-four-inch oil pipeline river-casing. This stuff wasn't the land casing, which was heavy enough; it was the special river casing.

The bronze man made himself a sling under the pipe. A hammock, a tight, snug little place to lie supported by the rope he'd been in such a wild haste to find. When he was done, and hauled up snug in the sling-hammock, one could look under the truck and not see him.

But if one happened to crawl under the truck, even partly under it, and poke around with a flashlight beam, he was sure to be seen. And once found, for a moment or two he would be helpless there. It was a good place to hide, but it wasn't a good place to be caught hiding. Not if one took into consideration the kind of a thing that was happening.

The bronze man lay very still. He coiled the end of the rope on his stomach. He wouldn't, he thought, care for more than half an hour of hanging like this. But it shouldn't take that long.

He listened to the night sounds, the crickets and the frogs and the owls, the rumbling of trucks in the distance, the heavy iron animal noises of bulldozers, the grinding of tripod-winches. The noises that go with the laying of a twenty-four-inch petroleum pipeline.

The noises sounded sharp and hearty enough. There was nothing sick-sounding about them, nothing at all.

There should have been.

SHORTLY another man came to the pipe-truck, coming idly, sauntering, pretending he was out for a walk. He was whistling softly so that no one would think he was trying to sneak or prowl. He reached the pipe-truck and leaned against the trailer duals and whistled. But he wasn't a good actor, and his whistling was unnatural.

The second man came more quietly. “Joe?” he said.

“Right.”

“Nice night.”

“Uh-huh,” Joe said.

“Got a flashlight?”

“What you want a flashlight for?”

“Want to take a look around.”

“I ain't got one. Pack'll have one. Pack carries one alla time.”

Pack came shortly. Another man was with him, a man called Dave. Pack said he had his flashlight. He said he'd look around.

“Want to see how bad that axle's broke,” Joe said.

He didn't want to see how bad the axle was broken. He couldn't see anyway, because a truck axle was

inside a housing, and anyway, if they broke, they broke. There wasn't such a thing as a bad break or a minor break. They just broke.

Joe put the flashlight beam into the pipe-truck cab. He put it under the truck, under the pipe, over the ground, around the wheels, in front of the truck, behind it, and he rammed the rod of light from the flash down each one of the load of twenty-four-inch river-weight pipes.

“Okay,” he said. “We got the place to ourselves.”

“That's why I put out the word for you to meet me here,” Pack said. “Nobody around. Nobody got any reason to come around. Anyhow, this won't take long.”

“Let's get it over with,” Joe said. “This is the night I'd set aside to catch up on my sleep.”

“Hell of a lot of sleep you'll get tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

Pack was chairman of the meeting. Pack was sharper, more suave than the others. Possibly he was a little smarter. But none of them were dumb; they weren't honest, and they weren't stupid.

Pack said, “Go take another look around, Joe. Here's the flashlight.”

“Dammit, we *took* a look around,” Joe complained, but he moved off with the flashlight.

Pack said, “You guys keep listening and watching that light of Joe's. You might see or hear something Joe would miss.”

“Say!” said the man called Dave. “What you trying to do, scare the hell out of us?”

Pack said, “I wouldn't want anybody to overhear this. Neither would you.”

“Why not?”

“Wait until Joe takes another look around.”

Joe had his look. He came back. He said, “Nobody around. Why so careful?”

“We got to kill a man,” Pack said. “And we've got to do it quick.”

NO one said anything, not a word. The heat lightning winked redly in the distance, and an owl hooted in the slough. Far away, somebody began beating a pipe with a sledge, making a dull bell-like rhythm. Joe coughed. He said, “Here, Pack, is your flashlight.” He wasn't casual. He wasn't even trying to be casual. He sounded about like any man would sound who had been told he was going to participate in a murder tonight. Startled, frightened, sick.

Pack said, “I don't like it either. But there's no other way out.”

No one answered him for a while. Then Dave said, “Let me say something right now: I've never killed a man. It'll take a damned good reason to make me kill a man. A mighty damned good reason.”

“You've got it,” Pack told him.

“I doubt that! By Heaven, I doubt that!” The fear in Dave's voice crawled like a snake.

There was a silence. Probably the others were thinking about the way Dave sounded, wondering if there would be as much gut-torn terror in their own voices if they spoke.

Pack cleared his throat. “You yellow-bellied son!” he said softly. “Lost your insides right out on the ground, haven't you?”

Dave breathed inward and outward deeply, audibly, the way a sick man breathes.

“Take it easy,” he said. “I'm all right.”

“You sure as hell don't sound all right.”

“I'm scared,” Dave said.

“How scared?”

“Skip it!” Dave said hoarsely. “Don't push me. I'm all right. Just don't push me, is all!”

Again silence, until Joe said uneasily, “Dave will be all right. I know Dave.”

Pack told Joe, “You'd better know him. You recommended him.”

“Listen, take it easy,” Joe pleaded.

Pack lit a cigarette. His hand shook, and he stared at the trembling hand. He grunted unpleasantly. “I'm jittery myself,” he said.

It was a diplomatic statement.

“That's what I mean,” Dave said eagerly. “I've got the jitters, is all. I didn't mean anything.”

Pack shook out the match. He grinned in the darkness. He had deliberately made his hand shake, for there was actually no tremor in him and no touch of uncertainty. He had long suspected Dave was weak, and a moment ago he had made certain. Dave's weakness would have to be dealt with, but this was no time for that. With his little shaking of hand and his false admission of fear, Pack had avoided doing anything about it now.

Pack deliberately held silence for a while, letting the other three stew. The cruelty in Pack was more than a streak; it was the big thing in his nature, and he enjoyed it the way some men enjoy strong drink, others a meal and others a woman. Finally he spoke.

“Jones,” he said. “The one they call Preach Jones. He's down in the paybook as Alvin Edgar Jones. Know him, any of you?”

The last question, did they know Jones?, was a master touch, a belt-punch.

“Jones!” Joe said hoarsely. “You mean it's Jones?”

“That's right.”

THEY knew Jones. One or another of them had had Preach Jones in his hair at some time, but it was startling to discover, out of a clear sky, that they were to murder him. Preach Jones was not an invested minister of the gospel, nor even a preacher at all, so far as any organized religious group was concerned.

He was merely a little man, with big soft eyes behind spectacles, who was always trying to carpenter other men's lives into a godly shape.

Oil pipeline construction is a hairy-chested job. This present Colbeck Construction Company project was no exception; tougher, if anything, because mostly there were old-timers on the job. The armed services had the young men. The fellows Colbeck Construction had hired were of the tough old school, from the days when pipe-joints were put together with threads, and tongued in place with brute sweat, when the men lived in tent camps and there were fights every night and a killing every week or so. The nice men, the engineers and the college products, were away fighting Japs and Germans.

Preach Jones was a saintly little nuisance with the ability to make you feel ashamed for saying a mouthful of cusswords. But he was nice. Somehow it inspired you to talk to him. You liked to talk to him; you found yourself telling him things that were close to your heart. He was a sympathetic listener.

Pack knew what the others were thinking.

“There is no other way out of it,” Pack told them grimly. “So don't start thinking up arguments.”

No one spoke.

Pack added, “The story is a long one, and we're not too sure of the details. All we know is that Preach Jones talked to Carl Boordling one time when Carl was sloppy drunk. You know how Carl was-when he got sloppy, he would get to thinking about his past, and it would scare him. Well, Jones happened to get hold of Carl, and out came the whole story.”

Pack paused for emphasis.

“There was enough in what Carl told Jones to hang all of us and wreck everything,” he added.

The fourth man whose name had not yet been used swore deeply and viciously. “Carl would do that! Damn a man who slops when he's drunk!”

Pack said, “Time is getting short. Jones is going to go along the hill road about nine o'clock. We can head him off there.”

“We haven't more than a half hour,” Joe said. “It's nearly eight-thirty.”

“That's right,” Pack agreed. “Joe, you and Dave will hide in the brush alongside the road. Guernsey, you stop Jones. I'll come up behind Jones and blackjack him. If he yells, Joe and Dave will close in quick. The idea is to get him without any noise, and get him out of there without hurting him too much. That's why I'll do the blackjacking myself. Don't any of you other guys hit him over the head or the heart. We don't want him killed.”

Far away, toward the river, a steamboat whistle sounded mournfully. The dogs on farms for miles around, as if they had been waiting for such an excuse, began yapping.

Pack finished, “We'll take Jones back in the hills a ways and have a talk with him. We've got to know how much he's told.”

There was another silence. Dave began to make his hard-breathing sounds again, deep and heavy, panting, as if the fear and nausea were animals in his chest over which he had no control. “Who-who-” Dave choked on the question, tried again with, “Who is going to-to-”

“We'll get to that,” Pack told him. “Killing a man is easy at the time. It's just the before and after that gets

your nanny."

"Take it easy, Dave," Joe said.

Pack turned away in the darkness. "Let's get going," he said. He spat.

Chapter II

THE bronze man slipped the knots in the rope which had held him against the pipe, concealed. He crawled out on the side of the pipe-truck where the moonshadows were thick, and for a few moments kneaded the places where the rope had cramped him. He crawled back under the truck and got the rope, so that no one would have his suspicions aroused by finding it there.

He set off for the so-called hill road. There was no mistaking the road. It swept in easy curves up to the crest of the mountain which overlooked the vastness of the lowlands where the river and the marshes and the farmlands stretched. Ten minutes should bring him to it.

The man he wanted now was Jones.

He had not learned much, hiding there. Not as much as he had expected to learn. Not enough, standing by itself, to repay him for the tedious sherlocking by which he had learned there was to be a meeting at the broken-down pipe-truck tonight.

He tossed the rope on to a parked cat tractor, left it there. It had served its purpose.

Jones. Jones was the man he needed now.

He had not heard of Jones before. As a matter of fact, he had heard very little about anything. The sum total of what he had known before was hardly more than he had learned by roping himself under the truck and eavesdropping. So he was glad to hear of Jones.

Jones was something tangible. Jones was a door. If the door could be opened it might reveal the entire mystery.

The bronze man began running. He ran lightly, for a large man, with a long muscular spring in his legs and an easy agility over logs and through the brush. It was not too dark to tell fairly well where the thickest undergrowth lay, and avoid it.

He knew where the ridge road lay. The first thing he had done, one of the first things he always did in a matter of this kind, was look over the vicinity. The things he noted were the roads, the buildings, the paths, the short-cuts, and whenever possible he learned by inquiry the local names and nicknames for those places.

He had not, as yet, introduced himself to anyone, or stated his purpose to anyone. No one, as far as he was aware, knew who he was or why he was here. He had told no one. He had been careful not to ask enough questions to seem suspicious.

He had been quiet and inconspicuous. He had observed. It wasn't an accident that he had watched Pack quite a lot. Pack was the one name he'd known when he came.

Pack's full name was Lowell Packard. He was a welder. What else he was wasn't certain yet. His name had merely been given the bronze man as a possible suspect.

Watching Pack, the bronze man had seen him contact the other four, one at a time, and make the arrangements for the meeting tonight. With the aid of very good binoculars and a not inconsiderable skill at lip-reading, the bronze man had learned that they would meet at the truck, and when.

Pack was acting, the bronze man suspected strongly, at the behest of someone else. But he didn't know who. Nor did he know how Pack had reached the higher-up.

The bronze man came to the ridge road. He reached it near the foot of the hill, a poor place to waylay anyone. He reasoned that Pack and the others would be in wait further up the road.

The road was graveled. There was almost no grader ditch. Weeds grew up out of the gravel beside the road, rank and uncut. He lay in the weeds, waiting.

It seemed he waited no time at all before he heard footsteps coming. He dared not lift his head, because the weeds weren't tall.

The footsteps came rapidly. Then they paused. They came rapidly again, and this haste was followed by another pause. It was an unnatural way to walk.

The bronze man took a chance and lifted his head. He could see a figure, only the outlines of it. But he saw enough to know that the person was agitated, and stopping to listen every few paces.

When the figure came abreast, the bronze man came up silently out of the weeds and seized the person. He knew he'd made an error, that he had hold of a woman, but it was too late then.

IMMEDIATELY he made a second error, when his impulse to be polite caused him to release the woman. He didn't quite release her. Just in time, he realized she had a gun in the waistband of her slacks.

She managed to draw the weapon, but he got hold of it. It was a revolver, a hammer model. He got his thumb-web between the hammer and the breech so the hammer could not fall. The hammer had a firing-spike on it which dug into his hand.

She said, “Jones, you fool! I'm Nola Morgan!”

The bronze man paid no attention, and kept working on her hand, not too roughly, until he had the gun. Just as he got it, she peeled his shin with a kick. She tried to run. He caught her.

Because he thought Jones might come along the road, and he still wanted to catch Jones, too, he hauled the woman off the road into the shadows.

“Take it easy.” He made his voice gentle, so as not to frighten her more.

She surprised him then.

“Jones!” she said. “Jones, what do you think you are pulling?”

So she thought he was Jones.

“Be still,” he said. “Listen for a minute.”

He wanted her to be quiet until Jones came along, then he would grab Jones, and it would straighten itself all out, he hoped.

“This is going to get you nothing but trouble, Jones,” she said.

“Shut up,” he ordered.

She said, “Don't tell me what to do!”

He startled her by holding his fist, huge and bronze, close to her nose. “Look, how would you like to be hit with that?” he demanded. He wanted silence urgently.

Unimpressed, she demanded, “What are you pulling?”

He didn't answer. She was speaking in a low voice, and he decided to take a chance on hearing Jones coming before Jones heard them.

He had no idea who this girl was, any more than he could tell what she looked like in the darkness. He decided to fish for information, and dropped in his hook by saying, “Isn't this what you expected to happen?”

“I'm not too surprised,” she said instantly.

“That's good.”

“Listen, I told you I would pay you for the truth about the misericord,” she said. “I will pay you. I'll even pay you more than I said.”

“Are you sure it is the right misericord?” the bronze man asked.

“It's the one Carl Boordling made in the penitentiary,” she said.

CARL BOORDLING? Who was Carl Boordling? The four men had mentioned him at their conference at the pipe-truck. Carl Boordling was the man who got sloppy in his cups and talked too much to Jones. Telling so much that the men felt they must now kill Jones because he had listened and was himself going to talk. The bronze man wished he knew more about Boordling.

“When was that?” he asked.

“Before he died,” she said.

“Oh, before Boordling died,” he said.

He was going slowly, picking his way, feeling.

Suddenly she demanded, “Was Boordling killed because of that misericord?”

“What makes you think that?”

“I don't know. Was he? Oh, I know the doctor at the penitentiary decided Boordling had committed suicide by drinking sodium sulphocyanate. They said he got it out of the chemical stock they used in the photographic class. But he could have been murdered, couldn't he?”

“Those penitentiary physicians are usually good men.”

“But this one didn't know what was going on.”

“Have you any proof?”

“That was one of the things you were going to give me, wasn't it?” she demanded.

He was cornered. She expected some kind of a direct answer. His mind raced, and he decided to try to evade the corner by putting her on the defensive again.

“We've got to be sure it is the same misericord,” he said.

“It is! It's the one Boordling gave me, along with that strange note.”

He said quickly, “What about the note? Let's see if it checks with what I know about it.”

He tried to keep any hint of groping out of his voice.

“Why do you want to know?” she demanded.

“I have to be sure.”

“Well, it's the right misericord-”

“The note. What did the note say?”

“The exact words were, 'This bloodthirsty looking trinket is not what it seems to be at all. It has a story to tell. Keep it, please, because it is not a gift, and it is important. You do not know me, so you can be sure this misericord isn't a gift. It is, incidentally, an exact copy of the one Napoleon Bonaparte owned. But that's not why I want you to keep it. Don't tell anyone about it, please.'“

The bronze man said, “That is a long note. You remember it quite well.”

“I should as many times as I've read it.”

“It sounds as if an educated man wrote it.”

“Boordling was educated. He was an engineer for some electrical company once, wasn't he?”

Up the road, higher on the hill, there was a struggle and a low outcry.

Jones! They had caught Jones up there.

THE bronze man was on his feet instantly. He gripped the young woman's arm and spoke to her with imperative haste.

“I'm not Jones!” he said. “They've caught Jones up there. They were lying in wait for him. They've got him. They're going to kill him. We've got to stop it. Now don't ask questions, and come with me.”

He didn't really expect her to comply, but he was pleased when she did.

“All right,” she said.

The bronze man left the road and headed for the sounds he had heard. The road mounted the hill in sweeping curves, and he was cutting across, saving time.

“Who are you?” the woman whispered.

“Quiet!” he said.

The going was fairly open. There was some buckbrush, a few redoaks, but mostly there was thick grass, sopping wet with dew. Such rock as there was was sandstone, and not very noisy when they stepped on it.

He heard sounds again. He gripped the girl's shoulder, pulling her to a stop, then down, whispering, “They're coming this way.”

They crouched there, and soon the four men-Pack, Dave, Joe, Guernsey-came stumbling past, dragging a fifth limp figure.

“I think he's dead,” Dave said. “Pack, I think you smashed his skull.”

“Oh, put him down. He's just knocked out,” Pack said. “Lay him down. This is as good a place as any to work on him.”

They let Jones drop loosely on the sod. Then they waited. They were breathing heavily. Pack struck a match and lit a cigarette, then said, “You might as well smoke if you want to. It'll be a minute.”

How frightened they were, and how dependent on Pack, was pitifully shown by the way all of them immediately lit cigarettes. Pack must have realized this, because he laughed.

Pack was the manager, the dominant force, as he said, “You did pretty good, Dave. I was worried about the way you were acting earlier.”

“I'll make it,” Dave said.

Suddenly there was a rushing, a scuffle, blows, grunts, a yell choked off. All was confusion for a moment. Then strained silence fell.

“Damn him!” Joe said. “He woke up and played possum and tried to get away.”

“I told you he wasn't bad hurt,” Pack said. Pack stood over Jones. “Jones, we'll kill you next time. You lay still and listen and answer questions, understand.”

JONES had a good voice. It still had melody and roundness in spite of the strain and terror in the man.

“Who-who are you?” he asked. “Say, are you Pack? You sound like Pack.”

“It's Pack,” Pack said.

“Whew! Gee whizz! I thought a bunch of hijackers had waylaid me. Let me up, fellows.”

Pack laughed, briefly and explosively. “Let him up, he says. Hear that? He thinks were playing. Like hell he does.”

Jones was silent for a moment. When he spoke, the little relief that had come into his voice was gone.

“What're you pulling on me?” he demanded uneasily.

“It's a case of *you* pulling something on *us,*” Pack said. “Isn't it?”

Jones didn't answer.

Pack said, “Where were you going just now? Up to the Morgan house on the hill, weren't you?”

“Of course,” Jones said. “What's wrong-”

“You're feeling pretty sassy,” Pack told him.

“Naturally, I resent-”

Pack, using a conversational tone, said, “Some guys never learn.”

There was a gasp, a moan, the moan more of mental than of physical agony. It was Jones, and after he moaned, he made various whimpering sounds of complete terror.

Pack said quietly, “Next time I'll put the knife in your guts and I don't mean maybe. Now I want straight talk out of you and no lip.”

In the darkness where they were crouched, listening, the girl Nola Morgan put her lips close to the bronze man's ear and whispered sickly, “They must have stabbed him.”

The bronze man said, “Sh-h-h,” softly. There was nothing they could do about it now. The stupid thing he had done was to wait until something like this happened. As much as he had dealt with men whose emotions were made erratic by excitement, he should have known Pack might suddenly wound or kill Jones.

Pack was saying, “You were going up that hill to talk to Nola Morgan.”

“I-I made a date with her,” Jones said hoarsely. “She is a very attractive girl, and I am very fond-”

Pack snorted. “You never met her in your life. You've seen her, probably. But never met her. We could tell that from the way you talked to her over the telephone.”

“You-telephone-?” Jones' voice had suddenly become as hollow as a voice could become.

Pack said, “We put a tap on your telephone line, brother. We've had a tap on it ever since we found out Carl Boordling unburdened himself to you when he was tight.”

“Oh!” Jones sounded sick. “You heard me trying to sell the information to Miss Morgan?”

“That's exactly what we heard. We were a little surprised at you, Jonesy. You're supposed to be a sanctimonious so-and-so, and it kind of upset us to hear you talking money to the Morgan girl the way you were talking it.”

Jones thought about it, evidently, for a while.

“Look, I'll drop the whole thing,” he offered.

“Now you're talking our language,” Pack told him. “Except for one thing: The story has already gotten around.”

“It couldn't!” Jones gasped. “I haven't told anybody.”

Pack grunted. He was pleased. There had been a kind of absolute truth in Jones' statement, a finality. He hadn't told anyone. A man as scared as Jones simply could not have gotten that much truth-sound into a lie.

“That's all, brother,” Pack said. He had the knife.

Chapter III

THE bronze man ran, then dived for Pack. He hadn't seen Pack's knife yet, could not even see in the murk what Pack was doing. But he knew enough from the man's tone.

He came down on Pack from the side, hitting the man, driving him down into the grass. He hit Pack on the side of the neck, partly on the jaw, and grasped Pack's knife arm and twisted it. He twisted to break the arm rather than get the knife, felt the padded snap as the bones, first the radius and then the ulna, broke. Pack screamed, as any man would scream, with the full rush of his lungs and his vocal cords making nothing but noise.

The bronze man clutched at Jones. Jones was moving. Jones was very scared. They hadn't tied him, and he wanted to get away from there.

Jones fought madly when he was seized.

“Stop it!” the bronze man said. “I'm helping you.”

Jones kept fighting. He fought now, more than he had before. The bronze man ran with him. Jones tried to trip him. The bronze man slugged Jones, using a short punch with his right hand.

The blow hit Jones on the throat, and for the next five minutes, Jones made a continuous series of gagging noises as he tried to get his paralyzed neck muscles to function.

A gun exploded, making a winking of reddish light and the thunderous amount of noise that a first shot from a gun always seems to make.

The bronze man shouted, “Close in! Get them! Arrest them!”

His voice had remarkable power. It was a trained voice, and he gave it all the volume he conveniently could, hoping to frighten the four men.

The yell might have had some effect. It was hard to tell. Certainly it didn't stop the shooting. There was more of that, a loud banging of guns and noise of bullets knocking about in the trees.

The bronze man reached the girl, “Run,” he said.

“I know these woods,” she said, in a much quieter voice than he expected. “This way.”

She led the route. She was fast for a girl, and because she seemed to know exactly where she was putting her feet with each step, she gave him a run for a quarter of a mile.

A few bullets followed them. Pack and his men could hear them, of course. But the trees were thick, the rocks big, and it was dark.

She was leading the route downhill.

“Don't you live on top of the hill?” the bronze man demanded.

“Yes. But that's exactly the way they'll expect us to go,” she said. “They might head us off.”

“They didn't know you were along,” he said.

She stopped. “They didn't, did they? That makes me feel foolish.”

“Better keep going.”

“Where are we going?”

“I have a trailer about a mile from here. That will do.”

THE bronze man had obtained the trailer his first day here. There had been difficulty about getting a house-trailer, because of the war-time scarcity. But he had insisted on the trailer, because it was the most inconspicuous way of living on this pipeline construction job. Most of the workmen lived in house-trailers. He had insisted, and he had gotten the trailer, but he was startled when it arrived. It was strictly a de luxe job, something that belonged in a Palm Beach trailer park instead of a rough and tough pipeline job. He had a suspicion that it might be making him noticeable.

Nola Morgan looked around the trailer and was impressed enough to say, “It's nice.”

So was she, the bronze man thought. He hadn't been expecting anyone like her. She was tall and smooth and golden. She had a flashing vitality, an aliveness, and no makeup. She wore slacks and a waist and a field jacket and a large handkerchief over her hair.

When he realized he was staring, he stopped it. He put Jones on the bed.

Jones was a round, fat, jolly-looking man. He looked like a cherub, a salesman in a bakery, a little fat Santa Claus in a department store. His pockets held a total of fourteen wooden pencils differing in color, size and length, a billfold containing twelve one-dollar bills, a draft card classification 1-A (H), a Bible, several religious tracts, and sales tax mill-tokens from Missouri and Kansas.

“Not very illuminating,” the bronze man said.

Nola Morgan had watched his searching of Jones. “Do you have a legal right to do that?” she demanded.

Her sharpness irritated him. “Is that important?” he said. He knew she did not trust him. It followed that she would not talk freely.

Jones was conscious. The last sound he had made had been the gagging and hacking as he tried to relieve his throat from the paralyzing effects of the blow with which the bronze man had silenced him during the rescue on the hill. He had not spoken since.

“Jones,” the bronze man said.

Jones stared at him. He stared fixedly, strangely. He did not speak.

“Want to talk to us about a misericord?” the bronze man asked.

Jones cleared his throat. “I think I know who you are.”

“Could be.”

“Yes, sir, there is not a bit of doubt in my mind about who you are. I've seen pictures of you. I've heard of you, too.”

“Want to talk freely?”

“No! No, I don't!” Jones closed his eyes for a moment, then shuddered. “The fact that you are here-a man of your consequence here, investigating, incognito-proves to me that this affair is a great deal more vast than I imagined. I do not want anything more to do with an affair of such enormity.” He looked steadily at the bronze man. “I haven't another word to say.”

“You're in pretty deep to back out.”

Jones nodded slightly. He shrugged. The gestures meant he'd made up his mind.

There was tape in the first-aid kit in the galley locker. The bronze man tore strips and sealed Jones' mouth, after making sure there was no impediment in his nasal passages which would keep him from breathing. He tied Jones with the clothesline, hand and foot.

Then he gestured to the girl that she was to go out side with him. She was puzzled, but she followed.

The darkness was still, musky. The heat lightning jumped with more liveliness in the distance. The night had settled down to a calm. The noises of the actual construction near the river were far away and peaceful.

“Why did you do that-tie him and leave him in there?” the girl demanded.

“They may follow us here. If they do, we had better be outside.”

“You think they will?” she asked, suddenly uneasy.

“Let's make sure.”

“What did he mean he recognized you?”

“He was possibly mistaken.”

“Oh, no, he wasn't!” she said sharply. “He recognized you. He said he'd seen your picture and heard of you. Who are you?”

“That doesn't matter,” he said.

“Who are you?” she asked sharply.

HE stood in the murk frowning and wishing he knew more about handling women. They mystified him as a class and invariably baffled him as individuals.

He had no intention of telling her who he was. He had taken infinite pains to conceal his identity.

He had even changed his personal appearance. His hair was different; this dull black was not its normal color. The muddy brown of his eyes was not normal, either. The change in eye-tint he had managed with plastic contact lenses which fitted directly against the eye. These were tinted. He had managed a stoop to look less tall and a slouching walk that was also a help. His skin was unchanged, because its natural deep bronze was too hard to change with dye. There was no skin dye that would stand up dependably under weather, wear, strong soaps and the gasoline or tetrachloride which pipeline workers used to get grease off their hands. It had been his intention to get a job in one of the pipe-line crews.

He said, “We have some time to talk now. Suppose you tell me a few things.”

“I asked who you are,” she said sharply. “Aren't you going to answer that?”

“No.”

“Don't expect anything out of me, then,” she said.

He said patiently, “If I knew more about you, who you are and what is your connection with the affair, I might feel free to tell you a great deal you do not know.”

“I'm not tempted,” she said. But she was intrigued by the idea that he might tell her much that she did not know. He could sense her interest. He knew also that she was trying to hide her interest, and this made him angry. He was playing games himself-but that didn't keep him from getting impatient.

He demanded, “What were you doing on that road tonight?”

Startled, she answered, “I wanted to make sure Jones came alone to talk to me. I hid at the foot of the hill road, where the road turns off the highway, to watch him go past. He went past alone. I waited long enough for him to get well ahead, then headed for the house to meet him. That was when you caught me.”

“Why was it important he come alone?”

“I was scared,” she said. “And if you think I am going to keep on talking to you without knowing who you-”

He gripped her shoulder, said hastily, imperatively, “Get down! Somebody's here!” He had heard a small sound from the darkness nearby.

“Who is it?” She sounded frightened.

“Wait here,” he whispered. “Keep down flat.”

THE bronze man crawled, a few inches at a time, in the direction of whatever it was he had heard. He came to a small ravine. He lay there, waiting, knowing he must be close to whoever had made the noise. As for the sound, he had decided it had been a man who had tried to sneeze and who had almost stifled it.

He was right. Close at hand, a man said in a low cautious voice, “God bless it, I'm going to have to sneeze again!”

“Rub your upper lip like the devil,” someone whispered. “That might help.”

After a while, the other said, “I think it's going to help.”

“It's these dang weeds growing around here, probably. I don't see the sense of waiting here in this ditch, anyhow. How much longer we gonna do this?”

“Until something happens, I guess.”

“Suppose nothing does?”

“In that case, the sheriff said to walk in and ask questions of whoever we found.”

“We're going to sound silly as hell, asking questions without knowing what to ask about.”

“You said it.”

“Did you hear this telephone call the sheriff got?”

“No, he took it himself. The sheriff doesn't excite easy, and this got him stirred up, so there must be something to it.”

“Man or woman on the phone?”

“That was a funny part of it. It was either a woman trying to sound like a man, or a man trying to sound like a woman, the sheriff said. He wasn't sure which.”

“Queer business.”

“Uh-huh. This party on the phone said there was going to be a murder around that trailer tonight, and to watch it. It was queer, all right.”

They lapsed into silence. In the distance, far away where they were beginning to put the pipeline across the river, men began beating a pipe with sledges. They beat the pipe with a regular mechanical cadence.

One of the men in the ditch complained, “I wish they'd get that damned pipeline built through here. There's been more stinking trouble since construction started.”

“It sure stirred up the Colbecks and the Morgans.”

“When old Erasmus Morgan was murdered, it stirred up a hornet's nest, all right.”

“You think Bill Colbeck killed Erasmus Morgan?”

“I doubt it. He had an alibi.”

“I know. But sometimes I wonder.”

“Listen, Colbeck isn't enough of a damned fool to kill a Morgan and open that old feud. Colbeck Construction Company is building this line, and it's going to go broke if this trouble keeps up.”

“It won't go broke as long as Art Strain is around to throw more money into the concern.”

The other deputy-the pair were obviously sheriff's deputies-chuckled. “That's quite a state of affairs. The general manager of a company furnishing money to keep it going.”

“Well, it's no skin off my nose, and all I wish is that the danged pipeline was built. I hear the army and navy needs the oil this line will take to the east coast. I hear it's what held up the invasion.”

There came from the trailer a noise that was neither scream nor words, but a little of each, with a gurgling overtone of death. Mostly it was a nasal noise, something a man would make through his nostrils alone, if his mouth was sealed. There was a complete, utter finality about the noise, a finished horror, an ending. The man who made that noise had died and you knew it.

The men from the sheriff's office piled out of the ditch, all but trampling the bronze man. The pair raced to the trailer, burst inside with flashlights in their hands. They cast the flashlight beams around.

“Oh, mother!” One of the deputies said suddenly, and he came to the trailer door and was sick at his

stomach.

The other deputy said, “It's that little fat guy named Jones. One of the pipeliners.” He whistled in wonder. “My God, they sure cut his throat from here to there.”

Chapter IV

THE bronze man listened for some sign from Nola Morgan, but none came. He watched the deputies throw their flashlight beams around suspiciously, saw the light hit the exact spot where he had left the girl. She wasn't there. She had gone, either of her own accord or under force.

One deputy started to dash off into the darkness. The other shouted, “Where you going, Sam?” Sam said he was going to catch the blankety-blank that used the knife.

The other deputy said, “You'll get an intestine shot out, too. Come back here, you fool. Let's use the telephone in here and call for help.”

“Is there a telephone in the trailer?”

“Sure.”

Sam came back and stood in the trailer door. He did not go inside, but stood in the door. After he had looked inside, he was sick again. He swore at his nausea.

“That knife on the floor; that's the one, ain't it?” he asked.

“Sure. It matches the other cutlery.”

The bronze man stiffened. The trailer, which was far more ornate than he had wanted, was equipped with silverware and cutlery in matching chrome and plastic. He had used the knives in cooking. His fingerprints would be on them.

Uneasiness began to crawl through his nerves. The men from the sheriff's office had been drawn here by an anonymous telephone call. They had been promised a murder. The murder had eventuated. Jones was dead, and the bronze man's knife had been used. There was reason to be scared.

The sheriff's man in the trailer was saying over the telephone, “Sure, sure, of course he was killed by whoever was living in the trailer. The guy who lives here came home a while ago and unlocked the place and went in. There was somebody with him, probably this Jones who got his throat cut.”

He paused to get a question from the other end of the wire.

“He's a big guy, if I remember,” he said. “Kind of a deeply tanned skin. Seems to have been around a lot, but not doing much of anything.”

The bronze man eased away. The neighborhood was no place for him to be caught.

What had happened to Nola Morgan he did not know. He did not think it was anything violent. And his conviction was that she was not in the neighborhood.

He went to the highway, reasoning that an alarm had not yet been broadcast, and began to run. He ran half a mile without slackening speed, and turned in at a private residence.

He had a car in the garage which he had rented at the private home. He had driven the car not at all since arriving in the vicinity, and he did not believe that anyone would connect the machine with him.

He drove west on the highway, then north about ten miles to a town of about six thousand. It was an old-fashioned town, a river town. He had looked the place over previously. It still had the old-fashioned brick pavement on the river bank with the big bollards and great rusting iron rings where the steamboats once tied up. Now it slept in the night.

The oldest hotel was still the best. A great old brick thing with a certain majesty in its dull red turrets and old-fashioned bric-a-brac.

He entered by a side door, waited in the shadows until the elevator operator and the night clerk had their attention on a pinball machine, and went upstairs.

He had a room which he'd gotten his first day in Arkansas. He let himself in, closed the door and went to the telephone.

He called Bill Colbeck and Arthur Strain and told them to come to his room immediately.

BILL COLBECK was a big man with a square, honest-John face. He had big bones and big muscles and an open-eyed look and a contagious grin and a big infectious donkey laugh. He made you think of cactus and sagebrush, drilling tools and wildcat oil wells.

He looked at the bronze man and said, “Who the devil are you? I don't know you.”

“Come in and sit down,” the bronze man said.

Bill Colbeck came in and sat with a leg cocked over the arm of a chair. He examined the bronze man curiously. “You're big enough,” he said. “The more a man looks at you, the bigger you get.”

“You own Colbeck Construction Company?” the bronze man said.

“That's the rumor.”

“Is it a stock company? Are there other stockholders?”

“Colbeck Construction is me,” Colbeck said. “My money and my blood and my tears, more of the last than anything.”

Arthur Strain arrived. He was as much a man for the luxury of the city as Colbeck was a man for the hard-bitten open places. His clothes were soft, his gestures were polished, his voice cultured.

“You telephoned me rather imperatively, I believe,” he said.

“Come in,” said the bronze man.

Bill Colbeck exclaimed, “So he got you out of bed too, Art! What goes on?”

“I have no idea.”

Colbeck nodded at the bronze man. “Did you ever see a bigger guy? I mean a bigger guy who didn't pack any fat?”

Arthur Strain smiled. He was a man whose manners did not permit him to comment on the appearance of another, unless in a complimentary tone. And he wasn't a man who would use compliments, except to his friends or for business reasons.

“Would you like to get along with whatever is on your mind?” Strain asked the bronze man. “After all, it's two o'clock in the morning, and we have a pipeline to build.”

Colbeck slapped a knee. “Sure, get going. I don't climb out of bed past midnight for everybody.” He sounded somewhat angry, as if he was wondering just what had persuaded him to get up anyway.

“Jones was murdered tonight,” the bronze man said.

HE dropped the remark casually, then watched their faces. He saw no emotions that should not normally have been shown, which could mean nothing, of course.

Anyway, he had their interest.

He said, “A large, modern pipeline is being constructed from the Mid-continent oil fields to the Atlantic Coast. The project is too enormous for a private concern, so the government is handling it. A number of different contracting firms received contracts to construct in total the various sections of the line. The Arkansas and southern Missouri section was awarded the Colbeck Construction Company, which you gentlemen represent in the capacity of owner and executive general manager.”

Bill Colbeck, who owned the company, showed his teeth slightly in something that wasn't quite a grin. “What's the childish word-picture of the situation for?” he demanded.

“That isn't all the picture,” the bronze man said. “The rest of it is this: The Colbeck Construction Company isn't delivering on its contracts. It is falling down. It is-”

“Damn you, don't tell me I'm falling down!” Bill Colbeck said. His face had suddenly darkened with rage.

“-is in the unenviable position of having failed to meet three of its forfeit dates on the contract,” the bronze man continued. “When the contract was let to Colbeck Construction for its share of the pipeline, it agreed to complete certain sections by certain dates, or forfeit penalty sums. Three times such penalties have been paid. As a matter of fact, none of the contracted sections have been finished on time.”

Bill Colbeck was livid with wrath. This contract penalty forfeiture was obviously a tender subject with him.

“What the hell business is it of yours?” he yelled. “If we never get done, it's no skin off your nose!”

“Bill!” admonished Arthur Strain. “Take it easy.”

“Easy, hell!” Colbeck shouted. “Who is this damned guy to come in here and call us out of bed in the middle of the night? What kind of fools are we to come down here and listen to his gas?”

“Bill, Bill!” Arthur Strain said sharply. “You sound like a fool!”

Bill Colbeck whirled on him and bellowed, “Who are you calling a fool? By God, general manager or not, someday I'm going to fire you off the job!”

Arthur Strain's mouth tightened downward at the corners, remained so for a moment. Then he smiled, and said, “Oh, keep your shirt on, Bill. If you could see the way you look, you'd laugh.”

Colbeck grunted. He did not apologize to Strain with words, but his manner conveyed that he was sorry for his loudness and his near-threats, and that he didn't really mean it.

“Who are you?” Colbeck demanded of the bronze man.

“This pipeline,” the bronze man said, “happens to be very important just now. The amount of fuel oil, aviation gasoline, plain gasoline, and other fuel this line will carry to the Atlantic Coast is controlling the progress of the war.”

Strain frowned at the bronze man. “Who are you? If this stuff you are telling us is straight, you must be somebody important.”

“That comes next,” the bronze man admitted.

He went to the window and pulled down the old-fashioned roller shade, pulled it down as far as it would go. At first, there seemed to be nothing rolled up in the shade. But he reached up behind the shade, and carefully pulled off an envelope of thin paper. The envelope had been colored carefully with ordinary crayon so that it was about the tint of the ancient shade-when the shade was pulled down, the envelope was not on the inside, but the outside, and it would take a sharp eye to discover it in the moment it whisked into view over the back side of the shade.

He handed the envelope to Bill Colbeck, who looked at the single sheet of onionskin inside.

“I'll be damned!” Colbeck blurted. He looked at Strain. “Art, we seem to rate important attention.”

“Who is he?” Strain demanded.

“Ever hear of Doc Savage?”

For a moment, Arthur Strain's face was very blank. Then he stood up quickly and put out a hand to the bronze man.

“This makes me feel somewhat foolish, Mr. Savage,” he said. “I'm glad to meet you.”

Bill Colbeck stared at the bronze man. “I suppose the War Department sent you down here?”

“That's right,” Doc Savage agreed.

“What the hell for?”

“To see why you aren't completing your part of the pipeline on time,” the bronze man said briefly. “And to see that progress improves.”

Colbeck scowled. “Simple as that, eh?”

COLBECK was sullen and angry. He had been talking crudely, but he wasn't a crude man. He was just taking pains to be somewhat insulting.

Doc Savage said, “Suppose you tell me how simple it is. Let's have your story.”

“Giving me orders now?” Colbeck asked sharply.

The bronze man gestured at the document. “Take another look at that. Next to the last paragraph.”

Colbeck said, “What the hell do I care what Washington writes on a piece of paper.” But he examined the document again. Apparently he had missed the indicated paragraph. Rereading it again, and understanding it, he looked sick.

“What's the matter, Bill?” Arthur Strain demanded.

“According to this, this Doc Savage can do just about what he wants to with this job-shut it down entirely, if he wishes.”

“Naturally,” Strain said.

“What do you mean, naturally?”

“No man of the caliber of Mr. Savage is going to appear on a job without authority. Bill, I'm afraid you're not awake to just who Mr. Savage is.”

Colbeck said uneasily, “Oh, I've heard of a Doc Savage vaguely, as a kind of international figure who has been mixed up in some kind of excitement a time or two.”

Strain laughed. “That sounds a bit like the little boy who looked at the elephant and said, 'Oh look, momma, a mouse.'“

Doc Savage asked, “Are you gentlemen willing to give me a summary of the situation here?”

Colbeck hesitated. Strain looked at Colbeck and waited, and then said, “Better tell him everything you know, Bill. You'll be glad of it later.”

Colbeck must have already made up his mind to speak freely, because he suddenly began disclosing information. After the first few words, he spoke in an easier voice.

“To understand the background of this trouble,” he said, “forget the war. Forget that this pipeline we're building is more vital to the war, and the future of America, right now than fifty battleships or a few thousand airplanes. Forget all that. Think of me as Bill Colbeck, a lad who came from a long line of Colbecks who have lived in this part of Arkansas since the days of Arkansas Post, the first settlement in Arkansas, long before the Louisiana Purchase. I'm Bill Colbeck, and I'm building a pipeline through Morgan country.”

“What has a Colbeck building a pipeline through Morgan country got to do with it?” Doc asked.

“That takes a little explanation,” Colbeck said. “Sit back and listen.”

COLBECK had a good deal of family pride, although he didn't look or talk like a man who would have. A confident, solid emphasis came into his tone when he spoke of his ancestors and their doings.

The Colbecks had come to Arkansas from England via Virginia, Kentucky and points between. Old great-great-Grandfather Hoit Colbeck had been assistant to the Territorial Governor when it belonged to the Missouri Territory, and had formed some of its earlier county organizations. He had also made an enemy of the first Morgan.

“The Morgans came in here from New England in 1815,” Colbeck said sourly. “They were snobs, but they were capable and they were aristocrats. Old Hoit Colbeck bought a slave from the Morgans and it turned out the slave had the plague and the Morgans knew it, or Hoit thought they did. Anyway, Andrew

Alstair Morgan and Hoit Colbeck had words, and Hoit shot and killed Andrew Alstair Morgan. A Morgan took up the quarrel by shooting at Hoit Colbeck and a Colbeck killed that Morgan. Then Morgans killed some Colbecks. It got worse and worse, and it got passed down from one generation to another. Colbeck kids were brought up to hate Morgans, and Morgan kids were brought up to hate Colbecks.

“In the Civil War, Colbecks fought on the North and Morgans on the South. And in 1868, in that fuss over whether Isaac Murphy was governor or not, Colbecks and Morgans were pitted against each other. The Colbecks were Republicans and the Morgans were rebels. It went on like that through the so-called gay nineties, and the World War and the boom and the depression. The Colbecks were New Dealers and the Morgans were old-line individualists, and they hated each other's guts and said so. Now and then, all through those years, a Colbeck or a Morgan would get killed by the other side.”

Colbeck stopped for a moment, staring at Doc Savage.

“Don't get the idea this is one of those mountaineer feuds,” he said.

Arthur Strain said dryly, “Anyway, the participants do not necessarily live in the mountains.”

That angered Colbeck. He shouted, “It's no hillbilly Hatfield-McCoy feud!”

Strain shrugged. “Skip it.”

Colbeck shoved out his jaw as if he wanted to say more, decided to drop the point, and wheeled back to Doc Savage.

“Take this pipeline contract. It goes through Morgan country. Through Morgan plantations. Through counties which have Morgan sheriffs and towns with Morgan mayors. Through Morgan farms and Morgan hills. Morgans to the right and to the left of you.” He scowled at the bronze man. “And that's not intended to be funny.”

“Take it easy, Bill,” Art Strain said.

Bill Colbeck sat on the edge of the bed. He stared soberly at the floor, and for a moment, when his belligerent attitude was relaxed, he seemed scared and tired. The change was brief, but it was a collapse; the tough go-getter sank for a moment, leaving a terrified, helpless man. But Colbeck immediately gripped his emotions and jammed them back into hiding.

He said, “The grandest Morgan of them all was old Erasmus Morgan. He was a great guy. Santa Claus had nothing on him. And I'm not kidding.

“Erasmus Morgan was the head Morgan, the president of the company, the shepherd of the flock, the first goose in the flight. He was their book of wisdom, and their example. And again let me say I'm not kidding, because old Erasmus Morgan was swell. I'm not being sarcastic. Erasmus Morgan was the leading citizen of Arkansas, for my money-for my money, the leading member of the human race.”

Arthur Strain said quietly, “Maybe you're laying it on a little thick, Bill. Old Morgan was okay. But he wasn't Jehovah and the seven angels.”

“He was for my money,” Colbeck said grimly.

For a moment, the terror crawled across Colbeck's face again.

“He was murdered,” Colbeck said. “And it looked for a while like it was going to get proved that I did

it.”

Chapter V

OUTSIDE in the street, a car passed. It was the first automobile that had gone by since they had been in the room, and it traveled rapidly.

Bill Colbeck had his face in his hands. He seemed to have run out of words.

Arthur Strain, speaking gently, began explaining about the death of Erasmus Morgan. Old Morgan had gone one night to a meeting of land-owners through whose property the pipeline was being constructed.

The meeting that night had been Erasmus Morgan's idea, and typical of his benevolence. It had been a get-together to compare notes, to insure that all the land-owners were getting an equal and fair damage payment. Pipelines had been known to pay one farmer fifty cents a rod damage and pay his neighbor twenty dollars a rod, and the land the same.

Colbeck Construction Company had been discussed and cussed at this meeting. It would have been at any meeting of Morgan majority. There had been no Morgan-Colbeck violence for a few years, but legends and talk last longer than a few years, so there had been some uncomplimentary talk about Colbecks.

Erasmus Morgan left the meeting in his car. He was very old, but he drove the car himself. He was found shot, in his charred car. The car had been run off the road, down an embankment, and apparently set afire. The fire had not consumed much, having died after the gasoline in the fuel tank was exhausted.

The bullet had been taken from Erasmus Morgan's body, and compared with the barrel flaws in a gun found nearby. This gun had fired the bullet. The gun belonged to Bill Colbeck.

Some of Bill Colbeck's fingerprints had been found on Erasmus Morgan's car.

Bill Colbeck looked up at this point in Strain's story.

“I didn't do it!” he growled. “It was the most beautiful frame you ever saw!”

“Bill was with me at the time the murder had to have been committed,” Arthur Strain said. “He was also with the governor of the state, the attorney-general, and some other big-wigs. We were at a dinner, and there was a poker game afterward. So Bill had an alibi. God help him if he hadn't.”

Bill Colbeck had taken to frowning at the floor again. His face was twisted, fierce, and afraid.

“You can imagine what happened to the Colbeck-Morgan feeling after that,” he said. “Right then, this pipeline started having trouble.”

Doc asked, “You blame your delays on this feud?”

“Sure.”

“Bill is a Colbeck,” Strain said. “And Colbeck Construction Company means Colbeck to all the Morgans. They're not unpatriotic, and they're not ignorant. They are just hell-bent on paying-off somebody for old Erasmus Morgan's death.”

“Have you any direct evidence Morgans are causing the delays.”

“Plenty.”

“Specific examples?”

“By the bushel. They sit around in the beer places and the honky-tonks and laugh about it and tell what they're going to do to Colbeck Construction. We've had Morgans drive cat tractors into the river and pile trucks against trees. We've tried to fire all the Morgans off the work gangs, but there must be some left.”

DOC SAVAGE was silent for a while. When he spoke, it was in pursuit of an entirely different subject.

“Who was Carl Boordling?” the bronze man demanded.

Bill Colbeck frowned, shook his head. But Arthur Strain showed surprise, then said, “If I'm right, I think he was a fellow who was picked up for killing a man in a beer joint brawl out on Taney road. He got a quick trial and sentence to the penitentiary, and died of some kind of poisoning, self-administered, shortly after they sent him to the pen.”

“That all you know?”

“I don't even know that. I'm just pulling on my memory of what I read.”

“Then you actually know of no connection the man had with this affair?”

“No.”

“What about the misericord?”

“The what?”

“Misericord.”

“What the hell's a misericord?”

Doc Savage shifted to another question, demanding, “What connection did Smith have with it?”

He was not putting the inquiries so much with the expectation of getting important answers as with the idea that, if he touched something important, it would show on the faces of the men. He wasn't learning much.

Arthur Strain shook his head. But Bill Colbeck jumped up suddenly, saying, “Didn't you say somebody named Jones was killed?”

“Murdered-”

“What about it?”

There were footsteps in the hallway, hurried ones. They came directly to the door of the room, and a hand seized the knob and tried the locked door.

“Open up!” a harsh voice said.

“Who is it?” Doc asked quietly.

“Tom Scott Morgan. The Sheriff,” the voice said. And a shoulder began hitting the door, making the panels crack and bulge.

Doc said, “It might be spectacular to break down the door, but there's not much object to it.” He went over and unlocked the door.

Four men-a town policeman, a state policeman and two men from the Sheriffs office, was the way Doc indexed them-came crowding into the room with the belligerent manner of men who were frightened but determined not to show it. Nola Morgan followed them, looking grimly determined.

The sheriff, a lean man with a capable manner, examined Doc Savage briefly. He indicated Doc.

“This the one?” he asked Nola Morgan.

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

Nola Morgan met Doc Savage's gaze for a moment. She made an obvious business of showing him she wasn't going to be bulldozed. But in the end she looked away uncomfortably.

“I'm sure he is the man I met on the hill road,” she said.

“He carried Jones and put him in the trailer?” the sheriff demanded.

“Yes.”

“And then he went outdoors with you?”

“He did. He said we should stand out in the darkness and listen for someone coming, although there hadn't been the slightest indication that anyone had followed us.”

“Then what happened?”

“He pretended to hear a sound. He left me, saying someone was close and he was going to investigate. That was a trick. His plan was to get away from me, sneak around to the back of the trailer, reach in through the window and stab Jones to death. That is what he did.”

The sheriff turned to Doc Savage. He was a wheaty looking man with blue eyes and very even, very solid-looking white teeth. A substantial and determined man, horrified at murder, but grimly pleased to be able to make a logical arrest so early.

“You own that trailer?” he asked.

“I have been living in it,” Doc said.

“All right. That's enough. The Prosecuting Attorney can ask you questions.” The sheriff indicated himself, continuing, “You probably don't know me, but I'm T. S. Morgan, county sheriff. You're under arrest. The charge is suspicion of having murdered a man named Jones.”

THE county jail and the sheriff's living quarters were together in a two-story red brick building on Flatland Street near the riverfront. The county was not populous, and the run of captured criminals far from high grade, so the jail was the smallest and nastiest looking building in the neighborhood, a position

it maintained by a narrow margin, since it was located in a section of warehouses.

The business of clapping Doc Savage into the ancient, but efficient calaboose was done with speed.

The sun was just coming up at the time. Sunlight, as a matter of fact, was slanting into the windows of a rat-nest rooming house across the street, and making the dirty panes somewhat less than transparent.

The man called Pack had been sitting on a straight hard chair in front of the window for hours, and his patience was low. He cursed the blinding sun bitterly. “I wait here all night, and then the damned sun gets in my eyes!” was his text.

Guernsey, the man who was not a conversationalist, said, “It was him.”

“You sure it was Savage?”

“Yep.” Guernsey was at the other window.

“Handcuffed?”

“Yep. State troopers had their guns out, too.”

Pack leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes tightly and holding them shut while he slowly got out a cigarette and put it between his lips. “That's better,” he said. He opened his eyes and lit the cigarette. “Come on, Guernsey.”

They left the rooming house by the side door, sauntered two blocks north and one east, and climbed into a car they had left there. Pack drove.

“I sweat a quart of blood,” Pack growled. “I don't like these damned elaborate schemes.”

“They're wonderful if they work,” Guernsey said briefly.

“Yeah, like a watch. And what happens to a watch if one wheel falls out. Just one little cog off a wheel will jim the works.”

“No wheels fell out.”

Pack glanced at Guernsey. Of all the men working in this tense and almost continuously nerve-wracking affair, Guernsey was the one Pack respected the most. Guernsey rarely had much to say when he was in a crowd, but what he did say was sensible, and Pack had noticed that men would listen to Guernsey and accept his sense.

Guernsey would talk when alone with another man. Not excessively, but enough to make him a pleasant companion. Guernsey was a coldly calculating crook under his taciturn exterior, Pack was convinced.

Pack had plans for Guernsey. After this present frightening affair was concluded, and if they emerged with their lives, Pack intended to persuade Guernsey to work with him. They would make a good pair.

Pack chewed the cud of his plans for the future as he drove along. His ideas for the future did not include anything on the scale of this present thing. Pack felt this was to be the biggest thing in his career. He had no regrets. There was too much apprehension, agony, shock and devilish plot-counterplot involved here. Too many chances of dying violently.

“Going to be a nice day,” Guernsey volunteered quietly.

“Looks like it might be,” Pack agreed. A great guy, this Guernsey, he thought.

THEY met Joe outside a ramshackle cabin on the bluffs north of the river, about two miles from the spot where Colbeck Construction was trying to put the big pipeline across the sullen river. Joe was stalking a rooster with a long club.

Joe said, “We'll have chicken for breakfast if I can get that doggone rooster.”

Pack wasn't interested in breakfast. He asked, “How's Dave?”

“Dave? Still asleep, I guess.”

“Is he over his jitters yet?”

Joe looked uncomfortable. “Oh, Dave will be all right. Don't worry about it.”

Pack reached out suddenly and grabbed Joe's coat front. He yanked Joe close by the fistful of cloth. “Listen!” he said harshly. “I didn't like the way Dave got the shakes last night. I don't like the idea of a man who might go limber on us. Now listen to this! If Dave goes sour on us, I'm going to hold you personally responsible!”

Joe had seized the other man's hand which was entangled with his coat, but on second thought he had not tried to free himself. He was afraid of Pack when the man was aroused.

“Dave is all right,” Joe repeated.

Pack released him. “Remember what I said.”

They went into the shack. It was a hovel. They had rented it from a shiftless white man who had the respect of neither the whites nor the Negroes in the neighborhood, and the place still had the same furniture and the same filth.

Pack shook Dave awake, and Dave sat up on the edge of the cot. Dave was groggy. He kept yawning and rubbing his face. Pack picked up a bottle half filled with small white capsules which stood on the floor beside the coat. It was barbital.

“At least, that stuff is better than whisky.” Pack tossed the bottle on the cot. “Could you use a drink, Dave?”

“Not me. Beer is my speed,” Dave said.

Pack nodded. “That's good. Stick to beer today.”

He gave them their orders for the day.

THE duties assigned Dave were typical for the day. He had a certain section of highway, and the west end of the town, for his territory.

The midnight-eight shift was just coming off duty. The pipeline construction was proceeding in three shifts, the clock around, because of the urgency of the job. The more dependable midnight-eighters had gone home to sleep as soon as their duty tour ended. Dave wasn't interested in those. The type of men he

wanted were the ones who floated into the joints for a drink of three point two, or harder stuff. The morning-drinkers. The loud-mouths.

Dave had his routine fairly clear in his mind.

First, he struck up an acquaintance with five men in a booth.

“They've got the guy who killed old Erasmus Morgan in jail, but I hear they're going to turn him loose,” he said.

There were Morgan men in the booth. They stared at him. One said, “So they finally hung it on Bill Colbeck, eh?”

Dave shook his head. “Not Bill Colbeck. Not directly, anyhow. The guy was working for Colbeck. He did the job for Colbeck. They arrested him in the hotel with Bill Colbeck about three or four o'clock this morning.”

Without a word, a Morgan man got up and went to the telephone. He talked over the phone a while, then came back. “They arrested a guy for killing Preach Jones,” he said. “Arrested him in Colbeck's hotel.”

Dave said, “Yeah. The guy tried to kill Nola Morgan earlier in the night. She got away from him. He killed Preach Jones for interfering with his attempt on Nola Morgan's life. Nola Morgan got the sheriff, and they went to Colbeck's hotel and arrested the guy before he could get money enough from Colbeck to skip the country.”

He let that soak in for a while.

“They'll turn the guy loose,” he said bitterly. “I don't see why the hell there ain't some men with hair on their chests around here. Something oughta be done about that guy.”

He left the booth, sure that the seed was planted.

He worked hard until mid-afternoon telling the same story in different places. By noon, three men had told the same story to him, with variations and exaggerations. By three o'clock, he had heard a score of muttered suggestions that a mob should do something about it.

Dave joined Pack, Joe and Guernsey at the filthy shack. Joe was a little tight.

Pack listened to them report.

“That's good,” Pack said. “That's fine. We've got the ball rolling.”

“They'll lynch the big bronze guy, whoever he is,” Dave said.

“They won't get a chance,” Pack said. “Get some sleep. I'll wake you.”

AT nine o'clock, it was very dark. Pack entered the shack quietly and awakened Joe, Dave and Guernsey. While they dressed, thunder whooped and gobbled in the distance.

Guernsey muttered, “Going to rain again.”

It had been a very wet spring, which accounted for some of the trouble they were having getting the

pipeline across the river.

Pack handed them rifles. One apiece. Short saddle guns.

He also gave each of them a cylindrical metal affair, the nature and functioning of which he explained carefully with: “These gadgets are silencers made out of automobile mufflers. You'll find the piece of gas pipe in each one will slip on the end of the rifle barrel. The rifle sights have been raised enough to be used over the silencers.”

“They're clumsy as the dickens,” Joe said.

“Sure, but they're the best we could do. You'll be shooting from a rest, with plenty of time to get set, anyway. They'll do the job.”

They dismantled the rifles, and put them, with the remarkable homemade silencers, in suitcases. They took the suitcase to the pesthole of a room-house across the street from the jail.

Pack went to the window. Below him in the street, there were a number of men and a few women standing staring at the jail. There were small groups, no large crowd as yet, and no loud talk, no shouting.

There'll be no mob attack on that jail tonight, Pack reflected. They're not shouting, and mobs shout and mill and work themselves up into a frenzy.

Guernsey was beside Pack.

“I can see him,” Guernsey said. “Second cell from the left.”

Pack stared, but his own eyes were less able than Guernsey's and wouldn't let him be sure. He opened his suitcase, in which he had put a pair of binoculars, and used those.

“You're right,” he told Guernsey.

Guernsey looked at their weapons. “I don't give a damn how good these silencers are, they're going to make some noise. We can't shoot.”

Pack knew this was true. He gave orders to Dave and Joe.

“Go down in the street,” he told Dave and Joe. “Start talking loud. Get together, and not too far from this window, and start yelling your heads off making speeches to the crowd.”

Dave and Joe livened up considerably at this news that they were not to take part in the actual trigger-pulling.

Pack added, “Don't start your speech-making at the same time. One begin, then later the other. That'll be more natural.”

Dave and Joe went out and downstairs. The next ten minutes was a dragging age in the room. Then they could hear Joe making his speech, yelling for violence against the man in the jail.

A second man started speech-making, and Pack laughed. “That's not Dave,” he said. “Some other guy got the fever.”

Guernsey nodded. He was watching the jail windows across the street. He could distinguish the figure of Doc Savage, or rather the silhouette of the figure, in one of the cells.

The bronze man moved in the cell, and Pack and Guernsey saw that it was indeed he. They could distinguish his features, the bronze color of his skin, in the lighted cell.

They watched the bronze man move out of sight. Then, a moment later, the dark silhouette of him appeared in front of the window.

“Now is as good as any,” Pack said.

Guernsey breathed, “Hold it a minute! My gun isn't set up quite right. I can't see the sights.”

He fooled with the rifle, squinting, moving the piece. The dimness of the light in the hotel room-there was no actual light in the room other than what came in from the streetlights-made aiming at the bronze man difficult.

“Okay,” Guernsey said.

Then the bronze man moved. His silhouette moved away from in front of the window, vanishing somewhere to the side of the cell.

Pack spoke fiercely, patiently.

“He'll be back at the window to see about the noise in the street,” he said. “We can wait.”

Chapter VI

IT was raining in New York City. Colonel John Renwick, the engineer, awakened with the glare of electric light in his eyes. He was befuddled with sleep, and his first reaction was shame at being caught asleep, so he said automatically, “I was sitting here thinking.”

The man who had turned on the lights laughed. “The way you were snoring, it sounded like bombers flying through the office.”

Renny Renwick had a long face that was perpetually sober. “Oh, hello, Monk.”

Monk Mayfair closed the office door. He had his pockets stuffed with the morning newspapers, all editions. He was a very short, very wide, and surprisingly homely man, but with a pleasant quality about his ugliness.

“Ham come down yet this morning?” Monk asked.

“No.”

“You work all night in the office here?”

“Just about, I guess,” Renny admitted.

“I'm glad I'm not an engineer,” Monk told him pityingly. “It must be great, sitting up all night beating your brains together to find out how many pounds of steel it will take to build umpteen miles of special invasion railroad.”

“Anyhow, I got that one job done,” Renny said with relief.

The office-it was the reception room, actually-was large and modernistic except for the incongruous intrusion of an enormous and elaborately inlaid table of somewhat oriental design, and an oversized safe

of a vintage forty years back. The room, impressive as it was, was the smallest of a suite of three rooms which comprised the entire eighty-sixth floor of the building. The other two rooms were the library and the laboratory. The place was Doc Savage's New York headquarters.

Monk hauled out a chair on the other side of the inlaid table, pushed aside a stack of Renny's blueprints, and spread out his morning papers. He began on the comic strips.

Renny, looking idly at Monk, had a thought which he frequently had, namely: Monk did not look as if he could possibly be one of the world's leading industrial chemists; he bore a much greater resemblance to an amiable ape which someone had shaved and dressed up in baggy clothes. But it was a mistake to underestimate Monk's brains.

Renny had worked with Monk Mayfair for a long time and he had learned that Monk could be depended upon in any situation which needed a man's character and courage.

Renny Renwick, with Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Johnny Littlejohn, and Long Tom Roberts-there were five of them, all told-were the Doc Savage group. These five had worked with the bronze man over a long period of time.

I wonder, Renny reflected, how we ever came to get together. There is as much difference among us, really, as there is in a group of cats and dogs. We look different, we act different, we think differently, and no two of us have the bond of the same profession. The one thing we have in common is a thirst for excitement. And that's a childish thing for grown men to have in common, when you stop to think about it.

No, there was another thing in common. Their bond with Savage. It wasn't a hold which the bronze man had on them, but it was a tie hard to define. If I were to name the principal ingredient in the glue that holds us together, Renny thought, I'd say it was respect. Respect for each other's ability, and a not inconsiderable respect for Doc Savage, who was as unusual as he was human.

MONK finished his comic strips, grunted amiably, and spread the front pages out on the table.

“Any word from Doc?” he asked.

“No,” Renny said.

“This makes eight days, doesn't it?”

“That's right.”

“I wonder where Doc went?”

“Holy cow, don't start on that before breakfast!” Renny said. Renny had a deep, bull-throated voice that boomed. “Let's go eat, or have you?”

“No, I thought we'd wait for Ham and all go down together,” Monk explained. He leaned back and grinned delightedly at the ceiling. “I'll tell you a secret. I fixed old Ham. I cut his water off. I introduced him to a beautiful blonde named Mabis, and Mabis has a very jealous Marine for a boy friend. This Marine of Mabis's is corps boxing champ, and noted for punching guys in the kisser when they fool around Mabis. I just happened to know the Marine was to make a speech at the International Club benefit last night, and I just happened to buy two tickets to the benefit and give them to Ham, and he took the bait. He was going to squire Mabis to the benefit. I wonder what happened.”

“Holy cow!” Renny muttered. “Let's go eat.”

“Without Ham?”

“You think I want to listen to you two squabble all through breakfast?”

“It should be worth hearing,” Monk said gleefully. He pushed the newspapers into the wastebasket, and got to his feet. “All right, let's go. But I wonder what's keeping Ham?”

The eighty-sixth floor headquarters was equipped with many gadgets, practical and impractical, because Doc Savage had a weakness for gadgets. One of the gadgets was a private elevator which traveled at a rate of speed that would scare the daylights out of almost anyone. Renny and Monk rode it down to the lobby.

“Someday something is going to go wrong with that elevator and it'll be the death of all of us,” Renny grumbled.

Monk grinned. “That's one of Doc's lemons. He invented the special mechanism to service skyscrapers, and they aren't building skyscrapers any more.”

“After the war, they'll be built.”

“Nah, after the war people will live in the country and fly airplanes to work.”

Renny grunted. Using what for money, he was tempted to ask. What about this unbelievable national debt? He was no economist, but of late the subject had been bothering him, just as it must have secretly been bothering every other American with foresight farther than the end of his nose. But he didn't care about starting an argument with Monk, who belonged to the live-today-worry-about-tomorrow-when-it's-here school.

Monk stepped through the revolving door to the street. Renny was close behind him.

Wind buffeted them, and thin misting rain wet their faces instantly. The restaurant was close. They began running, and two men were suddenly running alongside them. Two strangers.

One stranger took Renny's arm, the other took Monk's arm, and each stranger exhibited a newspaper-wrapped package he carried in his free hand.

“There's a gun in this newspaper,” Renny's stranger told him. “Better take my word for it.”

RENNY heard Monk say, “What's that? What'd you say?”

“Don't put your hands up,” Monk's stranger told him. “Just be damned careful to do what I tell you.”

Renny knew what Monk was sure to do. He did the same thing himself. He chopped down fast, as fast as he possibly could, with his arm which the stranger was not holding. He chopped at the package, and hit it, and knocked the package away from him.

The gun in the package exploded, its bullet hit the sidewalk and made a bright metallic smear, glanced and made a round hole and a long crack in a plate glass window.

Renny gave all his attention to the packaged gun. He seized it with both hands, fell upon it, twisted, fought for it and it alone.

Renny was a big man. He was nearly as tall as Doc Savage, and somewhat heavier than Doc. Renny's fists were abnormally large and full of strength.

He got the gun. He clubbed at the stranger. The latter dodged, and, frightened by the violence, began going away. As he went, he yelled, “Shoot 'im! For God's sake, shoot 'im!”

Renny veered to help Monk. But that wasn't necessary; Monk had his man down and was beating him over the face and skull with the package.

“Watch out! Gunplay!” Renny gasped. When Monk didn't seem to hear him, or at least paid no attention, Renny seized the homely chemist and yelled, “Watch out!”

Monk straightened, growling, “Where?” Then he muttered, “Oh, oh!” And he leaped, doubled over and zig-zagging, for the entrance of the nearest store.

From a car parked at the curbing about forty feet away, a man had stepped with a short old-fashioned lever-action rifle. He was trying to draw a bead on them. He fired too quickly, and missed.

Renny and Monk piled into the doorway, Monk first, Renny stumbling over him. Monk dropped the package containing the gun his stranger had held. He grabbed at the one Renny had. Renny said, “Get away!” He tore the wrappings off the weapon, disclosing a new-looking revolver.

Monk always got excited in a fight. It amused Renny. Renny said, “Put your head out and see if they'll shoot.”

Monk, in a dither, actually started to do it. He caught himself. “Why, blast you!” he muttered. Renny laughed.

There was no humor in Renny's laugh. It was just a kind of uncaring, desperate feeling he got when there was intense excitement. Ordinarily he was a taciturn and somewhat sour fellow, but excitement seemed to make him drunk. Afterward he would look back on the emotional binge with pleasure.

An automobile engine started. There was considerable excitement in the street, but they heard the engine going over the uproar. It didn't start the way an ordinary motorist would have started. It roared and tires squealed. It could be a scared motorist leaving. Renny took a chance that it wasn't. He put his head out.

The two strangers were in the automobile with the rifleman and they were leaving.

RENNY aimed deliberately, making a snap decision to shoot at the tires first, while they were near enough to make a fair target. Later he could try for the men. The gun made fire and noise in his big fist. The car tire made a loud whistling, then a mushy bang as it blew out.

The car was turning at the time. It reeled, failed to make the corner, heaved across the sidewalk, and broke off a fireplug. It stopped above the smashed fire hydrant, and the mounting roaring geyser of water slowly turned it over.

The three men came out of the machine. They didn't do any shooting. They ran. There was a subway entrance ahead.

The trio popped down the subway kiosk.

“Come on!” Renny yelled. “We may have them trapped.”

He sprinted across the street with Monk, and they could hear the slowly increasing rumble of a subway train in the tunnel. It was leaving. As they pounded down the steps, they saw the last coaches of the subway train leaving.

Monk yelled, “How can we stop that train? Aren't there switches or something in the stations? What about the signal system-how can we stop it with that?”

“I don't know,” Renny said.

“Dammit, you're an engineer, you should know!” Monk said wildly. “Where's something I can drop on the third rail and short-circuit the power.”

He dashed about frantically, finally seized a metal lid off the pop-cooler in the subway station newsstand, and leaped down on to the tracks. He tossed the lid on to the third rail and the wheel-rail. The result was fire, smoke, cracking spark, and stink. Nothing more. The tin sheet hadn't had enough conductivity to short-circuit the power.

Monk climbed on the platform, disgusted.

“Let's look at the car,” Renny said. “The police will be here in a minute. We'll put out an alarm.”

Climbing the stairs to the street, Monk muttered, “If anybody had told me a thing like that would happen right on a New York street, I'd have called them nuts.”

“Did you know any of the three?”

“Never saw them before in my life.”

“They knew us.”

“Depends on what you mean knew. Recognized us, of course. But I don't think they had ever met us before.”

“What were they up to?”

“Don't ask me,” Monk said. “It's as much a mystery to me as to you.”

“Did you get hurt?”

Monk shook his head. “Skinned up a little, is all. And I won't be able to sleep right for a week or two, probably.”

Renny shuddered. “I never tried that commando tactic of knocking a gun aside before, and right now it would take quite a bit to hire me to try it again.”

“Me, too,” Monk agreed uneasily.

Reaction was setting in. A few moments ago, when it was necessary, they had gone through with what seemed essential at the moment, and done so with a certain verve. Now they had time to think. It was like being shot at-when it happened, you ducked and were startled. Later you got to thinking about the hole the bullet could have made.

That was the bad part. Fear, like the measles, took a little time to develop. They came out on the sidewalk. A crowd was around the upset car and they were dragging a man out of the machine. “Holy cow!” Renny said, staring unbelievingly.

“Ham!” Monk said. “It's Ham Brooks! They had Ham in that car!”

HAM BROOKS was their friend, also a Doc Savage associate. Ham was a lawyer, his full name with trimmings being Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks. He didn't like the nickname of Ham, or professed not to, and so everyone who knew him well called him that.

He glared at Monk and said, “Don't stand there and gape at me! Cut me loose!”

Monk got out his pocket knife and sawed through the ropes. He helped Ham to his feet. Ham didn't seem to be harmed.

The crowd was growing. Someone recognized Renny, and the word went around about who they were.

Ham said, “Let's get out of here! I've got something important to tell you.”

Renny said, “Let's duck into the building. I'll call the police from there.”

They found seclusion inside the office building where Doc had his headquarters. Renny picked up a telephone.

“Make that call snappy,” Ham advised him. “We haven't any time to waste.”

Renny nodded. He got a police lieutenant he knew, and sketched what had happened, described the three men who had tried to waylay them, and where they had last been seen. “Pick them up if you can,” he said. “They tried to kill us. I don't know why yet. I'll give you more information when I get it.”

Ham was talking before the receiver was on the hook.

“Here's what I know,” Ham said rapidly. “I got a telephone call. Man with a shrill voice, or a deep-throated woman's voice. I couldn't tell which. Said Doc Savage was in trouble, needed our help. Said Doc might be dead already. Asked me to get over to North Jersey airport immediately for the full story.”

Ham stared at them uneasily. “You can imagine how that hit me. I dressed in a hurry and charged out of my apartment house, and those three guys were waiting. They had guns. They got me in the car, and came down here to waylay you two. They had me in the back, a laprobe thrown over me, tied up so I couldn't make a sound, and I wouldn't have dared make one if I could.”

Renny asked, “Think the phone call was a gag to get you excited and cause you to rush out into their waiting hands?”

“I do not.”

“Why?”

“The way they talked. They hadn't figured on me getting out of the apartment until later in the day, about the time I usually get up.”

“They knew when you usually get up?”

“Yes. That means they've had their eye on us for several days.”

“I don't get this,” Renny said.

“It's part of some kind of trouble Doc is in.”

Monk said, “We'll take the big car. It's faster.”

THE big car was a sedan, black, overpowered with a souped-up motor. Renny drove. He took Eighth Avenue north, then Broadway, then George Washington Bridge into New Jersey.

Monk said, “That was the darndest mess there in front of the building for a while.” And then he was silent, thinking about what a mess it had been, and how they could have been shot down. He began to perspire a little, and took out a handkerchief sheepishly and wiped his face.

“Scared now, eh?” Ham asked.

Monk was scared, but he put his handkerchief away, and examined Ham thoughtfully, noticing for the first time that Ham had a discolored eye.

“You didn't tell us they beat you up,” Monk said.

“Eh?”

“Your eye.”

“Oh, I got that last night,” Ham said. Then he scowled at Monk. “Yes, last night. And I intended to take that matter up with you. By any chance, did you know that Mabis had a slightly more than casual acquaintance with a big lug of a Marine?”

“Me?” Monk didn't succeed in looking innocent. “Did she?”

“Brother, I'll put that down in my book,” Ham promised unpleasantly.

Monk was uncomfortably silent. The gag had seemed funny when he had pulled it on Ham, but now it seemed pretty juvenile. He was ashamed of it, as he was frequently ashamed of his practical jokes afterward. Too many of them, it often struck him, were of the variety a ten-year-old would perpetrate. But they always looked good, if not too adult, at the time. There was also some added pleasure in the fact that the more childish the gag, the more it got under Ham's skin.

Nothing more was said for a while. All three of them were having nerves. What had happened was not conducive to a placid feeling. They had, in plain truth, had the devil scared out of them, and they had no idea what it was all about.

When they drew near the airport, Renny said uneasily, “Keep your eyes open.”

The airport was peaceful. They parked and remained in the car for a while, watching.

“I'll inquire at the line shack,” Renny said. “You fellows stay in the car and be ready to help me out if this is another joker.”

Renny walked to the line shack. The only occupant was a thin, disgusted-looking man who was making pencil marks on a stack of government forms.

“Is there someone around here who wants to see Ham Brooks?” Renny asked.

“Brooks? Brooks?” The man thought for a moment. “Oh.” He dug around in the forms and came up with

an envelope. “You Brooks?”

“He's in the car outside.”

“Well, give this to him.” The man extended the envelope.

“Where'd it come from?” Renny asked.

“Girl left it.”

“What girl?”

The man eyed Renny intently. “Girl who flew in here about six o'clock this morning. Private plane, nice little job.” He grinned slightly. “They were both nice little jobs, the girl and the plane. She paid the night man five dollars to use his car, drove off in it, and came back in about ten minutes in a hurry. She was acting kind of funny when she came back. Said she wouldn't need the car. Night man offered her the five bucks back, but she wouldn't take it. She used the telephone.”

“Whom did she call?”

“I don't know.”

“How many calls?”

“One.”

RENNY picked up the telephone, and got hold of the long-distance operator and said, to avoid an argument with the operator, “There was a call made to a Ham Brooks in New York City a couple of hours ago. Will you verify the charges, please.”

The operator looked it up, said, “Ninety-eight cents.”

Renny thanked her. He had what he wanted. The call the girl had made probably had been to Ham.

“What happened to the girl?” he asked the thin man.

The thin man was suspicious and doubtful by now. “What's going on? You a cop?”

Renny produced his billfold and dug out a couple of cards, which he tossed on the table. “Look those over. I'll be back in a minute.”

He went outside, took the envelope to Ham. “Here's what we drew.”

Ham tore open the envelope, unfolded the single sheet of paper inside. They read:

I SAW SOME MEN I'VE SEEN AROUND HOME AND I KNOW THEY WERE WATCHING HERE AT THE AIRPORT FOR ME. I'M AFRAID TO WAIT. DOC SAVAGE IS AT THE COLBECK CONSTRUCTION COMPANY PIPELINE JOB WHERE IT CROSSES THE RIVER IN ARKANSAS. HE IS IN SERIOUS TROUBLE, SOME OF WHICH IS MY FAULT. YOU HAD BETTER COME HELP HIM.

There was no signature.

“A girl left it,” Renny, explained. “Let's go ask the fellow in the line shack more about the girl.”

The thin man was frowning at the two cards Renny had given him. He handed them to Renny. “So you're a cop,” he said.

Technically, the cards identified Renny as a special state investigator, which was not the same thing as a policeman. Renny let it go.

“What became of the girl?” he asked.

“Well, she acted funny, as I said. She walked around the place two or three times, and then she had me fill up her tank with gas, and she took off.”

Renny said, “Did it look to you like she started off in the car, saw someone who scared her, then came back here, saw whoever had scared her was still around, and decided to get out?”

“I figured it was something like that,” the thin man admitted. “I didn't know what to do. I couldn't very well hold the girl. Her airman's identification card was okay. So was her license. She had an instrument rating.”

“Let's see your sheet.”

The thin man got out his book. Private fliers, because of war restrictions, could operate only from designated airports, from which they had to sign in and out.

Renny examined the signature on the book.

“Nola Morgan,” he said. “I never heard of her.”

“Where did she check out for?” Monk asked.

“Pittsburgh,” Renny said.

“That means she's headed back for Arkansas.”

“Probably.”

Ham Brooks thoughtfully pocketed the note Nola Morgan had left. “If you ask me, we'd better do the same thing.”

Chapter VII

IT was from the air that the river looked most like the kind of a river it was. From any altitude above five thousand feet it resembled a brown snake, sullen, lazy, dissatisfied, fretful, threatening. You got a feeling of foulness about the river.

The river had overflowed that spring, and the vegetation and crops on the overflow land had an unhealthy yellow cast, whereas the hill country and the uplands were furred with hearty green. It was as if the river had contaminated the country through which it flowed, sickened whatever was close to it.

Renny was flying. He was flying sheepishly, because he had made a bobble in his dead-reckoning navigation and hit the river fifty miles from his intended destination. He suspected he had bungled the computer gadget when he set up the triangle of velocities for his flight course. It was a mistake a WTS student wouldn't have made, and Renny was an engineer, and he was ashamed of it.

Anyway, they had hit the river at a power dam, a long wall of concrete which barred the progress of the brown river snake and fattened it for miles upstream. This wasn't where they were supposed to hit it, but it was a landmark easy to identify. Renny had turned downstream.

“There's the town,” Ham said finally. “Isn't that the pipeline just beyond it?”

Renny muttered that with his navigating, he wouldn't be too surprised if it was the Burma Road. He eased the throttles out and slanted down toward the pipeline job.

With an engineer's practiced curiosity, Renny examined the pipeline work. He frowned, dived the ship, and sailed along a few hundred feet above the line. He banked back toward the river.

The job down there wasn't going well, he knew immediately. First, it was strung out too much. Laying a pipeline was a regular operation. First, the survey crew laid out the line, and the aërial photos were taken. Then the claim agents bought up the right-of-way and cleared titles.

The soil-checker would come through, checking the earth for alkali or other chemical content injurious to pipe. Wherever alkali was found, the pipe would be re-routed to avoid these “hot” spots.

The ditching machines next, then the pipe-stringers, the tacker, the welders, the paralite and papering crew, the backfillers, the fencing crew-all these last in a compact group, probably spread out over no more than three or four miles of line.

Renny grimaced. Visibility was about twenty miles to the west, and it looked to him as if the pipe wasn't even in the ditch that far back.

The river crossing made him uncomfortable to look at it. He hated to see an engineering job bungled.

“There's plenty of trouble down there,” he said.

Ham and Monk were surprised. The construction job, to their inexperienced eyes, had looked large, efficient and impressive.

“What's the matter with it?” Monk demanded.

“The whole job is shot to blazes,” Renny explained. “No coördination. Take right across the river-the stringer crews aren't a bit ahead of the connection crew. And you can see, all the way down the line, where it isn't clicking.”

He scowled at the ground for a while, banking the plane back.

“Crews are short-handed, too,” he muttered. “Looks as if something was keeping them from work.”

“If there's trouble, Doc is probably here somewhere,” Ham said.

“We'll find out,” Renny said grimly. “This is a damned mess! Holy cow! Did you know the fuel from this line has to be reaching the invasion shove-off bases before we can start the last big punch to end this war?”

Monk and Ham hadn't known that. They had been doing odd jobs of specialized nature for the War Department and the general staff, but this was an engineering and supply problem, so they hadn't known. The War Department wasn't noted for broadcasting such information, anyway.

THE airport was a municipal one, suffering from the usual war-time doldrums. There were three shed-hangars and a seedy individual to take care of the line shack and the gasoline pumps.

“You ain't staying?” the seedy attendant asked.

“Why not?” Renny demanded, surprised by the man's unexpected curiosity.

“You ain't newspapermen, or government agents, or something?” the man inquired.

Renny growled, “Brother, who appointed you to ask-”

A man came out of the line shack saying, “I did. Keep your hair on straight, friend.” The man was tall, wiry, and he carried a shotgun casually across his arm. He was followed by another man, shorter, less flexible-looking, also with a shotgun. Both wore hunting clothes.

“Who are you and what's your business here?” the first man asked bluntly.

Renny didn't like the manner of either man. As men, they were decent looking. But their attitude certainly wasn't pleasant. Renny said, “I don't see any badges on you two birds. Show us a badge, and we might talk to you.”

“Maybe we don't need any badges,” the man said. “Who are you three? Some more Colbeck men?”

“What do you mean-Colbeck men?” Renny demanded.

“I'm asking the questions.”

Renny, in an ugly tone that suddenly got to rumbling, said, “You're the one who's getting his teeth kicked out in about three seconds.”

“Friend, I wouldn't advise you-”

“On your way!” Renny said. “Get going, you bums!”

“Listen-”

Renny said ominously, “Beat it, brother! Right now.”

The two men stared at Renny, who was not a sight to inspire peace in their minds. They were in an uncomfortable spot, with their bluff called.

One of them said to the other, “No need of getting ourselves skinned up by tackling three of them. Come on. They're Colbecks, all right.”

The pair walked off. They had the long healthy stride of men who had done a lot of foot traveling over hills and country roads.

Renny wheeled on the seedy old airport attendant. “Who were those two?”

“Chester and Jim Morgan, my second-cousins,” the old man snapped. “They're not afraid to have you know who they are.”

“What'd they mean-were we Colbecks?”

“Are you?”

Exasperated, Renny yelled, “I asked you! Now answer my questions!”

The old man scowled at Renny, then deliberately spat on the ground. “Nuts to you and the rest of the Colbecks,” he said. He turned and stalked into the line shack, slamming the door.

Renny, angered, seized the door knob with the intention of following the old fellow. The door was locked. Renny rattled the knob. “Open up!”

Inside the line shack, the old man said quietly and purposefully, “You try to bust that door down and I'll shoot you dead in your tracks, and I'll get away with calling it self-defense, too.”

Monk grimaced. “Sounds as if he wanted us to try it.”

“Where do we get a taxi?” Renny asked the old man.

“Walk,” the old man said.

THEY walked. It was about a mile. They passed two pipeline trucks piled in the ditch, one of them with a load of four forty-foot joints of twenty-four-inch river-weight pipe.

Renny, at the second truck, said, “Wait a minute.” He went over and probed and poked for a while, then indicated the pipe-trailer coupling. “Parted. Made the truck go into the ditch,” he said. He rubbed a finger over the greasy friction surfaces of the coupling. “Been wiped off,” he added. “There should be grease on that.” He got down and felt and searched carefully on the underside. “Holy cow!”

He showed them his fingers. He rubbed the fingers together. “Emery dust,” he said. “You can feel it. The stuff was put on the coupling so it would cut out. This is a special compound used for metal-cutting.”

“Deliberate?” Monk asked.

“Why not? It was wiped off, wasn't it?”

Monk waved an arm at the other damaged truck. “Two trucks knocked out on this short stretch of road. What's somebody trying to do-butcher this construction job?”

“Let's find out,” Renny said. “And while we're doing it, we might get a line on Doc Savage.”

They reached the outskirts of town. Only four cars passed them, and each of these was loaded with suitcases or the kind of light-housekeeping furniture which pipeline workers carry with them from one location to another.

They passed through a region of fairly nice residences. Then filling-stations began to appear, and the usual average of rooming-houses.

Renny stopped. “There's a guy loading his stuff into his car. Texas license on the car. And he looks like a pipeliner.” He glanced at Monk and Ham. “I'm going to see if I can find out whether the workmen are pulling out, and why.”

“Probably get your nose flattened,” Monk said.

Renny entered the yard. The house was two-storied, weather-boarded, a vintage probably thirty-five years back. There was a fat fortyish man and a fat younger man and a woman loading stuff into an elderly sedan.

“Leaving?” Renny asked.

All three stopped working. They stared at him. The older fat man said, “Get along, buddy. You haven't lost anything here.”

Renny scowled. “You insult people kind of sudden, don't you?”

The younger man said, “Look, Morgan or Colbeck or whichever you are, we don't want any part of this mess. We're getting out.”

“Quitting?” Renny asked.

“Yeah. And if you mean are we scared, that's right, too.”

“What's the trouble?” Renny persisted

Both men spat on the ground simultaneously.

“Are you kidding!” one said. And they both went back to carrying suitcases, cardboard boxes, and a baby crib out of the house.

The woman stood staring at Renny for a while, then cried shrewishly, “You git! You leave us alone, you hear!”

Renny went back to Monk and Ham.

“Everybody seems to be in a stew,” he said. “Let's find out whoever is bossing this pipeline job and get the lowdown.”

THE office had been makeshifted out of a suite of sample rooms on the balcony floor of the old hotel that was still the best hotel in town. A cardboard sign with *Colbeck Construction Company* lettered on it with crayon marked the door.

Big Bill Colbeck, with strain showing all over his honest-John face, stood flatfooted behind his desk and said, “Yes, I'm Colbeck. Yes, I own the company, or what was the company. What do you want?”

Renny introduced Monk, Ham and himself. “We're associated with Doc Savage,” he added.

“Damn my soul!” Colbeck said violently. He strode to a connecting door, shouted, “Art! Oh Art, come in here. The Philistines are with us again.”

Arthur Strain came in, a long man who looked soft without any fat. He wore tweeds and everything that went with them, down to a knobby briar pipe which gave off the aroma of good Irish-blended tobacco that was hard to get these days.

“These three guys are friends of Doc Savage,” Colbeck told him.

Strain extended his hand. “Glad to meet you gentlemen. I hope you can help us.” When he had finished shaking hands, he asked, “Have you seen Doc Savage yet?”

“We don't know where he is,” Renny said. “Do You?”

“In jail.”

“How come?”

“Sit down,” Strain suggested, “and I'll tell you about it.”

Arthur Strain proved to have a gift for clear expression. He painted a word picture swiftly, emphasizing the points that were important. How the construction of the pipeline had dragged mysteriously until Colbeck Construction had been forced to forfeit three of its penalties for failing to have agreed-upon amounts of pipeline built by agreed-upon dates. The penalty payments had been a severe strain on the company, since they wiped out the profit on each section and a good deal more.

It had become more and more apparent, Strain explained, that the old Morgan-Colbeck disagreement might be behind the trouble. And then Erasmus Morgan, patriarch of the Morgans, had been murdered, and an attempt made to lay the blame on Bill Colbeck. That had brought the Morgan-Colbeck scrap out into the open.

This was the mess into which Doc Savage had ventured. Strain explained that he and Colbeck had not known Doc, nor been aware that the bronze man had been assigned by the federal government to solve the pipeline trouble. This they had not known until night before last, when Doc had called them to his room here at the hotel.

“While he was talking to us,” Strain explained, “the Sheriff appeared and arrested him. Savage was accused of killing a fellow named, or called, Preach Jones. They locked Savage up, after he was practically identified as the killer by a girl named Nola Morgan. She had been with Savage when-”

“Wait a minute!” Ham interrupted. “Who was this girl?”

“Nola Morgan. She's one of the leading Morgans, a niece, I think, of the old fellow who was murdered, Erasmus Morgan.”

She's more than that, Ham thought. She's apparently the girl who flew back east and got us on the job.

“Do you know the girl?” Strain asked.

“Never met her,” Ham said. “Where is Doc right now?”

“In jail. An attempt was made to kill him last night, but it didn't succeed.”

Renny stared at Strain with a shocked intensity. “Good Lord, you say that casually!”

“I'm sorry,” Strain said. “It's hard to believe such things happen. I didn't feel casual about it, I assure you, although I had met Mr. Savage just once.”

“What about this attempted killing?”

“Well, there was mob activity in the street, and someone took a shot at Mr. Savage through the cell window. It missed.”

Bill Colbeck snorted, said, “It didn't miss. It was a damned good shot. It was the best shooting I ever heard of. And it didn't miss. It went right smack through a dummy Doc Savage had made of himself out of a piece of wallpaper he'd torn off the wall of his cell. He held this silhouette up in front of the window, and bing! Somebody, put a bullet through. Right between the eyes.”

Renny asked, “What about this mob?”

“Well, what about it?”

“Did somebody stir it up deliberately so there would be excitement to cover the shooting?”

“Could be,” Bill Colbeck said.

Arthur Strain made a quick, unbelieving gesture. “Bill, you're getting a little wild again,” he said.

“Wild?” Colbeck wheeled on his general manager. “Look, I've been around trouble before. I know what trouble looks like. And we've got plenty of it right here on this construction job.”

“Probably not as much as you think.”

Colbeck swore violently. “There's a regular civil war! We're the same as out of business!”

“Take it easy, Bill,” Strain soothed.

“Easy, nothing!” Colbeck yelled. “You sat around in a Tulsa bank too much of your life, Art. You may be able to recognize a financial cyclone when you see one. But what you don't know about pipeline troubles would fill six books.”

Colbeck's inner tension was bursting out into the open, like a buzzard chick hatching out of a shell. He was scared, and big enough and two-fisted enough to be ashamed of being scared. His excitement was the more stark for that, since a frightened strong man is more disturbing than a scared weak man.

“The job is shut down!” Colbeck shouted. “The men who scare easy are leaving. Hell, I saw a dozen cars headed out of town with men and their families. It'll be weeks before we can get going-but now we'll never get going again.”

“What's the trouble?” Renny demanded.

“Money.”

Arthur Strain made a slight, embarrassed gesture, saying, “Don't worry about that, Bill. You can count on me to furnish what money you have to have.”

Bill Colbeck scowled. He shook his head. Then he grinned sheepishly at Strain. “Thanks, Art,” he said.

Renny said, “We didn't come here to pry into your financial problems. What we want to know is what happened to Doc Savage, and what happened to this pipeline construction job.”

“Savage is in jail charged with murder,” said Colbeck. “The pipeline construction job is blown higher than a kite, nearly.”

“Exactly how bad is the construction situation?”

Bill Colbeck hesitated, then spoke quietly, with no exaggeration.

“If we could get the line the rest of the way across the river, we would make it,” he said. “We might even beat the forfeit date.”

“How far is the line across the river?”

“It's damn near across. Right at the critical point.”

“We'll look into that after we talk to Doc,” Renny said.

Colbeck grunted, said, “If I can't get that pipeline across the river, you'll play hell doing it.”

RENNY, Monk and Ham went to the jail. Enroute, Monk said, “Colbeck is worried.”

“He is a crude fellow,” Ham said. “You notice that last crack he made? If he couldn't build a pipeline across the river, nobody else could.”

Renny said, “I sort of liked the guy.”

“But he was insulting!”

“Well, he's got things on his mind. He's got reason to be short-tempered, the way it looks to me. I like men to show the way they're feeling. It's these deep foxy guys who hide everything you have to look out for.”

“Well, I liked Strain better than Colbeck,” Ham said. “Strain didn't have the manners of a goat, at least.”

Renny changed the subject saying, “There's the jail.”

They had trouble getting to see Doc Savage. The county was holding the bronze man, which meant the sheriff had custody.

Sheriff Tom Scott Morgan examined Renny's special commission cards, laughed and said, “No thanks. They don't carry weight here.”

“But-”

“Look,” Sheriff Morgan interrupted. “You're going to tell me the unpleasant things that will happen to me if I don't coöperate with you. Save your breath.”

The sheriff wasn't being nasty. He was merely stating his position, and making it clear that he felt he knew what he was doing.

“I could promise you some unpleasant things,” Renny said.

“No doubt.”

“You could be obstructing justice, you know.”

Sheriff Morgan nodded. “People been telling you I'm holding this man in jail because he's a Colbeck?”

“We haven't been in town long enough to hear any talk,” Renny told him. “And Doc Savage isn't a Colbeck or a Morgan. If you'd call Doc anybody, you'd call him the American people.”

The officer considered that for a moment. It made him angry. He jerked a thumb at his own chest. “I'm the American people. They elected me. I take this job seriously. I do what I think is right, and if I'm wrong, I'll take whatever hell is dished out. I'll take it, then go home and sleep, because my heart is pure. But if I do something I don't feel is right, and it turns out bad, I can't sleep, because my heart ain't pure. Get it?”

Renny jumped up wrathfully.

“You're just a lot of words!” he snapped. “You going to let us talk to Doc, or not?”

“I'm not.”

Renny demanded, “Is Nola Morgan related to you?”

“Somewhat.”

“How much?”

“She's my sister.”

“All right, Nola Morgan came to New York and got us on the job,” Renny said. “Does that make it any different with you?”

The Sheriff looked him in the eye. “Suppose I was to tell you my sister, Nola Morgan, was right here in town and at home every minute since Doc Savage was locked up? Would that make it any different with *you?*”

Renny's jaw went down. He was silent for a while.

Ham Brooks said, “Sheriff, are you telling us that is the truth?”

“I'm telling you to get out of here,” Morgan said. “Now. Right now!”

Chapter VIII

RENNY RENWICK, Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair stalked in silence to a restaurant, where they found a table. The waitress came, and they had difficulty thinking of anything to order, half-realizing the hesitancy was due to their depression.

Monk Mayfair, watching the faces of the others, could see that they were having about the same thoughts he was having. His own weren't very pleasant. He had seen enough since arriving to know there was plenty of trouble afoot, and that it was too far along for gentle methods to stop it. It was too far grown to nip in the bud, because it was well out of the bud.

And Monk was convinced that Doc Savage was in very real danger. A murder charge was never something to trifle with, no matter how innocent you were. They executed you for murder, with due process of law, inexorably and frighteningly. The theory was that innocence got its due, but Monk had a hunch that Doc would not be in jail now if he could prove his innocence.

The waitress brought their food. They had ordered eggs because they hadn't eaten since the night before-things had happened too fast in New York to think about food-and so what they wanted was in the nature of breakfast. But the waitress brought no eggs, and apologized, “We usually get them fresh from the country, but now we can't.”

“How come?” Monk asked.

“Morgans raise the eggs and they're afraid Colbecks might eat them,” the waitress said wryly.

“Which are you, Morgan or Colbeck?”

“I'm an innocent bystander,” she said. She glanced about uneasily. “There's been rumors they would dynamite this place because Bill Colbeck eats here. Do you suppose they would do that?”

“It doesn't sound logical.”

“Who said anything about logic?” the waitress retorted.

When she had gone away, Renny muttered, “We had better get organized.”

“So I'm thinking,” Monk said.

Renny examined his big fists thoughtfully. “How does this sound to you? Monk, you and Ham take the Colbeck and Morgan mess. One of you work on the Colbecks, the other one on the Morgans, and see what you can dig up.”

Monk said, “That's a good idea. I'll take the Morgan angle.”

Renny added, “I'll go have a look at that pipeline river crossing job. As an engineer, that's probably my best angle. One of our jobs here is going to be to see that the pipeline goes through.”

“That's good, too,” Monk agreed. “Me on the Morgans. Ham on the Colbecks.”

Ham eyed Monk narrowly. “I think we'd better match to see whether you or I take the Morgan angle.”

“That's not necessary,” Monk said innocently.

“You have any particular preference?” Ham demanded.

“Shucks, no. Makes no difference to me, but I'll take the Morgan angle.”

“Because you've heard Nola Morgan is a very pretty girl?”

Renny stared disgustedly at Monk and Ham.

“Holy cow!” he said. He fished a coin out of his pocket and slapped it down on the table. “Call it,” he told Monk sourly. “I'm in no mood for this sort of thing now.”

Monk eyed Renny's hand sheepishly. “Heads,” he muttered.

It was tails.

Ham said, “That's what I get for living right. I think I'll start out by investigating Miss Morgan personally.”

HAM BROOKS liked fine living. He was an enthusiast about good food, good clothes, beauty and comfort and existence in the genteel way. When he could, he liked to live that way himself, and he enjoyed seeing others do it. The plantation impressed him.

The white house at the top of the hill road was a conspicuous landmark for miles across the countryside and up and down the river. Ham, turning his rented car into the long sweep of the driveway, examined the place with appreciation.

The mansion had obviously been built before the Civil War days, but it was no seedy relic of the old south. The columns had a fresh majestic sweep, the paint was crisp and white, the lawns manicured, the shrubbery well-cared for. Behind and to the east were the outbuildings, the sheds, the barns, the cribs, the stock pens. There were tractors and combines and fine livestock.

Looking at the place, Ham felt an urge to be a farmer. It was the kind of a place that made you feel that way.

He clattered the brass knocker against the door, half expecting the panel to be swung ajar by a

picturesque old darky with white hair and lots of teeth. He was so completely primed to tell an old darky, “Cunnel Brooks to see yoah Mistress, suh,” that he was thrown off the track when Nola Morgan herself opened the door.

“Hello,” she said.

Ham made foolish noises.

“Come in,” Nola Morgan said. “I've been expecting one of you.”

“You-uh-know me?” Ham managed to say. He had gotten a good look at the girl by now. Monk'll sure be burned up that he didn't get this part of the job, he thought.

“You are Ham Brooks,” she said.

Ham had mentally arranged an orderly sequence of questions, but he was confused, and he asked bluntly, “Was it you who came to New York-you who telephoned me?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you leave so quickly?”

“Didn't you get the note I left at the airport? They had men there watching me. I guess they knew I always use that airport when I fly to New York. I should have landed at a different one, but I didn't think of that.”

"Your brother,” Ham said, “claimed it wasn't you who notified us.”

"Did he?” She walked ahead of Ham. “Will you come this way. I want to show you something.”

She led the way up a stairway to a large sunny room furnished in wicker and tweedy stuff. Near one of the windows a good surveyor's transit was set up. Nola Morgan went to the instrument. “This is the only thing I could find around the house that would do for a telescope,” she said.

She stooped and peered through the transit.

“Take a look,” she said. “You may have to adjust the focus.”

Through the transit Ham saw a backwater slough, a sloping bank, a man lounging on the bank, and two enormous cane fishing-poles stuck in the mud of the bank.

"Looks innocent, doesn't it,” the girl said.

"Yes.”

"It isn't,” she told him. “Do you know flag code? He's using those poles to send messages to someone.”

Ham put an eye to the transit. “He moved the right-hand pole. But its not semaphore.”

"He moves the right pole for a dot, the left for a dash, and both of them for the end of a message. He just reported your arrival.”

THE man on the bank of the slough, Ham decided, could see about half of the Morgan estate.

The girl, answering a question that popped into his mind before he could word it, said, “There are two more. One on the west side of the place and another one on the north. A rabbit couldn't come or go

without them being aware of it."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know."

"Morgans?"

"Certainly not. If they were Morgans, I would know about it."

"Colbecks?"

"I don't know. But I doubt it."

"Then who in the devil are they?"

Nola Morgan shook her head. "Sit down," she said. "I want to talk to you for a minute."

Ham took a chair. He didn't feel like sitting down. It was being more and more impressed on him that something tense and mysterious was happening, and it didn't make him want to sit and talk.

"Listen to me," Nola Morgan said. "Something big, frightening and terrible started happening in this part of the country several weeks ago. It began gradually, so gradually that none of us recognized anything unusual. And I still don't know what is at the bottom of it."

"What about this Colbeck versus Morgan-"

"That's what I'm telling you," she interrupted. "This thing that is happening had to happen behind a smoke-screen. And the smoke-screen that was selected was this Colbeck and Morgan legend."

Ham said, "I just came from town, and what I saw going on wasn't any legend. It was a civil war getting ready to pop."

Nola Morgan said sharply, "Don't tell me my local history! You're an outsider. You don't know anything about it. The Colbeck-Morgan feud was a dead duck twenty years ago. There hadn't been even a fist fight between a Colbeck and a Morgan for ten years. It was just talk. That's all. Talk, like some southerners still talk about the Civil War and damn-yankees. There actually was no Colbeck-Morgan bad feeling three months ago."

"But-"

"Somebody stirred it up. Somebody-a large and very slick organization of somebodies-dug this old feud out of its grave and dressed it up in war paint and feathers and rattled its old bones. Morgans began to hear that Colbecks had said nasty things about them-but the Colbecks hadn't said any such things. Colbecks heard slander which Morgans had supposedly said. Morgans hadn't said it. Lies. Somebody was spreading lies."

"You seem pretty certain," Ham said. He was getting confused, wondering just what was what.

Nola Morgan continued, "Then a Morgan was waylaid and beaten up on a dark road, and his assailants called each other Colbeck names. But we checked into it, and *they weren't Colbecks*. The next week, a Colbeck was stabbed by a man who said he was Finis Morgan. But Finis Morgan was right here in this house at the time of the knifing! We knew that for a fact."

Ham asked, "Who is *we?*"

Nola Morgan's face got a slightly chalky coloring. “Erasmus Morgan,” she said. “He was my uncle, and he managed this plantation for me. I don't mean that I employed him. Erasmus Morgan was a very capable and influential man and quite wealthy. He liked this place, and preferred to spend much of his time here. He managed the plantation in order to have an excuse to stay here a lot.”

“Erasmus Morgan,” Ham said. “Where is he now?”

“Dead,” she said grimly.

Ham suddenly wished that he hadn't asked such a blunt question about Erasmus Morgan. The pain in the girl's voice, the tragedy behind her eyes and her manner, made him uncomfortable.

“I'm sorry,” he muttered.

NOLA MORGAN said that Erasmus Morgan had been murdered at night after he had left a meeting of land-holders through whose farmland the pipeline was being constructed, a meeting at which the land owners had organized to see that they got fair damages, a meeting that might have been construed as Morgans against the Colbeck Construction Company. But it hadn't been that. It had been only a meeting such as farmers often held when a pipeline was going through their farms.

“He was shot with Bill Colbeck's gun,” Nola Morgan said. “The bullet came from the gun, and the gun was traced to Bill Colbeck. But Colbeck didn't do it, any more than Finis Morgan had stabbed a Colbeck a few days before.”

She stopped speaking and stared at the floor. Emotion had piled up in her, tightening her throat and holding back her words. She had thought a great deal of Erasmus Morgan, and his murder was a thing about which she could not talk calmly. Ham, wishing for words, could think of none.

Finally, without looking up, she continued, “It was three weeks after the funeral when a man in the state penitentiary, a man named Carl Boordling, gave me a misericord he had made-”

“A what?”

“Misericord. A beautiful, intricate, and yet horrible thing. And I knew, from the strange way Carl Boordling gave me the misericord, that it somehow was a clue, or a solution, to the whole affair. And today, more than ever, I'm sure of it.”

“What makes you sure?”

“The efforts that have been made to get the misericord.”

“You have it here?”

“No. And I'm not telling anyone where it is.”

“But someone wants the misericord?”

“Carl Boordling died suddenly in the penitentiary. I think he was murdered because he gave the misericord to me. A woman came to me. She said, very pitifully, that she was Carl Boordling's mother and she wanted the misericord because it would be a keepsake of her son. I checked on her and found out she was a woman with a police record from Little Rock. Next, I was offered money for the thing. Then I was threatened if I didn't give it up.”

“Who is after it?”

“I was never able to find out definitely who it is.”

“No suspicions?”

She indicated the man fishing. “He is one of them.”

Ham stood up. He said, “This may seem kind of abrupt, but I'm going to go to work on that fisherman right now. What do you say to that?”

“That's what I've been trying to get up nerve to ask you to do,” Nola Morgan said.

Chapter IX

WHEN Ham Brooks walked out on the slough bank beside the fake fisherman, he did so with a casualness and confidence he certainly didn't feel. Ham now wore ragged overalls, a straw hat which was a wreck, and eyebrows considerably darker than normal, thanks to Nola Morgan's eyebrow pencil.

“Okay, you can go home,” he told the fisherman.

The fisherman, a short, dark, full-lipped man, was eating a sandwich. He was startled. To get time to examine Ham, he made a business of swallowing half the sandwich and swabbing out his cheeks with his tongue.

“Says which?” he demanded.

Ham sat down by the fishpoles. “Go home. I'm taking over.”

“Yeah? Taking over what?”

Ham laughed. He was proud of how natural the laugh sounded. “Oh, I'm not a wolf, Junior,” he said. “And you should put some bait on those fishhooks.”

Ham calmly picked up one of the poles, made a series of three movements with it. Then he moved the other pole, the first one, then the other one. The fisherman watched narrowly, translating the code which Ham was sending. It was the two letters, OK.

The fisherman grinned. “How come I haven't seen you around?”

“Maybe I haven't been around,” Ham said. “But don't let that worry you.”

“What'm I supposed to do?”

“Go talk to the boss,” Ham said.

“Eh?”

“That's right.”

The fisherman thought deeply for a while. Ham had the growing horrible conviction that he had said something to give himself away. But the fisherman complained, “Hell, I'm due for some sleep.”

Ham shrugged. “All I do is tell you what I'm told to say.”

The other seemed satisfied. He indicated the white Morgan house on the hill. “Girl left a while ago. Some guy with her. They left in a car.”

“You pass the word along?”

“Sure.”

“Then I should have an easy time of it. Be seeing you.”

The man grunted, and walked away, disappearing into the bushes.

HAM waited, exhibiting a patience which he was far from feeling. Knowing he was probably being watched by whoever was receiver for the messages, he was careful not to do anything suspicious. He sat down and behaved as a fisherman would behave. Who was receiving the fish-pole-transmitted messages, he could not tell, although his eyes searched the surrounding woods and fields repeatedly.

Then Nola Morgan's voice called softly, “He's far enough away.”

Ham hurriedly quit the slough bank. His leaving would alarm the message-receiver, possibly. But he wanted to follow the fisherman.

The fisherman had walked up a small hill, following a winding path, and came to a dirt road. He had a car parked there.

The road was not muddy, but it was soft in the ditches from recent heavy rains. The man's car nearly got stuck, and he swore and backed up and lunged ahead, and finally got going. By that time, Ham and Nola Morgan had reached their own cars.

Ham was driving the car he'd rented, and Nola Morgan had borrowed a machine, a coupé. It was Ham's theory that their quarry would be easier to follow with two cars.

Their system was for first one to follow the quarry, then turn off into a side road before the fisherman's suspicions were aroused, and the other take up the trail.

They went north on a highway, west on a blacktop road that was nothing extra, and on gravel again to the blufflands which overlooked the river and the long sweep of the building pipeline.

The fisherman pulled his car into a filling station which somehow, without there being anything definite to justify the impression, had the air of a black market layout. As Ham drove past, he saw the fisherman walking toward a tourist cabin. Ham didn't pay too much attention, being afraid to turn his head lest he be recognized. He had pulled his hair down over his eyes, put on a different hat, and made himself a trick moustache out of a folded shoestring, but he didn't have much confidence in the disguise.

Around the next turn, there was a long hill, and he found that Nola Morgan, who was ahead of him, had pulled off into a lane. He stopped beside her car.

She said, “That's Whitey's back there-a logical place for him to stop.”

“Logical?”

“Whitey runs a tough joint.”

“Is he a Colbeck?”

She grimaced. “No. I hope you haven't the idea that this country is populated exclusively by Colbecks and Morgans?”

“I was beginning to wonder.”

“Well, that's a long way from being a fact,” she said. “Come on. Let's see what we can find out.”

HAM had his own ideas about a woman's place, particularly when trouble was around. He touched her arm, and said flatly, “You stay here. Get in the brush and keep out of sight. I'll look around.”

She looked at him steadily. “I suppose you can see that I'm scared,” she said. “But I'm not too scared to help.”

“That isn't the point. This sort of thing is man's work.”

“I hope you're not disgusted with me?”

“Quite the contrary, believe me,” Ham assured her.

He left her in what he believed was sufficient concealment. It was a brush thicket, and if their cars were discovered from the road, she would have a chance to slip into a gully and get away. Or, if shooting started at the filling station-tourist camp, she was close enough to the cars to get to one of them and escape.

“Remember, stay right here,” Ham warned. “And if there is trouble, get help. Don't try any heroics.”

“I will.” She was noticeably pale.

Ham left her. He went toward the filling station. Because he was not sure whether there were guards in the neighborhood, he moved as cautiously as possible.

The filling station-tourist camp layout was larger than he had thought. There was a small lake behind, evidently a slough arm of the river, with a dock and floating boathouses. The place had a sullen, seedy look, and nothing had been built with any consideration for beauty.

Ham picked the spots where brush grew, where the weeds were tallest. He should, he decided, not have much trouble crawling from one cabin to another until he found the one where his quarry had gone. He worked forward.

He didn't get far.

Sound, a stirring in the bushes close by, made him tighten out flat on the ground. The next instant there was a hard, unpleasant object against his back.

“Lay still, bud,” a voice advised “This thing in your back is a twelve-gauge shotgun.”

Ham lay still.

The voice called, “Okay, Pack. This him?”

Ham lifted his head. He saw a compact man come out of the bushes. The look on the man's face put a coldness all through Ham, for it was the expression of a man who had no feelings about life or death, one way or the other.

There were other men, two of them, armed. But they were just other men at the moment, other men with normal emotions of fright and nerves and nausea. The nausea and the coldness leaped frighteningly through Ham. He was quite convinced that they were going to kill him.

The man Pack stooped and looked at Ham, examined Ham's face. He smiled a little, completely without feeling.

“That's the one Nola described to us,” he said. He straightened. He lifted his voice. “It's okay, Miss Morgan,” he called.

What a child I was in her hands, Ham thought sickly. And then, because his rage was like a scalding bath, he said what he thought, not considering that there was a lady present.

Chapter X

RENNY RENWICK encountered Monk Mayfair in the middle of the afternoon on the pipeline construction job. Renny was looking over the river-crossing, and he found Monk working. Monk was swamping for a welder.

“What you doing out here?” Renny demanded. “You're supposed to be digging up information.”

“That's what I'm doing,” Monk assured him. “I met a welder named Dave somebody-or-other in town, and we're getting to be thick friends. This Dave was a little tight, and he let slip some stuff about being on the inside. I think he really is. Dave's swamper had quit, and so I talked him into letting me take the vacant job myself.”

“The idea being to try to pump this Dave?”

“That's it.”

“Have you learned anything yet?”

“Nothing except that this thing is serious. What have you found out?”

“Not much we didn't know already. When are you and Dave off work?”

“About an hour,” Monk said. “You might stick around and sort of follow us. Maybe something will turn up.”

Renny nodded. He continued on his job of surveying the construction work.

Renny had told Monk that he'd learned nothing they didn't already know, but this was an understatement. He'd turned up much that was important, and indeed it might even be as vital as anything. He didn't have his fingers on any villains yet, but he had a hunch he could grab them where the hair was short and make it hurt.

He walked back along the line. Colbeck Construction had good equipment. Very good. Not flossy stuff, but real working outfits, and Renny had a hunch that there was no better equipment anywhere-which made it doubly mysterious that Colbeck Construction was having so much trouble.

He walked around a big ditching machine, a special job constructed for this big pipe. Good outfit, and it had cost plenty.

He went on, thoughtfully, to the river bank. The pipe was in the ditch up to the river section, and the papering machines were wrapping it before the winches lifted the pipe so the skids could be removed and the pipe lowered into the ditch. After that would come the backfiller, and the fencing crews, and the job would be done.

The pipe was being jointed together on shore for the river crossing. The joints, forty-foot river-weight steel, would be butted on the bank and the line-up clamps put in place, then tack-welded. After the stringer beads had been run by the main welder, the pipe would be worked, an inch at a time, farther out into the river.

It was supported on barges, which were carefully moored and snubbed. On the barges, the big barrel-shaped river-clamps were put on the pipe. These weighed almost a ton a section, two tons per clamp, and their purpose was to hold the pipe on the river bottom.

It sounds simple, Renny thought, just stringing a pipe across a river. But with a river like this, it's about as simple, in many respects, as building another Golden Gate bridge.

He could see-anyone could see-that the work was practically at a standstill.

RENNY discovered Bill Colbeck. The owner of Colbeck Construction was on the river barges, working his way along the catwalks toward the shore. He paused to go aboard a dredge, but did not remain there long. He came ashore and approached Renny. The man had the facial expression of a whipped animal.

“How's it going?” Renny asked.

“Fierce,” Colbeck muttered. He seemed inclined to talk now, a change from his attitude at the hotel. “I've got sanding-in trouble now. This river is a devil.”

He meant, of course, that the ditch they had dredged in the river bed for the big pipe was filling with sand faster than it was supposed to.

Colbeck glanced at Renny sheepishly. “I think I'd better apologize for my attitude.”

“Eh?”

“It didn't quite dawn on me who you were, Renwick,” Colbeck said. “After you left, it bit me, and I dug up some back copies of engineering journals with your articles in them. It made me feel foolish. You seem to be about twenty times the engineer I'll ever be.”

Renny grinned slightly and said, “Don't believe all you read.” He indicated the pipeline river-crossing. “If you could get the line across this river, you would feel better, eh?”

“Feel better, my God!” Colbeck said. “It would bring the thing down to my size. It would save my neck.”

“How long is it going to take you?”

Colbeck's mouth corners sagged. “I know you're engineer enough to see the truth. I doubt if Colbeck Construction will ever be able to put that pipeline across.”

Renny turned to look back at the river crossing. It was, he reflected, a tough job. And it was a job that would have to be pushed to a quick completion, if the big pipeline was to go into operation.

Renny had been on the telephone to Washington earlier in the afternoon, and he had received a blunt

statement about just how imperative the pipeline was to the war progress. The beginning of the line, the hundreds of miles from here back into the mid-continent oil fields, was already being filled with oil. The sections on east were complete, and almost entirely water-pressure tested. In brief, the whole line was ready to go except this vital link.

The ugly part of the situation was this: No one but Colbeck Construction could finish this link of the line within, at best, several months or a year. The reason for this was the special machinery necessary.

Building a 24-inch pipeline was something new. A long line of that diameter had never been attempted before. For this river crossing, Colbeck Construction had started a year and a half ago designing and ordering the special machinery for the river crossing part of the job. The machinery was here. It was all right here on the river bank, on the water, on the barges. That machinery had to be used. Without it, there would be a delay of months or a year until similar machinery could be constructed.

Renny scowled at the sullen, nasty looking river with its squirming expanse of muddy water. It was a big river. It was treacherous, the kind of a river that would crush the soul of an engineer.

Renny turned to Colbeck.

“What would you say to my lending a hand?” he asked.

The emotion, relief and hope, that lunged through Colbeck for a moment made the man speechless. “You-you mean that?” he asked, at last.

“Sure.”

Colbeck put out his hand. “Brother, you've got a job,” he said. Then, because his voice was so hoarse with emotion, he cleared his throat.

THEY rode back to the hotel which was Colbeck Construction headquarters. Renny asked, “How much sleep did you get last night, Colbeck?”

“A couple of hours. Which was more than I got the night before.”

Renny said, “You pile into bed right away. Get some sleep, so you'll be worth something.”

Colbeck grinned. “I believe I might. I'll take you in to Art and explain the situation.”

Arthur Strain was sitting in the office behind a pile of telephone books. He indicated the telephone wearily. “I've run up a thousand dollars in telephone tolls,” he complained. “We haven't got a chance of hiring experienced pipeliners to replace our men who are quitting. We're licked. Ordinarily, we could use green help. But this river job demands experienced men.”

Colbeck looked uneasily at Renny Renwick. “What do you say to that?”

“We may whip it,” Renny told him.

Arthur Strain, somewhat startled, asked, “What's this? You two were about to chop each other's heads off when you first met.”

“Renwick is going to take over the job of putting that pipe across the river,” Colbeck said.

“What?” Strain gasped, and his mouth remained open.

“That's right,” Colbeck said.

“Good Lord!” Strain said softly.

“Look, you don't need to be so astonished,” Bill Colbeck told his general manager. “Renwick is more engineer than I ever thought Colbeck Construction would ever have working for it. I'm damned glad to get him. You should be, too, considering how much money you've sunk into the concern.”

Arthur Strain whistled shrilly. He fumbled for a cigarette and lit it, all the while staring from Bill Colbeck to Renny Renwick. Speaking over and through his amazement, he said, “I'm bowled over. But Bill is right. This is a damned fine break.”

“Renwick has some plans,” Colbeck said.

Renny asked, “Skilled manpower your principal difficulty right now?”

“That's right,” Arthur Strain agreed. “We have lost, for one reason or another, our foundation of skilled and experienced men. Some of them have been hurt-and Colbeck will tell you that he's believed some of the accidents that injured them were rather strange-and some of them have quit us because of this Colbeck-Morgan feud.”

Renny said, “All right. First, get hold of all the experienced men you've got left. Jerk them off whatever jobs they're on now. Get them here on this river job. Every man who has experience.”

Colbeck grunted pleasantly. He reached for a telephone. “Some of them I can get by telephone. We use short-wave radio to keep in touch with our other line crews, so we can get others that way.”

“You're supposed to get some sleep,” Renny reminded him.

“I'll sleep fine,” Colbeck said, “after I know the men you want are on their way.”

Arthur Strain said, “Renwick-even with all our men, you won't have enough. I know. I had this same idea, and I checked our experienced-man lists.”

“Get them here,” Renny directed. “We'll use what we can get, and short-cut the job.”

“That'll mean taking chances, gambling. That river crossing is a devil. Lose an inch, and you've lost it all.”

“That's what we'll do.”

Arthur Strain shook his head slowly. “That'll be like walking a tight-rope across Niagara Falls. Either the rope holds you, or you're a gone goose.”

“That's about it.”

“I'm afraid I'll have to be on record as opposing your idea,” Arthur Strain said.

“Want to help us, or want to quit now?”

“Oh, don't get me wrong,” Strain said. “I'll help with every lick I can hit. After all, I've got something like four million dollars of my own money sunk into this job. If we whip that river, I might salvage that.”

“Good.”

“I hope you know what you're doing,” Strain said grimly.

“I know what I'm doing,” Renny told him.

IT was dark, nearly midnight, when Renny left the hotel where Colbeck Construction had its headquarters. Bill Colbeck had gone to bed, and so had Arthur Strain.

They had managed to locate a skeleton crew of men with river experience, divers, dredge men, men who knew pipe and a river.

Knowing pipe and a river was the thing. They had to have such men. It was a specialized knowledge, like being able to use a bombsight to put a bomb through a factory roof from twenty thousand feet, or being able to take a barrel of crude oil and get a lump of synthetic rubber out of it. Except that bombardiers and synthetic rubber chemists were a lot more plentiful than men who knew how to get twenty-four-inch pipe across a devil of a river.

Renny jumped when a, “Ps-s-s-t!” came out of the darkness. It was Monk.

“Thought we were going to get together after work,” Monk said.

“I got too busy,” Renny told him. “You got something?”

“I sure have.” Monk beckoned. “Better get out of sight. I don't think anybody suspects me yet, but I want to avoid taking chances.”

Renny joined Monk in the murk between two buildings. Monk explained quickly, “That welder I was swamping for, that Dave bird, is mixed up in it, all right. He's going to some kind of a meeting, and he's going to put in a word for me with his boss.”

“You must have really put the pressure on him,” Renny said.

“Yeah. The point is, we might trail this Dave to the meeting, and do ourselves some good.”

“Let's go,” Renny said grimly.

“I wish we could get hold of Doc.”

“Any word from Doc?”

“I was over to the jail a minute ago. The Sheriff threw me out again. He wouldn't even listen to me.”

Renny said, “That Sheriff throws us out a little too promptly.”

“Eh?”

“You know something?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a hunch this jail thing is a rig. Don't ask me why, because I haven't any proof. But that Sheriff isn't a fool, and he's been acting like one. And when intelligent people begin doing fool things, and Doc is in the neighborhood, you can generally bet a fuse has been lighted somewhere.”

“But what could be going on?”

“Don't ask me,” Renny muttered. “Let's start shagging around after this Dave individual.”

THE man called Dave had a room in a green bungalow on Wisteria Street. The light in the room went out ten minutes after midnight, and shortly a figure came out of the house.

“That's Dave,” Monk whispered to Renny. They were sitting under a low pine tree in a yard across Wisteria.

Dave went north. Monk and Renny followed, moving through yards, avoiding the sidewalks and streetlights. Dave headed for the center of town, the business section, which was largely in darkness.

A block west of the town square, which was the usual park containing the county courthouse, Dave turned into a vacant lot used for parking. He climbed into a large truck with a van body, and backed it out.

“Holy cow!” Renny rumbled. “We'll be lucky if we don't lose him now!”

To their relief, Dave pulled into a filling station on the next corner. The attendant began filling the gas tank.

“Come on!” Monk said. “I think we can climb into the back of that truck without him seeing us.”

Renny thought so, too. They kept close to the fronts of stores, doubled in behind the filling-station building, watched their chance. While the attendant was accepting payment from Dave, they were able to move silently to the open rear of the truck van, lift themselves up on the tailboard, and inside.

They sat there, in intense darkness, pleased with themselves.

The truck got moving. It lurched out into the street, and turned south.

Several bulky objects in the front of the truck body which Monk and Renny had taken to be freight of some sort now stirred and became men who had been concealed under a tarpaulin.

Glare from flashlights abruptly filled the truck.

Renny's shocked, “Holy cow!” did not get out of his throat. It seemed to stick there. There were, as nearly as his blinded eyes could discern, seven men besides themselves in the truck. He wondered, foolishly, how so many men and guns could have been hidden there without Monk and himself realizing it in time.

One of the men pulled the van doors shut, after stepping carefully past them, to say, “You with the big fists-we'll search you first.”

THE truck drove, as nearly as Renny and Monk could estimate, about seventy miles, most of the distance on concrete. During the long ride, at least two hours, all seven of the men spoke a combined total of not more than ten words. They hardly took their eyes off Monk and Renny, kept the flashlights on, and kept their guns-mostly shotguns-on cock.

Then, for about a mile, the truck jounced over rough road, the last quarter-mile steeply downhill. Renny smelled river just before they stopped.

Some of the men unloaded, and spoke in low voices to other men outside.

“Out,” Renny and Monk were ordered.

They were taken aboard a houseboat, a lubberly vessel consisting of a ponderous barge with a square unlovely house structure built upon it.

One of the men hauled open a floor trapdoor.

“Down,” he said.

Renny and Monk climbed down into the hold of the barge. The bilge stink in the place made them both cough. There was about an inch of slime underfoot, and where the barge was down at the stern, probably a foot of dirty river water. There were two electric lanterns which gave quite a bright light.

“Ham!” Monk exploded.

HAM BROOKS was sitting in a kitchen chair, with both arms extended out from his sides and held in this position by half-inch rope tied to his wrists and to either side of the barge hull.

Behind Ham, also on a chair with her wrists similarly secured, was a girl.

Monk, looking past Ham at the girl, decided she must be Nola Morgan.

The man Dave said to someone in the deckhouse above, “Toss two more chairs down here.”

Monk and Renny were put in the chairs, told, “Hold out your arms!” Dave did the knotting of the ropes to their wrists, using sailor knots and tying them as tightly as he possibly could. Renny, clenching his teeth with pain, saw that the girl's hands, and Ham's, were purple and useless from the constriction of the ropes which held them.

Monk, when he could get his mind off the pain of his wrists, asked, “Are you Nola Morgan?”

“Yes,” she said.

Ham said, “They caught us this afternoon. I thought for a minute Miss Morgan had led me into a trap, because right after the men grabbed me, one of them asked another if I was the man the girl had described. I took that to mean Miss Morgan had decoyed me into an ambush. I yelled something about it-and that tipped them off Miss Morgan was near. That was what they were trying to find out. It was a trick. They caught her.”

Ham's voice was bitter with self-condemnation. He had been responsible for the girl getting caught. He was sick about that.

Nola Morgan spoke, evenly enough.

“There's a chance for us,” she said. “They want the misericord.”

“Misericord?” Renny said.

Nola Morgan said, “If I give the misericord to them, they promise to turn us loose. Mr. Brooks thinks they won't.”

Ham said, “They won't. You can look at them and know that.”

“We'll have to take the chance.”

“No.”

The girl told Renny and Monk, “I'll have to give them the misericord. If I don't, they will leave us here in the houseboat when they drift it against the dam.”

Renny stared at her unbelievingly. “What are they going to do? Blow open the dam in the river above where we're putting the pipeline across?”

“That's right. They're going to load the houseboat with dynamite, drift it against the dam and set it off. They'll knock out the dam watchman so that he can't give an alarm or stop it.”

Renny felt his mouth getting dry from fear. He thought of the surly yellow river, already near flood, and he thought of the pipeline machinery on the lowlands at the spot where they were trying to put the line across the river.

Blowing the dam might not cause any great flood, and probably it wouldn't drown anyone. But it would sweep away the barges and wreck the special machinery for handling the twenty-four-inch pipe. It would certainly do that. For six months, a year maybe, there would be no line across the river. Not until that special machinery was replaced.

With that conviction in his mind, he had another thought, a wry one, to wit: It was odd that he should be worrying about the pipeline, whereas his own life and the lives of the others was equally at stake. That way of thinking was a soldier's way of thinking. Because actually a great deal more in the way of blood and tears and human values depended on the completion of the pipeline than hinged on whether or not Nola Morgan and Monk and Ham and himself continued to live. This pipeline was a vital weapon against the monster of war; without it, the monster would certainly flourish, live longer and more horribly.

Renny shivered.

Chapter XI

THE office had no windows, but it did have a large skylight through which all the scattered spark-like stars in the night sky were visible. The office was long, narrow, with a very high ceiling. Once, it had been a hall in the center of the building, which accounted for the absence of windows. It was an ancient worn place, but regal, too.

Tom Scott Morgan, sheriff of the county, found himself stepping softly when he came into the room. He grinned at himself, thinking that it was funny how another man could impress you until you even walked lightly in his presence.

The Sheriff put down the tray he was carrying, placing it on the table. “I figured you might use something to eat,” he said.

Doc Savage had been pacing the room, around and around with a steady, restless, intense stride. He paused, and said, “Thank you.” And in the same breath, asked, “Has the man from Little Rock gotten here yet?”

“Not yet,” the Sheriff said. “The train will be twenty minutes late. I just called.”

The bronze man made a move to resume pacing, just enough of a move to hint that he was on edge and wild with impatience. Then, with outward calm that was unruffled, he sat at a table and took one of the sandwiches.

“Any trace of the truck?” he asked.

The Sheriff was uncomfortable. “No. The last report we've been able to dig up is that it was heading north on the river highway. There's a dozen roads it could have turned off.”

“Your men are still sure that Monk and Renny climbed into the truck?”

“Yes.”

“What about Ham and your sister? Any trace of them?”

“No, not a sign,” the Sheriff said.

Sheriff Tom Scott Morgan spoke heavily, and now it became his turn to feel the stomach-hollowing rage of impatience, of futility. Because he was a careful, taciturn man who never liked to show his feelings, he deliberately sat on the corner of a desk and dangled a foot. This waiting was agony for him.

He knew it was a waste of time for him to think about the situation. He'd already beaten his brains until they ached, helplessly. His helplessness made more complete his trust in Doc Savage; he was like a man who couldn't swim hanging on to one who could.

However, he had trusted Doc Savage from the beginning. The first thing he had done after arresting Savage was to get in touch with Washington by telephone, and with the Governor of the state. Their instructions had been to work with Doc Savage, and that was his inclination, anyway. He had explained this to his sister, Nola, and she had surprised him by agreeing immediately. She had not, at first, realized Savage's standing.

As Doc Savage had made succeeding moves, the Sheriff had become more puzzled. He had understood Doc's motive in sending for his aides in New York-but why had the bronze man despatched Nola on that mission? They had talked over the summoning of Monk, Ham and Renny here in this office-Bill Colbeck and Arthur Strain had been present at the time-and it had struck the Sheriff that it would be much easier and more sensible to telephone Monk and the others. But Doc had not agreed. He had insisted on a personal messenger, and Nola was a logical one, because she had a good private plane.

Very carefully, though, Doc Savage had explained to Nola that she might be followed or waylaid and she must be careful. There had been only Nola and her brother present when Doc explained this. The bronze man had, the Sheriff knew, been reluctant to let Nola do the job. But she had, and she had come back safely, and she had been followed as Doc Savage predicted she would be.

The bronze man, the Sheriff realized, had known almost certainly that the girt would be followed. This had surprised the Sheriff, and given him the conviction that Doc knew exactly what he was doing.

Why Monk and Ham and Renny hadn't been told that Doc Savage was really not under arrest, the Sheriff didn't know. He suspected it was a case of not having too many cooks. As far as the Sheriff knew, only he and his sister were aware that Savage was not a prisoner.

Savage's instructions had been to allow everything to proceed normally, as it would if he were in jail.

The exception was the misericord. They had sent for that.

DOC SAVAGE lifted his head abruptly, listening to a train-whistle in the distance. He glanced at the Sheriff, and the officer nodded. “He'll be on that train,” he said.

“The misericord will be brought directly here?” Doc Savage asked.

"Yes."

The misericord had been in the safety deposit box in the Little Rock bank where the Morgans kept an account. Nola Morgan had taken it there, as soon as she learned that it was important, and that it was desired by others who were willing to take violent measures to get it.

Two deputies had gone to the Little Rock bank to get the misericord. They had left yesterday, and the delay was due to a misunderstanding with the bank officials, necessitating considerable telephoning for the purpose of identification.

But the misericord should be on that train which had just whistled. Doc Savage wanted to see it. In a few minutes, it would be in his hands.

Doc asked the Sheriff, "Any more threats?"

The Sheriff shook his head. Rage made him compress his lips until they were as tight as the hard lips of a catfish.

There had been only the one telephone call, anonymous. Turn over the misericord, or Nola Morgan would be killed. This communication had been their first proof that Nola Morgan was in trouble, and ever since the Sheriff had been fighting a sickness inside.

Footsteps sounded outside. A voice called, "Tom?"

"They're here," Sheriff Tom Scott Morgan said swiftly. He opened the door. "You got it?" he demanded.

The two deputies who had gone to Little Rock came inside. One of them said, "Sure. Here it is."

THE misericord was a large one, about sixteen inches long. A true misericord was a thing with a thin needlelike blade, its purpose being to slip between the joints of a suit of armor in order to finish off the occupant. This one was large for that, although the blade was thin enough, and wicked.

Doc Savage turned the misericord in his hands. It was hand-made, and exquisitely so. The workmanship was careful, painstaking. He held the weapon by the blade and swished the handle up and down, and the blade was flexible.

"The handle been taken apart?" he asked.

Sheriff Tom Scott Morgan nodded. "Taken apart. The whole thing X-rayed, and gone over with a microscope for signs of engraving. Nothing to be found."

Doc pulled the blade thoughtfully across a finger, testing it.

"This was made by Carl Boordling in the State Penitentiary," he asked. "And it was given to Nola Morgan with the inference that it was the clue to who murdered Erasmus Morgan?"

"That's right."

The bronze man examined the blade intently, and moved a fingernail over its edge. He seemed totally preoccupied in the cutting edge of the knife, as if it held the truth about the knife.

"What about this Carl Boordling," the bronze man said suddenly. "Who was he?"

Tom Scott Morgan had much information about Boordling on the tip of his tongue. “The man was educated, a college product, an engineer, who went to the dogs. He came here from the east. I think his family was killed in an automobile accident when be was driving the car, and this put him on the downgrade. He was here in town about two years, and hung out with a tough crowd.

“Several months ago, Boordling was suspected of a black-market business in gasoline tickets. He would do anything for money. Later he was arrested-”

“After Erasmus Morgan was killed?”

“Yes. But he was never suspected of any connection with the death of Erasmus Morgan. Boordling was arrested for black-marketing gasoline, and convicted and got a quick trip to the penitentiary. Somehow or other he wound up in the state pen, not the federal, because the state handled the prosecution. Anyway, he was in State when he gave my sister that misericord. And a few days later he died, ostensibly from poison he had secured from the penitentiary photographic darkroom chemical supply, and taken deliberately. Suicide. My sister thinks he was murdered.”

Doc said, “Will you bring me this Boordling's record?”

The Sheriff stood up quickly. “Sure.” He went away, and was back shortly with the galley card.

Doc looked over Carl Boordling's record. It was not particularly vicious; it was just distasteful and unpleasant. It was the story of the fall of a man from a respected and skilled position. The wreck of a career.

Abruptly Doc Savage picked up a pencil and ringed a part of Carl Boordling's record.

“Employed five years with the King Novelty Company, during which he was credited with four inventions.” The bronze man leaned back; for a while he looked at the ceiling fixedly, thoughtfully. “I think I remember some of the products of the King Novelty Company,” he said.

Suddenly he fished through the papers on his desk. Not finding what he wished, he asked the Sheriff, “Do you have one of your business cards with you?”

The Sheriff shook his head, then admitted sheepishly, “I got an old campaign card of mine in my billfold. That do?”

“Let's see it.”

Sheriff Morgan was baffled by what the bronze man did with the card. Doc merely held the edge of the card against the blade of the misericord and-holding misericord and business card close to his face-slowly cut into the edge of the card with a single long stroke.

That was all. But from the bronze man's facial expression, the Sheriff knew that something important had happened.

Doc got to his feet.

He wrapped the knife very carefully in paper, tied it with string, and handed it to Morgan. “Hang on to this,” he said. “It's going to hang a man.”

“Damn me!” Morgan said. “I don't get it.”

Doc said, “Keep your deputies on call here. I'm going out to see a man. If things go right, I will be able to

wind this thing up quickly by myself. If not, I'll need help, and plenty of help."

Morgan indicated the knife. "What'll I do with this?"

"Keep it safe."

"But if something would happen, how would I know-"

"Get the King Novelty Company on the telephone and ask them what Carl Boordling invented for them," Doc said. He moved toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" Morgan said sharply. "What's the idea of not telling me what this misericord means?"

"Our bird is a very bold bird, but if it was to get around that we know what the knife means, the bird wouldn't be bold. The bird would take wings, and might get away. Or is that childish?"

Morgan scratched his head. "I'll think about it and let you know."

DOC SAVAGE moved rapidly when he reached the street, heading for the business district. It was very dark, the hour not far from dawn, and the streets deserted.

He walked rapidly, then slackened his pace. He had been determined on a course when he left the jail, but now indecision had taken hold of him. He was not sure.

He stopped finally, in the murk of a doorway, and gave more thought to what he should do. His first intent had been to act directly, to confront the man he suspected, to charge the man, arrest him. He had enough proof. Until tonight, he had had suspicion, enough suspicion to make certainty in his mind. He had known quite surely who had killed old Erasmus Morgan, and who had caused all the trouble for Colbeck Construction, and he had known why. But the proof he had was circumstantial, a putting of two and two together to get four. It was not direct proof. And direct proof he had to have. The knife, the misericord, had given him that. He had more than an opinion, a guess, now.

But now he was thinking of Monk, Ham, Renny and Nola Morgan, and he wasn't quite sure direct action was the thing. Standing there in the darkness, his uncertainty increased until he decided to do it differently.

He resumed walking until he came to an all-night garage with a lunch stand adjacent. In the lunchroom there was no one but a sleepy counterman.

"Use your phone?" the bronze man asked.

"Go ahead. It's a pay phone," the counterman said indifferently.

Doc Savage picked up the receiver. But he did not make a call; instead, he put the receiver back on the hook, and went outside.

Walking slowly in the darkness, he began practicing Pack's voice, as nearly as he remembered it. He went back, with his mind, to the minutes three days ago when he had been hidden in the rope sling under the pipe-truck and had listened to Pack talk to his men. He concentrated on bringing out of his memory Pack's tone, his inflection, all of Pack's character that was in Pack's speech. He tried Pack's voice again and again, using it to rehearse the simple speech he intended to make over the telephone.

He went back to the lunchroom telephone and called the number he wanted.

“I guess you know who this is,” he said into the telephone mouthpiece. “I wouldn't call you like this, but there's a bad break. We can get the misericord if you'll come out here where we're holding them.”

That was his speech. That was all he intended to say. He held his breath, waiting.

Low frightened profanity came over the wire for a moment, then, “I'll be there right away!” The receiver went down on the other end of the wire.

The bronze man breathed inward deeply, held the breath, let it out with a rush of relief. His shirt was wet with the perspiration that tension had brought.

Chapter XII

THE highway was a damp ribbon through the predawn fog. It was no longer dark, but the sun was not visible because the fog that came from the river, where the cold sullen muddy water was condensing the moisture in the warmer air, was crossing the highway in slow rolling masses.

The fog, or possibly dampness coming up through the concrete during the night, had put a wet film over the highway on which showed to some extent the tracks of the car which Doc Savage was following.

By keeping a close watch on the pavement, he could guess how far the other car was ahead, and measure his speed accordingly. He was going fast. For thirty miles he had not been under fifty. For a while he had been able to watch the car without difficulty, because the driver had kept his yellow fog lights on, but now that it was lighter, the fog lights were off, and it was something of a blind-man's buff.

When Doc suddenly discovered the fresh car tracks were no longer on the wet pavement, if was a biting shock. He slowed the car, a little at a time, decreasing the engine speed so that it would sound as if it had gone on. He pulled over to the side of the road, shut off the motor, got out and went back, running.

The car could not have turned off far back, probably within the last half or three-quarters of a mile. He kept to the side of the road, on the shoulder, watching and listening as he went.

He found a side road, gravel. It did not show the tracks nearly as plainly, but there were pebbles which had been turned over freshly, small signs, difficult to locate. The car had turned off on the gravel.

He did not go back for his own machine. This road would not extend far. It led down toward the river, and there were no bridges here, nowhere for the road to go but to the river bank.

He followed it half a mile, then heard men running in front of him, coming toward him. He left the gravel road in a hurry, taking cover.

The running men appeared out of the fog, two of them, Dave and another. They were breathing heavily.

Dave stopped, told the other man loudly, “This is far enough for you. You stay here. If you hear my signal, pass it back quick.”

“You'll whistle three times if cops come, twice if somebody comes and you're not sure whether it's cops, and once if it's somebody who is okay?”

“That's it,” Dave said.

Dave ran on up the road. The man he had left got off the road, taking shelter in bushes, and remained there.

Satisfied the pair were lookouts only, Doc Savage went on, keeping off the road, moving through the brush parallel to it as silently as he could.

He came shortly to a house, a ramshackle place that had no panes in the windows and no doors on the frames. Nearby were two sheds obviously used as garages. Beyond was the river, a floating dock, a houseboat tied to the dock.

In front of one of the garage sheds stood the car which Doc Savage had followed here. Three men waited beside it, impatiently, glancing often at the houseboat.

Shortly a man came running from the houseboat carrying a man's coat, hat, trousers and necktie. The garments, Doc saw, were those that had been worn by the man he had trailed.

One of the waiting men started a hurried exchanging of the clothes for his own. He got into the car when he had finished the job.

He asked anxiously, "Think I look enough like him to fool anybody who happened to be trailing him into following me away from here?"

"Keep your face down, and you'll get by."

"What if I'm picked up?"

"You don't know anything. Stick to that."

The man drove away. He was frightened.

The others watched him go, and one muttered, "I wish to hell that dynamite was here, and this thing was over with."

"What I don't get," his companion complained, "is who made that telephone call, if Pack didn't?"

"Damned if I know."

"Well, it's sure queer."

"Just so they don't catch that truckload of dynamite on its way here. That would be a hard thing to explain." The man nodded toward the river dam about a mile downstream. "They would sure as blazes guess it was going to be used on the dam."

THAT was all Doc Savage was able to get of their conversation, because the pair moved into small bushes and crouched down there in hiding. Doc had not been able to hear all their words, but by watching their lips closely, he had a general idea of what they had said.

A truck and dynamite and the dam-these were words that had clattered heavily on his ears. He frowned at the brown ugly river, visible between the bushes, wishing he didn't have to face the conviction that these men intended to dynamite the dam and send an increased volume of water down to ruin the Colbeck Construction river pipeline crossing job.

Suddenly Doc wished he had brought along help. It would be no spectacular flood if they broke the dam, because it was not a high dam. It was not even likely that much farmland would be flooded. But the pipeline-crossing would be wiped out. All the barges, the machinery that was specially designed for work with twenty-four-inch pipe, would be torn loose, smashed, lost in the river.

He decided, abruptly, to get to a telephone and summon help. There should be houses along the highway from which he could telephone.

He was moving away through the undergrowth when he heard a truck in the distance. Then a whistle, and the whistle was relayed. A single whistle. That, he remembered, was to mean that whoever was coming was known. And he could tell that the truck was on the gravel road.

He halted, weighing possibilities, and in the end decided he dared not take the time to go call help.

He went back, this time to the river bank. In the bushes there, he stripped off shoes and coat and shirt and necktie, concealing these carefully in the weeds. He rolled his trouser legs as high as they would go, so they wouldn't bag full of water and impede swimming too much.

The truck arrived. It was not a large one, and the back was open. It contained possibly a dozen metal kegs of the type used to pack blasting powder.

“Hey, I thought it was supposed to be dynamite,” someone complained.

The driver said, “I was lucky to get this. It'll do the job.”

It would do the job all right. It would do it as well as dynamite, probably.

Doc Savage decided that now was as good a time as any to try to reach the houseboat. He couldn't wait much longer, because the fog was beginning to thin over the river.

He eased quietly into the river. Because this was backwater from a dam, and the river was high and tormented anyway, enough bushes overhung the water to conceal him.

The water was cold; not a clean bite, but a nasty, clammy, lifeless chilling sensation. He sank very deep, and took his time.

It was not too difficult, if he had no mishaps. The greatest distance he would have to cover without showing himself-which meant swimming underwater-was not more than fifty feet. There was nothing to keep him from making that, nothing whatever. But at the end of it, if he put his head out of the water in the wrong place, he would probably be shot instantly. It was not an easy swim.

He breathed very deeply and rapidly to get an extra charge of oxygen, then took a normal breath, sank and swam. He allowed for the slight current, swam with long strokes on his back under the water, so that he could tell if he came too near the surface.

There was plenty of air in his lungs when he bumped into the houseboat. He worked around to the stern. The slime seemed to be half an inch thick on the timbers.

He raised to the surface and got air into his lungs and nothing unexpected happened.

HE was on the river-ward side of the boat. By lifting an arm, he could touch the edge of the hull, the rail. He closed both hands over this, lifted silently on to the deck.

He could not stay there. He could hear voices in the superstructure, one of them the voice of the man he had followed here. They were excited, uneasy.

Near the bronze man's feet was a crude hatch, a square affair, that might admit him to the innards of the houseboat hull. He sank beside the hatch, found it had a heavy set of hinges, a hasp, with a bolt thrust

through the hasp. He managed to unscrew the nut on the end of the bolt with his fingers.

The hatch made a small rusty grunting as he opened it. Out of the hole came the smell of disuse, of river slime.

He went down quickly, pulling the hatch shut behind him to block off the light. He crouched there. There had not been much light outside, but this was dark by comparison.

At the far end of the cavernous, low-ceilinged barge hull, a single electric hand-lantern, hung from the ceiling. Its battery was low, the light from it reddish and inadequate.

He distinguished four figures tied to chairs-Monk, Ham, Renny and Nola Morgan.

He became tight with anxiety lest they had not recognized him. Then he heard Monk, his voice so grated by pain that it seemed to come from a sand-filled throat, say, “Quiet! For God's sake, be quiet!” Monk had recognized him.

The four, Doc saw, were not tied to the chairs, but to either side of the hull instead. Their arms were stretched out tightly, and their congested hands were not pleasant to look at.

There were no guards in the hull. Doc went forward quickly. He had his pocket knife out when he reached Renny, and he sliced through the rope.

Renny's arms, when they came loose from the rope, seemed to take on enormous weight, a force that pulled Renny forward and down, all but out of the chair. And they wouldn't bend.

In the midst of his trouble with his arms, Renny tried to point upward. He was afraid to speak. He was trying to signal.

He meant that there was a hatch overhead. Open. It led into the cabin.

Doc nodded that he understood. He went on, cut loose Nola Morgan next, then Ham and Monk. All of them had the same difficulty with their hands and arms. Their arms had been stretched out by the ropes so long that now they were of no use.

Doc watched them closely. There would be a few moments now when they could do nothing. When, moreover, there would be awful stinging agony as circulation resumed in their tortured hands. He watched them fighting the pain. He went to each of them silently, doing what he could to restore use of their arms.

OVERHEAD, there was scuffling, and a heavy bump as a burden was slammed down on the cabin floor. Someone cursed the slammer of the burden, ending by asking what he was trying to do, blow them all to kingdom come.

The other laughed sourly. “Black powder won't explode from shock.”

“Well, take it easy anyway,” the first man snapped. “How many more of those kegs are there?”

“Eleven more. Twelve altogether.”

“Is it enough?”

“If it's set off right, it is.”

“Well, how'll we set it off?”

They got into an argument then about how to set off the powder, one school of opinion maintaining that if it was just exploded in the cabin, or even in the hull, most of the force would be expended upward, and the dam wouldn't be blown out even if the barge was smack against the dam at the time.

Doc beckoned at Nola Morgan, Monk and the others. He indicated the stern hatch where he had entered. His plan was to get all of them outside and into the river. And then, if they were very lucky, they could swim underwater as far as the shore.

“Can you swim fifty feet or so under water?” he whispered to Nola Morgan.

She nodded.

They were under the hatch, and Doc had his hands against the underside of the hatch, ready to shove, when he heard footsteps on the deck. One man.

The man walked to the riverward end of the houseboat. He stopped, standing directly overhead. Doc stood there tensely, imagining the man looking around, searching for signs of trouble.

“What the hell!” the man overhead said explosively. He stooped, and Doc heard the bolt rattle against the hasp. The man had discovered the bolt out of the hasp, was replacing it. They were locked in.

But the man didn't go away. He stood there, and his curiosity must have climbed, because suddenly he yanked the bolt out and hauled open the hatch. Then he made a fool mistake, putting his head down the hole to see if anything was wrong.

Doc got him by the throat.

Chapter XIII

THE ideal result would be to get the man silenced instantly. Doc tried very hard to do it. He failed. It seemed to him that the victim could not possibly have made more noise. The fellow kicked his feet frantically, on the deck, beat the deck with his hands. Moreover, he made an assortment of squawks by squeezing air out past the bronze man's fingers around his throat.

Doc got one hand loose, hit the man an uppercut, as hard as he could manage. That silenced the fellow. But it was too late. They were yelling in the cabin. The man had a revolver. It dropped down into the hull. Monk got it. His hands were so stiff that he had to hold the weapon with both of them.

“Out!” Doc said. “Fast!”

He went out of the hole himself. Their position was bad. They were outnumbered. The others were in no condition for really effective fighting.

Men were coming down the narrow deck from the deckhouse door, shouting questions.

Ham Brooks, with tardy presence of mind, shouted, “It's all right. I tripped.”

The men kept coming.

Doc Savage reached up, got the overhang of the deckhouse roof, and chinned himself, hooked his elbows over the edge, and climbed on top. The roof was tar-papered, and the covering was

sun-cracked.

There were two stovepipes protruding from the roof. Doc kicked them violently as he went past, hoping the commotion in the cabin would add to the confusion. One of the stovepipes broke off, bounced ahead of him, and he scooped it up.

He discovered a man standing on the floating dock, holding a powder drum in his arms, staring foolishly. Doc threw the stovepipe at the man, and it hit him squarely across the face. The man did not drop the drum, did not move, did not do anything but stare. He had a revolver stuck into his belt.

Doc decided to try to get the gun. He made a short running jump for the man. The spectacular method would have been to jump and hit the man with both feet, an impact that would kill or badly injure the fellow. It was tempting. But if something went wrong, it could readily mean a broken leg. Doc jumped for the dock beside the man.

He landed heavily, letting momentum throw him against the man. The fellow staggered, flailed his arms, the powder drum falling. Doc tried to grab him, but the man-gun still in his belt-somersaulted off the dock backward into the river.

The powder drum was rolling slowly. Doc got it before it went off the dock edge, and with it, jumped back aboard the houseboat.

Two men, just coming out of the door, saw him and retreated. They backed into the cabin. There were four others in the cabin at least, judging from the sounds.

Doc, close against the deckhouse wall to one side of the door, struck the powder drum against the edge of the door. The lid, a push-in affair similar to those on most tin cans, popped off, letting the black powder flow out.

Doc heaved loose powder through the cabin door as if he was shoveling wheat. The powder scattered in the cabin about like black wheat. When he had the drum nearly empty, he heaved that inside, too.

“If you shoot,” he shouted, “you'll explode the powder!”

This wasn't exactly true. Unless the gun flame actually touched the powder grains, it wouldn't catch. And if it did, it would burn, not explode. But it would burn very briskly.

AT the stern, there was scuffling. Doc hadn't noticed how many had run aft. But now a shot banged out at the stern; a man said something sick and horrified before he stumbled backward into view. He sat down on the deck, holding his upper chest.

Monk came into view, holding a gun with both hands, aiming at the shot man's head. But Monk changed his mind-to Doc Savage's unbounded relief-and kicked the wounded man's jaw somewhat out of shape, instead of shooting him again.

Monk shouted at Doc, “Only two came back here! Renny got the other one!”

“Throw me your gun!” Doc said.

On shore, a man galloped into view and bellowed, “What the hell's going on there?”

Monk decided to shoot him.

“Throw me that gun!” Doc said again.

Monk got it this time. He started to toss the weapon toward Doc, became afraid it would fall overboard, and stumbled down the deck a few yards before he tossed it.

Doc caught the weapon.

He put the muzzle close to the powder he had spilled and pulled the trigger. The muzzle flame fired the spilled powder.

The amount of fire and smoke was entirely satisfactory. Doc lost his eyebrows, and as much of his bronze-colored hair as wasn't too damp to singe.

Inside the cabin, there was a *whoosh!* Smoke. Fire. Screams.

Doc had stumbled back and fallen in a sitting position on the deck, thinking he was burned worse than he was. Organizing himself, he rolled over and aimed carefully at the man on shore, who was still bellowing demands about what the hell was wrong.

Doc shot at the man three times. Three shells were all that were left in the gun. Unscathed, his target galloped off into the brush, yelling violent personal opinions.

Doc stared at the gun. The barrel, he noticed for the first time, had a noticeable bend.

Monk shouted, “Don't shoot that gun! I hit at the guy Renny got and missed-struck the deckhouse and bent the barrel.”

“You picked a nice time to tell me,” Doc said.

A MAN came out of the cabin door. He came out in a flying leap, smoke streaming from his clothes, apparently blinded. He tripped over the deck rail and slammed down flat on the dock in a fall that was awful, but probably not fatal.

Ham Brooks-he was up on the cabin top-shouted, “The whole boat's going to blow up!” This was for the effect, because it wasn't going to do anything of the kind. But it was good propaganda for the men in the cabin. They began coming out.

Three appeared, one of them temporarily blinded, the other two confused but with good eyesight. Monk and Ham and Renny jumped down on the float and coöperated in a reception committee. They couldn't do much more than club with their benumbed arms, but they did that with enthusiasm.

Another man dashed out of the cabin. Nola Morgan said, “I'll try my luck on this one.” She had picked up the heavy short bolt which had been through the lock hasp of the stern hatch, and she held it tightly clenched in her fist for weight and authority.

She hit the man's jaw. He dropped as if killed. Nola let fall the bolt, and clamped both palms against her cheeks.

“Oh!” She was horrified. “I didn't intend to hit him so hard! I killed him!”

She hadn't. The man rolled over, got up, and fell into the river, came to the surface, clutched the edge of the dock and hung on, screaming that he couldn't swim and how nice he'd be if they only wouldn't let him drown.

Monk looked at the deckhouse. “The big stink himself hasn't come out!” he said.

Doc listened to a man moaning and shrieking in terror inside the cabin. He decided the fellow was probably harmless, and went in. The place was full of smoke and the formidable odor and bite of much burned powder.

With a little groping, Doc got hold of Arthur Strain and hauled him out.

ABOUT that time, they heard a truck motor start, and heard the truck leave rapidly.

“There goes the rest of them,” Renny said disgustedly.

Doc said, “I'll see if there's a phone at the dam.”

The bronze man went ashore, and ran toward the dam. He exhausted his wind before he reached the dam, and arrived puffing for air.

He found a fat, amiable, white-haired man serving as dam watchman. The watchman was disgruntled.

“What the devil's going on?” he demanded. “My pal Bill, who was playing checkers with me, lit out a minute ago like he was afire.”

“Who is your pal Bill?” Doc asked.

“Fellow who lives on that houseboat where the rumpus was.”

“Your pal Bill,” Doc explained, “was probably going to crack you over the head in a few minutes. Then they were going to float the houseboat against the dam with a load of powder aboard, and blow out a section of the dam.”

The old man said something appropriate, and added, “I better get my shotgun.”

“Where's your telephone?”

“In the shed. Blow out the dam? Who'd want to do that?”

“A man named Arthur Strain,” Doc told him. He went to the telephone.

LATE that afternoon, Sheriff Tom Scott Morgan came into his office grinning. He told Doc Savage, “Strain is arguing with the Prosecuting Attorney, offering to plead guilty of trying to squeeze Bill Colbeck out of Colbeck Construction. All Strain wants in return is not to be charged with murdering Erasmus Morgan.”

“That would be a good trade,” Doc said.

“Wouldn't it! Fat chance Strain has got.”

Monk and Ham and Nola Morgan had been waiting in the office. Nola asked, “Tom, have you got that misericord? I want to see it work.”

“Oh, sure.” The sheriff went to the desk around which they were sitting, opened a drawer and produced the misericord. “It was right here all the time. I thought you knew that. No, I guess I forgot to mention it.”

Doc Savage demonstrated with the long-bladed misericord and a stiff business card.

“Carl Boordling, the man who made this knife, was evidently a party to the murder of Erasmus Morgan, or at least he knew that Strain did it,” Doc explained.

He indicated the misericord's blade edge.

“Carl Boordling,” he said, “was once with a novelty manufacturing concern which marketed one of those dime-store gadgets you probably have all seen. The gadget consists of a round piece of cardboard with a metal or plastic ribbon attached to the center. You hold the cardboard in one hand and draw the ribbon between the thumbnail and finger of your other hand. There is a sound-track, small ridges and depressions just as in the cut of a phonograph record, on the ribbon. When your thumbnail is drawn over it the novelty gadget will say something like, 'Hello, sweetheart,' or, 'Happy birthday, dear.'

“When Carl Boordling was sent to the penitentiary on another charge, he must have been afraid Arthur Strain would kill him because of what he knew. So he made this misericord by hand, and he put a sound-track on the blade. It must have been very painstaking work, but Boordling was an expert at that sort of thing, so he managed very nicely.”

Doc drew one edge of the knife across the card edge.

It said: “Arthur Strain killed-”

He drew the other edge over the card and got: “Erasmus Morgan.”

“That,” Doc Savage explained, “is why Arthur Strain was so anxious to get the misericord. It was probably the only real evidence against him.”

Renny Renwick and Bill Colbeck arrived shortly afterward. Colbeck was excited. “I hear Strain's trying to make a deal. Confess he was throwing the hooks into me if they'll not charge him with murder!”

“Not a chance of such a deal,” Doc assured him.

“I hope not!” Colbeck said indignantly. “He's got a nerve!”

Renny volunteered, “Doc, we're going to lick that river crossing. We've got enough experienced men. I think we'll have the line across the river in another two days. Anyway, we're sure to get it across.”

Monk asked Colbeck, “You'll lose your time-forfeit anyway, won't you?”

“I suppose so,” Colbeck admitted.

“Will it break you?”

“It'll sure give me a hell of a bend.” Bill Colbeck grinned. “I like the way it's turning out, though. My God, it would have been awful if Art Strain had boosted me out of the company and taken control.”

“Would Strain have managed that?”

“He sure would have. I was all set to take another loan off him, and I couldn't pay it back if this river-crossing had flopped-which he was going to see that it did. And I'd have given him enough more company stock to give him iron-bound control. Yeah, he'd have stolen the outfit.”

Nola Morgan shuddered. “It doesn't seem possible there could have been murder and such conniving for control of just one business concern.”

Bill Colbeck snorted. “Listen, I've got a fifteen million dollar outfit. I work all over the midwest. And you don't build twenty-four-inch pipelines with peanuts.”

Monk looked admiringly at Bill Colbeck, thinking that Colbeck didn't look or act like a guy with fifteen million. Monk liked to hear somebody talking about that much money. It restored a guy's faith in himself. Monk's bank-account was currently slightly below zero, so his faith needed restoring.

He made a mental note to put the bite on Bill Colbeck for a small loan. He'd probably get it.

On the strength of the idea he made sheep's eyes at Nola Morgan. He'd ask her for a date, he decided.

It was discouraging to have Doc Savage stand up at this point and say, “Miss Morgan and I are going out tonight and see what we can do about forgetting this mess.”

Most unsatisfactory.

THE END