



THE LAND OF FEAR

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. SKELETON DEATH

THE customs inspector thought later that perhaps he should have done something about it. But there was nothing he could have done. Customs inspectors can prevent contraband from entering the country, but *fear* can pass any boundary line, duty free.

The inspector was a war veteran. He had seen fear in many forms, but never such fear as was mirrored in the eyes of the three who came in on the *S. S. Gentina* that morning.

Afterward, the inspector understood a little, and felt an icy grip on his own heart when he realized that one of those three who stood before him had already been doomed, that a strange, horrible death was going to strike before the sun set.

The policeman who stood at the dock was attracted at first by the costumes the trio wore. He was no style expert, but it didn't take a style expert to know that the clothes were old-fashioned. Then, as he stepped forward, his curiosity aroused, he forgot all about the clothes. He knew fear when he saw it.

There were two men and a girl. Their faces were bewildered, and they slipped along furtively, huddled together.

The *S. S. Gentina* was not one of the aristocrats of the seas; it seldom carried passengers. There was no huge crowd of welcoming relatives and friends to greet those who disembarked. Only roustabouts were on the wharf.

But even these the three drew back from, their eyes betraying a panic that could not have been induced by the sound of city traffic, the mournful toots of tugboats. The policeman stepped forward and spoke gruffly.

"Here, you! Where do you think you're going?"

The men stopped, faces suddenly white. Only the girl seemed able to speak, and her voice was little more than a whisper—a soft whisper of slurring consonants.

"We—we want to see Doc Savage," she said.

The policeman's air of harshness dropped from him, and his voice was one of deep respect as he answered, "An' shure, miss, that won't be hard to do. Just get a taxi, an'—"

The policeman stopped. His audience had vanished, had slipped by him so quickly that he was surprised to find them gone.

A frown crossed his Irish face. Half irritated, he walked down the wharf and addressed the first mate.

The *S. S. Gentina's* officer shook his head. "You know as much about 'em as I do, copper. They kept to their cabins most of the way across. Seemed to be afraid of their shadows, almost. That girl's a looker though, ain't she? Comes from Genlee, somewhere in Africa, though I'll be blasted if I know where it is."

The policeman scowled and turned back. Then he shrugged. The girl had said they wanted to see Doc Savage. That was a good sign.

THE taxi darted under elevated tracks, missed a truck by an eyelash and halted with shrieking brakes at a red light, barely averting a collision with a car ahead. No words of caution came from the rear seat. The driver was annoyed, vaguely. Usually when he drove, strangers to the city held their breaths and looked alarmed.

Then, although the driver listened closely, he heard nothing that was being said by his fares. Accustomed as he was to eavesdropping, he was balked.

"You really think this Doc Savage can help us?" one of the men passengers asked. His head was bowed, his attitude that of resignation. The others barely stirred. It was as if the question had been asked many times in recent days, as if question and answer were merely part of an accustomed routine.

"He—he's got to, Richard!" the girl breathed. Her round face was flushed; her small hands opened and closed convulsively.

"And he will, Virginia," the second man said, His voice was intended to be reassuring, but there was no mistaking the undercurrent of doubt and worry.

"He must," the girl said simply. Her round face was framed by black curls that fell to her chin; her lips were soft, but there was more than a hint of determination in her fear-clouded eyes. A cape was about her shoulders, despite the warmth of the day—a cape that enhanced the ruffled sleeves, the wide, flaring skirt of her gown.

The strained faces of the men tightened as she glanced at them. One, the smaller of the two, had the pathetic appearance of a bewildered watchdog. The other, tall, brown-eyed, smooth-shaven, was younger, but his features appeared tired; his broad shoulders slumped.

The cab slid to a stop before a hotel.

"I'm Harlan Spotfield," said the taller of the two men, as he halted before the room clerk. "I want three adjoining rooms for myself and my companions." A strange ring, a large cameo set on a gold band, flashed as he reached for a pen.

The room clerk glanced at the register after they had signed. "Harlan Spotfield. Virginia Jettmore. Richard Castleman. All of Genlee, Africa," he read.

Spotfield turned, broad shoulders squared. "I'm going to Doc Savage at once," he said. "You two go to youah rooms. Stay there. If—if you don't hear from me in two hours, you know what to do. Carry on. Much depends on us. Many lives are at stake."

Many tragedies might have been prevented, many people would have been saved much trouble, if the three had used a simpler method of getting in touch with Doc Savage—if they'd used a telephone.

At least one person would still be alive. But that realization was only to come later, long after the damage had been done, when even Doc Savage's trusted lieutenants were beginning to know the meaning of fear.

VIRGINIA JETTMORE already knew. Her wide, flaring skirt billowed and swung as she paced the hotel room, small hands clenched, face frozen. She watched a clock ceaselessly.

"Two hours—and no word." The girl's voice was emotionless, devoid of feeling, but its very flatness carried an ominous note.

The little man started. His head lifted, and the fear he'd shown before was nothing compared with the stark terror his face now reflected.

"It's followed us!"

The little man rose to his feet, his eyes darting wildly, like those of an animal seeking to escape from a trap; his mouth worked spasmodically, but no words came.

"Stop it!" cried the girl. "Moah than our lives are at stake! Wait!"

Richard Castleman sank back, the light of sanity slowly returning to his features.

Virginia Jettmore walked to the phone, lifted the receiver. "Get me Doc Savage's office, please," she said. Her voice was steady, but the hand that held the receiver was white, the fingers twisted and strained.

A voice answered. For a moment, Virginia's face dropped its tenseness; then her words poured out in a steady stream. She stopped, and her features changed.

The small man watching her needed no explanation to understand the words she was hearing.

The girl's voice died away. With a hand that trembled violently, she replaced the telephone receiver.

"He—he never arrived!" she faltered. Her face was an ashen caricature of human features surrounded by

the charcoal of black curls.

"And Doc Savage?" Richard Castleman's voice was barely a whisper.

"He's not theah, either, but is expected soon."

The little man's shrunken shoulders seemed to swell. His deep-set eyes glowed with a hidden fire. For a moment, it was possible to forget that he was small, insignificant. Courage flared briefly in a body that had been made for carrying out orders, not for initiative.

"I—I'll go—and I'll reach Doc Savage!" he said.

MANY blocks away, a bronze giant was driving along slowly in a big car. Tendons like cables stood out on the hands holding the steering wheel. The bronze of his hair was a little darker than the bronze of his skin.

Seated in the automobile, it was difficult for the casual observer to realize the true proportions of the bronze giant's stature. Corded muscles meshed under his skin in a manner which made their tremendous size scarcely noticeable.

People turned, to stare with awe and admiration. Doc Savage apparently was unaware of their scrutiny, but his gold-flecked eyes missed nothing.

A voice came from a loud-speaker cleverly concealed somewhere in the car.

"Doc! A girl just telephoned. Appeared frightened. Wouldn't say what the trouble was."

The bronze man stepped down on the accelerator; the big car shot ahead through city traffic. The message had come from Doc Savage's office over a special micro-wave radio beam.

There was nothing to tell Doc Savage that this call was any different from the others he received each day asking for aid. A majority of those calls referred to trivial matters. Every one knew his reputation, asked him for help.

But it took something big—something beyond the ken of ordinary criminologists—to put Doc Savage on the trail.

There was one part of the laconic message that interested him, however. The girl had sounded frightened and hadn't said why. That was unusual, for those who answered his telephone were adept in drawing all details from callers.

A DOZEN blocks away, Richard Castleman was having his difficulties. There was a reassuring sound in the hum of motors, in the undertone of voices and traffic. Policemen stood at corners, and there was the comfort that comes from brushing elbows with others.

Richard Castleman should have felt easier. He didn't. One hand held a small sheet of paper—directions for reaching Doc Savage's offices written for him by the room clerk. The other hand was clenched; his eyes were bewildered. Every now and then his frantic gaze swept the crowd behind him.

Perhaps it had been imagination, but he'd thought he'd seen some one following him. It was hard to be sure in a crowd, but there was no use taking chances.

The little man stopped a policeman, asked a question and darted on. He was beginning to breathe easier now. He had almost reached his goal.

Doc Savage's headquarters was in this same block—in the one skyscraper which occupied the entire block.

A traffic light changed. The crowd swarmed across the street. For a moment, Richard Castleman was standing almost alone. He glanced in a window and saw a reflection. Instantly, he threw back his head and emitted a shriek of such terrible fear, that it carried above all street noises.

People turned to look, paralyzed, and what they saw left their faces masks of panic—left them with a scene of such terror, that it recurred in nightmares for weeks.

Richard Castleman had turned, had thrown up his arms and started to run. Then his body seemed to fade. There was a faint cloud that resembled steam, but where it started at, where it went, none later was able to say.

Where the man had been, a strange heap fell to the sidewalk.

A few hardier souls stepped forward, looked once, then added their cries to those of others. Some fainted.

What had been a man was now only a ghastly, grinning dried framework. It was as if the body had belonged to a person dead for centuries, instead of seconds. Clothes that had been strong and serviceable had crumpled away.

A big car drew up at the curb, and a bronze giant stepped out. Doc Savage had sped to his office to investigate the strange call received from the girl. As he saw the skeleton, a peculiar, eerie trilling note filled the air—a fantastic sound that seemed to come from everywhere and yet had no definite source. The trilling was a small, unconscious thing which Doc Savage did when under sudden stress—or when greatly surprised.

Chapter II. A STRANGE WARNING

THE bronze man could not have prevented the murder. Richard Castleman was dead before Doc Savage reached the scene.

At the rear of the crowd, a figure turned and walked away, melting into obscurity, hidden by curious forms as New Yorkers played true to custom and crowded forward with necks craned to see what had happened.

No one but Doc would have noticed that vanishing figure. His gold-flecked eyes photographed the move, caught a fleeting glimpse of a slinking form before it vanished in a sea of struggling humans.

It would have been useless to attempt pursuit. The crammed street prevented movement. And besides, there was nothing definite to connect the disappearing figure with the strange pile of bones on the sidewalk. But the incident was impressed firmly on Doc's brain.

Since childhood, he had gone through a routine of exercises daily—a routine that not only had developed him physically, but had trained his mind so that he could couple cause and effect more swiftly than the ordinary man.

The average person would never have seen a connection between the laconic message Doc had received and the murder in front of the building where the bronze man had his offices.

Doc did not know there was such a connection, but his gold-flecked eyes were glinting strangely.

Easily, his huge shoulders cutting a path for him, Doc moved through the crowd and entered an office building, a huge structure of brick and steel that towered high in the air.

Doc stepped into a special high-speed elevator; it went to the eighty-sixth floor, rising with such speed that an ordinary man would have sagged and gone to his knees. Doc Savage withstood the strain without apparent effort.

As he approached his office, a door swung open suddenly. A shadowy figure appeared on the opposite wall of the hall, a slender well-dressed figure carrying a long cane under one arm—and a strange-appearing pig under the other.

Without pausing, the bronze man walked straight ahead, and the door of the office closed behind him.

A ROAR of rage came from one of the two men who confronted him.

"You ape-faced missing link! You misguided freak of nature! Where did you get that?"

The two men were paying no attention to Doc—the words were not addressed to him.

The speaker was a tall man with lean shoulders and thin hips, attired in a fashion that was sartorially perfect—and who resembled the shadowy figure that had appeared on the hall wall, except that he had no pig under one arm.

"Just a gentle reminder of your upbringing," said the second man. His voice was small and childlike, and came strangely from a homely face composed mostly of mouth. Tiny eyes were sunk in pits of gristle. Long, hairy arms hung below his knees.

In appearance, he did resemble a bull ape. Hardly more than five feet in height, almost as wide, his nubbin of a skull looked as if it held scarcely a thimblefull of brains. But that was misleading.

The two turned, faced Doc. "This—this—" The tall man broke off, as if at loss for words. Which was unusual. Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, better known as "Ham," was one of the most astute lawyers in the world. The halls of Harvard still shouted his praises. "Monk—" he began again, then gestured resignedly and stopped.

"Monk," Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, grinned, his homely features lighting up amazingly. One of the greatest living industrial chemists, he had a perpetual quarrel with Ham. Much of it dated back to an event which took place during the World War, when Brigadier General Brooks had once been accused of stealing a pig—an offense he had always laid at Monk's door.

"I really got the goods on him this time, Doc," Monk grunted. "I got a picture of him walking around with a pig under his arm."

At Monk's right elbow was a small movie projector. It had been pointed toward the door, and when the door had opened to let Doc enter, the scene had flashed on the wall of the hallway.

"He's faked that picture!" the dapper Ham squawled. "He's taken a picture of that pig, Habeas Corpus,

he always has around him, and made it look like I was carrying him!"

"You received a message from a girl, a call for help?" Doc broke in.

Monk and Ham abruptly stopped their bickering. They knew the bronze man—knew every inflection of his voice. And that voice indicated now that something serious was in the air—something probably connected with the telephone call.

"We made a record of the conversation," Ham said.

Doc nodded, went to a desk and opened a drawer. Through a robot arrangement, every telephone call received at his office was recorded, if no one was present to take it. And often when some one was present the voice was recorded so the bronze man himself could hear the message.

In silence, the dapper Ham and bulky Monk watched as Doc put on earphones and listened. Twice Doc repeated the record, missing no shade of inflection, no word of the message.

"She mentioned a Harlan Spotfield," the bronze man said. "Call all hotels, starting with the best ones, and see if a man by that name is registered at any of them."

Ham leaped to do his bidding.

Monk's homely face lighted up. "Is something doing?"

"More, perhaps, than you think," Doc Savage said quietly.

Monk grinned delightedly.

"You can tell the girl was frightened when she called," Doc Savage went on. "But her voice had character. It was not the voice of one easily disturbed. She needed help, badly, it appears."

"I've located Spotfield, Doc," Ham called, "or rather the hotel where he's staying. He registered shortly after noon with a Miss Virginia Jettmore and a Richard Castleman."

"Good," said Doc. "It was probably Miss Jettmore who telephoned. We will go—"

He broke off suddenly. The door to the office had opened. A figure stood just outside—a strange figure, with face obviously disguised.

Words poured from the newcomer in a rapid stream.

"Have nothing to do with Virginia Jettmore, or with those with whom she came," the figure said. "The skeleton death awaits all who come in contact with those from the land of fear."

The door slammed.

A roar of rage came from Monk; his apelike figure shot forward. Ham whipped his cane from a table, raced after him. That cane really contained a long, slender sword, which Ham could use with deadly effect. Its point was tipped with a chemical that brought quick unconsciousness, but didn't harm the victim.

Doc Savage sat quietly at his desk.

OUTSIDE, he could hear Monk lumbering down the hallway. Monk looked slow, but his bulky figure covered ground with amazing speed.

Sounds of the chase faded. After perhaps five minutes of silence, discouraged footsteps returned.

Monk and Ham reëntered the office, their faces long. "He got away," Monk said laboriously.

Doc said, "Any one who planned an open threat such as that, would have made sure his line of retreat was open. But it does not matter. We will go to the hotel, call on Miss Virginia Jettmore and find out what it's all about."

Ham perked up. "What did he mean by 'skeleton death'?" he asked.

Carefully, Doc explained the scene he had witnessed when he arrived at the office building.

Monk's eyes grew wide. "But—but that couldn't be done! There's no way that—"

"Doc said it happened, didn't he?" glared Ham, glad to get back at Monk for the pig trick.

Monk swallowed, and shut up. Doc said nothing.

"What about that 'land of fear' that fellow mentioned?" asked Ham.

Doc shook his head. "We'll find out."

Crowds still milled about the sidewalk as the three reached the street and started for Doc's car. An ambulance had backed up to the curb, although the grim cargo it was taking aboard was far beyond any help a surgeon might give.

A police car was also at the curb, and two patrolmen were busy holding back curious spectators. A second police car appeared at the corner, casually cruised nearer.

Doc skirted his big machine to get in on the driver's side. The cruising police car speeded slightly.

The bronze man glanced toward it. Light was flickering on the shiny end of a snub-nosed machine gun. The hideous roar of exploding shells rose over the sound of traffic.

Doc only had an instant's warning. But he had trained himself since childhood for just such emergencies, for acting fast in moments of peril.

He'd had the key to the car door in the lock, had half turned it. However, there would have been no time to open that door, to swing inside the machine where he would have been protected by bulletproof glass and cold steel

INSTANTLY Doc dropped, and so perfect was the coördination of his muscles that he was already rolling under the machine before the first volley of bullets struck where he'd been standing a split second before.

Monk and Ham were on the far side of the machine, protected by its impregnable bulk.

A curse of anger came from the machine-gunner. But the gunner was no novice. His second burst of bullets was directed down, so that they struck the pavement just under the running board of Doc's car, to ricochet savagely toward the curb.

Had Doc remained under the car, that second hail of lead would have caught him. But he'd twisted, had slipped out from under the car in the rear.

The policemen on the sidewalk had drawn their .38s. They stared bewilderedly for a moment at the police car, then realized the truth. The men in that machine were not dressed in the blue uniforms of officers of the law. They were in civilian dress.

Monk whipped a weapon from his pocket. In appearance, it was something like an overgrown automatic, but it had a circular magazine. This magazine held bullets, not of solid lead, but thin-shelled projectiles that contained a chemical. Called "mercy" bullets, they did not kill, but only brought unconsciousness to those they struck. The weapon had been designed by Doc.

The hairy chemist's weapon came up, but the police car had spurred ahead. Doc stepped back behind his own auto as another savage volley of lead rained toward him. The other men were firing now.

The policemen on the sidewalk fired. Instantly, it seemed, one of them doubled and fell as the machine-gunner turned his weapon on them.

The crowd frantically sought hiding places in doorways and stores. Not all succeeded. Some fell under that withering blast.

Monk fired. A queer expression crossed the face of one gunner. He slumped across his weapon.

The second policeman, face a hideous mask of rage, raced into the street, his service pistol barking. He had seen a companion shot down, the unforgiveable crime.

The policeman's marksmanship was not the best. He was excited, but a lucky shot went home. The police car, which had been picking up speed, swerved suddenly and crashed into a traffic light. The impact was terrific. The shattered and now lifeless bodies of the men inside were folded up in crumpled metal.

Doc Savage glanced around quickly. The ambulance attendants, ignoring danger, were already at the sides of those who had fallen. All that could be done for them was being done.

"Looks like that fellow certainly meant his warning," Ham drawled.

"A blasted trap to make us run out and get killed!" growled Monk.

"I think so," Doc agreed. "At least, it shows that it is certainly time for us to find what this is all about."

Unruffled, he got into his car, slid behind the wheel. The others stepped in after him. The attack had been so sudden that few knew it really had been directed at the bronze man and his companions.

Doc's car headed toward the hotel where Ham had learned Harlan Spotfield had registered with a girl and a second man.

THE hotel clerk was inclined to be voluble.

"Yes, they're registered here. And a strange-appearing trio. I never saw such clothes, outside of the movies. But it wasn't that which impressed me so much." His voice dropped, became a confidential whisper. "They were all afraid, deathly afraid. One of them went out at once. He never came back. Then a second man went out. He hasn't come back."

Doc nodded. "And the room number of Miss Jettmore?"

"1252."

The bronze man expressed his thanks and went to the house telephone.

Only the muted sound of a ringing signal answered his call.

Doc, still holding the receiver, glanced at Ham. His cane swinging, his attire the envy of the wealthy idlers around him, Ham strolled to the desk, asked casually, "Miss Jettmore didn't go out, of course? She is still in her room?"

"Oh, yes," said the clerk. His smirk conveyed the idea he certainly would have noticed if *she'd* gone out.

Doc replaced the receiver, walked to the elevators.

"No answer?" rumbled Monk.

The bronze man shook his head.

As they stepped from the elevator on the twelfth floor, Doc was slightly in advance. A casual observer would have thought nothing of the way the three walked down the hallway. But one accustomed to the ways of Doc and his aids would have known that this seemingly aimless alignment was one of strategy.

At Room 1252 Doc halted, knocked. There was no answer. He tried the door. It was locked.

A ring of keys appeared in one of his hands. The hotel management would have been astonished to know that the door's burglarproof lock could be so deftly opened. But the door swung free in a very few seconds.

THE bronze man swung the door wide, then stood motionless on the threshold. Nothing was to be seen except the ordinary furniture of a high-priced suite.

Monk started to press forward, only to halt as one of Doc's hands dropped on his left arm. Ham stood so he could see down the hall, swinging his head to watch both directions,

Then Doc entered the room. A faint frown appeared on his face.

Nothing seemed amiss; there were no signs of a struggle, or indications even that the room had been occupied recently. But the bronze man's nostrils caught the faint scent of perfume. It was hardly discernible.

Slowly, Doc started forward, weight balanced on the balls of his feet.

A door opened—a door leading to a bedroom. An audible gasp came from Monk. Always susceptible to beauty, he stood amazed at the vision that confronted him.

Small, her eyes wide in her rounded face, her black curls clinging close to her head, a girl stood in the doorway, looked at them strangely. Her glance passed over Monk's homely face to return to the bronzed countenance of Doc.

"I'm Doc Savage," said the bronze man. "This is—"

A deep sigh parted the girl's red lips. One hand swung from behind her wide, flaring dress—a hand that held a businesslike automatic.

The gun swung up, pointed directly at Doc. One small finger pulled the trigger. The bullet hit Doc in the chest and flattened harmlessly against the bulletproof vest he always wore.

Chapter III. SEIZED!

MONK leaped forward. The gun cracked again. The look of fatuous adoration vanished from Monk's homely face; his long arms swung up—only to halt.

Doc had acted before him. Fast as Monk was, his bronze chief never failed to amaze him with the lightning rapidity of his actions. One of Doc's hands caught the girl's gun wrist, took the weapon from her.

Ham had been at the door, but at the sound of the shot he, too, had whirled, had darted forward. He was just in time to catch the girl's limp figure as it started to slump to the floor, eyes closed.

"Wonder a woman-chaser like you wouldn't know enough to do this!" he sneered.

Monk's mouth dropped open at the unexpected insult.

"Carry her to the lounge," Doc directed.

He lifted the girl's eyelids, looked at the strange-appearing pupils of her eyes.

Monk, still grumbling, ambled into the bathroom, and returned with a glass of water. He would have poured it on the girl's face, if Ham hadn't prevented him.

"Want to get her pretty clothes water-stained and earn her displeasure?" he jeered.

Monk bristled. "She tried to shoot Doc!"

Doc said, "She did not know the type of clothing we wear."

"Which shows we're up against a new set of enemies," contributed Ham.

"I can't understand a good looker like her being mixed up with a murder gang," Monk grumbled.

The homely chemist would have understood better if he could have witnessed what was occurring across the street, in a room on the fourteenth floor of another hotel.

A SQUAT man laid down a pair of binoculars. He swore tonelessly. "I knew that trick wouldn't work!" he snarled.

His clothes were tailor-made. Sartorially, he could have entered any drawing-room. His voice had an artificial culture.

There was only one thing wrong: Everything he wore had a tinge of green somewhere. In his suit, it was a thin stripe. His hat was green. There were green dots on his tie. A green thread was in his socks. His spats, also, were green. Even the cigarette he smoked had a green band about the butt.

"Why shouldn't it work?" asked a man who sat close at his side.

"Greens" Gordon spat, lost his veneer he'd prided himself on for years, and reverted to lower East Side vernacular.

"Dat Doc Savage is too smart," he snarled, when his remarks finally became sufficiently mild to be understandable. "He gets away from the boys wid the Tommy; he gets away from the gal!"

"The girl was hypnotized?" asked his companion.

"You asked for some mug who could put a single idea into a frail's brain!" rapped Gordon. "I got yuh one. Dat broad didn't have one idea except killin' Doc Savage. You saw how it worked!"

His companion nodded. It was getting late in the afternoon. There was no light in the hotel room. None was needed.

But even if the room had been lighted, Greens Gordon's companion would have been hard to identify. His face was blank; there was an artificial hint about his features. He was big and powerful, well-dressed. He looked like nothing except a clothing-store dummy—an inanimate object without brains or nerves.

"That's twice within an hour Doc Savage has escaped death," he said softly. "Perhaps he's even a tenth as good as I've understood he is."

"He's ten times as good as you'll ever believe he is!" Greens Gordon barked sharply.

The big man beside him smiled—a grotesque smile that was without mirth.

"You saw what happened this afternoon?" he asked.

Greens Gordon's squat figure seemed to swell, then deflate, as if a balloon had been punctured. His beady, close-set eyes clouded, only to flare with sudden decision.

"I could make a million dollars, if I knew how to do what you did," he said huskily.

"And we'll make more than a million dollars when Doc Savage is out of the way," his companion purred.

"But Doc Savage—"

The big man smiled thinly. "You know your part of the bargain. I know mine. And you do have an executive mind."

Greens Gordon's squat body lost its seeming flabbiness. His head came up; beady eyes sparkled with greed.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for a million dollars!" he rasped viciously, regaining his carefully developed poise. "Doc Savage or no Doc Savage!"

"And you've prepared for the next step?" his companion asked acidly.

"There isn't a man in the world who can dodge what is going to happen," Greens Gordon said solemnly. He was almost his suave self once again.

He raised the window before him, leaned out. His hand first was on the window sill. Then that hand reached up, came down.

A man directly across the street from him sighed gently and turned to the score of others lounging about the room.

"The boss says go," he said quietly. Quickly, the group slipped from the room, headed silently for the stairway that led down to the floor where Doc and his aids worked over the girl.

"SHE'S coming out of it," said Ham.

Monk looked down at the white face of the girl, growled fiercely, "About time! If she'd had any smelling salts around here, we'd—"

"Step back to the door," Doc Savage said suddenly.

Monk and Ham forgot their bickering. They obeyed without hesitation. If the girl would only talk, at least part of the mystery would be explained; and they knew that no one could do more toward getting information from her than the bronze man.

The girl's eyes opened, stared blankly. Doc Savage sat by her side.

"You wanted to see me, Miss Jettmore," the man of bronze asked.

Virginia Jettmore stirred restlessly on the lounge. It was as if she was collecting her courage against some hidden, almost overpowering fear. Gradually, her eyes lost their wildness, regained the look of sanity.

"Doc Savage?" she asked calmly.

The bronze man nodded. "You called my office and asked if a Harlan Spotfield had been there," he reminded.

Ham put his head out the door of the room, glanced quickly up and down the corridor. Nothing was to be seen. Silently he closed the door, drew nearer the lounge.

Monk showed his curiosity without shame. Frankly, he moved up until he was standing right behind Doc, his homely face alight with interest.

The girl looked long and searchingly at the bronze man.

"Have you ever known fear?" she asked.

Doc Savage's gold-flecked eyes looked at her without change of expression. Monk's mouth dropped open. Ham smiled slightly.

I've heard the word," Doc Savage said simply.

Virginia Jettmore nodded. "My father was not mistaken," she stated. "He'd heard of you, said you were just such a man. And we need you. We need your help. I'll tell you the entire story."

She paused, breathed deeply, seemed almost to relax. Monk and Ham were unable to take their eyes from her. She glanced beyond them, stiffened suddenly.

The knob of the hotel-room door was turning, slowly and noiselessly.

Doc's gold-flecked eyes narrowed. He did not turn his head; his gaze remained squarely on the girl's

face. But his huge frame tensed.

The hotel-room door opened.

"Watch out!" the girl screamed.

MONK'S homely face had been alight with interest, his hairy figure leaning forward. It would have taken an anthropologist to have analyzed the change that occurred when the girl cried out. Monk spun, long arms sweeping up from below his knees, teeth showing in a fighting snarl.

Dapper Ham's reactions were equally as swift, but entirely different. The lean lawyer's form pivoted, like that of a dancer, and as rapidly. His face didn't change expression, but the end of his cane dropped off; naked steel now gleamed in one hand.

The bronze man's movements were blindingly fast. And he did many things at once. One huge, muscle-corded fist shot out, pushed the girl back against the lounge so she would be out of range; the second swung up as he spun, came to his feet.

Each of the three had recognized the warning as the girl's face had altered; each had known danger was near before she had cried out.

Men were crowding into the room—hard-faced, cold-eyed men. The hallway seemed packed with them. A veritable avalanche of human forms surged forward.

No guns were in their hands. Guns make noise. And some things can't be hushed up even in the best of hotels. But each man was swinging a small, rubber blackjack, rubber loaded with lead at the end. It was probably one of the most dangerous weapons that ever came in contact with a human skull. Innocent-appearing on the surface, those blackjacks could dent a sheet of solid steel.

Monk and Ham had been fast. Few could ever equal them on speed. But fast as they'd been, they were slow compared to the bronzed giant, whose fists already were cracking jaws of their foes. And each time a fist swung, a man went down.

But hope died in the girl's eyes. At least a dozen men were inside the room; more were pushing into it. As one man went down, two more would step forward to fill his place.

When Monk went into action, he moved as the big apes did: slowly, but with great precision and deadly menace. His long arms swept up, wrapped around the first of his foes.

The man attempted to swing his blackjack, but he'd been too slow. His hands were pinned to his sides, and his ribs cracked under Monk's bone-crushing pressure.

Ham danced back and forth, like a fencer, his slender sword darting in and out. Some men it seemed barely to touch, but they fell, victims of that sleep-inducing drug.

Two more men went down under Doc's powerful fists. Then the leader of the attackers barked a sharp order. The gangsters spread out, drifted away from the door, leaving room so that more could enter.

It seemed impossible that only three men could escape the overwhelming number of blackjack-swinging killers.

But Doc and his men were accustomed to fighting against heavy odds, A fighting grin was on Ham's

slender face; Monk's homely features were alight with the lust of battle.

Only Doc Savage seemed emotionless of all those in the struggling mass. And there was nothing emotionless about the way he was fighting. His huge, corded hands snapped out, caught a pair of his foemen by the necks, snapped their heads together. They dropped, unconscious.

Hands reached out, grabbed the bronze man by the knees as one of the men who'd been knocked down early in the struggle came to and started to rejoin the fight. Another jumped at Doc from one side.

And behind him a huge man—almost as big as Doc Savage himself—swung a blackjack for a killing blow.

MANY things happened at once. No one witnessing the fight would have believed Doc could have escaped. The blow from the blackjack was hard enough to have cracked even his skull. But he wasn't there when it came down.

Despite the efforts of the two men trying to hold him, the man of bronze broke free easily, ducked and jumped backward. The blackjack went over one shoulder.

Doc's powerful hand shot up, caught the giant by the wrist, threw him over one shoulder. The man crashed through the open door into the bedroom. Doc dived after him. The door smashed closed. The sounds of a terrific struggle came from inside.

The leader of the attackers grinned. Doc Savage might be a mighty fighter, but the giant he was battling had once been fairly high in the ranks of heavyweight boxers—and besides that he had a gun and orders to use it if necessary.

As if in answer to the gangleader's thought, a pistol shot came from the next room. There was a sound of a falling body there, then silence.

The fight had been going against Monk and Ham. Their enemies had managed to circle behind them. In spite of the tremendous battling abilities of the two, they were borne to the floor by the sheer weight of numbers.

Blackjacks came up, crashed down.

"Get goin' mugs!" barked the gangleader. "Tie and gag that girl! We've got to get outta here! Somebody probably heard that shot!"

His orders were carried out briskly. The door to the bedroom opened. A giant walked out—a giant with a battered face, but with a sickly grin spreading across scarred features. His nose was twisted to one side.

The gangleader smiled. "Kill him?" he asked softly.

"I don't think he'll do much fighting for some time to come," the giant rumbled.

Men already had the girl bundled up in coats. A gag was in her mouth. Others had darted into the hallway, were guarding all approaches.

A service elevator stopped. Efficient gunmen overpowered the operator. The gang pressed inside, the girl effectively concealed in the close-packed mass of humanity.

Those of the gang who had been knocked out were dragged along unceremoniously.

But in the hotel room Monk and Ham were stretched out unconscious. And in the bedroom a big figure lay face downward—a figure that breathed gaspingly and strenuously.

Chapter IV. THE STRANGE HOUSE

THE elevator shot without a stop to the basement. Here the few hotel employees who attempted to stop the gang were knocked out mercilessly with blackjacks.

A huge white truck was drawing up to the back door—a truck with the words "Lightning Laundry" stenciled on the sides.

As the gangsters rushed out, the rear door of the truck dropped down. The men dived inside, pulling the girl with them.

Without loss of time, the truck pulled away. A block distant it shot into a narrow alleyway. When it came out, the license plates had been changed; its color no longer was white, but black, and the sign on its sides read "Long Distance Hauling."

The change had been easy to accomplish. The white color and laundry sign had been merely paper hooked to the sides of the truck. The disguise wouldn't have passed close inspection, but no one had been given an opportunity to inspect it closely.

Motor-cycle cops and radio cars roared by, headed toward the hotel, sirens open. None bothered about the truck.

Inside the truck it was hot. There were no windows, very little light. For the most part, the men tried to stay in one spot.

The giant was an exception. Clumsily, it seemed, he was moving back and forth in the van. He had a handful of what appeared to be pebbles, but they were a queer type of pebbles. Small, scarcely larger than peas, they were made of a substance that must have been of extremely great density, since they were heavy.

Curses marked the path of the lurching giant as he tripped over legs, bumped into others. The handful of pebbles diminished.

"Sit down, Bunko!" the gangleader growled at last.

The big man moved close to him, found a seat. The van was making good time now, had evidently got beyond the range of traffic lights onto an open road.

The truck made a turn, seemed to be climbing a hill as its motor labored and slowed. Then it stopped, only to move again after a short interval.

The back was dropped, and men piled out. The truck was in a huge basement, dimly lighted. Near by was an elevator.

Most of the men stayed below. A few got into the elevator, the girl with them.

"Come along, Bunko!" rapped the gang chief. "The boss may want to see you, an' I can give you a job

upstairs for a while."

Wordlessly, the big man got in the elevator. It sped upward. There were no marks on doors to show how many floors were passed, but some seconds elapsed before the elevator came to a halt.

The gag was taken from the girl's mouth; she was pushed out of the elevator. Her hair was in disorder; she was bound tightly and had no idea what might happen to her, but Virginia Jettmore's eyes had lost some of their earlier panic.

Whatever it was that had made her so fear-stricken, she certainly did not appear particularly frightened by the gangsters.

Doors appeared on all sides. Some were closed, a few open. Here and there a hallway would run for a few feet, only to stop at another door. The hallways were set at angles; nothing seemed to run in a straight line.

The gangleader pulled the girl toward one of the doors, opened it, thrust her inside.

"Bunko, you and Gats stay here on guard. I'll be back."

"GATS" was small, wizened. He would have appeared a kindly, middle-aged man, if it hadn't been for the cruel lines about his face. All the viciousness of a life of crime was written in those lines. He regarded his companion scornfully.

"Pullin' a grandstand stunt to get in with the boss, just because you're big!" he sneered. A revolver appeared in one of his hands suddenly. "I could have fixed that bronze guy myself with this. But no"—he spat disgustedly—"you look big, so you got the chance; and then you had to use a gun yourself before you finished him!"

The giant shrugged, leaned back against the wall.

Gats's revolver slipped back into a shoulder holster, but his evil eyes retained their glint; his thin lips were twisted. He took a key from one pocket.

"Think I'll go in and see how our pretty lady is making out!" he snapped. "You stay out here and tip me off if any one starts to come. I think maybe that girl'll enjoy a kiss."

The giant's face didn't change expression. His battered features remained without emotion, but he put out one big hand, caught the little man by an arm.

"We was told to guard her," he remonstrated mildly. "I don't think I'd do that."

Gats struggled to get free, found himself powerless to release his arm. Curses rolled from his lips; he reached for his gun, only to halt, an expression of surprise crossing his sin-marked features.

Apparently without visible effort the giant's second hand shot out, caught Gats's gun wrist.

"I'll kill you for this!" the little man raved. "I'll—"

He broke off suddenly. The elevator door was opening. The giant released his hold, idled casually against the wall. The little man straightened; his eyes became blank.

Two men stepped out of the elevator. One was squat and powerful, a touch of green in every article of

his attire. The other was tall, broad-shouldered. A mask completely covered his face.

Greens Gordon glanced at the two guards briefly.

"The girl all right?" he snapped.

"Yeah," Gats replied dourly.

"See that she stays that way," Gordon ordered briefly.

With his masked companion, Gordon vanished down a hall, entered a room, closed and locked the door behind them.

"See, I saved you from gettin' in trouble," the giant remarked.

Gats's face lost its impassivity. Once more, the killer look was in his eyes.

"Big guy, you've earned yourself a one-way ride," he grated softly.

"And if I spoke up maybe you would have become a skeleton," the giant said, calmly.

THE effect of those words on Gats was instantaneous and hideous. He lost his arrogance, quailed with sudden fear.

"The—skeleton—death!" he gasped, features ashen.

Gats gulped, paused. Slowly, his face regained its color, but he ran his tongue over dry lips, looked nervously in each direction. He seemed to have forgotten his threat to kill the giant.

"Be a good guy an' get me a drink of water, will you?" he asked. "I'll stand guard, an' somebody's got to be here all the time."

The giant didn't ask why Gats couldn't go for water while he remained on guard; he merely nodded, walked toward a door.

Behind his back, the little man's face had changed; his lips became a single tight line. Murder was written in every wrinkle of his crime-ridden features.

The giant disappeared from view, went down a small passageway. And once out of sight, his actions changed.

Gone was his seeming indolence. He moved quickly, raced down the hall. Doors were on all sides of him. The passageway ended in a blank wall. He retraced his steps, tried various doors. Some opened; some didn't.

The water cooler was located easily, but the giant took his time about drawing the drink Gats had requested. He seemed curious. Once, he heard the faint mumble of voices, leaned his head against a wall; but the sound was too indistinct to make out.

An impatient hail came from the outer lobby. The giant filled a paper cup hurriedly, walked out.

Gats gulped the water down hastily. His eyes were glowing feverishly.

"Ain't heard a sound outta the girl," he said, brushing his lips. "One of us oughta take a look, an' since

you're afraid to have me go in, you do it."

He took the key from one pocket, unlocked the door. The giant walked inside.

Across the room, tied to a chair, was Virginia Jettmore. Her face was scornful, although her full lips trembled just a little.

Behind the giant, Gats whipped out his gun, lifted it until the muzzle bore directly against the big man's back.

"The boss said not to let anythin' happen to this girl, Bunko!" the little man rasped viciously. "It seems to me you're about to bother her, so I'm going to kill you!"

GATS never did know just what happened. He was tightening his finger to fire. Then, so suddenly it seemed no human could move that fast, the giant had turned. One hand snapped out and a finger caught in the trigger guard of the revolver, preventing Gats from shooting.

A second fist came up. It opened palm wide and strong fingers pressed the nerve centers at the base of Gats's brain.

Gats sank to the floor, a bewildered expression on his face. His eyes had the appearance of a person shell-shocked, or under the influence of some strong narcotic.

The giant took the gun from Gats's hand and extracted the shells. The gun he replaced in one of Gats's pockets; then he pulled the little man from the room and closed the door behind him.

"What type of house is this?" the giant rapped.

"A crazy house." Gats's voice was without expression or inflection. It was as if he was speaking while filled with truth serum.

"What do you mean, a 'crazy house'?"

"It has two hundred rooms, a thousand doors, a dozen death traps."

"How do you get out of it from here?"

"The elevator. Or the stairs."

"Where are the stairs?"

"They're hard to find. You go down the passageway to the right, enter the third door, turn to your left, go into what seems to be a closet, lift up a trapdoor an' go down a ladder for five steps, then turn and step. You'll be in another passageway; follow that and—"

On and on, the instructions ran. They presented a queer picture of a queer house, truly a crazy house. One such as might exist only in a madman's brain—or in Coney Island.

"Who built this place?" the giant asked, at last.

The little man shook his head. "Some nut who died. Greens Gordon bought it. The nut used it as a playhouse, played tricks on his friends. Greens has found a better use for it."

The giant nodded, as if satisfied. Once more his hand came up, cracked the little man at the base of the brain. Gats's eyes closed; he slumped forward, unconscious.

The first blow had merely temporarily paralyzed him. He could talk, but his answers were dictated from his subconscious mind. He had no realization that he was speaking. The second blow had left him senseless.

The giant propped the little man's body against the wall, sat him up, so it appeared he was only resting, head down, as if sleeping.

Then he rose, with catlike tread, retraced his steps to the door from behind which he'd heard voices.

His eyes were glowing strangely, gold-flecked eyes that missed nothing—the eyes of Doc Savage.

Chapter V. A WARNING ALARM

THE gangster giant had fallen an easy prey to Doc Savage when the two had crashed into the hotel bedroom. Finding a gun on the man, Doc had fired it, correctly deducing what the gangleader would believe.

It had been a simple matter then for the bronze man to trade clothes with his victim. A master of make-up, he'd even transformed his face, so that it looked like that of the man he'd overcome. The deception had not been noticed in the speed of the get-away and the semi-gloom of the big van.

One of Doc's ears now went against the door. Voices could be heard, but not plainly. The door was thick, exceptionally thick. Even Doc's hearing, acute as it was, failed to pierce the way.

There was a thin strip of space between the bottom of the door and the wall.

The bronze giant reached inside his shirt, into the emergency kit he always carried strapped to his body. He brought out a long wire. At one end was a small, pin-sized opening, covered with a convex glass. At the other was a small knob, scarcely as large as an ink bottle and built along the same lines.

Stooping swiftly, Doc slid the small end of the wire under the door. He glanced at the top of the knob at the other end, moved the wire several times, then nodded with satisfaction. One huge thumb pressed a small button on one side of the knob. There was a faint, scarcely discernible hum.

Doc straightened. The cap he'd taken from the gangster had pushed back on his head, revealing bronze hair. He pulled the cap down, walked quickly back to where Gats lay slumped by the door.

No one else appeared near. Doc opened the door of the girl's room and stepped inside.

Virginia Jettmore's eyes opened wide; her fists clenched.

Silently, Doc started stripping the shirt and trousers from the unconscious gangster. A wondering look crossed the girl's face.

Doc walked to her, cut the ropes that bound her hands and feet. "Slip out of that dress and put on these clothes," he said briefly.

A startled expression flared in the girl's eyes. "But who—"

"Doc Savage," the bronze giant explained, his voice more gentle. "We must get out of here, and we

certainly could not do so in that dress you are wearing."

The girl smiled suddenly—a smile that drowned for a moment the fear that always seemed to be with her.

"I should have known," she stated. "But what—"

"I'll explain later."

Doc turned his back. A few seconds later, the girl tossed her dress to him. Unemotionally, Doc redressed the gunman in the girl's old-fashioned clothes.

"Do you know how to use a gun?" Doc asked.

The girl nodded. Doc retrieved Gats's gun, reloaded the weapon and handed it to her.

"Wait here," he commanded. "I'll be back in a few moments. Do not use this unless it is necessary."

The bronze man moved quickly. Closing the door softly behind him, he raced down the hall, picked up the wire and the strange knob he had placed there a few minutes before. The voices of Greens Gordon and his mystery companion still rumbled from within the room.

A sound came from farther down the hall—a sound such as might have been made by a heavy footstep. Doc moved forward, swiftly but noiselessly.

He didn't see the scarred face that peered out of a room behind him, peered for an instant, then ducked back. It was the face of one of the men who had made the attack at the hotel—the one in fact who had swung his blackjack and knocked Monk unconscious.

MONK was no longer unconscious. He almost wished he was, his head hurt so badly.

"I told you he wasn't dead," came Ham's smooth voice.

"I thought I was in heaven until I opened my eyes and saw you," Monk grunted feebly.

He got up with difficulty, rubbed the huge knot on the back of his head and blinked rapidly. He was ringed by bluecoats and detectives. Ham was wavering slightly, but was on his feet.

"Where's Doc?" Monk mumbled.

Ham gestured airily, but his face was grave. "Gone," he said briefly.

"For the tenth time, I want to know what happened here!" rapped one of the detectives. "I'm tired of evasions, even if you do happen to be Doc Savage's friends!"

Ham turned to him gravely, eyebrows lifting slightly.

"Why, my dear officer, I thought I had explained." One eyelid twitched slightly as he glanced at Monk. "Doc Savage, this ape here and myself, came to this hotel to see friends. We were set upon. There was a fight. When I regained my faculties, I learned from you that a girl had been kidnaped, and that Doc Savage was gone. That's all I know."

"You know much more than that, and you're going to tell it!" the detective snapped harshly. "Maybe Doc Savage took the girl himself, for all I know. He's a mysterious guy sometimes, even if the commissioner

does say he's all right."

Ham looked slightly bored.

"Start talking," snarled the detective.

"You've heard all we've got to say," Ham addressed the detective.

The officer scowled, seemed about to get mad, then thought better of it. There was finality in Ham's voice. He knew there was no use in trying to get more information if Ham and Monk didn't want to talk.

"There's something damned funny about this," the detective muttered. "But if you won't talk, I guess you won't." He shook his head dourly. "The papers are going to make a lot out of this. First a mug gets wiped out on a busy street, turns into a blasted skeleton, and then a good copper gets burned down when a fake squad car comes along a few minutes later; an' now a dame gets kidnapped!"

"We've still got the guy we found in the other room," reminded one of the other detectives standing by. "Let me get him down in the basement at headquarters and I'll find out what it's all about."

"Sorry." Ham shrugged slightly. "He's one of our helpers. He goes with us."

For a moment, another explosion appeared certain. Monk tensed visibly. Then the detective gave up, threw his hands out in a gesture of resignation.

"I've been told to cooperate with you guys," he half yelled. "But sometimes you make it blasted hard, not telling us what it's all about!"

Monk himself was rather inclined to agree. He said as much when he and Ham had half carried the still groggy giant out, placed him in Doc's car and started back for the bronze man's offices.

"We don't need this guy. And what do you mean by saying he's one of our helpers?"

Ham smiled slightly. "I didn't lie, as you so crudely suggest," he said, with mock politeness. "You see the clothes this fellow is wearing, don't you?"

Monk looked, growled under his breath.

"They're Doc's clothes, of course," Ham went on dryly. "That means Doc is wearing this man's clothes. So this fellow is one of our helpers. Besides, Doc would want him to go to the hospital."

Monk's homely face lighted slightly. Doc had long maintained a secret hospital in up-State New York. Here criminals were sent by Doc. Their brains were operated upon. When they recovered, and were returned to the outer world, they remembered nothing of their past, started life anew as good citizens.

Ham wheeled Doc's big car into a basement entrance of the office building, went to a telephone. A few minutes later, an ambulance came. When it left, the giant gangster went with it.

Ham glanced at his watch, and a worried expression crossed his face. "It's almost the hour," he said laconically.

"And Doc's not here," Monk grumbled inanely. "Shall we send the message?"

Ham shook his head. "Our instructions might be followed, but we don't know yet that this is serious enough to warrant our going ahead."

A scowl crossed Monk's homely face. "Doc has taken an interest in it, hasn't he?" he asked rhetorically. "And that girl—"

"I see. The girl." Ham nodded with pretended gravity. "So you think she might be influenced by gold, do you? Why, you hairy ape, if you were King Midas himself no girl as good-looking as that one would ever be able to see you!"

"Howlin's calamities!" piped Monk, in his childlike voice. "She oughta like me after lookin' at a fashion plate like you, you shyster!"

Monk and Ham entered Doc Savage's offices, still arguing. Instinctively, they glanced about the room.

A small colored light was showing on a panel, directly over the bronze giant's desk.

Without a word, the two darted into the next room, and stopped before a strange-looking machine.

"Doc has found something!" Monk rumbled, excitedly.

A CASUAL observer might have wondered whether Doc had found anything or not. The bronze man was standing in a maze of passageways of the crazy house, many miles from his office, his gold-flecked eyes alert.

Cautiously, he opened one of the many doors and peered through. Three men were standing there. Their bearing was arrogant, but uneasiness was also manifest in their manner.

Doc closed the door noiselessly, started back down the hallway. He moved slowly, mentally locating all the doors and passageways Gats had mentioned when he'd told how to get out of the house. He would have moved much more swiftly had he seen the scarred face that looked after him.

Costa Tria had once been in a mine explosion. It had left his features terribly marked, but no more marked than his soul. If there was a good trait about him, none of his companions had ever discovered it.

Greens Gordon had found him in a breadline, had hired him. Greens was not a philanthropist; he hired only men who were as evil as he was—and that covered plenty of ground.

During prohibition, Greens had been one of the leading offenders. He'd risen high in the ranks of gangdom through the use of the "ride" and of dexterous Tommy men.

Starting with a lower East Side gang, he'd reached the top of his profession—and that profession was making easy money, no matter how many murders were involved.

With repeal, Greens changed his tactics, but not his ways. He'd gone into rackets—not always big rackets—but preferably those that were fairly safe and netted a good return. Always, he'd kept his eyes out for the chance to make millions.

Not even Greens Gordon trusted Costa Tria, but he was a good man to have around. He instilled fear in recalcitrant members of the gang; he respected no one except his chief.

And not always his chief, as Greens Gordon would have understood if he'd seen Tria's cautious approach to the room where Virginia Jettmore was supposed to be bound and helpless.

Tria's scarred features were split in an evil grin; his close-set eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he saw that no one was before the girl's room.

Doc Savage repassed the room where Greens Gordon and his companions were talking. He paused briefly, then walked on.

No sound broke the stillness. The house might have been deserted. Few could have realized the number of gunmen who were hidden here.

The bronze giant stopped suddenly and tested the air. Not even a wild animal had more keen olfactory organs than Doc Savage, thanks to the bronze man's scientific system of exercises. He caught an odor that had not been there a few minutes before.

Without change of expression, Doc's speed became that of a sprinter. He burst into the lobby where he and Gats had been standing guard. No one was there, but the alien odor was stronger. The door leading to the girl's room was closed.

Doc thrust it open, paused motionless on the threshold. A small figure in wide flaring skirts lay on the floor. Gats had not moved.

But the girl was gone!

THERE was no sign of a fight in the room; only the fact that the acrid odor was stronger showed that any one besides the girl and Gats had ever been there.

But that was enough. Doc stepped back in the passageway, listened intently. Nothing could be heard and there were many doors which might have been used in a flight.

The passageway seemed the most logical course, however. Doc followed it rapidly. Occasionally, he caught a faint smell of the alien odor and knew he was on the right path.

He increased his speed, ducked under low-hanging arches, through long, narrow aisles.

Faintly, the man of bronze heard voices. One was whining and servile, with an underlying threatening note.

The other was that of Virginia Jettmore.

Doc's frame seemed huge in the clothes of the giant. Tremendous tendons almost split the seams of the coat he wore.

Then he threw a door open, flashed into a room.

Costa Tria knew doom when he saw it. He knew that this man with piercing, gold-flecked eyes was not "Bunko." He knew that his scheme had failed. For Tria, while he didn't know why Gordon had ordered the girl kidnaped, knew the gangster wanted her badly enough that he'd pay much money to have her returned if she disappeared.

The scar-faced man had intended to shake down his own chief. He couldn't do that now, but there was one thing he could still do.

Virginia Jettmore gave a low cry of joy. She had been tricked by Costa Tria, and had feared she was not to escape from him.

WHEN Doc had left her alone in the room, her terror had returned. The giant who had cut her bonds had told her he was Doc Savage, and she had no real reason to think that he wasn't. But he hadn't looked as he had when he'd appeared at the hotel, and his actions had been suspicious.

As she'd stood in indecision, a man had opened the door—a man with a hideously scarred face. Automatically, Virginia Jettmore had lifted the gun she held in one hand.

Costa Tria hadn't known she didn't know how to use the gun. He had given what he'd thought was a reassuring grin.

"It's all right, señorita," he had whispered. "Fear not. You are surrounded by enemies, but I will save you."

Virginia had hesitated and Costa Tria had leaped. Before she could cry out, a dirty hand had been pressed over her mouth; clawing talons had yanked the revolver from her hand and she had been forced to accompany her grinning captor.

But Costa Tria was no longer grinning now. His face was a mask of rage. The bronze giant leaped toward him.

The scar-faced man took advantage of the one second he had in which to act. In that second before Doc Savage's relentless hand snapped up, knocking him unconscious, he moved. For Costa Tria knew more about this crazy house than any one else. He knew every room and every trap.

He stepped back and crushed a heel down hard on a small square of the floor.

Alarm bells crashed out deafeningly. Pointers on certain well-concealed, but always watched alarm boards, showed the room from which the signal had been given.

Chapter VI. DEATH TRAP

VIRGINIA JETTMORE was breathing fast, and fear had returned to her face.

"He—he tricked me!" she gasped. "Now they'll kill us both!"

"Wait!" Doc ordered crisply.

It was growing dusk. Already, it was hard to see without electric lights. The bronze man jumped to a window, pushed it up, and looked out. The next instant, the girl gave a startled exclamation.

Doc's body had vanished out the window. Virginia Jettmore ran to the opening and peered out after him. Dimly, she could see him moving up the side of the building.

To her it appeared there was nothing he could cling to, but Doc's powerful fingers sought out crevices and sills and swung his body up almost as rapidly as if he were mounting a ladder.

A moment more and the man of bronze had reached the roof, vanished from view. Almost before Virginia knew it, he had reappeared, descending as swiftly as he'd climbed.

"Come," Doc said.

The alarm bells had stopped ringing. An ominous silence gripped the great building. Overhead, two wires were crossed. Doc had shorted them, stopped the flow of electricity into the house.

With the girl at his side, Doc stepped back into the passageway, started toward the lobby where the elevator shaft was located.

Cautiously, the two advanced and rounded a turn, only to halt. Creeping toward them, submachine guns in their hands, were three men.

Doc grabbed the girl and swung her into a near-by room. The rasp of her shoes made a sound on the floor.

Br-r-r-r-r!

A machine gun cut loose, tearing the wood around the door.

Doc pressed a small tablet into the girl's mouth. "Hold your nose and you will be able to breathe all right," he said softly. He placed one of the tablets in his own mouth.

A gangster swore harshly. "Fool! Don't shoot until you see something to shoot at!"

"I—" the other man began, only to pause.

Doc reached into a pocket, pulled out a small glass cylinder and tossed it out into the hall. It made a tinkling sound as it broke.

"Hold your breath!" one of the gangsters shouted.

DOC waited calmly. Seconds passed. A heavy body fell to the floor in the hallway; a second went down and then a third.

Doc had been accustomed to using a type of anaesthetic in his gas bombs that acted instantly and could be avoided by holding the breath for a few seconds. That secret had been printed in the newspapers, and criminals knew about it.

So he had substituted a gas that remained in the air longer, until it was impossible for any normal person to hold the breath longer and still was effective.

The tablet Doc had given the girl and had placed in his own mouth had been invented by the bronze man long before. They gave off oxygen, absorbed the waste material expelled in the breath, and permitted breathing without using either mouth or nose.

Quickly, Doc led the girl from the room.

It was completely dark now, but Doc's marvelous sense of direction kept them on the right course. Gangsters could be heard moving through the halls, as they advanced toward the room from which the alarm had come.

Several could be heard approaching, directly ahead.

"Keep still and follow my lead," Doc whispered. "In the dark it is unlikely that we will be recognized. We can slip by these men, make our way out."

The girl nodded her understanding.

"Shoot to kill," rumbled a strident voice. "The boss wants the girl wiped out. She'll probably be with

some one, for some one freed her. Blast him down, too."

Virginia Jettmore's hand tightened on Doc's arm. He moved forward steadily, keeping close to a wall.

"How about lights?" a killer whined.

"We'll use our flashlights when we get close to the room," came the reply. "We know this house better than they do. No use giving ourselves away."

A dim hum came from somewhere far down in the building. Lights flickered overhead for a moment, then came on with a steady glow.

Doc and the girl halted. Facing them, not three steps away, was a massed mob of gunmen, all with weapons in their hands.

The girl bent her head. She had donned Gats's hat; her long, black curls didn't show. And Doc acted instantly.

"We didn't see 'em down that way," he said, in Bunko's voice. "They must 'a' slipped through."

"Somethin' wrong here—" began one of the gangsters.

"This way! This way! I see them!" came a voice from behind the massed mob. The voice sounded like that of Greens Gordon.

The gunmen whirled. Moving with the speed of light, Doc grabbed the girl, slammed her into another room, closed the door behind them. It would take the gunmen only a few seconds to learn that they had been tricked, that Doc had used ventriloquism to make them think Greens Gordon had called them.

It took less than that. A roar of rage came from the passageway. Guns snarled. Hot lead tore through the door, raked the room. Then heavy bodies smashed against the flimsy structure. It was only a matter of seconds until it would give way.

"We are lost," breathed the girl.

DOC drew a flashlight from one pocket, surveyed the room they were in. A dozen doors led from it. One might lead them to safety; another might bring their doom.

Doc's scrutiny was lightning fast. Then he pressed the girl toward a small opening, pushed a slide back and urged her ahead.

They left the trap.

"All the other doors and doorknobs were dusty," Doc explained curtly. "This one alone showed evidence of having been used."

For a space they moved ahead, bent half double. Suddenly, Doc halted the girl. Fear-stricken voices could be heard. They came clearly through the thin paneling.

"It's out!" said the first voice.

"You mean—" began a second voice.

"I mean the skeleton death is loose! *It* was with the boss! These two we're huntin' must be worth a lot!"

There was silence—silence so deep, it almost seemed the two listeners could hear the speaker's teeth chatter.

"I've taken lots of guys on rides," the first voice went on, "but I never was scared before. I am now. An' with that thing runnin' loose, no tellin' who's goin' to get it. It might make a mistake!"

Doc moved ahead, the girl behind him. They stepped from the passageway into a room so dark it was impossible to see a step ahead. Their feet came down on a thick rug.

And across the room a light flashed on suddenly. It showed a hideous, grinning skeleton—a skeleton that held a gun in one hand. It was enough to make overwrought nerves give way.

EVEN those in the building who had not confronted a grinning skeleton were nervous. Greens Gordon was one of them. He was pacing restlessly, his heavy-set figure swaying.

"I can't understand it. That bronze devil must still be alive!"

His companion looked up languidly. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a peculiar face that plainly showed the marks of artificial make-up, his voice was colorless.

"Perhaps I underestimated this Doc Savage. He escaped your trap at the hotel, you say?"

"Escaped and must have got here!" Gordon grated. "I got my dope direct from the inside. The third man found laid out at the hotel wasn't Doc Savage. That means it must have been one of our men. This Savage must have slipped out here. I am sure he was the one who put out the lights a few minutes ago. Lucky we have an emergency system."

"And now the girl has escaped," the tall man said softly.

Greens Gordon jerked up, his eyes taking on a look of fear. "Now don't hold that against me," he said quickly. "Why do you want her so bad, anyway? Why didn't you let us kill her?"

His companion smiled thinly. "For your first question, it's simply that I do not want her to talk to Doc Savage and tell him what little she knows. And I wouldn't let you kill her, because we may have need of her later to get the secret we must have."

"We'll catch them; they can't get out of the building!" Gordon rumbled.

"You'd better be sure!" the other snapped, vicious suddenly. "There must be no mistake when millions are involved! If there are—"

Gordon's face ordinarily was ruddy-complexioned. Now that color faded until his skin resembled old magazine paper.

A radio broke in abruptly—a low-wave-length radio tuned to police calls.

"Calling all cars," came the announcer's emotionless voice. "Be on the look-out for a black moving van with the sign 'Long Distance Hauling' on the sides. Such a truck was used this afternoon in the escape of the gang who kidnaped a young woman guest from the Duras Hotel."

The big man looked at Greens Gordon quickly. The racketeer's face expressed blank astonishment.

"There is believed to be a connection between this crime and the skeleton killing earlier in the day," the radio voice went on. "An autopsy report indicates the man whose skeleton was found gave the appearance of having been dead for centuries.

"The press is making a big play on this case. The girl who was kidnaped and the man who was slain, both arrived here to-day from Genlee, Africa. A third companion has disappeared. It is essential to clear up the mystery at once. The commissioner has authorized me to say that—"

The voice from the radio went on and on.

Greens Gordon's barrel-shaped figure seemed to shrink. His companion looked at him coldly.

"I thought there was no leak?" the big man said.

"I—I—" gasped Gordon. "I can't understand it! All tracks were covered perfectly! There was *nothing* to show how my men got away, or that there was any connection between the cases!"

A burst of machine-gun fire came from some place in the building, not far away.

"You have erred so far," the big man said quietly. "Doc Savage is here. In some way, his men have learned at least part of the truth, have reported it to the police. It is time we acted. Come!"

The big man rose to his feet and pulled a queer-shaped object from his vest. In appearance, it seemed only like a small horn, or a diminutive funnel.

Greens Gordon frankly shook with terror as he glanced at it. Like a man hypnotized, he opened the door and led the way to the hall. He knew skeletons might soon appear—new skeletons.

THE skeleton that confronted Doc and the girl was not a new one, but it might as well have been. The effect on the girl was the same. She slumped forward limply.

Doc caught her as she fell and slapped her smartly across the face. The bronze giant was never cruel, but he knew the only way to handle a case such as this. Kind words would have brought only additional hysteria. A shock was necessary, and he provided that shock.

Virginia's eyes opened and stared once again at the hideous object that barred their path. A moan came from her lips.

"It is nothing," Doc Savage said, as roughly as he could. "A trick, a part of this house that has been called crazy."

The bronze man pushed her to her feet, made her stand alone while he advanced toward the skeleton and touched it.

"This was put here by the former owner of this house," Doc explained, not unkindly. "It is standard equipment in the so-called 'crazy houses' of the amusement parks. It means nothing."

With a visible effort, the girl regained control of herself, but she could not turn her eyes toward the skeleton.

"It reminds me—" she began.

"Let that wait," Doc interrupted. "We have more important business now. We must get out of here."

Alone, Doc could have made his escape from the house without difficulty. He could have opened a window and have descended the sides of the walls. The girl made the problem more difficult.

The sides of the house were smooth. While Doc could sustain his own weight easily, it was doubtful if he could get grip enough to carry the girl on his shoulders.

The bronze man paused. The entire house was now alive with noise. Men were searching each floor. Occasionally, a pistol shot showed the high tension of strained nerves.

But the house had many rooms. It was going to take some time to make a thorough search. Gats had spoken of traps. The skeleton might have been one, but it had been harmless. It was difficult to know, however, just which way to head.

And there was always the unknown danger: The danger of the skeleton death.

It was impossible to reach the elevator; the lobby undoubtedly was well guarded. But there might be a chance through use of the stairway Gats had mentioned. They moved on.

For the girl the next fifteen minutes always remained a nightmare. Already shaken, in deadly fear, she followed Doc almost as an automaton. Some doors refused to open. Others opened to reveal only blank walls. They led nowhere.

Doc rarely used his flashlight; there was too much danger of it being seen. They entered a big room. It was peculiar in that it had only two outlets, the one by which they'd come and the one in front of them.

There was nothing to do but go ahead. Where they had been moving swiftly and without hesitation, however, the bronze man now moved cautiously. The girl sensed the change and crept closer to him, her hand on his arm as if for the courage it gave her.

Doc opened the door and stepped through. Doc placed a foot down gently, tested with his weight, then moved ahead—and the floor went out from under him.

There was a shrill cry of terror from the girl.

The next instant lights flashed on. They could see the trap into which they'd fallen.

Their bodies were speeding downward at a terrific pace, speeding on a greased incline. And below them, plainly visible, steel shafts were awaiting them, sharp headed spears pointed directly toward them, ready to pierce the strongest body.

THE incline was long, but its length was diminishing by yards with each passing instant.

After that one startled scream, Virginia Jettmore had lapsed into a dead faint, her body flashing rapidly in a limp heap behind the huge form of Doc Savage as they bore down on the steel shafts that would impale them.

Few men in the world could even have thought during that swift downward plunge. Only one could have thought and then have acted.

Doc Savage's muscles moved even before his conscious brain realized the peril. The long hours of practice he'd taken, the many dangerous spots he'd been in—all coöperated in the instinctive movement he made now.

His long frame swung sidewise; his feet pressed one side of the slide, his gigantic, muscle-corded shoulders the other.

Clothing ripped from his back. His shoe soles stung with the sudden heat of friction.

A mountain climber goes up a crevice by bracing his back against one side, his feet against the other. But a mountain climber doesn't have a dead weight pressing against him; he's not on a greased incline.

The steel shafts shot nearer, grew larger, deadly and unyielding.

The bronze giant strained. His corded tendons called upon strength they never had been called upon to use before. Crimson stains were left as fragile cloth gave way and skin alone took up the battle.

The downward plunge was slackening, slowly, but nevertheless with a definite decrease in speed.

Doc Savage's huge body went rigid. All the hours of intensive daily training, all his life of scientific living, went into a single surge.

His frame half lifted from the greased slide—but it stopped moving. His feet held steady on one side, his shoulders on the other. And the girl's body also stopped as she rested against his huge form.

The sides of the slide hadn't been greased. The pressure Doc exerted had been sufficient to hold, to leave him pinned rigid between the two sides.

He reached out, touched the closest of the steel shafts. The spears were needle sharp.

THE girl's eyes opened, stared blankly. Cautiously Doc moved, testing the spears. Only a few of the steel points were real. The outer ones were of paper and bent readily under his touch.

The original owner evidently had played his grim game with false spears. Greens had substituted some of deadly steel where a sliding body would strike.

Lifting the girl to one shoulder, Doc stepped down, bent the paper spears back and opened a trapdoor.

Gunmen were rushing forward. They had heard Virginia Jettmore's one frantic scream.

Carrying the girl's weight easily, the bronze giant dodged those who were approaching.

They were on the first floor now. Freedom should not be far away.

Doc sped down a hallway, only to stop as he saw two men guarding a door that led outside the big house.

The girl stirred. "I—I'm all right now," she breathed. "Forgive me for fainting."

Doc put her on her feet and glanced ahead. Beyond the two men were bright lights. The entire area around the house was lighted; gunmen were watching from all sides.

The bronze giant grinned slightly.

"Stay here for a moment and keep still," he cautioned.

Then he was moving forward. The two guards at the door turned to survey him suspiciously. They were garbed in chauffeur's uniforms.

"See any one go this way?" Doc asked.

The two shook their heads and their automatics came up. Doc paid no heed, strolled toward them. Then his hands shot out and did something to their necks—to their spinal nerve centers. The two dropped.

Virginia Jettmore rushed forward and would have darted from the house, but the bronze giant stopped her. Then he stripped the uniforms from the two chauffeurs.

The girl's eyes flickered understandingly. Without hesitation, she changed into the uniform of the smaller man. Doc shifted as quickly, then dressed the two fallen men in the clothing he and Virginia had discarded.

With steady boldness, they walked into the lighted area, sauntered toward a big auto that stood outside a gate. Carelessly, they stepped inside. Doc pressed the starter and a motor hummed.

Behind them they heard a yell of victory. Doc glanced back.

The two men he'd overcome were struggling to their feet, trying to give chase. One cried out in terror, a shriek of agony that echoed and reëchoed through the night.

As Doc watched, the bodies of the two melted away. Two skeletons dropped limply in the doorway of the big house.

Chapter VII. A KILLER'S DISGUISE

"AND now suppose you tell me what it is all about," Doc said quietly.

The car purred swiftly through the night, swung around a corner, headed back toward the city on a main highway.

Virginia Jettmore's fingers relaxed, she straightened in the seat, wet her lips. "You've heard of Genlee?"

Doc Savage nodded. "A settlement in Africa. Founded by a group of Southerners who fled the States when they saw the North was going to win the Civil War and did not intend to surrender."

The girl looked surprised. "I thought we were forgotten; I didn't know any one remembered that."

The bronze giant smiled slightly.

"Theah were about twenty families to begin with," Virginia Jettmore went on. "Theah were accompanied by some of their old-time retainers. They went to Africa, formed the town of Genlee. Originally, it was named aftah General Lee. But time and custom brought the contraction of the name."

"And time brought an increase in the population of your town, but the ways of the old South were always observed, even in costume and custom," Doc Savage prompted.

"Yes," the girl said. She hesitated. "You know I never was away from Genlee until this trip. My fathah was born theah, became the leader of the colony when grandfathah died. All went well—" She paused.

"Until the skeleton death began to strike?"

The girl nodded; her cheeks lost their color. Once more her lips trembled. Her eyes became those of a harried animal.

"It was awful!" she breathed. "At first, only one died. No one could understand. Then moah. It came so no one would walk in the fields at night. It was even hard to get anyone to walk theah in the daytime.

"Fathah became old overnight. His hair turned white. We were all afraid." Her hands tightened, and tears glistened in her eyes.

"I can't tell you how afraid we became. It's hard, heah, to picture the scene. Friends you knew, people you'd grown up with, suddenly disappearing. Only a skeleton being found. Sometimes it was hard for us to know whose skeleton it was. We'd have to call the roll to find out."

"And then—" Doc asked softly.

"Then fathah heard of you," the girl said simply. "Something had to be done. The colony was threatened with extinction. Harlan Spotfield is his right-hand man. Fathah picked Harlan to come. But I insisted on coming, also. Fathah objected, but I made him see you might want to talk to some one of the family. And of course, if I came Richard Castleman would naturally be along. He'd taken care of my schooling, had been with me since I was an infant."

"It was a small man who was killed in front of my office," Doc said.

"Richard Castleman," the girl replied, dully. "He was small; Harlan Spotfield is large."

"And Spotfield has disappeared. Don't you think that is strange?" Doc asked.

The car they were driving was back inside the city, was moving swiftly now along well-lighted streets.

Virginia Jettmore considered a moment, face blanching.

"You—you don't think Harlan has been doing all this, do you?" the girl ventured.

"I'd like to talk to him," Doc said noncommittally.

He wheeled the car toward the basement entrance of his office building.

THE girl became silent. Despite her fears, she was showing an interest in her surroundings. She had seen many strange things during the day, but none that left her more surprised than when the door to the basement garage rolled back automatically as the car neared it.

"A photo-electric cell," Doc explained briefly. "When the circuit is broken as we near the door, it sets machinery in motion that opens the door."

The girl's look of wonder didn't change.

Doc glanced back at the incline that had appeared in front of them. One foot crashed down suddenly on the brake. The next instant he had shot the car into reverse, slammed it back roughly, only to stop, leap out and race desperately into the basement.

A small, oblong object, apparently of steel, rolled down the incline ahead. Doc snatched a peculiar-appearing cloth from a bench, grabbed the oblong object, wrapped it in the cloth, tossed it in one corner.

There was a muffled explosion.

Scarcely breathing rapidly, the bronze man returned to the car and drove it into the basement. The door closed behind them.

"What—what was it?" the girl gasped.

"Our enemies evidently telephoned ahead to some of the gang in the city," Doc said grimly. "A bomb had been attached to the door. As the door opened it pulled a plug and started the detonation machinery of the bomb, so it would explode just in time to go off under our car. Had it done so, we would have been blown to pieces.

"I wrapped the bomb in a particularly powerful type of steel cloth. It prevented any damage and muffled the explosion." The man of bronze didn't add that the cloth was of his own devising, for use in bulletproof undergarments.

He led the girl to the high-speed elevator that led to his offices. A few moments later, they stepped into Doc's rooms.

Monk and Ham leaped to their feet. A grin of frank admiration was on Monk's homely face. Ham, dapper as usual, bowed slightly. "I knew Doc would bring you back with him," he said.

Doc started toward the next room. "Did you develop the film?" he asked crisply.

Ham and Monk became serious. "It's drying now, Doc," said Ham. "Should be ready in a few moments."

The bronze giant stopped in front of a queer-looking machine. "The conversation came in fine," Monk rumbled. "We played back one of the records and gave a little of the information we heard to the police—but not too much."

DOC nodded, opened a panel and extracted several records. The interior of the machine was highly technical. The outside appeared something like that of an extremely sensitive radio.

In effect, the machine really combined a radio and a television receiver, but it had some novel features. All sounds it received were immediately transcribed on a record not unlike that of a phonograph. And in front of the television disc was a small, efficient moving-picture camera. The small wire and knob Doc had used at the door of Gordon's office had been the television sender.

"Doc had a small television and radio sender with him," Ham was explaining to the girl. "He got close to the room where Greens Gordon and somebody else were talking, and probably put the lens for the television sender under a door. Everything it saw was transmitted here on a very low-wave length and photographed. All words that were spoken were radioed here and transcribed on records."

The bronze giant walked to an ordinary phonograph, placed a record on it, started it. Monk, Ham and the girl leaned forward intently as voices filled the room.

"The escape from the hotel was well managed," came a flat, unfamiliar voice.

"I'm going to do my part. It's up to you to do yours," came the tones of Greens Gordon.

"The truck idea was good. No one would ever think of looking for a black moving van labeled 'Long Distance Hauling' when only a laundry truck appeared at the hotel," the flat voice went on.

"I'm smart," Greens Gordon continued complacently. His voice changed. "But I wish you'd tell me what

it's all about. You talk of millions—"

"And I mean millions! This plan is sure-fire. It will be legal; we won't be taking chances."

"If you call murder—skeleton murder—legal," Gordon said dryly. "And we took chances enough until we got Doc Savage out of the way."

"And I hope you're right, I hope he is dead!" said the other. His tones lost their flatness, became slightly animated.

"Each time I see you, you look different," Gordon was going on plaintively. "At least, you could tell me something about this skeleton death. Why, with that—"

"The skeleton death is my secret!" snapped the second voice. "You've seen what it can do. If I wished to turn it on you right now—"

"Don't!" half screamed Gordon. "But listen." He spoke quickly. "With that weapon we could take banks, jewelry stores, even the treasury itself, I guess. No one can stand against us. Fear would work where bullets won't."

"I have other plans," the other said flatly.

The record came to an end. Doc turned to Virginia Jettmore.

"Spotfield?" he asked briefly.

The girl's eyes were wide open, blank. The black curls made her oval face seem even a deader white. She moistened her lips, half sobbed, "I—I don't know. It—it sounded something like him, and yet—"

WHOEVER it was, his argument with Greens Gordon continued. No additional information was given on the second record. Gordon wanted the strange weapon to use as he knew best how to use it: to instill fear where fear would mean quick cash. The other was as bluntly refusing.

There could be but one ending: It came when Greens conceded sullenly that he would follow orders implicitly.

"I'm glad you agree," came the flat voice of his companion. "Now that we fully understand each other, I'll tell you something else. This first plan of mine will only be a starter. It will furnish us—without much risk—funds for a much greater undertaking."

"And that?" Gordon asked eagerly.

"That," said the other silkily, "will be the complete domination of whatever area of influence we want. Perhaps we'll become statesmen, rule the world. At any rate, we'll see to it that the skeleton death brings us power and riches beyond the dreams of the most autocratic dictator. We may turn it on the President; we may—"

The voice came to a sudden end. Doc had been forced to stop his small portable television radio sender at that point.

Monk and Ham looked at each other, all raillery forgotten for the moment. Their faces were deadly serious. Even Doc's gold-flecked eyes had narrowed.

"See about the film," he said, crisply.

His two aids turned to obey. For the first time they realized the magnitude, the tremendous possibilities before the owner of the secret of the skeleton death.

Doc spoke quietly to the girl, told her to take a seat until he returned. Swiftly, he walked to the small apartment he kept behind his elaborate offices. Here he removed all traces of the make-up that had caused him to be mistaken for the gangster Bunko.

AS Doc returned, Ham was threading a movie projector with a long roll of film. The room was darkened and images appeared on a screen.

"I want to get a look at the man who proposes wholesale murder so calmly," Ham said quietly.

The movie camera that had been set before the television screen had been an exceedingly swift one. The pictures, as they appeared now, seemed almost in slow motion.

Greens Gordon could be seen clearly. He was pacing back and forth in an ornate office. Occasionally, his face showed anger; more often, it was set in a gambler's mask.

But it was his companion that held the attention of the four who were watching the film. The man was standing quietly, his back turned to the camera.

Long moments rolled by. An impatient exclamation came from Monk.

"Daggonit, isn't that bird ever going to turn around?"

Greens Gordon had stopped. He stared directly at his companion. Evidently a tense moment in their conversation had arrived. His companion's shoulders shrugged; one hand went out in an oratorical gesture.

Then he turned.

There was only a quick look, then the screen went blank. But that quick look had been enough.

His features were those of Ham!

Chapter VIII. AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

HAM leaped to his feet. He shook a fist at the now blank screen. Monk's mouth opened; a surprised expression crossed his homely face, to be replaced by a slow grin.

"Why you shyster," he roared, in his thin voice. "And all this time I thought you was with me! But no, you was plotting murder with that green-striped racketeer!"

Ham sputtered.

"But—but that man looked just like your friend heah," Virginia Jettmore exclaimed.

"We are dealing with a rather intelligent foe," Doc Savage said slowly. "He intends that no one should know what he looks like."

"But why pick on me?" Ham shouted.

"Because he knew you're a clothes horse anyhow!" Monk put in quickly.

"Because he knew I, at least, looked as though I might be a serious enemy!" Ham howled.

"Did his features and build impress you as those of any one you know?" Doc asked the girl

"You—you mean Harlan?"

"Harlan Spotfield, or any one else you might have known or seen at any time," Doc replied quietly.

For a moment, it seemed as though the girl did not intend to answer. Her eyes grew even larger, her lips trembled.

"Harlan's about that size," she said at last, weakly.

"The guy who was supposed to come see Doc in the first place?" asked Monk.

Virginia Jettmore nodded slowly. "Fathah trusted him. But if it isn't Harlan, who else could it be?"

"We'll get him and see—" Ham said.

Doc held up a hand for silence. Some one was approaching down the hallway—some one walking with faltering steps.

The next instant, the door opened, and Harlan Spotfield stood facing them!

VIRGINIA JETTMORE screamed faintly. There was some reason for that scream. Spotfield's appearance was evidence enough of rough treatment. But his eyes were the most terrifying feature. They seemed almost to bulge from his head; his lips were opening and closing weakly.

"Virginia!" he croaked.

The girl looked at him, one hand to her mouth. Then she started forward, eyes filled with sudden relief. "Harlan! Harlan! Are you hurt?"

"Stop!" said Doc crisply. His voice was not raised, but the girl halted instantly.

The disheveled man in the doorway stared at the bronze giant with unseeing eyes. He raised one hand. It seemed heavy, weighed by the large, old-fashioned cameo ring he wore.

"Come with me, Virginia," he pleaded.

"But—but this is Doc Savage," exclaimed the girl. "He is the one fathah told us to get. Why should we leave now, just when we're heah—all but poor Richard?" Her voice faltered.

A strange gleam came into Harlan Spotfield's eyes. "Have you told Doc Savage what we want?"

"Why—why, of course," stammered Virginia.

For an instant, it appeared that Spotfield would faint. His big body sagged; he reached one hand back for the doorsill.

Doc Savage dropped down in his chair behind his desk, gold-flecked eyes emotionless as he watched the tableau. Monk's mouth frankly hung open. Ham's entire attention was on the girl and Spotfield. None saw Doc press a tiny key.

Spotfield repeated dully, "You've told Doc Savage the whole story?"

"Yes," said the girl, somewhat impatiently this time. "Why not, Harlan?"

"Then they'll kill us!" he screamed.

So suddenly that Monk and Ham were caught flatfooted, Spotfield whirled, yanked open the door, attempted to flee.

His body fell forward. He caught himself with difficulty. A yell of pure fright broke from his lips as his hands pawed the air frantically.

His feet had not moved. It was as if they had been sealed to the floor.

Monk lumbered forward; his long arms wrapped about the struggling form of Spotfield. He tried to lift the man up, tried to turn, to carry him back farther into the office.

He couldn't move!

A STRANGE expression crossed the homely chemist's face. Ham and the girl looked on in amazement.

Monk looked down at his feet, sought vainly to lift them. Then he peered at Doc, grinned wisely.

"I should have known you'd figure out something like this, Doc," he said, admiringly. "I don't know why I didn't think of it."

The bronze man's eyes twinkled slightly. He pressed another button. Without difficulty, Monk carried the still-fighting Spotfield over in front of the desk, smashed him down on it solidly. Ham jumped to the other side.

"Why did you try to run?" Ham barked.

Spotfield seemed not to have heard the question. His eyes were fixed on Doc Savage's face, his expression that of a man who had run into something he'll never be able to explain.

"How did you do that?" he demanded bluntly.

"Inspect your shoes," Doc advised quietly.

Wonderingly, Spotfield crossed his legs, looked at the sole of one shoe. It appeared covered by a fine metal.

"When you entered the door," Doc said, "you stepped on tiny, almost invisible steel shavings. Those shavings were short, but needle sharp; they pierced the leather of your shoe instantly and covered it like a paste. It would be necessary to remove the leather sole to get rid of them, they are imbedded so firmly. The rest was simple—merely an electric magnet."

"Of course." Intelligence dawned in Spotfield's eyes. "A powerful electric magnet under the floor, and right by the door, would grip the steel, and since thousands of those small shavings are in my shoes, the

force was enough to keep me from moving. All you had to do was to set the magnet to working."

"True." Doc's manner changed. He shot his question abruptly. "And now, please tell us where you have been, and what your connection is with the skeleton death."

Spotfield's face changed color; for a fleeting instant he glanced at the girl.

"It's terrible!" he moaned. "Did Virginia say I had anything to do with it?"

"I—I—" the girl started.

"All who came here from Genlee were connected with the skeleton death, of course, if only because it was following you," Doc broke in smoothly. "No one has accused you yet of being responsible for it, but you must admit you have much to explain."

Spotfield nodded his head slowly. "Youah right, suh." He took a long breath, spoke swiftly.

"WHEN I left the hotel where I'd left Virginia and Richard, I started for your office. I know now I should have taken a cab. But I had been penned up too much on the boat, I needed exercise, so I walked.

"As I neared your office, two men stepped out, asked me for a match. As I reached for it, a gun was put into my side, I was forced into a car.

"The next thing I knew, I was taken before a terrible-looking creature, a man dressed mostly in green."

"Greens Gordon!" interjected Monk.

"This man asked me many questions," Spotfield went on. "Why, I do not know. But I was forced to tell him who had come with me, and the purpose of our trip. They—they beat me up somewhat. Then I was put in a room. Later, a thug told me Richard had been killed, Virginia kidnaped, and that no one was going to get to Doc Savage to tell him our errand.

"But something evidently went wrong. A half hour ago my eyes were taped, my arms bound, and I was brought to a place neah your office, and told I must get Virginia and bring her back with me, or I would be killed."

He stopped. His eyes dilated, and his face became a mask of terror. "Killed I say!" he half screamed. "Killed by the skeleton death!"

Virginia Jettmore's features were an ashen color.

Ham was staring at Spotfield's terror-stricken figure queerly. Monk quite frankly showed his disgust.

"So you'd take a girl back where she might get killed, just to save your own skin," he accused.

"But it's horrible!" Spotfield jabbered. "You don't know how it tears the flesh from your bones, leaves you nothing but—but—"

"You reached Doc. He'll take care of you," Ham reminded dryly.

Spotfield controlled himself with difficulty. "I—I hope so," he gasped weakly. "But the men he is fighting are terrible, and they promised me death." His fists clenched; the cameo ring loomed pink against the white of his fingers.

Doc apparently had lost interest in the tale. He was looking at what appeared to be a small compass on his desk. There was a thin pointer inside a glass-covered disc.

But there were no marks to indicate directions on the dial, and the pointer did not hold steady to a given direction, as would a compass.

Instead, the pointer was moving slowly, swinging along toward the corridor door.

"Your enemies are coming, Spotfield," Doc said quietly. Spotfield leaped to his feet, shrieked horribly. The next instant he had darted through a door, into an inner room of Doc's office, covered behind a desk.

MEN crowded in the hallway outside the office. They were advancing cautiously, their rubber-soled shoes making no noise on the hard corridor floor.

In the lead was Gats, a gun in one hand. Behind him pressed a dozen more men, similarly armed.

A tall, broad-shouldered man beside the wizened gangster elbowed to the fore. In his hand was a funnel-shaped thing. He didn't speak. He kept his face partly hidden.

The group stopped, ranged themselves on either side of the door to Doc's office.

"Remember, don't fire unless I give the signal," the big man said flatly. "This should do the work, but if any one rushes out, blast him!"

He swung the office door open, extended the funnel around the edge.

Chapter IX. AN EFFICIENT COMPASS

MONK and Ham were watching Doc. They did not move. There was a reason for that. Doc had seen the door open. If he'd wanted them to act he would have said so.

Virginia Jettmore appeared almost in a trance. Harlan Spotfield's despairing shriek was still ringing in her ears. She expected nothing but death.

But, dazed by fear as she was, she still was aware that Doc had pressed a button and that confident grins had crossed the faces of the dapper Ham and the homely Monk.

She took confidence from the expression on the faces of the others, only to wonder if something was wrong. Doc had pressed a second button. Questioning looks crossed the faces of his aids. Ham opened his mouth to speak, only to clamp his jaws together.

A voice was speaking from outside the doorway.

"You defied my warning," came flat, blank tones. "You were told to stay out of this case, Doc Savage. You disobeyed. Now you die."

"Melodrama!" snorted Monk.

Doc made no comment. He was looking intently toward the doorway, toward the peculiar-shaped funnel that had been pressed around the sill.

There was a faint hiss. A cloud formed in the outer part of the room—a cloud visible only for an instant before it vanished.

The door crashed closed. Running footsteps could be heard in the corridor.

Monk and Ham looked at Doc. He shook his head.

"Let them go," the bronze man said calmly. "We know where to go when we want information; besides, they gave us more than a little of it just now."

"What?" blurted Monk. "All they gave us was proof that they intend to kill you!"

"And proof of the principle behind the skeleton death, although all the details are not clear just yet," said Doc.

VIRGINIA JETTMORE was amazed.

Even Ham and Monk appeared surprised, although they had witnessed Doc's apparent feats of magic too often to doubt his statement.

"I understood your first move," said Ham.

"Sure," added Monk. "That first button you pressed dropped the invisible shield, but what was the second for?"

Doc shook his head. "Later," he replied briefly.

The bronze giant's office long had been protected by an invisible shield, to be dropped at will. In reality, it was simply bulletproof glass strong enough to stop the most powerful bullet, yet so clear it could not be seen.

Doc turned to the room into which Spotfield had darted. Spotfield was crouched behind the desk, hands clenched in his hair, the cameo ring jutting out strongly. He looked up as Doc entered. His eyes popped.

"You—youah still alive?"

"A dumb question," rumbled Monk over one of Doc's shoulders.

"Then you really can save me!" shrilled Spotfield. He jumped up, came forward to drop almost at Doc's feet.

"You will come with us, will come with Virginia and me to Genlee and save it from destruction?"

"What is behind the attempt to wipe out Genlee?" Doc countered.

Spotfield shook his head. Slowly, his ashen features regained their color. "I—I don't know."

Doc walked back to his desk, glanced at the compass.

"Your enemies have left the building," he said. "You and Virginia stay here. Monk, Ham and myself will see what more we can find out from Greens Gordon before we know if it's necessary to go to Genlee."

Ham nodded wisely. "Gordon holds the key."

Spotfield had regained some of his aplomb. He walked to Doc's side, glanced at the small compass as Doc picked it up and dropped it in a pocket.

Doc appeared to pay no attention. He led Spotfield and the girl to his private apartment back of the offices. There were books, a radio, easy-chairs and solid doors.

"You will be safe here," he said. "Keep calm until we return."

"I'm curious about that compass," Monk grumbled as the high-speed elevator dropped to the main floor.

"I was in close contact with many of the gang right after they kidnaped Virginia Jettmore," said Doc.

"Sure, but what of it?"

"You have heard of radidite?"

Monk and Ham shook their heads.

"It's a rare stone discovered recently in South America," Doc explained. "Seemingly it has some of the properties of radium, hence its name. But it has no medicinal qualities, and its rays do not burn. However, certain substances, or metal alloys, are highly sensitive to it.

"There are few pieces of radidite in the country, except those I have obtained. I simply dropped a small piece of it into a pocket of each man in the gang I could get close to. The compass has a needle of sensitized alloy inside a partial vacuum. Consequently it swings toward radidite, and indicated to me that some of the gang was approaching."

"And how efficient is it?" Ham asked interestedly.

Doc drew the compass from his pocket. "I have never had occasion to try it over long distances, but—"

He held the compass out. The needle had swung instantly toward the northeast, held steady.

"At least it works for some miles. The indicator is pointing toward Greens Gordon's hang-out. All the gang must be back there by now."

BUT the man of bronze was mistaken for once. He didn't see the small figure that stepped out from a cigar store, slipped into the crowd behind them as they left the office building.

Their shadow had not been with the gang when the kidnap raid had been staged. Therefore, there was no radidite in his pocket, nothing to attract the compass.

The man's face was vicious; he kept his head down, as if anxious his features should remain hidden. He saw Doc and his aids enter a restaurant. He darted to a telephone booth.

"Your men failed," he said when he got his number.

Greens Gordon swore horribly. "How could they? They used the skeleton death?"

"Doc Savage is alive," the little man reported laconically. "He and those guys called Monk and Ham are getting something to eat."

There was a moment of silence. "And the others? The girl and the big man who was sent to Savage's

office to get her?"

"They must still be there."

"Good! Give me the name of the restaurant where the bronze giant and his men are. Keep an eye on 'em."

Not long after, Greens Gordon received a second call.

"Doc Savage and his men have left the restaurant and have entered a car. They are headed northeast," came the report.

A sly grin crossed Gordon's heavy face. "Good," he said. "Come in. We'll take care of Savage's office later."

But Gordon's face looked almost black as he hung up the telephone receiver; his heavy eyebrows drew down, and his mouth twisted up.

"They're on their way here," he said to the gunman near him.

Gats's face split in a savage snarl. "Let me take a Tommy gun and go down the road a piece!" he barked. "They'll never get here!"

Gordon shook his head. "Their car is bulletproof. No, there is a better way." He rapped instructions.

A few moments later, men were racing down the road from the huge house where the racketeer had his headquarters. Some carried wire. Two carried huge weights. Two others carried heavy cans.

Half a mile down the road, they worked swiftly. The wire, almost invisible in the night, was stretched across the road, over limbs of trees. At each end, one of the big cans was attached. The weights were used as counterbalances.

A warning whistle sounded. Faintly, down the road, could be heard the hum of a powerful motor.

The men raced to the fields on either side of the road, and hurled themselves to the ground.

That car should be bearing Doc Savage, and when it struck that wire, no man cared to be close by.

DOC SAVAGE was in the car, his bronze features dimly outlined in the glow from the dashboard light.

Monk and Ham were sitting in the rear seat. In their hands, they each carried a queer-shaped mercy pistol, an oversized automatic with circular drums that carried bullets that brought unconsciousness, but not death.

"We're getting close," Doc warned.

Doc was holding the compass in one hand. His gold-flecked eyes glinted suddenly.

The needle indicator no longer was standing still; it was darting from one side to the other.

The bronze man looked ahead. The car's headlights already had been turned off, but there was moonlight enough to show the road ran in a straight line, directly toward a huge blur that was Gordon's crazy house.

Their destination was still almost a mile away. It was certain that the low throb of the motor couldn't be heard that far.

"Get ready to jump!" Doc rapped.

Monk and Ham opened doors on either side of the car, stood ready to leap. There had been a note in Doc's voice that had told them all they wanted to know. Action was near!

"Jump!" ordered Doc,

In the same instant, the bronze man opened the door beside him. He opened the gas lever slightly and stepped from the machine, landing lightly on the ground.

The huge car roared on. The steering gear was such that it would take a strong wrench to change the direction, and the road was smooth.

Like shadows, Doc and his aids drifted to one side of the road, into a field. They half ducked and stood waiting.

They didn't have long to wait.

There was a terrific flash of fire, followed by a blast of air that knocked them from their feet. Their eardrums were almost deafened by the concussion.

The speeding car had struck the wire, had pulled it tight. The cans attached at either end struck simultaneously on each side of the machine.

And the cans had contained nitroglycerin. The car had vanished. It was doubtful if more than a scrap of metal would ever be found to show that it had existed.

Greens Gordon, safe in his headquarters, chuckled without mirth. His men rose shakily from either side of the road, made their way back to headquarters.

But behind them, slipping easily and noiselessly, came Doc and his aids. Once more Doc's alloy needle compass had saved their lives.

Chapter X. GATS SEES A GHOST

FROM outside, the building appeared huge, but it gave no indication of the trick rooms and pitfalls of death it contained within its walls.

Doc surveyed it swiftly. The gangsters they had trailed vanished through a door that lead to the cellar. Only an occasional light showed higher up in the structure.

"Wait!" the bronze man said briefly.

Without a sound he vanished, slipped closer to the building. Greens Gordon's office was on the top floor. The problem was going to be to reach that office without detection.

Doc circled. Guards stood at the front door. The bones of those who had fallen there had been removed. No other entrance came in view, except that through which the gangsters had disappeared.

But there were many windows within easy reach. Doc tested one of these cautiously, his big frame tense.

He raised it a fraction of an inch.

No alarm bell sounded, but that did not mean that the window might not be connected with a burglar alarm.

The bronze man inspected the sill rapidly with a tiny flashlight. There were no wires, nothing to show it was attached to a signal; but still Doc seemed to hesitate.

Often, he sensed danger where no danger appeared to be. And a sixth sense now was sounding caution. He retreated slightly and waited.

The dense darkness inside the room was cut for an instant by a lighter beam. Only supersensitive eyes could have noticed that beam, so quickly was it gone.

Doc smiled slightly, stood absolutely still, his body merged with the darkness of a tree. A shadow passed in front of the window; eyes stared out.

Some one cursed slightly. The window was pushed back down.

For ten minutes, Doc stood motionless; then he again approached the window. And this time he acted without hesitation.

He drew a thin slide from his pocket, pressed it in the minute space between the bottom of the window and the sill. Slowly he pushed this back and forth, sensitive fingers tuned to catch the slightest vibration.

Exactly in the center of the window he stopped, pressed the slide in tight, then bent it so it would hold firm.

When next the window was opened no alarm would be given. The secret had been easy to discover, merely a small spring button on the window sill. With the window down no signal showed, but when the window was raised, even half an inch, the spring button came up, flashed an alarm. Doc had simply fixed a slide over the button so it could not raise even with the window up.

Swiftly the bronze man turned, raced back toward the spot where Monk and Ham were waiting.

And from a window near the one he'd fixed, eyes stared at Doc's back. Gats had not been entirely satisfied when he'd answered the alarm and found nothing. He'd gone to an adjoining room and peered out.

Now his beady eyes were protruding; his wizened face was horror-stricken.

Doc Savage must be dead! His auto had been blown into a thousand fragments! Yet if it hadn't been Doc Savage's face he'd seen for a fleeting instant, it must have been that of a ghost.

Gats trembled, then clenched his fists and caught hold of his nerves. Ghosts didn't bother to come in windows; they could come right through walls.

Doc Savage was alive! The little gunman turned, raced to the room where Greens Gordon sat.

ALL was quiet as Doc, followed by Monk and Ham, returned to the window. It was but the work of seconds to raise that window, slide into the house.

"Be careful," Doc cautioned, in a low tone. "This is a tricky building. Take no chances."

Ham murmured assent.

"Dang it," Monk muttered, "I wish Habeas Corpus was along. He'd help us."

"That pig!" snorted Ham.

Doc placed a hand on a wrist of each of them suddenly. The low-voiced squabble stopped. They all stood, listening intently.

Nothing was to be heard. There were not even the ordinary noises that come when a group of people are in a house, even when they are not talking.

It was almost as if the house was vacant, or as if every one in it was tense, waiting for an expected storm.

"Getting in was almost too easy," Ham volunteered at last.

"Right," Doc agreed, his voice scarcely more than a whisper. "It looks like a trap. We will go back, if you wish."

Monk growled briefly. "We can take care of ourselves," he rumbled.

Doc said nothing more. He turned on the tiny beam of his flash and advanced swiftly.

The door of the room opened noiselessly, and the three entered a small corridor. It, too, was dark.

That was unusual. When Doc had been in the house earlier in the evening, there had been dim lights in the corridors, even though a majority of the rooms were unlighted.

Rapidly they moved ahead. Doc was heading for the stairway so clearly described to him by Gats. It would have been inviting death to have attempted to seize the elevator.

They entered a narrow tunnel, the ceiling so low they were forced to bend over. Ham was directly behind the bronze man, while Monk brought up the rear.

A surprised grunt came from the hairy chemist. At the same instant, something crashed out of the darkness and knocked the flash from Doc's hand.

"Got 'em!" roared a jubilant voice.

A machine gun clattered angrily. Bullets raked the narrow tunnel.

DOC had heard Monk's surprised grunt. He didn't know what had caused the hairy chemist to cry out, but the tone of Monk's voice was indication enough of danger.

Even before the flashlight had been knocked from his hand, the bronze man had hurled himself down—and forward. Ham was almost as swift.

Lead whistled over their heads. A shriek of agony came from behind them.

Doc's plunge had been almost like the dive a football player would make for a tackle. His arms wrapped around the knees of a little man standing with feet wide apart, a machine gun in his hands.

The little man went backward, bullets from the gun cutting a line along one wall and through the ceiling as the weapon continued to spout. Then it shut off suddenly. Doc had grabbed the gun from the little man's

hands.

The gunner screamed for help. A dozen voices answered. The room seemed filled with milling men.

"Lights! Lights!" some one was shouting frantically.

Doc swung the machine gun like a club. Men went down. No more shots were fired. Those in the room knew that something had gone wrong, and were afraid to use their automatics for fear of hitting one another.

The bronze man heard Ham's voice as the dapper lawyer wiggled out of the passageway and went into action.

A switch was pressed. A big light went on in the middle of the ceiling. For an instant, there was a confused picture of men sprawling on the floor, others on their feet, guns in hand.

Then there was a crash. The light went out. Doc had hurled the machine gun at it, had burst the globe.

Automatics cracked. Bullets went through the space the bronze man had occupied a moment before. He was no longer there. He had leaped toward the door an instant after hurling the gun at the light.

A roar came from the mouth of the passageway. A body was picked up, smashed with deafening force against an opposite wall.

A sigh of relief came from Ham.

The shrill cry that had followed the first burst of machine-gun fire hadn't sounded like Monk, but the dapper lawyer had feared his hairy friend had been caught.

Monk had been knocked down. Some one had mixed signals. A gunman had stepped up behind Monk as he'd entered the passageway, had struck him over the head with the butt of his automatic. The hairy chemist had dropped, momentarily stunned. He'd escaped, but his assailant had been mowed down.

Doc thrust the door open, jumped into the passageway. Fighting was still going on behind him, but a moment later Ham and Monk also were in the hall. The gangsters hadn't seen Doc's signal, though the bronze man and his aids were still in the room.

All Doc had done was to draw back his coat sleeve for a second. The illuminated dial of his wrist watch had shown. Monk and Ham had understood.

Swiftly, the three raced down the hall. They rounded a turn. A dim light was on, and a guard stood near the elevator shaft.

The surprised gunman lifted his weapon, tried to shoot. The next moment he dropped, limp. Doc had sprung ahead. His powerful fingers had brought swift unconsciousness to the other.

THE bronze man and his aids didn't know it, but the overcoming of the guard had been witnessed. A squat, heavy-set figure dressed in green had been approaching, only to dart back as he saw the three men near the elevator shaft.

Greens Gordon's face was almost the hue of his clothes. He'd been both surprised and angry when he'd received Gats's message and had learned Doc was still alive. He had issued quick orders and had supposed they had succeeded when he'd heard the shots that had signaled that the bronze man and his

lieutenants had walked into the ambush.

He had particularly wanted them out of the way. For while he'd been waiting for the machine-gun fire, he'd received a telephone call. A flat, emotionless voice had asked if Doc was dead.

Greens Gordon had said "yes."

His complexion grew even more greenish as he thought of it. The man at the other end of the line had seemed pleased at the news, but the racketeer knew quick, violent death. The skeleton death might follow if the other learned he had failed.

The skeleton death was walking even now. That was one thing that made Gordon feel so faint. The flat-voiced man had spoken calmly of taking care of "that other little matter."

Gordon knew what that other little matter was.

The racketeer knew, too, that arrangements had been made for them to leave the city, that the path was supposed to be clear. But that had been based on the assumption that Doc Savage was dead.

Gordon glanced around the corner. Doc and his men were getting into the elevator. A sly grin crossed the gangster's face as the elevator shot upward, a grin that hardened suddenly into grim determination. He was willing to dare a lot with millions of dollars as the reward—and the skeleton death the penalty for failure.

THE corridor was clear as Doc, Monk and Ham burst out of the elevator on the top floor. But where the house had been still as death when they had entered, now it was filled with the noise of shouting men and running feet.

Doc led the way swiftly to Gordon's office. The door was closed, but unlocked. A moment later and the three were inside with the door closed behind them.

"Search swiftly," Doc urged. "Somewhere here we should find what we want, some clue to the skeleton death and why it is being used."

Gordon's room was large, with a thick rug on the floor. In one corner was a safe. Doc went to it and started working swiftly with the combination. Monk and Ham rifled through papers in the desk.

"There's enough evidence here to put Gordon in jail for life as a racketeer," Ham observed.

Doc said nothing. He spun the dial of the safe, his sensitive fingers catching the feel of the tumblers. Within the space of seconds, the supposedly burglarproof safe was opened. A mass of papers and money came into view.

The bronze man ignored the money. He scanned the papers swiftly.

"Nothing there?" blurted Monk, watching Doc's expression.

The bronze man shook his head. "Not yet. Look swiftly. We'll be discovered soon, and there's only one door out of this place.

Monk lumbered to the door. "I'll stand guard," he offered.

He tried the knob and a surprised expression crossed his homely features.

"Doc!" he bellowed.

THE bronze man looked up, watched as Monk put all his enormous strength into a frantic effort to open the door.

Doc's nostrils sniffed. He leaped to his feet, rushed to Monk's side, his bunch of skeleton keys in his hand. He tried one, shook his head.

"Locked from the outside, then plugged," he said calmly.

Monk's features became slightly apprehensive. The bronze man tried the door, put his big shoulders to it and pushed. The door creaked, but did not give. It was of oak, and stoutly constructed.

Now Ham's nose moved. His eyebrows raised inquiringly as he looked at Doc. The bronze man nodded. A strange heat was invading the room; an ominous silence had gripped the big house.

Monk's eyes flitted rapidly around the room, a dazed expression on his lowering brow. There were no windows. The door by which they'd entered was the only way out.

Doc crossed the room to the side of the safe. Ham's mouth opened slightly, to close as a glint of admiration filled his eyes.

Easily, almost as if he wasn't performing a feat that would have shamed a professional strong man, Doc lifted the safe, carried it in his arms halfway across the room. He stopped, swayed back and forth slightly.

There was a thunderous crash. The safe smashed into the door, hurled with all the strength in Doc's amazingly powerful body.

The door gave, burst open.

Flames flicked evilly into the room. The passageway to the elevator was blocked by a wall of fire!

Chapter XI. THE CHASE

SMOKE funneled from the cracks in the woodwork. Intense heat fanned the air. Doc Savage turned away from the elevator, and moved down the corridor. There were two doors. He ripped one open. Flames belched out. Below was a deep pit.

Doc closed the door quickly and tried the other. A large room loomed before him. Fire leaped from floor and walls. At the other side of the room was a second door.

The bronze man whipped back down the corridor. As he ran, he pulled three tightly wrapped packages from an inner pocket. He unfurled these on the run.

"Quick," he rapped, "put these on! We've got to go through that room!"

Monk and Ham took the strange packages from their chief. They proved to be queer-looking garments, like union suits, but large enough to go on over their clothes. They seemed to be made of cellophane, were transparent and thin. The substance was a strange type of asbestos, perfected by Doc. With each suit was a hood that fitted tightly. Monk and Ham struggled into them. Doc donned his.

"Got breathing pills?" Monk inquired. He knew the suits had to be air-tight to keep out the flames and ever mounting heat.

Doc handed pellets to his aids. Monk popped his into his mouth and started to pull on his transparent hood. Ham did likewise.

Doc motioned the two to follow and ran lightly down the blazing hall. Conversation was impossible. All communication had to be by motions. But Doc and his men were all adept at several forms of sign language.

They reached the room. Angry flames licked at them. Smoke obscured their vision. The heat was like that of a blast furnace.

They didn't feel the heat. The suits, constructed by Doc's cunning skill, resisted almost any temperature. They were built so that an air pocket was formed between the clothing and the body, and were in effect like great, flexible vacuum bottles.

Doc strode ahead, ripped open the door on the other side of the room. They came upon another crazy, twisting hallway. Doors studded the walls. Some showed narrow, flaming closets. Obviously, the gangsters had thoroughly saturated the entire building with gasoline.

Blue and red tongues of fire forked from the cracks of the floor ahead. Doc walked cautiously. Strips of flooring, tinder dry, blazed like sulphur matches. The hall was a giant flue. The flames roared through it. But they could hardly hear the roaring from within their fireproof suits.

Suddenly the floor beneath Doc gave way. With a ripping crash, he plunged into a flaming abyss, and vanished from view. Smoke filled the air.

Monk and Ham could not see Doc, nor could they call. Without an instant's hesitation, they leaped into the gaping, blazing hole.

THERE was a swift, red flash. Then Monk and Ham landed on solid flooring. Doc stood there waiting. They were in another passageway, and at one end, through the flames could be seen a window.

Doc ran toward that window. It was their only chance. Monk and Ham followed, but their faces were perplexed. They knew Doc could descend the side of the building easily, but they couldn't. Then their faces cleared. The bronze man had signaled swiftly.

The windowpane had been broken by the intense heat. Doc dropped through the opening, caught the sill by his finger tips. Ham crawled out behind him, grabbed Doc's body and slid down until he was holding by Doc's heels. Then came Monk.

When he had descended until he was holding on to Ham's heels, Monk's feet reached the window sill a floor below. He released his hold, got a firm grip with one arm and caught Ham as he dropped. Doc descended easily.

The three in turn repeated the procedure until they were close enough to the earth to drop unharmed.

Policemen seized the three as they struck the ground. The chief inspector came upon the scene, and Doc spoke a few words with him.

"Of course, Doc Savage," the inspector said. "Take my car. It's as fast as they make 'em."

Doc got in, Monk and Ham following him.

The queer compass was in one of the bronze man's hands. The needle swung toward the city. It moved slowly until it was headed directly toward the spot where Doc's skyscraper office was located.

AND the needle didn't lie. A powerful car was speeding toward the bronze man's office. Shifty-eyed men huddled in the dark tonneau. They were eyes that looked on death as commonplace.

The car stopped before a great skyscraper. Men leaped from it and hurried into the building. One was big, with broad shoulders.

Waiting in the car, Greens Gordon wiggled nervously.

"Shouldn't take them long," he grumbled.

It didn't. Five minutes later, a group of men burst out of the building. A girl walked in their midst. Her face was white, her eyes wide with terror. She looked like one who had just walked close to death.

The scrawny hand of Gats seemed to hold her by an elbow. It was as if he was courteously escorting her over the sidewalk. A casual observer would not have seen the automatic he pressed against her ribs.

But a policeman, eyes more alert, did see. For a moment he stood paralyzed, unable to realize what was occurring.

The car door slammed, the motor purred.

The policeman cried an order to halt, lifted his whistle and sounded a piercing blast.

Unhurriedly Gats turned in his seat, fired once. The policeman crumpled.

"You shouldn't 'a' done that!" Gordon rapped.

"It's quite all right," said the tall, broad-shouldered figure beside him. "No one can catch us; no one will follow us. Should they even try, arrangements have been made to care for them; and in any event no one will be able to trace our course."

The big man might not have felt quite so sure had he known that even then a small, peculiar compass was following the route of their car.

"Do you suppose they got the girl?" growled Monk. His small eyes were gleaming. There was no mistaking the meaning of the swing of Greens Gordon's car toward Doc's office.

"I should have stayed there," Ham said disgustedly.

"It would be almost impossible for any one to get inside where the girl and Spotfield are—unless the door was opened for them," Doc said.

The bronze man's voice was quiet, but Monk went silent suddenly. Then he gasped and said one word: "Spotfield!"

"We do not know," Doc reminded him.

Ham had been peering at the queer compass. Now he pointed quickly. The needle was swinging.

"Whatever was to be done at the office is over with!" he snapped. "They're heading north. Can we cut them off?"

"We can try," the bronze man said. He stepped down hard on the accelerator. The motor whined louder; the landscape became only a dim blur.

They roared into the city's outskirt factory districts. Great buildings floated past them. The road no longer was open and clear. Traffic thickened. Street lights glowed yellow above corners. The needle on the compass swung slowly, following the course of their quarry. It quivered not at all.

"We're getting close," Doc said quietly. "Get your superfirers ready."

Monk and Ham pulled out their queer, pistol-like guns loaded with mercy bullets.

The car whipped around a turn and straightened out. The needle pointed straight ahead. There were only three cars in sight. Doc looked closely at the indicator. It moved so slightly normal eyes could not have seen it.

"Third car ahead," Doc said shortly.

He stepped hard on the gas. They crept up, passed the first car. The second machine turned off. Still the needle pointed ahead.

A sharp red burst of flame came from the back window of the fleeing car. A rifle bullet splattered on the bulletproof windshield.

Those ahead knew only that a police car was following them. They did not suspect that Doc was at the wheel.

"I told you it was dumb killing that cop!" Gordon roared at Gats.

The little gunman said nothing. His eyes were filled with the murder lust as they looked over the sights of a machine gun.

"It is essential that we stop them," came the flat voice of the broad-shouldered man.

DOC and his aids were stopped. But it wasn't through efforts of the gangsters. A truck, heavily loaded, rumbled from a side street. For an instant, a collision seemed inevitable. Then Doc swung the inspector's car sidewise, pivoted in a spin, and averted the crash.

It was only a matter of seconds to straighten out, but in that time the gangsters' machine disappeared. The compass, however, picked up the course.

Doc stepped up the speed of the car rapidly, only to pause. The needle no longer was holding straight. It was bobbing from side to side.

"One of them has left the machine," Doc said. "We will have to wait a few moments."

"Why?" Monk demanded.

"Most of them stayed in the car," the bronze man explained. "In a few moments the additional pull of the majority of the lodestones will give us our direction."

"But we'll lose time!" Monk wailed.

"Unfortunately we will," the bronze man said. His voice was calm, but his brow was wrinkled slightly.

One minute, two minutes went by. The needle stopped its wavering. Doc started the car. Again they careened around corners, but Doc seemed to be driving slower now. Suddenly, the indicator straightened out entirely.

"They've stopped!" Monk shouted. "We'll get 'em now!"

Doc said nothing. The wrinkle had disappeared from his brow; he was smiling slightly. They came to a corner. Doc shot by it without slackening speed.

"Hey, why didn't you turn?" Monk howled.

A terrific explosion was his answer. A good fifty feet of pavement leaped into the air on the side street. Had they turned, they would have caught the full force of the blast.

"The needle steadied much too suddenly," Doc said calmly. "They knew we were close behind them and wanted us to turn that corner, for they had dropped a short-fuse bomb."

The bronze man circled swiftly. He made no attempt to cut back behind the other car.

"But—but—" Monk started.

Doc Savage's face was grim. "I should have seen it before. There is only one logical place they can be heading toward. They are on their way to the airport."

Monk's big fists tightened. The others had a good start; their machine was fast.

Street lights whipped by on either side, then they reached a more-traveled highway and were forced to slow down so as not to endanger others. The red flash of a tail-light showed before them as they shot onto a side road toward the airport.

The inspector's car skidded wildly as it made a sharp turn into the airport. Two big transport planes were lumbering across the field, their powerful motors wide open.

Monk was out of the car even before Doc stopped, and was racing across the field, his superfirer in one hand.

The transport planes lifted easily.

"Too late!" Ham groaned.

DOC nodded grimly. On one of the runways, near at hand, was the car they had been pursuing. It was empty now. The glass had been broken out of the rear where guns had been fired back at the bronze man and his aids.

Monk returned, glum-faced. "It'll take us a few minutes to get a ship, and get it warmed up," he growled. "And it'll be harder finding them at night."

"I think I know where they are heading," Doc said. "But it will do no harm to go to the administration building and see what destination was given when the planes took off. Gordon undoubtedly telephoned

ahead and arranged for them."

He started across the field at a dogtrot, Monk and Ham at his side. The airport was not a large one, and its business offices were at the far end of a long hangar. No one was in sight.

At a lighted door, the bronze man stopped. He knocked briefly, then tried the knob. It was locked.

Doc's great, bronze-corded fingers tightened on the knob. The door burst open as if a bull had rammed it.

Monk groaned. Ham leaped forward impulsively.

In one corner of the room there was a huddled form. Crimson oozed from a hole in the temple.

Greens Gordon's gang was taking no chances on leaving some one who might give a clue to any one tracing them. Gats's gun had spoken again. The airport manager was dead.

Chapter XII. A MIDNIGHT INTRUDER

"AND we still don't know what it's about," Monk moaned.

Ham said nothing, he was looking at Doc expectantly.

"Back to the office!" Doc rapped. "We must act fast. While going through papers at Gordon's office, I learned he owned a yacht. It is not in his name, but it is anchored off Miami. Undoubtedly they will fly there, destroy the planes and board the yacht."

Monk's homely face lighted, then paled.

"But the girl—"

"They probably have the girl, and Spotfield, too," Doc said. "Otherwise, they never would have left the city."

Swiftly, they ran for their car. It wasn't often that Doc and his men were left with so few clues to go on in a major case. The very fact that they were left with few clues indicated to them that something of far more than usual import was behind all that had happened.

"If that bunch of vultures ever gets to Genlee," Monk muttered, "whatever it is they want there, they'll get."

"The 'land of fear,'" Ham quoted softly.

Doc said nothing, he was pushing the police inspector's car along as fast as it would go, weaving through traffic more expertly than a taxicab driver.

Still silent, he wheeled the big car into the cellar garage of the skyscraper. The three raced to the elevator, shot upward.

Doc stepped into the office first, looked around. There was no sign of a struggle; everything seemed in place. He moved ahead, toward the apartment suite where Virginia Jettmore and Harlan Spotfield had been left.

A gasp came from Monk. Ham's lips tightened. They had been expecting it, but the discovery still was a shock. The door to the apartment was slightly open. The lock had been shot out.

The hairy chemist would have raced into the room. Doc restrained him with a gesture, glanced at a meter on the wall. Then he nodded, opened the door wide.

The room was vacant.

"They—they got her," grunted Monk. His fists clenched; anger showed on his homely face.

The bronze man said nothing. A faint slip of paper, barely visible, had been tucked beside a cushion in one of the big chairs. He reached for it, read it swiftly, then handed it to Ham.

"Gosh," the dapper lawyer muttered. "She says the gang broke in, told her Doc was dead and that they were going to take her to Genlee. Says she got a chance to write this as they went in the inner room after Spotfield."

"Spotfield, he's the one we want!" Monk half shouted. "What does she say he did?"

"That's all the note says," Ham said. He looked puzzled.

"Perhaps we should look in the inner room," Doc suggested quietly.

With catlike tread the bronze man walked forward, his aids behind him. He thrust open the door.

A weird, trilling note filled the room. It seemed to come from nowhere. It was musical but tuneless. Something had happened that was unusual even to Doc Savage.

A skeleton was huddled in one corner of the room. Just a pile of bones and a grinning skull. And on one bony finger was an old-fashioned cameo ring—a ring of old Southern design.

"SPOTFIELD!" gasped Monk.

"And I had him picked as the villain!" said Ham.

Doc moved forward, studied the bones. They were dry and old, as if the victim had been dead for years. But that, as Doc knew, was the way the skeleton death worked. The bones were those of a large man.

"He really did have something to be afraid of," said Monk, and the hairy chemist's voice contained an unusual note for him—a note of awe.

The position of the skeleton showed that the big man had evidently seen his doom approaching, had raced, terror-stricken, to a corner in a futile attempt to escape his doom.

"But since Spotfield really was innocent, then who—" started Monk.

"We must find out," said Doc. "And I want to show you something interesting."

He led them back to the outer door of the apartment, pointed to the indicator. "This door looks as though it had been shot out, does it not?"

Ham nodded.

"But this indicator shows different," the bronze man went on. "If the door had been forced from the

outside, the meter would show a charge of electricity. But it does not. So it was opened by the inner, insulated knob."

"Then the girl is in with the gang!" moaned Monk. His homely face registered genuine sorrow.

"Stranger things have happened!" Ham rasped.

"There are many strange things in this case," Doc said. "Both Virginia Jettmore and Harlan Spotfield said there was nothing of value in Genlee. Yet a skeleton death that apparently originated there followed them to New York. The man behind it was able to enlist the aid of Greens Gordon. He spoke of millions to be gained. How?"

Ham shook his head. "It beats me. It has caused many deaths and probably will cause a lot more. They are evidently on their way to Genlee; no telling what will happen."

Doc nodded. "Exactly. So we will go to Genlee. You two get the yacht ready. I will be along shortly."

"I've got to get Habeas," Monk said stubbornly. "This is going to be a long trip."

"You leave that pig home," Ham complained. "I'm going to take Chemistry, and one animal is enough."

"Oh, it is, is it, you half lawyer!" Monk bellowed. "Any time you think you can take that idiot monkey where Habeas can't go, you're even crazier than I thought!"

Still arguing, Monk and Ham walked to a large back room where their pets were quartered.

Ham swung open the door.

Sprawled beside a huge tailless monkey lay one of the most amazing shotes conceivable. The porker rose and stretched as the two men appeared. It had the legs of a dog, a scrawny body, a snout of incredible length and a pair of ears which might well have been used for wings.

Near the pig, the huge monkey stood on its hind legs and swayed back and forth. And a peculiar beast it was, larger than a chimp, but smaller than a gorilla. It was covered with rust-colored hair and certainly looked like Monk.

As Chemistry came forward, he picked up Habeas by one big ear. The pig squealed and grunted wrathfully.

"Put that fool hog down," Ham ordered. "You'll get fleas." Chemistry obeyed, clucking amiably.

THE warehouse where Doc's yacht was kept was only a few blocks away. Ham and Monk walked. It was late, and few pedestrians paid any attention to the two strange-looking animals who romped along beside them.

The hairy chemist and the dapper lawyer said little. Each was busy with his own thoughts.

An extremely large pier warehouse loomed before them. Apparently it had not been used for some time. The name "Hidalgo Trading Company" was spread over the front.

Had an interested person been given the opportunity to investigate, he would have found it a truly remarkable pier. He would have found the walls were several feet thick and reënforced with a mesh of stout, steel beams. Even the roof was virtually bombproof.

There were no windows, and it looked like an unhealthy, ill-kept sort of place. Had some one attempted to enter, he would have found many other things about the strange building.

Ham stiffened suddenly, and grabbed one of Monk's arms. The hairy chemist stopped, looked ahead, and his mouth dropped.

Chemistry and Habeas Corpus had early decided where they were going. They had raced ahead. Chemistry had been to this place many times; he liked it. Now he had run up to a big door at one side.

"Somebody's been here," Ham whispered.

Monk understood. Chemistry had drawn close to the big door; his body should have broken the line between two photo-electric cells. Alarms should have sounded inside the warehouse, a red light should have flashed a warning in the wall under the roof.

But nothing had happened. The alarm system had been disconnected.

WITHOUT words, Monk and Ham drew their superfirers and went forward. Habeas and Chemistry had been forced behind.

Silently the two opened the door, slipped inside. Their eyes were alert, bodies tense.

To a newcomer the interior of the warehouse would have presented a truly remarkable spectacle. In addition to a vast amount of concrete floor space, there was a veritable indoor yacht basin.

A sleek, sharp-prowed Diesel-engine yacht, the *Seven Seas*, was moored at one side. Its engines had been especially designed by Doc, and it could run half again as many knots as any other yacht its size in existence.

Besides the yacht, the rounded, black hull of Doc's submarine showed dully in the dim light that always burned in the building. Then there were nearly a dozen amphibian airplanes. These ranged from a gigantic tri-motored speedship that could attain nearly three hundred miles an hour, to a pair of true gyroplanes, which could rise vertically.

But Monk and Ham had eyes for none of these. They had seen them too often before. Their attention was centered on the *Seven Seas*.

A shadow moved on the deck of the vessel. Monk and Ham raced forward, noiselessly, jumped aboard.

For a moment they stood motionless, ears attentive. They could hear nothing. Then they began a slow descent into the boat.

Monk caught a fleeting glimpse of a moving figure. The man's form was indistinct, but the hairy chemist could see he had a hat pulled far over his face.

What Monk didn't see was that the man had risen suddenly from the opened cap on one of the fresh-water tanks; he didn't see the now empty can that the man thrust back in a pocket.

"Halt, there!" roared Monk.

A stab of flame was his answer. There was a deafening *crack*; and a .45 slug whizzed close to one ear. Ham shouted, raced forward.

Monk bellowed. The bullfiddle moan of his superfirer cut the air. But he might as well have fired at a shadow. The man had disappeared, up a companionway to the deck of the yacht.

Ham's lean legs galloped swiftly after him. Monk lumbered in the rear.

There was another stab of flame. Once more the .45 barked. But the bullet did not come near Monk or Ham. It struck the single night light. The warehouse was plunged in darkness,

Monk and Ham converged on the place where they'd seen the stab of flame. They crept warily. They spread widely apart to lessen the culprit's chance of escape.

The hairy chemist heard the sound of breathing ahead of him. He sprang and bellowed for Ham to come help as he did.

There was a short, terrific struggle.

"Let go of me, you hairy ape!" the dapper lawyer gasped in one of Monk's ears. "You're crushing my ribs. I won't be able to breathe right for a month."

MONK gulped, turned loose his grip. Ham staggered up. The whine of an electric motor came to their ears.

"Dang it," howled Monk, "while you were around getting in my way, that guy's getting away!"

He turned, raced toward the front of the warehouse. The big double doors were being opened by the motor. A figure ran into the street.

Monk and Ham pursued, yelling vainly. A car was waiting. The man with the gun leaped on the running board. The machine whined away before the two pursuers could fire.

A big sedan turned a corner—the sedan the police inspector had loaned Doc. It rolled up to the entrance to the warehouse, stopped. The bronze man got out.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

Ham told him. Doc went to a switchboard, turned on powerful lights that flooded the hangar.

"How did that guy get in without setting off the alarm?" Monk rumbled. "It wasn't working. That's what gave us the tip-off."

"He did not *get* in. He was carried in," Doc said. He pointed toward a large packing box, from which the cover had been tipped. It was one of several boxes delivered that day with needed supplies for the hangar. Inspection revealed the cover had been smashed from within. The box was empty.

"He was smuggled here in this," Doc continued. "Then he disconnected the alarm from inside the building, so he could get out when he wanted to without attracting attention."

Doc and his aids inspected the *Seven Seas* carefully for signs of sabotage. Doc went over the motors with extra precaution. He checked the radio. He made a chemical test of the fuel to see if it had been tampered with.

Then, taking electric torches, the three went into every dark spot, every cubbyhole aboard the craft to make sure no time bomb had been hidden on it.

Doc tested the generators, the gyroscopic compass. The rudder was clamped rigid and the steering apparatus given a pressure test. The rear end of the hull was lifted from the water and the motors raced to test the propeller shafts.

Everything seemed to be in perfect working order.

"I guess we must have got here just in time," Monk said happily. "But Greens Gordon certainly is taking no chances. He must have planned this even before he thought he killed us."

But Monk forgot that the shadowy figure he'd seen had been on the yacht. He didn't know that they'd arrived just too late, that tragedy had been left aboard the vessel.

Chapter XIII. A TRAP THAT FAILED

THE great outer doors of the warehouse hangar swung open with majestic precision. In the engine room of the *Seven Seas* the only man not of Doc's immediate group, stood at the controls.

Doc was on the bridge. Ham stood in the bow to cast off the breast line. Monk was in the stern. On the dock, casting off both lines, was Chemistry, the giant ape. He cast off the bow hawsers first, then ran toward the stern.

"That's something your hog can't do!" Ham bawled to Monk. "The only thing that pig's good for is eating, and he'd probably be stringy at that!"

"That's not true, you skinny fashion plate!" Monk bellowed, in indignant rage.

Ham smiled. "Come aboard, Chemistry," he called. "Pay no attention to this ignorant prototype of yours."

The ape leaped aboard nimbly, and Monk growled and grumbled to himself. The ape's proficiency cast a shadow on Habeas, and Monk resented it bitterly.

Ham rubbed on the salt.

"Go aft and help that thick skull stow his lines," he ordered.

Clucking happily, Chemistry lumbered astern and handled ropes like an old-time sailor.

Doc yanked the chadburn on the bridge. Bells jangled in the engine room and the rakish craft backed smoothly into the stream. As soon as its bulk had passed the great doors, they swung inward, closed noiselessly and automatically.

The churned wake showed white in the murky salt water and cut a wide arc. The ship's bow pointed downstream, toward the channel lights. Doc yanked the chadburn again and the propellers churned mightily. The craft slowly gathered speed.

The sky was black with the intense darkness that just precedes dawn. Ferryboats tooted and churned their way back and forth. There was little traffic on the river.

Doc headed his craft around the tip of Manhattan and toward the Narrows. Ahead loomed the dark blot of some craft crossing their bow. Doc leveled his glasses.

"Barge," he said crisply to his two aids, now on the bridge with him.

It was one of those double-ended barges, with bow identical to its stern. Its motion was slow. The only way its direction could be determined was by the single green light, which indicated it was headed to starboard.

The barge, light and riding high, undoubtedly was being towed by some small craft on the other side, not visible from the yacht.

There was nothing to indicate that it was anything but what it seemed to be: innocent and merely cumbersome. But Doc's gold-flecked eyes narrowed.

Suddenly, twin blasts came from the whistle of the towing craft. The signal was for Doc to put his helm to port, so the barge would pass to starboard, permitting the yacht to fall behind the barge's stern. It was the regulation pilot rule signal.

Doc put his helm slightly to port. The ships were not far apart now. Instead of falling to the barge's stern, the yacht seemed glued to a course bent on collision. Doc put the helm a little more to port. Still the barge held dead in their path.

"Our steering gear must be afoul," Monk muttered.

The bronze man pushed the wheel hard over. The towing craft darted suddenly from behind the barge, shot into sight. It was a high-powered speedboat. It appeared on the port side of the yacht's bow.

Ham exclaimed angrily. The reason for the confusion now was glaringly apparent. The barge's running lights had been reversed. Instead of going to starboard, she actually had been creeping to port, directly into the path of the *Seven Seas!*

A collision seemed inevitable!

DOC spun the wheel the other way. The yacht was unusually sensitive to the wheel, but even so it seemed to respond slowly. The two decks were only feet apart.

Ham and Monk braced themselves for a crash. The chadurn jangled below, half speed to full speed. The engines throbbed. The two hulls touched lightly. Wood scraped on steel; then the yacht straightened, slid past the drifting barge.

The speedboat, which had headed for shore, suddenly swerved. It darted for the yacht and lead spat from its bow. Machine-gun slugs ripped through the superstructure of the bridge. Doc zigzagged the yacht.

"Answer their fire," he rasped. "Aim at their steering gear. Get them out of control. They are fast."

Monk and Ham leaped below, and emerged with machine pistols. They used inflammable bullets. They must cripple the speedboat. Its occupants would undoubtedly be wearing life preservers and could get ashore if they sank the craft.

More machine-gun slugs ripped through the bridge. The special steel hull resisted their onslaught.

Ham took careful aim. His gun moaned. The speedboat by this time had cut half the distance of the river. Retracing her path, she was only a few hundred yards from the drifting barge.

Monk opened up. The bullfiddle moan of the superfirers rose to a thundering crescendo. A red path of

fire showed where the bullets were striking.

The speedboat swerved violently. The steering gear had been hit. Traveling at nearly fifty miles an hour, the craft was entirely out of control.

A wide arc took her directly toward the drifting barge. There were screams of terror from the men aboard as they jumped. The speedboat crashed directly into the center of the barge.

The blinding light of a terrific explosion rent the air. The concussion was so great that the big yacht heeled on her side from the force of the blast.

"Dynamite," Doc said. "Riding high, but with enough dynamite aboard to have snuffed us out."

Ham chuckled grimly. "Gordon may not be much on imagination—that's the third time he's tried to get us with explosive—but he certainly is persistent."

"His companion with the skeleton death has imagination," Doc said dryly.

There was silence for a moment.

"At least Gordon and his friend aren't having much luck yet!" the hairy chemist blurted suddenly.

But Monk couldn't hear the hum of a wireless transmitter in the hills above Quarantine. He couldn't hear the dot and dash of a high-powered set sending out a strange code from Staten Island.

If Monk could have heard it, he would have been less easy than he was. The smart radio operator on a palatial yacht rising and falling in the gentle swell off Miami was taking down and translating the code without effort.

This yacht was much larger than Doc's. It carried a large crew. One reason the crew was large was that its designer had lacked the genius to so coordinate the equipment that three or four men could operate the vessel. It was a big yacht. And it was fast.

The radio operator finished translating the message and typed it on a slip of paper. He handed the paper to the yacht's owner, who stood anxiously at one side. The owner was a squat figure in pale-green ducks. Even the visored officer's cap he wore was edged in green.

When he entered the radio cabin, he had spoken in the smooth, polished tones that should be used by the gentleman owner of so fine a yacht. But when he read the radiogram, he swore.

His voice developed a hoarseness. He talked like a mule driver, or more like a longshoreman. He rushed from the radio cabin and tore into the main saloon, waving the paper.

"That bronze devil is still alive!" he yelled. "He got out of the fire and even escaped our trap in the harbor—" Greens Gordon stopped, stuttered.

"I thought you told me he was dead long ago." The voice of the speaker was oily. It was flat, with scarcely any inflection whatever. He was a big man. His complexion was dark, and a livid scar ran from ear to chin on one side. It was impossible to tell whether the scar belonged there.

Gordon's hand shook and perspiration broke out on his forehead. "I—I was sure of it!" he stammered. "He was riddled with a machine gun first, then left to die in my house when I burned it!"

The big man grinned mirthlessly. "I might have known you would fail," he said.

Gordon shivered, but he'd long ago learned it was better to attack than to retreat. "Blast you!" he shouted. "I wish I knew what you really looked like! One day you look like one thing, and the next day like another."

"It pleases me to keep you confused," the suave one answered. "You confuse so nicely. But do not work yourself up. I am not going to, er—eliminate you yet for your failure to do your part."

Bluster dropped from Gordon; he paled. "If only Doc Savage was outta the way!" he breathed.

The big man looked at the trembling racketeer with distaste, took his time about speaking. Then: "We're going to Genlee, that charming little settlement in Africa," he said. "Nothing is going to stand in our way."

"Yeah, we can get there all right," Gordon began, "but if Doc—"

"There are no ifs, my friend. We are going to Genlee. We are going there *now!*" The speaker's eyes darkened, and his voice took on a harsh and grating tone. "And, friend, when we do get there, we are bringing back with us a secret worth many millions. That will be only the start. It may cost much, but we will not be the ones to pay the price. If Doc Savage should follow us there, I assure you he will not leave."

"You mean"—Gordon wiped a sweating palm on the sleeve of his immaculate jacket—"we will use the skeleton death again?"

"Certainly, Gordon. Perhaps we shall use it on quite a few, even as we used it on the pilots who brought us here before we destroyed the planes."

"I hope Doc Savage don't get there," Gordon grumbled. "He might throw a monkey wrench in our plans yet."

The suave one lighted a cigarette with great deliberation. He blew a cloud of smoke into the air and turned again to the gangster.

"Have you forgotten, my friend, that his yacht was visited by one of your men before it sailed?" he asked.

He rose, paced noiselessly to a chromium-rimmed porthole. "No," he concluded. "Doc Savage will die. He has crossed swords with me, and that means death. Perhaps he is already dead."

DOC was not dead. He was forcing his sensitive craft along at top speed through a choppy sea off Hatteras. The bow of the trim ship rose and fell in the onrush of waves. White water broke over the jut of her stem and cascaded aft over the bridge, descending with a flat slap on the fantail deck.

The inclosed pilot house was dark, save for the tiny light in the binnacle of the magnetic compass. It cast the dark shadow of its copper hood over the forward windows of the tiny control cabin. The numbered dial of the gyroscopic compass showed but dimly before the wheel. It gave no illumination whatever.

Doc refreshed himself from a special thermal container of chocolate he had brought with him. It was nearly empty. Monk and Ham were below decks, putting things to rights and making a routine tour of the vessel to check equipment and gear.

They started in the forward rope locker and worked toward the stern. They left Chemistry in the rope

locker, happily coiling lines. When Ham had induced the ape to learn knots and rope handling, he had done it to embarrass Monk.

In the engine room they came upon Singleton, the Diesel expert whom Doc occasionally drafted into service as engine man when his aids were for some reason absent.

Singleton had known fear in his day. He had known danger. His wiry, thin form had been through many perils. His seamed, leathery face had looked upon death. He had been once a notorious criminal. He had taken many lives himself, but he didn't remember that now.

He had been sent to Doc's up-State "criminal curing" hospital to have his tendency toward crime removed by delicate surgery. It had been removed. So had the sense of haunting fear that he had always before known.

But fear had come back to him again. He, too, had heard of the skeleton death. It was enough to shake the foundations of his rehabilitated mind.

He grinned nervously at Ham and Monk as they passed through his smoothly throbbing precinct on their tour of inspection. He wiped his hands on a bit of waste and waved a friendly greeting.

Habeas, the pig, grunted his salutations and tarried in the spotless domain of rushing Diesels. Habeas always liked to tarry there. There were so many fascinating smells to investigate in the familiar but entrancing engine room.

Monk and Ham went on through the bulkhead door toward the after rope locker. Singleton walked toward the chromium tap that carried fresh water from the refrigerated tank. A metal cup hung from a hook. Beside it was a tubular container of paper cups. Even a Diesel engine room is hot and makes one thirsty.

Singleton's hand still shook a bit as he reached for the metal drinking cup. He still felt a nameless fear riding close upon his shoulders. He thought again of the skeleton death. But he need not have worried about that. The skeleton death was not for him.

AN excited squeal from Habeas was the first warning. Monk knew the expressions of his pet porker. He knew there was terror in that squeal. He thrust the dapper Ham roughly to one side, plunged toward the engine room.

Ham ran, too, and was almost beside his simian-appearing companion as they stood in the bulkhead door. Both knew instinctively that they were looking at death.

Singleton lay huddled in a grim heap below the water tap. The metal drinking cup was clutched tightly in his right hand.

"Go call Doc!" Monk bawled, leaning over the stricken man.

Ham leaped for the companionway leading to the deck above. Monk lifted the inert form to his shoulders, carried him like a sack of flour. The cup dropped to the floor.

Still carrying Singleton, Monk followed Ham up the companionway staircase and onto the deck. The fresh winds blowing over the yacht, he thought, might help revive the victim if there was any chance for him at all.

Doc loomed beside him. "Quick," said the bronze man, "take him into the chart room!"

Monk leaped up the steps to the bridge and carried Singleton to the comfortable couch in the chart room behind the pilot house. There the bronze man bent over the stricken engineer, pried back the eyelids and felt the pulse.

"Dead," he said.

Doc's mouth was grim. Singleton had been one of his proudest achievements in the ranks of graduates from his up-State hospital.

With slow steps, Doc moved toward the water cooler on the forward wall. He plucked a paper cup from its tubular container, filled it from the cooler and drank deeply.

Chapter XIV. A KILLER'S PLAN

OUTSIDE, the water hissed by on either side of the slim yacht. Perhaps that is why neither Monk nor Ham noticed the sound as Doc drew his drink.

Monk's eyes were fixed firmly on the dead face of Singleton. It always hits hard when a man you've worked with is struck down suddenly.

Then the hairy chemist's brain recalled the faint gurgle of the water as it had issued from the cooler. He remembered the metal water cup which had been clutched tightly in the hand of the dead engineer.

An icy blast swept him. He whirled, cried out, "Doc! Doc! Don't drink that!"

Even as he yelled, he knew his warning had come too late. Doc already had drank.

Ham spun. He, too, recalled the metal drinking cup. He recalled the man who had been on the yacht the night before. He knew what had happened.

"Drinking water poisoned!" he yelled.

Doc Savage was standing near the water cooler, one hand lifted to his face.

A half sob came from Monk. The engineer, he knew, had fallen dead almost as soon as he had drank the poisoned water. Doc was still on his feet, but that could only mean that the bronze man's resistance powers were harder to overcome.

Ham cried out in amazement.

Doc's head had lifted; with steps that were almost steady, he walked to a medicine cabinet, took out a small vial and drank. Slowly his cheeks resumed their normal bronze hue.

"You are right, Ham," he said calmly, "it was poison. But Singleton would not have died if he had followed orders."

"W-what do you mean?" Monk demanded.

"I told him—as you two were told—to use nothing but these paper cups to drink from," the bronze man went on.

"The paper cups are lined with an oily compound, an antidote for any alkaline poison, and alkalines are usually used in cases of this kind because they are readily soluble in water.

"There is enough antidote in any of these cups to prevent a fatality. Then it is easy enough to take more and bring recovery."

"I remember now," Ham said. "When Singleton came aboard, he was complaining about those paper cups. Said they had an oily taste and didn't give a man a decent think."

Doc went to the cabinet and took out a test tube. Into it, he poured a few drops of some chemical. Then he filled the test tube from the water cooler and held it to the light.

"An alkaline, all right," he said. "One of the most swiftly acting ones. We can neutralize it without trouble, and our water supply will be fit to drink."

"I think I'll stick to the paper cups anyway," Ham grinned.

A clucking noise behind them interrupted the conversation. In the doorway stood Chemistry. Always trying to mimic his human companions, he was showing off in his anthropoid fashion.

In one hand was the dead engineer's drinking cup. It was two thirds full of water. Still smirking proudly, he raised it to his lips.

With a roar of surprise, Monk leaped at the tailless ape. One of his hairy forearms smote another hairy forearm as he knocked the cup from the ape's grasp. He shoved Chemistry aside and kicked the cup through the door.

Astonished and enraged, Chemistry bounded up and down, just as Monk did when he was angry. The ape jabbered in indignation and made menacing gestures toward Monk. Ham stepped into the breach and calmed his pet.

"For once in your life, you hairy baboon, you've done something valuable!" the dapper lawyer shouted at Monk.

The homely chemist instantly recovered his aplomb.

"Don't know why I did it!" he said savagely. "Must have been crazy to save that fool ape!"

"Your anthropoid ancestors would never have forgiven you if you hadn't," Ham retorted.

Doc left his aids quarreling. He went to the filling cap of the fresh water tank, unscrewed it and poured in a chemical mixture that would neutralize the poison. Then he went to his laboratory.

The laboratory was ultra-modern. It contained many strange chemicals, and many were needed for the tests Doc was making. He prepared a thin, colorless liquid and subjected it to terrific heat.

The work was slow and difficult, but the bronze man was patient. He would soon be at grips with Greens Gordon and his mysterious companion in crime, and he would need to be prepared.

HAD Doc been able to see the scene on Green Gordon's luxurious yacht, he would have known peril was not far off. The yacht had neared one of the many small islands that dot the outer fringes of the Caribbean Sea. Now it had slowed, and its anchor went down.

Men worked swiftly, unloading supplies into a small boat; then they rowed to the island.

Greens Gordon's face was worried. "You're sure they're close on our trail?"

"We intercepted a wireless message not an hour ago asking for weather conditions," his companion said calmly, blank face emotionless. "That should be enough to indicate even to you that every trap so far has failed and that they probably are near."

"But how—" began the racketeer.

"I don't know," the scar-faced man said coldly. "I am sure I don't know how they could keep so well on our trail. We are off the regular course. But perhaps you were right in the first place; perhaps this Doc Savage is a superman. Certainly, he seems able to get out of any trap you prepare for him." He laughed mirthlessly. "He won't get out of this one!"

Greens Gordon's face set stubbornly. "You criticize the traps I set, yet now you're planning one that's simple, one that even I could avoid."

"You!" the scar-faced man sneered. "Of course, you could! But I'm setting this trap for a different kind of man. Doc Savage would never go by a deserted and waterless island and leave a woman on it to die of thirst. The very fact that this trap is simple shows its genius—my genius."

The racketeer gulped, started to exclaim angrily, then changed his mind. "Perhaps you're right," he admitted after a time. "It begins to sound good. They'll stop; one or more of them will land, and then—"

"And then you'll see just how well this trap works!" the other rasped savagely.

Greens Gordon rasped an order. Several men appeared. With them was Virginia Jettmore. Her face was set and pale.

Without a word, she was forced into a boat. The others crowded in after her and rowed to shore where men were busy working.

The scar-faced man's face became more pleasant. The island couldn't have been better for his purpose. He watched the men complete their work, then went with them as they returned to the yacht.

A few minutes later and the vessel was under way again. But back on the beach was Virginia Jettmore, her eyes bleak. She knew a trap had been set for Doc Savage, but not even she knew just what that trap was.

ON the deck of the *Seven Seas* Doc Savage was checking the queer compass. Then he nodded, satisfied.

"We are gaining much more rapidly than I had hoped," he said quietly. "Action will probably start soon."

It was late in the afternoon, but not yet quite dusk. A small island appeared off to starboard.

"Funny," Monk rumbled. "Wonder why they swung this far south, and so close to the island?"

"From the looks of the compass, they must be right on the other side of that island," Ham put in.

Doc nodded. He had noted that fact, also. The bronze man lifted a pair of binoculars and scanned the island. Suddenly he stiffened, laid down the glasses and changed the course slightly.

"What's the matter?" Monk rumbled.

"Look at the island," Doc replied quietly.

A low exclamation came from the hairy chemist. "Virginia Jettmore!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly," Doc agreed. "Tied to a tree."

"A trap," Ham put in hastily.

"Undoubtedly," the bronze man nodded.

"Then what—" Monk started.

"What can we do?" Doc asked. "We don't know that she is a part of the gang. It could be that she was marooned here and left to die. It is much more probable, of course, that she is being used to force us to stop. In any case, we can do nothing but halt and pick her up."

Ham nodded somberly. He, too, had been impressed by Virginia Jettmore, but he had known cases before where girls had been members of gangs, and he realized as well as the others that they probably would be running into peril if they stopped.

But there was no hesitation on the part of any of the three. Doc swung the yacht close to the island. The motors stopped. An anchor dropped.

They were close enough now so that they could see all details of the scene. They could even see Virginia Jettmore's features plainly. Her face appeared stained.

"It all looks innocent enough," Monk rumbled.

"But undoubtedly isn't," the dapper lawyer said. "True, the island is small. It has only a few trees that could be used for concealment, but I don't like it."

"One of us must stay on the boat," Doc said quietly.

"Let this shyster and me go," Monk put in swiftly. "I think it's a trap, too, but there's nothing we can see. If there isn't any trap, we can get the girl all right. If there is one, it is best that you be out of it, so you can rescue us."

Doc considered swiftly. Monk's words were true enough, but the bronze man never asked others to go where he wouldn't go himself.

"I'll go," he decided. "You and Ham stay here. Keep your weapons ready. You can cover me with your fire if anything happens."

Ham's mouth opened, then closed. He knew argument was futile.

Swiftly, a small boat was swung overside. Doc dropped into it. It was only the work of seconds to reach shore. Moving lithely, the bronze man moved across the sand.

Without warning, his footing went out from under him. Both feet were gripped as if with quicksand. He fell face downward. His eyes, ears and mouth were filled with a thick, choking substance that made it impossible to see or breathe.

THE trap had been cleverly concealed. A shallow, wide trench had been dug along the entire length of the short beach. Into this had been poured a thin mixture of cement. Sand had then been scattered across the top and smoothed out.

The cement had thickened in an hour until it was almost like heavy tar. Doc's feet had been caught firmly, and as he'd fallen, his entire body had become caked.

Monk and Ham had been ordered to remain with the yacht. Under ordinary circumstances, they would have done so. Had there been an attack with guns, they would have known what to do.

But this was different.

Startled yells came from their throats. They saw how firmly the bronze man seemed imbedded.

Without hesitation, they dropped their weapons and leaped into the water, to swim swiftly toward shore.

Doc Savage relaxed instantly after he fell. Giant muscles swelled in his corded arms, a hand came free. But the cement was hardening. Only the fact that his skin was oiled enabled him to struggle to his feet.

A quick flash of one hand freed his eyes and mouth. He turned toward the yacht.

"Go back!" he shouted.

Monk came up from under the water like a big whale.

"What?" he gasped.

Br-r-r-r-r!

A hail of bullets ripped through the air from a submachine gun, to spray the water back of Monk and Ham.

A skinny figure reared up from behind a tree.

"Just come on in, youse guys, I'm waitin' for yuh!" he rapped.

Ham dived, twisted under the water and attempted to go back to the *Seven Seas*.

The distance was too great. When he came up, bullets were clipping the water on all sides of him.

"I'm not shootin' to kill now!" Gats rasped angrily. "But come on back, or I will!"

"Come on in, Ham," Doc Savage said quietly. The bronze man would have taken the gamble himself, but he knew Ham could not make it, that the dapper lawyer would be riddled if he tried to regain the yacht.

Monk lumbered up to Doc's side.

"I'm sorry, Doc," he moaned. "I should have stayed there!"

DOC SAVAGE said nothing. Had his instructions been obeyed, they would not have been trapped. They hadn't been, but he did not criticize.

Other armed men were appearing from behind trees now. Doc and his aids were weaponless. They were forced to stand motionless as ropes tied them securely. Only Doc's fingers worked briefly before those

ropes were put on.

"Why didn't you shout a warning?" Monk cried angrily at the girl.

Virginia Jettmore said nothing. Flesh-colored tape had been pasted over her lips. She couldn't cry out

"She's goin' away," Gats grinned evilly. "But you guys ain't." He motioned with his head toward the cement. "You're goin' tuh stay right here."

Chapter XV. THE BATTLE ABOARD THE YACHT

CAUTIOUSLY, Gats and the other gunmen skirted the trap of hardening cement. One untied Virginia Jettmore and brought her to the beach. The girl's eyes were pleading.

Then Gats turned to his helpless captives.

"Step back," he ordered. His Tommy gun waved suggestively. There was nothing to do but obey.

Silently, Doc stepped back into the cement. Ham and Monk ranged on either side of him. They sank slowly, the cement clamping like iron over the shoes and ankles. Their hands were tied behind them.

"This is good!" Gats rasped. "I've shot down lots of guys, but never guys that didn't even have a chance to run. You guys won't even have that."

Doc Savage's gold-flecked eyes sparkled slightly, but he said no word.

Gats's lips drew back in a savage snarl; he lifted his submachine gun.

"Hey, wait!" one of his companions cried. "Greens said no shootin' 'til he got back!"

Gats glanced at the sea. Dimly, in the dusk, Greens Gordon's boat could be seen returning, but it still was far ahead.

"It'll be an hour before it gets here," the little gunman complained. "I'm not going to wait here on the beach that long."

"Then let's don't," the other proposed eagerly. "These birds can't fly," and he laughed. "Why don't we go to their boat and see what there is to drink? That'll help pass the time."

Gats hesitated for a moment, then grinned broadly. "Why not?" he seconded. "We won't even have to come back here. I can plug them just as well from the yacht as on the shore."

Swiftly, the gunmen pushed the girl into the boat Doc had rowed ashore and pulled toward the *Seven Seas*.

Behind them three figures stood swaying, feet tight in the grip of hardened cement.

GORDON'S yacht used its searchlight as it approached. First it played over the *Seven Seas*, outlining Gats and his companions. Then it swept over the beach, and over the three figures who slumped dejectedly there.

"Seems to be some animals there with them," a flat-voiced man said at one shoulder of Greens Gordon.

The racketeer grunted. "They always take a pig and an ape with them. Gats probably tossed them overboard and made them swim to join their masters."

The flat-voiced man chuckled.

"Your plan was a good one," Greens Gordon conceded.

"Of course," his companion gloated. "It was a simple trick, and nothing new, I know. But I was going on psychology. No matter which one of the three went ashore and got caught in it, the others were sure to follow; then we had them. They could have been shot down there, but I wanted to see them die myself."

Gordon nodded, and ordered a tender lowered. They put out for the *Seven Seas*.

"What about Doc Savage's ship?" Gordon asked. "Shall we sink it, after the killing is over?"

His companion considered a moment, then gave judgment. "No. It may have equipment we want. We'll take it along."

Gats was pacing the deck impatiently, Tommy gun under one arm. He and his companions had been disappointed. They had found no liquor.

"Ready to see me shoot, boss?" he asked.

Greens Gordon shuddered, then nodded. Doc Savage was caught at last, was soon to die, but he'd feel better when it was all over.

"Get to shore and turn loose," he ordered.

Gats shrugged. "That ain't necessary, boss." He called one of his companions. A searchlight swung on the beach, focused on three swaying figures. A tailless monkey and a queer-appearing pig raced for the trees.

Gats lifted the Tommy gun almost lovingly and pressed the trigger.

B-r-r-r-r-r!

The three swaying figures seemed to sag lower as lead played over them—lead that sprayed from top to bottom.

"O. K., boss. They're done," Gats said emotionlessly.

Greens Gordon shook himself slightly. The scar-faced man smiled.

"Get the girl. We'll go back to your yacht," he said. "We'll send a crew for this one, then go on."

Not long afterward there was a jangling of bells in the engine rooms of both vessels.

Africa was the destination, and death the project. And behind, on the almost barren island, cement held fast three swaying figures.

THE sailor on the bow look-out of Greens Gordon's yacht had never been to Africa. But he had read about it, and he was an imaginative fellow.

He knew that the jungles of that dark continent teemed with fearsome beasts. He knew there were

gorillas twice as big as a man, with chests like hogsheads and arms like tree trunks. He was staring into the face of the rising moon as he thought of all the terrible things in the jungle.

He was thinking of them when he felt a hairy hand touch his neck. It became a real, but horrible nightmare when he whirled around. He found himself staring into a grinning, anthropoid face.

The sailor screamed, but he didn't make any noise. It was stopped in his throat by a sinuous, black hand. He was hearing the thing make a soft clucking and barking as he lost consciousness.

The helmsman on the bridge wasn't thinking about Africa when he glanced toward the sailor on the fo'c's'le head in the half light of the moon. Then he thought about a lot of things he had done in his life that he shouldn't have done. He still didn't believe what he was seeing, but his eyes popped almost out of his head.

Gorillas don't swim to the middle of the ocean, he knew. It must be the moon. He stepped closer to the edge of the bridge and stared intently.

A cry died on his lips. It died there because there was no way for his breath to get beyond the hairy hand that gripped his throat. He fell, unconscious, to the bridge deck.

As the helmsman fell, a dapper, though somewhat dripping figure, stepped out of the shadows and took the wheel. The simian-appearing battler grunted in approval and went soft footedly down the steps to the main deck.

He worked aft cautiously. As he approached the after companionway, he almost ran into a burly assistant engineer emerging from below decks.

The engineer was a huge fellow and no coward. He had always been well able to take care of himself. In Singapore, he had once killed a man with his fists. There was an electric light bulb in the companionway and he could see his assailant was not a gorilla, but a man, even if he did look like a gorilla.

Hairy hands seized the engineer. One hand went to his throat immediately to prevent an outcry. The engineer probably would not have cried out. He always had been a silent fighter, but the simian fellow gave him an advantage by using one hand to take care that there would be no noise.

The engineer used both fists to pound the face and midriff of his hairy opponent. But the one free hand of the ape-appearing fighter was as strong as both hands of the burly engineer. The engineer tried to kick. He aimed a heavy shoe at the shins of his captor.

There was a squeal. Sharp teeth bit into the engineer's leg. He could have cried out then, if he had been able to cry out. A glance from the corner of his eye told him it was a pig that had bitten him.

That was incredible. What was a razorback pig doing on Greens Gordon's yacht? Then the sailor lost consciousness. Later, the last thing he could remember was that he had thought he was going mad.

BUT other mysterious things were going on aboard the Gordon yacht. In the dimly lighted companionway that ran the length of the ship, a dark figure crept. It was a big and strong figure. It would have been unmistakable to any one who had seen it before. It was Doc Savage.

Doc should have been back on the small island, riddled with lead. Not even bulletproof underwear would have been protection against the lead that had rained about his head as well as his body.

But no bullets had struck either the bronze man or his aids.

With the coming of darkness, Doc had worked swiftly. It had been an easy matter to slip off the ropes that bound his hands. Getting out of the cement had not been so easy, but it had been done.

The trap was not deep, but even six inches of hardened cement would be enough to hold an ordinary man. Doc's feet, however, had been trained as thoroughly as his hands, and were almost as limber. And where his shoes did not protect his flesh, his pants leg did.

The bronze man had simply compressed his feet, and drawn them, one by one, through a hole no larger than his ankle. Only his lifetime of training enabled him to do the feat, and even his muscles were strained.

Once free, his skill had loosened Monk and Ham. Taking a piece of metal from the belt about his waist, he had spun it between his hands like a drill. The cement, although hard, was still not baked. It had chipped. His aids had come free.

Then, doffing their outer clothing, they had rigged dummies to stand swaying over the concrete. The bullets from Gats's machine gun had riddled only those dummies.

Just as the two ships had gotten underway, Doc, Monk and Ham, redonning their riddled clothing, had taken Chemistry and Habeas Corpus and swam to Gordon's yacht.

Now the bronze man crept forward softly. Voices could be heard, one boisterous, the other dead and flat.

"Now that we've gone this far, and Doc Savage is out of the way, why not tell me what it is we're after? Tell me what the skeleton death is?" Gordon was yelling.

"We're after a million dollars—as a starter, then unlimited millions. Nothing can stand before the skeleton death," the flat voice replied.

"But what is the secret? What is the skeleton death?" Gordon kept yelling.

"Quiet!" snapped the flat voice. "I am tired of your bickering. Do you doubt me? Do you wish to see the skeleton death work again?" The voice dropped, became low and brittle. "Do you wish to have me try it on you?"

"No! No!" Gordon's voice was a horrified scream.

DOC hesitated, then moved silently on. Gordon and his unknown friend could be reached later. There was something else that had to be taken care of first.

At each cabin, he stopped and listened. From some came the heavy breathing of men off watch and sleeping. Others were silent.

Finally, Doc stopped beside the door of what seemed to be a small cabin. He listened intently, then smiled. His keen ears, even through a ship's door, could detect the difference between the breathing of a man and that of a woman.

The man of bronze rapped gently on the panel. There was no response. He'd expected none. He took a fine piece of wire from his pocket and inserted it in the lock. All the doors of Gordon's yacht were equipped with high-grade spring locks, yet it took the bronze man but a few seconds to throw the

tumblers.

Her hands lashed behind her, Virginia Jettmore lay on a bunk. Her tense, pale face was turned toward Doc; her black hair hung in damp ringlets about her high, well-formed forehead. The girl's eyes lighted amazingly; she started to speak.

Doc motioned her to silence, strode catlike across the cabin and severed her bonds.

"I had hoped to find you unharmed," the bronze man said, low-voiced.

"They forced me to lead you into the trap at the Island," the girl breathed. "I'm so happy you escaped. When they got me at your office, I spilled things from my purse so as to write you a note. Did you get it? Is that why you're here?"

Doc nodded. "And Spotfield?"

Virginia Jettmore shivered; terror returned to her dark eyes. "He—he darted into the next room!" she half sobbed. "I—I heard a yell—and he didn't come out again!"

The bronze man didn't tell her about the huddled pile of bones that had been found in the inner office. He knew her imagination had filled in that gap.

Instead, he took her by one arm and started toward the companionway.

Voices were suddenly raised high above decks. Heavy bodies fell with resounding crashes. Monk's high-pitched voice bellowed in the air.

Monk, Ham, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry had been discovered.

Doc pushed the girl back into the stateroom. "Stay here!" he ordered crisply. "Something has gone wrong. I will be back as soon as possible."

With long strides the bronze man ran aft, mounted the stern companionway. He started toward the bridge, only to halt suddenly as he noticed a dim figure by the plane which rested on the catapult. The tarpaulin had been torn from the open cockpit.

Instantly, Doc turned in that direction. Three sailors came tearing around the corner of the deck house, bore down upon him.

Doc crouched, sent his left fist out in a small arc. The foremost sailor tumbled to the deck, his head striking a stanchion.

The other two became more wary. One drew a sheath knife and held it in the palm of one hand. He drew the arm back, and Doc feinted. The knife whizzed through the air—but struck nothing. The bronze man had dropped. The knife blade broke in two parts against a steel bulkhead behind him.

The two sailors leaped, but they landed on an empty space of hardwood deck. Doc had rolled faster than the eye could follow, had leaped to his feet and bounded forward.

One of the sailors grabbed a belaying pin. Perhaps he could have made use of it. It is difficult to tell. But something else occurred then that took his mind off what he was doing.

From a crackling start, an airplane motor burst into a roar. There was a *whoom!* as the catapult shot the open cockpit monoplane into the air.

The sailors turned to look as the plane dipped and dropped dangerously near the tossing waves before rising. Then it drummed steadily upward. It headed toward Africa.

DOC looked only long enough to ascertain what had happened. The sailors were still spellbound. They went from that state into one of unconsciousness.

Four sailors were battling Monk and Ham when Doc got to the bridge. They ceased battling. It wasn't painful for the sailors. They didn't even know what hit them until they regained consciousness later.

"Take the wheel, Ham," Doc rapped swiftly. "We've got to get away from here before that gang on the *Seven Seas* finds out what's happened."

The dapper lawyer leaped to obey. Monk turned to one ladder leading down from the bridge, Doc took the other.

A sailor was trying to come up one side. Greens Gordon was trying to come up the other. Neither met with any success.

"We're going to make it," Monk rumbled.

"Ahoy!" came a hail. A bright searchlight swept the Gordon yacht, lighted up the scene on the bridge.

The *Seven Seas*, manned by Gordon's men, had crept up, was alongside.

"Put up your hands, Savage!" yelled the gangster in charge of the *Seven Seas*. "Release Gordon and let him give us orders, or we'll blast you off that bridge with your own weapons!"

"Tell 'em where to go, Doc!" growled the hairy chemist.

"Exactly," Ham grumbled. "The missing link shows signs of intelligence."

Doc released Gordon, threw his hands up. Monk and Ham flushed. They knew why he'd done that. Doc would take any chance himself, but in this case he knew one of his aids might lose his life if he didn't surrender.

Greens Gordon appeared nervous. He was bewildered. The departure of the plane had been a surprise to him as well as to every one else, as great a surprise even, as finding Doc still alive, but he barked several orders.

Doc, Monk and Ham were bound quickly. Chemistry, the redoubtable ape, lay on the deck, lashed hands and feet. Even Habeas had his four diminutive hoofs tied stoutly with rope. Once more Doc and his men were helpless captives.

Gordon yelled through a megaphone and the *Seven Seas* dropped astern.

Through the moonlit night came the fading drone of an airplane motor. It came from the direction of Africa, where lay Genlee and the land of fear.

Chapter XVI. DESTINATION—GENLEE

WHITE plumes of spray broke over the bow of Greens Gordon's yacht. The vessel hesitated, then

moved ahead. Gordon himself was hesitating.

His mysterious companion was gone—gone in the night without any explanation. The racketeer's face grew hard. It seemed that he had been double-crossed.

A slight frown crossed his heavy face as he glanced at the figures tied securely on the bridge. His co-plotter certainly had left him in a fix. He didn't like the sight of Doc Savage, even tied up. Doc Savage had been tied up before—and had escaped.

The small, wizened figure of Gats sidled up to him.

"Bump 'em off, boss!" he gritted. "We've had enough trouble with these guys!"

Gordon's brow lowered; he paced restlessly. "I've been played for a sucker, Gats!" he snarled.

The little gunman looked surprised, yanked his gun from a pocket. "Shall I give it to 'em?"

Gordon's hand fell on Gats's wrist. "Wait! It was the other guy who double-crossed me—the skeleton death guy!"

Gats started. "Then—"

"It means," Gordon rasped viciously, "that we're left out in the cold! We don't even know where Genlee is. We don't dare go back to the city right now. The heat is on for us there. We pulled that guy's chestnuts outta the fire for him—and he's left us with the chestnuts!" The racketeer gestured toward the bound figures of Doc and his aids.

"You're not goin' tuh let him get away with it, boss?" Gats's tones were horrified.

Greens Gordon paced restlessly back and forth. His jaw set. You can't get to be a boss racketeer without some nerve, some decision.

"Bring up the girl," he ordered.

"But what—" Gats started.

Gordon swung, glared at the little gunman. Gats gulped, ducked below.

The racketeer walked over to Doc, glared down at him.

"You're helpless, Savage. You realize that, I hope?"

Doc looked up calmly, said nothing.

"Damn you!" Gordon roared, with sudden savagery. "Can't anything get under your skin?"

"Nope," Monk replied for the bronze man. "Nothing can." Ham chuckled.

The racketeer's manner changed, became oily. "I can't gain anything by fighting you, Savage. I've found that out. Let's make a bargain. I'll turn you loose, put you back on your own ship—if you'll promise me you won't follow me, or try to get even with me later for anything I may have done to you."

"We never bargain with criminals," Doc said coldly.

Gordon swore, turned on his heel. "Have it that way then, mug! And lay there and watch something pretty!"

Gats struggled up to the bridge, dragging Virginia Jettmore behind him.

"Leave her here!" Gordon snarled. "Go down to the engine room and get a white-hot poker. I'm tired of fooling around. This girl is going to talk—if I have to burn the words out of her!"

DOC'S mouth became a tight line; his gold-flecked eyes flashed. Monk growled fiercely. Ham's face became a mask of suppressed fury.

The three were lying almost under the bright light on the bridge. Any motion they might make could be seen plainly. Habeas and Chemistry were further aft, in the dark.

Virginia Jettmore's face was pale but determined. She glanced at Doc as if for directions. He gave no sign. She turned back toward Gordon, stared coldly into his face.

"What questions do you want to ask?" she said calmly.

Gordon dropped his air of viciousness, donned his veneer of culture, swaggered forward.

"It's very simple," he said. "All you have to do is to tell me how to get to Genlee—and what is there after you arrive."

"I'll tell you nothing." Virginia Jettmore's mouth set firmly.

Without change of expression, Gordon walked forward, moved as if to slap her across the cheek.

There was a roar of rage from Monk.

"I would not do that, Gordon." Doc's voice was quiet, but there was an undercurrent in it that sent a shiver through Gordon's heavy frame.

"You wouldn't, eh?" Gordon's wrath turned on Doc. Gats came up the ladder, holding a white-hot poker in one hand. Gordon grabbed it, swooped close to Doc, held the point directly over the gold-flecked eyes.

"Now, Miss Jettmore, talk! If you don't, this bronze devil loses his eyes!"

The girl gasped. Where she had shown no fear for herself, anxiety was plainly visible in her face for Doc.

"I'll talk!" she half cried.

The bronze skin of Doc Savage's face reflected the heat of the metal. Not a muscle of his face moved, although the point of the poker was so close it almost blistered his skin.

Gordon raised the poker slightly and half turned to face the girl. "Then talk!" he rasped.

All attention was on Doc. None saw Ham roll quietly backward into the shadows close to Chemistry.

The girl was speaking rapidly, giving directions so that it would be easy to find the town of Genlee.

"And the secret, what is that?" Gordon roared. "What's there that's worth a million dollars?"

"I—I don't know—" the girl started to say.

The racketeer moved, as if again to point the white-hot end of the poker at Doc's eyes.

There was a sudden squealing. Gordon dropped the poker, narrowly missing Doc, jumped back.

Habeas Corpus, loose and furious, had hurled his perky bulk on the gangster, had fastened his teeth firmly in one of Gordon's legs.

GORDON swore fiercely, danced about in a desperate effort to free himself. Gats yanked his gun, tried to get an opening to fire.

"I'll fix that pig!" he roared.

A figure clad in a sailor's uniform leaped from the shadows. "I'll take the pig!" he shouted. "We'll have roast pork to-morrow!"

"No, you won't!" roared Monk's voice.

"We'll roast him on a spit!" the sailor-clad figure's voice replied.

"Why, you—" Monk's voice choked off in angry indignation. He'd recognized the voice of the sailor.

Doc Savage lay silent. His nimble fingers had long since untied his bonds; his gold-flecked eyes had seen Chemistry likewise work free.

The bronze man had signaled Ham, who had rolled back close to the ape. Ham had soon been freed. Then Monk had rolled back. His bonds, too, had been loosened by the rope-wise ape.

Doc spoke quickly in guttural Mayan, a language few understood, but which was known both to Monk and Ham.

The sailor had grabbed Habeas, had leaped back in the shadows. Gats still had his gun in his hand, eyes startled.

"Get him!" Gordon screamed, and pointed to Doc.

He was too late. Three strong figures had hurled themselves forward.

Gats didn't even have a chance to fire, so quickly did the bronze man shoot up from the deck, nail his gun wrist. For the second time in his career, the little gunman went limp under Doc's fingers.

Ham, who had overcome one sailor and donned his uniform, leaped at a second opponent. Monk's hairy arms twisted around the helmsman.

Gordon had long since given the job of killing to others, but he still carried a gun. He tried to get that gun out now. His effort was wasted. One of Doc's huge, corded fists crashed up, almost knocked the racketeer's head from his body.

The attack had been staged with such speed that not a warning cry had been raised.

"So you wouldn't let Gats plug Habeas!" Monk jeered, grinning from ear to ear.

Ham looked flustered. "Well, you saved Chemistry once," he said in lame explanation. Then he blustered: "But just the same I am going to roast that pig some day!"

Monk chuckled happily.

Doc left the others on the bridge, sped quickly through the ship. Every sailor not needed for immediate duty felt strong, quick fingers touch nerve centers in the neck.

They sighed, sank down, and were silent. In a few hours they would recover, none the worse for wear.

Ham took the wheel. Doc rubbed the back of Gordon's neck. The racketeer's eyes opened. His subconscious brain alone was working; he was under the influence of Doc's weirdly powerful eyes. Doc asked no vocal questions; his eyes alone spoke, and the gangster answered.

"I don't know," came Gordon's plaintive voice. "I never really saw the man. One day he looked like one man. Another day another. But he came to me with references from friends of mine that I couldn't doubt. He was vouched for as one of the most clever and dangerous criminals in the world."

He paused, then went on: "He has the skeleton death. I never had it. He's after Caleb Jettmore. When he gets to Jettmore, gets the secret he is after, Jettmore will become a skeleton; then he's going to take the girl, and—"

Doc rose. "Quick!" he snapped. "Signal the *Seven Seas* to come alongside. We have no time to lose!"

MONK signaled with a flashlight. The *Seven Seas* put on speed and came up beside Gordon's yacht.

Doc pulled Gordon to his feet and directed him to speak.

"We're coming aboard!" Gordon roared. "Doc Savage and me's fixed up a deal! Stand by to help us to the deck!"

A minute more and Doc was helping Virginia Jettmore into the tender. Monk and Ham dropped down, the hairy chemist carrying Habeas. Chemistry, with a rolling, sea-going gait, clambered down a rope.

Those aboard the *Seven Seas* suspected nothing until they saw that Gordon had not come aboard. Then it was too late. Doc and his aids had no time to waste. They wasted none. Gordon's men never had a chance.

In possession again of Doc's yacht, the three moved swiftly. The after part of the vessel looked like an ordinary cabin. It was not. Doc touched a button and the entire superstructure split in two.

Neatly cradled there lay the fuselage of a giant, tri-motored plane. Beside it lay the wings. A mast bent over and became a crane. Quickly, grapples were attached and the fuselage of a plane, an amphibian, was hauled into the air.

The three men worked with rapid precision. The giant wings were attached. Then the girl, Habeas and Chemistry boarded the ship, and it was lowered into the sea.

Doc and his aids slid down ropes; the motors of the plane sputtered and caught. It was well they did so. The seas were beginning to run higher. Only automatic fenders kept the amphibian from crashing into the side of the yacht.

These fenders were cut loose. Doc warmed up the motors and gave the ship the gun.

Few fliers had more hours in the air than Doc Savage. Weeks and months of intensive study of aerodynamics had furnished him with an ability as a pilot little short of magical. Navigation came easy for him.

He needed all his skill now. The plane was heavily loaded with fuel; the seas were high. At just the proper moment on the crest of a long swell, Doc pulled back on the stick.

The plane lifted, sank to hit a wave with crushing force, nosed down to what seemed certain disaster, then lifted, slowly at first, then more rapidly.

"Boy, that *was* close!" breathed Monk.

Virginia Jettmore went forward, sat beside Doc.

"Please," she pleaded. "You heard what that man said. The skeleton death is going to get my fathah. Save him!"

Doc Savage nodded. "We'll try," he said.

EVEN by air the trip was going to be a long one. Doc insisted that the others go to sleep in the bunks in the big cabin of the plane. He stayed at the controls, hour after hour.

At daybreak Monk relieved him, while he took a short nap.

"Will we be in time?" Virginia Jettmore asked as the bronze man roused.

"Of course," Ham assured her.

Doc was grimly silent. He would have liked to comfort her, but he never promised what he couldn't be sure of delivering.

All day, the great amphibian roared through the sky. Dusk fell again. Doc guided the ship with an unerring hand.

Virginia Jettmore sat as close to him as possible. She couldn't have explained it, but her heart increased its beat every time she looked at him.

Virginia didn't know it, but she was doomed to disappointment. Long ago, Doc had come to the conclusion that women could have no place in the dangerous life he lived.

Darkness enveloped the rolling miles of cactus and sand. Doc made a quick check of the instruments on the lighted panel.

"We are not more than an hour away," he said.

Virginia Jettmore's breath came out in a soft sigh. "Oh, please, please let us be in time," she breathed. "Let us save fathah and the town of Genlee."

Chapter XVII. THE SECRET REVEALED

THE Negro spiritual can be hauntingly beautiful. It can be sung as a soothing release from a day of toil. But it can be something else. It may be sung to keep a black man's mind from the horror of death.

There was terror in the melody that drifted, dirgelike, from the compound. As the black men sang, the beat of tom-toms and the grinning skulls of death seemed to hover in the air.

Outside the compound, a white man hurried up the narrow street. He looked behind him furtively. He, too, had the air of fleeing in the path of death. He had no understanding of what he feared. He knew only that he might suddenly become a skeleton.

He had seen it happen to others.

The man hastened from the vicinity of the compound. His quick feet took him toward the great colonial manor that stood majestically on the hill.

There were no signs to inform a visitor that this was Genlee. There had never been a need for signs. That was because there were no visitors. Only a few stumbled on it, and they were seldom wanted.

When Caleb Jettmore's father had fled the South during the Civil War as Northern victory had appeared certain, he had wanted to put everything behind him. So he had. There was no railroad leading to Genlee. There were few roads. It was self-sufficient, self-supporting.

The nervous white man scurried on. Out beyond the scattering of houses lay broad acres of fields. He scarcely glanced at them. Dusk was coming. Death often came in the daylight. But in the dark—

The white man shuddered as if a cold wind had smote him, but the evening was warm.

Had he been a stranger and not haunted by fear of death, he would have given more than a passing glance to those sprawling acres.

Genlee was like a great Southern plantation. It had been copied from one of the greatest. But there was one difference—a very peculiar difference.

There were no rows of white-flowering cotton plants.

There were rows of plants, true. But they were not like cotton. They were strange. They looked like cactus. That is, they looked as unpleasant as cactus. But there was something sinuously graceful about them. Like rubber plants.

The white man reached the great mansion. He crossed the wide veranda. Stately columns rose from the veranda's edge to support the wide, overhanging roof. The man went into the great center hall and turned to the drawing-room on his left.

A TALL, white-haired man stood there by a window. His snow-colored hair flowed long; his face was strong but grim; there were many lines of worry.

The newcomer hesitated before he spoke. He had seen those lines of worry come into that strong face. He had seen the other set his mouth in grim determination. It had been a determination to defeat the death threat that hung over them all.

"Mistah Jettmore," he began, "the field hands are getting moah nervous all the time."

Caleb Jettmore turned around. His face was haggard with worry. He glanced at a picture of a smiling, black-curled girl.

"Death may strike heah again, Pennfield," he said slowly, "but I'm moah worried about Virginia, now."

Pennfield shifted uneasily. He had tutored the girl through her formative years. He was almost a second father to her. He had avoided talking about her since she had left. The skeleton death had given Genlee a

respite. But perhaps it had—

He refused to let his mind think of it.

Caleb Jettmore spoke again; he spoke more to himself rather than to his old retainer.

"I should have gone to the outside world," he said, "even though I know nothing of it. But then, at least, I'd know what's going on. I don't rightly know what a trouble-buster is, even. That's what Harlan called this Doc Savage."

The old retainer shook his head. "I don't know, eithah," he offered, "but this Doc Savage must be wonderful."

Caleb Jettmore walked again to the window, looked into the sky. He did that often. Spotfield had told him Doc Savage would come by way of the sky. Caleb shook his head. It seemed hard to realize that men did fly, even though he had books from the outside world, had read of such marvelous feats.

Jettmore straightened suddenly. A faint drone struck his ears—a drone such as he'd never heard before. At first, he thought it was his imagination. Then the sound grew louder, more definite.

Caleb snapped to attention. His shoulders went back; he straightened to that ramrodlike military bearing with which he normally carried himself.

"Doc Savage!" he snapped. "It must be he! Get the men out quickly!"

THE sounds of the spiritual stopped. Blacks poured from the compound; the place seethed with feverish activity. Even the Negroes understood that the name of Doc Savage meant salvation for them. Torches flared; men marched toward a great cleared field behind the mansion.

The drone of the plane became a roar. It circled overhead, its lights showing clearly in the African night. Black field hands stationed themselves at the four corners of the cleared space. Their torches marked the landing spot as they spiked them into the earth.

The plane circled twice, then straightened out in a long glide. It bounced to a stop as Caleb rushed forward. Torch bearers followed him closely.

Doc Savage had been described to Caleb Jettmore. He expected to see a big man; perhaps he expected to see a superman. He cautioned himself that he should not expect too much.

The flier stepped from the cockpit. He was alone. He was a big man. His broad shoulders indicated strength, and his bearing showed assurance. Bronze hair was awry on his well-shaped head.

Jettmore strained forward. He was timid before so great a personage from the outside world.

"Welcome to Genlee, Mistah Savage," he faltered. "We had hoped you would not fail us."

The bronze man took Jettmore's hand in a firm grip. He did not smile. His face was stern.

"Mister Jettmore," he began, "it is difficult to greet you with bad news, but—"

Caleb Jettmore dropped his head. His eyes sought the ground.

"I feared that," he said, striving to control his emotions. "Virginia is—"

"Dead," the other clipped. "It is tragic, but it is true."

"And Spotfield?"

"Also dead," said the bronze man. He looked hard at Jettmore.

Life went out of Caleb Jettmore. He seemed in a daze. His shoulders drooped, and his eyes were glazed with defeat. He had called the great Doc Savage. His call had been answered. But there was no release from fear.

"COME to the house," Jettmore said. His voice was lifeless. "We are bowed with great sorrow, but we must remember that othah lives are threatened."

Caleb walked with bent head. The bronze man strode behind him. Pennfield, the old retainer, padded in the rear. He never took his eyes from the broad shoulders in front of him. Such a visitor, he told himself, had never before come to Genlee.

Inside the drawing-room of the great house, Caleb Jettmore slumped into a chair behind a desk. His eyes were dull with misery. The bronze man sat a few feet away. His strong hands were on his knees. Pennfield, silent, ever watching, took another chair farther out in the room.

The bronze man broke the silence. "You have some mighty secret, Mr. Jettmore?" he asked. "It must be so, to have caused all this death and trouble. And I'm afraid—"

"Yes, yes, you are afraid theah may be moah." Jettmore waved a weary hand; there was resignation in his voice. Then he straightened.

"I have been a proud man," he said, with slow precision. "But now my life is ovah. I've been an exile from my country—a country I've nevah seen. The Civil War was difficult for my fathah to forget, Doc Savage, for he was proud.

"I, too, have been proud. I did not care to return to that country until I had something big to offer. I have that now. My work is complete; but now I do not care. I will tell you, Doc Savage, I will let you take my secret back to those United States."

The big, bronze fingers worked strangely. Pennfield, fascinated, watched them. Immense, they were, an even bronze in color. Pennfield's eyes could not leave them; he watched them twist and lock.

The bronze giant rose, paced restlessly. "You are right to confide in me, Mr. Jettmore," the big man said. "Once that secret is in the hands of the United States government, I am sure death will cease to follow you."

"I shall give it to you," the old man said, in calm determination.

The bronze man stopped, his face tense with interest. "And the secret?" he asked.

"A plant which horticulturists have been seeking for years," the old man said proudly. "I have learned how to combine a hardy cactus plant with the moah delicate rubber plant. I have evolved a tree that will produce rubber in the United States."

There was a moment of silence. The bronze man gasped. His eyes showed interest; he spoke quickly.

"You understand what that really means, Mr. Jettmore? You understand that such a plant will make the

United States independent of foreign countries for one of the most vital products it needs, in both war and peace?"

Caleb Jettmore smiled; his shoulders straightened.

"I understand, suh. It is what I've been working for. Something that would grow on the great American desert, where conditions are almost the same as here."

"Such a secret is worth millions," the bronze man was going on, almost unheeding Jettmore's words. "A man could get his own price for a formula that would bring such a plant. Rubberkak. An almost priceless discovery. And you have the formula ready. You will permit me to take your great gift back to the United States?"

Jettmore walked toward an old-fashioned safe. "The formula is heah. But no one but myself can understand it as it is. I will explain it to you."

The bronze man's hands worked strangely. He half turned. Pennfield, looking on queerly, opened his mouth to speak.

There was a sudden, wild shriek.

Jettmore spun, features ashen. The bronze man's mouth dropped wide.

Where Pennfield had been standing there was now only a ghastly, grinning skeleton. As they watched, the bones creaked, crumpled to the floor.

CALEB JETTMORE groaned; his face worked. He stood as if paralyzed, rooted to the floor.

The bronze man took control. "Quick, outside!" he ordered. "Perhaps we can catch the villain!" He dived for the door on a quick run. Caleb followed. Dazedly he thought the bronze man looked even bigger and more powerful than before.

Caleb Jettmore was courageous. He stayed, side by side, with the bronze man as they searched the grounds. But they found nothing. Silently, they returned to the drawing-room. Perspiration stood out on Jettmore's brow.

"Poor old Pennfield," he said sadly. "A most faithful man. Why did they have to take him, too?"

The bronze man's eyes snapped. His answer was terse and to the point.

"Whatever this terrible power is," he said, "it wanted to prevent me from getting that formula." He paced the floor.

"The formula first," he decided. "We must get that in safe hands and then track down this murderer. We will find him, and he will be punished. But now, let us have that valuable formula and get it to the country you have readopted."

Caleb was still pale. "When the field hands find Pennfield has met the skeleton death, there will be plenty moah trouble. I had best destroy the formula. It is simple. I can explain it to you in a very few minutes. You will remember it, I know."

The old man walked again to the window. He looked out into the African night. The plaintive wail of a Negro spiritual came once more.

Jettmore turned. "I am not a young man, Doc Savage. I had hoped my daughter could reap the fame that will come. I have no such ambition for myself. But that is not to be."

The bronze man moved impatiently, started to speak, then changed his mind.

JETTMOORE returned to his desk, slumped into a chair. "Heah is my secret, Doc Savage. I will give it to you, then you go back. If Virginia were alive, I'd go, also. But now—"

He gestured resignedly, began a slow, detailed explanation of his secret formula.

So tense was the bronze man, so dazed was Jettmore, that neither noticed anything unusual in the air. A mosquito can buzz about a room on a summer night and few will notice its presence until it bites.

So it was with the plane. When its first gentle droning was audible, neither Jettmore nor his visitor noticed it. The bronze man was too intent upon what the old man was saying and was about to say. Jettmore was too grief-stricken.

"Those are the preliminary steps," Jettmore was continuing. "Now for the vital factor, the one thing that took me longest to find, and which is absolutely essential—"

He paused. The roar of the approaching plane had grown until it almost drowned out his words. Jettmore's head came up, a surprised look on his face.

But if Jettmore was surprised, the bronze man acted even more so. He leaped from his chair, ran to the window. He was silent, tense as he watched the plane glide to a perfect three-point landing.

The door of the plane opened. Six figures, plainly visible in the still-burning torches, stepped out.

One of them was tall, even taller than the bogus bronze man who stood beside Jettmore's side, his face even a darker bronze hue. Another of the six was a girl.

A startled exclamation came from Jettmore as he saw her. He whirled on his companion.

"You lie!" he shouted. "Virginia is not dead! She's heah!"

He found himself talking to no one. The bogus bronze man had raced from the room.

Chapter XVIII. AN OFFER

BLACK men crept cautiously toward Doc's plane. Their eyes rolled whitely. They had learned that Pennfield's skeleton lay in the drawing-room of the big mansion. No spirituals came now from the darkened compound. They were too terrified even to find relief in haunting melody.

Jettmore ran from the house. The dim torchlight showed his white locks flying. He caught sight of the girl, raced toward her.

"Virginia! Virginia!" Jettmore's voice was almost a sob of joy. He wrapped his daughter in close embrace.

There was a strange silence. The very air seemed filled with peril, with fear—fear exhibited in every movement of the cowering crowd that stood near the plane, fear that enfolded and engulfed like a fog.

Even Chemistry was aware of it. Warm as the night was, the big ape moved closer to Ham, put one hairy fist on the dapper lawyer's arm. Habeas brushed close to Monk's legs.

Palm trees hung motionless in the still, warm air. Their drooping branches gave the appearance of weird skeletons.

"I—I was told you were dead," Jettmore was murmuring. His voice, more than his words, told the terrific strain he was under, the terror that held him.

Virginia Jettmore's eyes became fear-clouded. Once more she was as the New York customs inspector had seen her.

"Fathah, this is Doc Savage," she said.

"Another man told me he was Doc Savage!" the old man rapped.

He turned, surveyed Doc closely. Slowly his figure stiffened, his hand came out. He was proud, but he knew he stood before a greater, stronger presence. He looked into the gold-flecked eyes of the bronze man, and doubt left him.

"I am proud to meet you, suh," he said formally. "I know now I have been harboring an impostor. When I see you, I wondah how I evah could have made that mistake."

Doc smiled slightly, took the proffered hand.

Ham snickered. "First he looked like me; now he looks like Doc." The dapper lawyer turned toward Monk.

"He couldn't look like you, you hairy ape! Nobody could do that but Chemistry here."

Monk sputtered wordlessly.

Doc took Jettmore's arm, led him aside. The two talked earnestly.

Jettmore's white head shook in vehement protest at Doc's words.

"It is the only way," the bronze man said. "Come."

His face bewildered, but with a shade of fear gone from his eyes for the first time in months, Caleb Jettmore turned to the others.

"Let us go to the house," he said.

Monk and Ham glanced at each other in surprise. There was something here they did not understand.

The girl said nothing, she was clinging to her father, happily.

THE grim skeleton of Pennfield shouted in silent warning as the group entered the big mansion. Chemistry shied from it; even Habeas pretended to ignore it.

Monk and Ham were accustomed to danger. They, even as Doc, were hardened to horror. But as they glanced at that heap of dried bones there was not one who did not feel an instinctive crawling of his flesh.

Jettmore looked at Doc, pleading in his glance. The bronze man shook his head slightly.

"Wait here," he said quietly. "I will return soon."

He turned, started out. With a squealing grunt, Habeas Corpus lunged toward the door. Chemistry rumbled, rose up and started to lumber after him.

"Call them back!" Doc rapped. He stopped, turned, took one last quick look about the room, then was gone.

"Why—why where is he going?" Virginia Jettmore gasped.

Monk and Ham said nothing. They knew. The quick, worried glances that passed between them told the fear they felt.

Ham broke the tension. "Wish he'd taken that blasted pig," he growled sarcastically. "He'd make such a funny-looking skeleton."

"No funnier than that homely ape of yours would make, you shyster!" Monk bellowed, advancing menacingly. Chemistry lumbered beside him.

Ham looked from one to the other.

"No, I guess you're right," he observed. "But if the two of you disappeared at the same time, we wouldn't be able to tell which was which."

Even frightened, Virginia Jettmore was forced to smile. Monk and Chemistry, side by side, did look almost like twins.

A frantic knocking on the door interrupted the raillery. A terrified black man, hat in hand, rushed into the room. He dropped, shaking, before Jettmore.

"Ghosts is walkin', Mistah Jettmore!" he wailed.

"What do you mean?" Jettmore snapped.

The black man's eyes rolled; he undoubtedly was in the grip of a wild, unreasoning terror.

"I saw that Doc Savage leave heah, Mistah Jettmore," he moaned. "Evahbody know he come heah to save our lives. I—I was afraid. I thought if I followed Doc Savage and kept close to him, I might be safe.

"He—he went to that plane of his. Then he came out and went to that palm grove."

The black man stopped; his whole body shook with fright.

"And then?" prompted Jettmore.

"And—then—I saw it!" the black man wailed.

"Saw what?" Jettmore said impatiently.

"His ghost! Another Doc Savage! It followed him!"

The colored man's voice ended with a piercing wail. Then there was only silence—a stricken silence.

All in the room understood now. Doc Savage had gone to trap the killer.

And the skeleton death was trailing him! The bogus bronze man, he who held the secret of the skeleton

death, was skulking through the dark palm grove behind Doc Savage with murder in his heart!

VIRGINIA JETTMORE screamed, and fainted.

Jettmore roared. He looked now like the type of man his father had been—a man General Lee had chosen for one of his chiefs of staff. Fear was erased from his lined features by cold determination.

"He'll not get Doc Savage unless he gets me, too!" he cried.

He ran to a rack on the wall, pulled from it a huge but ancient pistol. He whirled, started for the door.

Monk seized him.

"Doc told us to stay here," the hairy chemist said, not ungently. "Wait, Mr. Jettmore!"

Ham, too, held up a restraining hand. But the dapper lawyer's eyes were anxious. The skeleton death was following Doc out there in that dark palm grove. He knew Doc never took unnecessary chances, but death had often knocked on the bronze man's door.

That door had never opened—so far. But there might come a time.

And death was close to Doc.

The dim finger nail of a new moon cast a vague light into the rolling palm grove. It was only a suggestion of light, just enough to magnify insignificant objects into hideous shapes. Tall palms reached up into the sky like tentacles of death.

Doc Savage moved so quietly, he scarcely seemed to touch the earth at all. But, strangely, at widely spaced intervals he turned on a powerful flashlight.

A few hundred yards behind Doc Savage another figure moved. It was a man almost as big as Doc and he moved with almost the same amount of caution.

The slinking figure halted now and then, let Doc go on. He was too far behind to see Doc's movements, but he saw the occasional glare of the flashlight.

Suddenly Doc Savage stopped; he stepped behind the trunk of a huge palm tree. A cloud obscured the wisp of a moon. Nothing could be seen.

A small package came from Doc Savage's pocket. There was the faint sound of breathing, then silence. The cloud drifted on, pale light once more flickered through the big palms.

Doc's voice boomed loud in the clearing.

"You are the killer and you are following me!" he said clearly. "If you will give yourself up and stop your murder, I will not turn you over to the law! I offer you this chance now, but the skeleton death must stop!"

A jeering laugh filled the grove, a maniacal triumphant peal of murderous mirth.

The pale light of the moon seemed to grow stronger. The figure of Doc Savage showed dimly against the tree.

Doc's voice continued. He talked calmly, logically, without anger. Doc's offer did not mean the man would go free. It meant only he would go to that hospital in up-State New York where skilled surgeons would fit him for a new and crimeless life.

Doc's voice was interrupted. There came a dull pop and the figure of the bronze man vanished. Once more that harsh, maniacal laughter rang out.

"You're smart, Savage, but not smart enough!" he grated. "I suspected you inflated a balloon in the likeness of your figure. And every one knows you are a ventriloquist. But it didn't work. I punctured your balloon."

Laughter, wild and unrestrained, filled the air.

"YOU are a smart man," Doc Savage said. His voice came from an entirely different section of the grove—a section astoundingly close to where the killer stood.

The laughter choked off, feet trod heavily as the big man ran suddenly.

"Oh, no, Doc Savage," came the killer's voice. "I cannot see you, but you cannot see me. And I know you do not murder." The voice dropped, became deadly. "But I do! And sooner or later I will really see you! And when I do—"

Figures flitted back and forth in the dark grove. It might have been a game. It was, in a way. A game of death!

The killer's nerves apparently weakened. He called out. Doc stopped.

"Let us talk, Doc Savage," said the killer.

"Are you ready to consider my offer?"

"No, but I have an offer of my own to make. If you will get the secret of rubberkak for me, you and I can have millions."

"And if I refuse?" Doc's voice was clipped and hard.

"If you refuse, you and every one in Genlee will die—will die the skeleton death!"

"I make no promises, but I will talk to you." Doc's tones were hard. "I will show you where I am."

The flashlight glowed again in the night. It showed the big form of Doc Savage, his bronze face, bronze hair and corded hands as clearly as if it had been daylight.

A cruel grin crossed the killer's face. He crept forward, a peculiar funnel held in one hand.

MONK was pacing restlessly back and forth in the big room at the mansion.

Jettmore had slumped back in a chair, his white hair bowed. Virginia sat beside him.

Only Ham appeared calm, and his face was lined. All were showing the strain. It had been thirty minutes since Doc had left.

Monk could stand it no longer. He bounded up. "I'm going out there!" he said, grimly.

Ham started forward, then halted. "What could we do?" he asked simply. "If Doc can't handle it, we couldn't."

Monk swung around, moved impatiently. It was always harder for him to wait than it was to act, but he realized the truth of Ham's words.

"But if Doc doesn't come back—" he promised. There was boundless courage and a reckless challenge in that promise.

"If not," Ham said quietly, "then we'll do our best."

They were silent, but their thoughts were out in that silent, dark grove.

ONE of Doc's hands held the flashlight. The hand was steady.

But the other hand held a tiny glass bulb no bigger than a pigeon's egg. It contained an anaesthetic gas that would bring instant unconsciousness, but would do no real harm.

Doc had made no promises. Besides, he had not been fooled. He fully understood the killer was merely trying a trick so he could get close enough to use the skeleton death.

Slowly the bronze man advanced, walking toward the spot where he knew the killer was advancing to meet him.

The killer halted, circled in the darkness. His jeering laughter came from one side, from a point astoundingly close.

Doc whirled.

"Now Doc Savage, do we talk business or do we not?"

Doc's free hand swung back and forth, ever so slightly.

"Stop it!" rasped the killer. "Attempt to play no tricks, Doc Savage! Even if you should shoot me now, in fact no matter what you do, I am so close you would die. My finger is on the key to the skeleton death. Nothing could save you!"

Doc's big figure seemed to grow taller.

"I can make no promises. I will merely repeat my first offer. If you will surrender, I will not turn you over to the law."

The killer's figure stepped into view. A small funnel was held in one hand, close in front of his body.

"Then you die! Where others have failed, I will succeed!"

Doc's hand came up, attempted to throw the gas bomb.

There was a faint hiss.

A peculiar trilling note filled the air; then there was a moment of silence.

The gas bomb fell to the ground beside Doc. The flashlight went out.

The grating laugh of the killer floated eerily in the night.

On the sand beneath a tall palm lay a hideous, grinning skeleton.

Chapter XIX. A GHOST COMES BACK

BACK in the drawing-room of the mansion there was silence. Monk idly scratched the bristles on Habeas's back. Only Chemistry moved. Grunting softly, he lumbered about the room.

Suddenly, Habeas's sail-like ears stood erect. Chemistry halted in his tracks. There came a faint crunch of gravel and then footsteps sounded on the veranda. The doorknob turned and a big, bronze man strode in.

"The killer fled!" he said crisply. "I don't think he'll be back."

"Thank Heaven, Doc Savage!" Virginia cried. "I was afraid for you!"

Monk squinted his small eyes, and the look of tension left his face.

"Glad you're back, Doc," he said, trying to keep emotion from his voice.

"Me, too." Ham was visibly relieved.

Habeas, grunting, started across the floor. A few feet from the man, he stopped. The bristles rose on his back and he charged suddenly ahead. His sharp teeth bit into the calf of one of the bronze man's legs. Chemistry, jabbering angrily, started forward.

"It isn't Doc!" Monk howled, and lunged. Ham's sword cane came out of its sheath.

The bronze man kicked the pig from him, and the dead, flat voice spoke quickly.

"Back! Or each of you will become a skeleton!"

A peculiar, funnel-like object emerged from beneath his coat. His eyes narrowed, and his lips twisted in a cruel sneer.

Monk and Ham both stopped. Habeas started a second charge. Monk spoke sharply and the pig retreated with visible reluctance. Ham called Chemistry back.

"Who are you," Monk demanded, "and what happened to Doc?"

"Who I am is not your business," the bronze man sneered.

"But Doc—"

"Where others have failed, I have succeeded," the flat voice went on. "When I have gotten what I want, perhaps you can go find Doc Savage's skeleton on the sand."

"Or perhaps you'll kill us all then, anyway!" Ham rasped.

"That is for me to decide," the killer smirked. "First, I want the formula for rubberkak."

"Rubberkak! What is that?"

Every one in the room started except the killer. He glided to one corner, careful to keep all present under his eyes. Then he turned.

Standing in the doorway, a machine gun in his hand, was Greens Gordon. Gats was at his elbow. Other gangsters were behind him.

THE killer showed no surprise. He bowed slightly. "I underestimated you, Gordon," he said, in his dead, flat voice.

"Yeah? Well, nobody can double-cross me, and get away with it!" rasped the stocky racketeer.

"How—how did you get here?" gasped Virginia Jettmore.

Gordon sneered. "Surprising how nobody seems glad to see me." He edged on into the room, others of his gang behind him.

"It was simple enough," the racketeer grated. "You mentioned Genlee. When everybody ran off and left me, I decided I'd better get here, too, to find out what it was all about.

"We put on forced draft, ran into Casablanca. There we managed to charter a big plane and get directions." He shrugged. "The rest was easy. We just flew here and glided in with our motors off so we wouldn't be heard."

"Again I compliment you, Gordon," the killer said.

Greens Gordon's face got hard. "It's going to take more than compliments, guy, before you're square with me. What was the idea of running away?"

"I knew you could take care of Doc Savage," said the bronze man smoothly. "I thought it best that I come on ahead, get the secret and then return to you."

Gordon looked doubtful. An incredulous grunt came from Gats. The little gunman's eyes were wide; he held a gun firm in one skinny fist.

"How about Doc Savage?" Gordon rumbled, somewhat mollified.

"He's a skeleton." The killer's voice was flat, full of conviction. There was no doubting his sincerity.

Monk started to edge toward the killer. The funnel swung toward him. He halted.

"We have won the game, Gordon!" the killer chuckled. "Keep your guns on these two Doc Savage aids, and I will finish getting what we want!"

CALEB JETTMORE had sat like a man paralyzed. Now at the killer's words, his head came up, his lips set.

"You will get nothing from me, suh. I am ready to die."

"Yes?" jibed the killer sardonically. The strange funnel in his hand turned toward Virginia Jettmore.

"Perhaps you are, but would you care to see your daughter die? Would you care to see her turn into a skeleton before your eyes?"

Jettmore gulped helplessly.

"Don't tell," the girl said courageously.

"Tell him what he wants to know," Monk growled fiercely. "You have no choice. Later—well, later we'll see what can be done."

"He's right," Ham put in. "We all know what the skeleton death can do. I admire you for your own courage, but do not risk the life of your daughter."

"But—but what assurance have we, that this—this monstah won't kill us aftah I've told?" gasped Jettmore. His voice rose to a wail. "What assurance have we that my telling won't really be signing death warrants for us all?"

Monk said nothing. There was no such assurance. Monk realized, even as Jettmore did, that the killer could not let them live once he had the secret. But he realized, also, that as long as there was life there was a chance. He wanted Jettmore to play for time.

Ham had the same idea. He spoke gently. "We can do nothing but accede, even though we realize we may die later," he said.

Jettmore bowed his head. He understood. He started a jerky, rambling statement.

"Stop it!" rapped the killer. "You've gone over that before. Give me that vital key to the formula."

Out across the sands, under the palm trees, a weird figure was staggering weakly. Huge, powerful limbs seemed without strength to carry a broad-shouldered body.

The sand tripped feet that usually were fleet. The figure fell, only to stagger up, move forward again. The man shook his head, drew long gulps of breath into big lungs.

Shadowy figures were hunched back in the darkness. The black faces of many of those who called Genlee their home, peered with awe-stricken eyes at what they saw.

Even as they watched, the weird figure seemed to draw strength from some hidden source, to straighten and walk forward with more assurance.

GREENS GORDON'S eyes were shrewd as he listened to the words Caleb Jettmore was speaking.

The racketeer had not been misled by the killer's soft words. He fully understood his once mysterious ally intended to double-cross him again.

But Gordon was not dumb. He was memorizing those words, even as they were spoken. He, too, realized the tremendous possibilities of rubberkak. He saw himself returning alone to the United States with that secret, dropping his illegal enterprise, and becoming a man of power.

Jettmore stopped. His head drooped.

"I—I have told all," he said. "You now know as much as I."

Gats snuggled closer to Greens Gordon, spoke from the side of his mouth in a whisper that did not carry two feet.

"Let me bump that skeleton death guy," he said. "Then we can cash in."

Greens Gordon's head gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Gats and Gordon alone were inside the room. The others of the gang were huddled in the door way. Gordon's back was turned. He did not know that his henchmen were disappearing, one by one.

Only Monk noticed that; only Monk saw gangster after gangster suddenly leave the floor, to apparently float noiselessly back and out of sight.

The hairy chemist's breath came out in a faint sigh. His eyes lived again.

The killer had seen Gordon's faint signal. A sardonic grin crossed his face. The funnel turned full upon the bulky racketeer.

"Stalemate," he rasped flatly. "You can blast me, surely, but you'll die if you do!"

Gordon's face was indecisive. Then his resolution tightened. The machine gun was held steady in his hand.

A shriek came from Virginia Jettmore. The skeleton killer's eyes almost started from his head.

Standing in the doorway, directly behind Greens Gordon and Gats, was a tall, glowing skeleton!

Chapter XX. FINIS TO A KILLER

DOC SAVAGE had solved the principle of the skeleton death almost at once. There could be only one explanation.

The human body is almost ninety per cent water. The only weapon of death possible that could transform a man into a skeleton in the space of a second had to be some strong dehydrater that sucked all the water from the body.

The bronze man had tested his theory when the skeleton killer had appeared at his headquarters in New York. Besides dropping the invisible shield, he had turned on overhead sprinklers. This had created so much moisture that the deadly weapon had been unable to do more damage.

But knowing that sooner or later he would come face to face with the killer, Doc had worked on his yacht and prepared a mixture to cover all the pores of his body, to so completely plate his skin that the weapon would be harmless.

When he had appeared before the killer in the grove, he had been covered with this paste.

The paste had worked—except that the pull of the death machine had been so strong that the blood had been drawn to his head so rapidly, Doc had been dizzy for an instant.

In that instant the gas bomb had fallen from his hand; he had been overcome.

Now the man of bronze stood behind Greens Gordon, hands reaching out.

The skeleton killer gave an unearthly scream. His weapon came up.

Greens Gordon and Gats had no way of knowing that an unearthly appearing figure stood behind them.

The machine gun in Gordon's hand roared. Gats fired savagely.

The skeleton killer buckled. A surprised expression came over his face.

Doc jumped back, and just in time. He tried to carry Gordon with him. The racketeer had leaned forward. He escaped the grasp of Doc's strong fingers—and became a skeleton!

There was a steady hissing.

Monk called out in alarm. His warning came too late. Doc was already out of harm's way. The others were past caring.

Where Gordon had been standing there was now only a heap of bones, bones that seemed to stand in the air for a moment before falling. A smaller skeleton was by his side, a skinny skeleton that even in death seemed to be trying to clutch a deadly automatic in bony fingers.

"Doc!" Ham and Monk spoke as one.

The peculiar-appearing skeleton walked into the room.

As he came fully into the light the skeleton seemed to disappear.

Ham grinned delightedly. "Phosphorus, by golly!" he roared.

"It fooled that killer there!" Monk chuckled,

Jettmore at first looked bewildered, then smiled. Events had been occurring almost too fast for him. Virginia's eyes never left the smiling face of Doc Savage.

"Phosphorus is right," the bronze man agreed. "I painted a skeleton on myself. As long as I had a bright light, the flashlight turned on me, it didn't show, but when the flashlight went out I expect it did look as though I'd fallen a victim."

"But—but who *is* the villain?" Jettmore gasped uncertainly.

Doc smiled, walked toward the crumpled heap of the skeleton killer.

"HE was a master of make-up, for one thing," Doc said. He took a rag, wiped the bronze from the face of the fallen man. His fingers worked swiftly; gradually the features of the skeleton killer changed.

"Spotfield!" cried Jettmore.

"Exactly," said Doc.

"But—but he was killed in your office!" exclaimed Virginia Jettmore. Ham and Monk echoed her statement.

"You mean you thought he was killed," Doc corrected softly. "Probably some other member of Gordon's gang had to pay with his life for that deception. Then he placed his own ring on the victim's hand, escaped by another door and donned a different disguise."

"But—I trusted him," stammered Jettmore.

"How long had he been with you?" Doc asked quietly.

"Five years."

The bronze man nodded. "That is about right. Shortly over five years ago one of the most notorious killers and criminals, a former actor, disappeared. He had made the mistake of committing murder in England. He was believed to have perished when fire destroyed a plane he was piloting.

"Evidently he did not. He fled here, the last place any one would ever think of looking for him. When he learned you had made a valuable discovery, but would not tell him, he persuaded you to send him to the United States. Through his former connections he contacted Gordon, arranged for Gordon's support."

Ham nodded. It all fitted in.

"Why did he kill Pennfield?" Jettmore demanded suddenly.

Doc pointed to one hand of the fallen man—the hand that had worn the ring.

"I was not here, but it seems probable that Pennfield noticed that faint band of white on the one finger—the finger where Spotfield always wore a ring. He became suspicious and Spotfield killed him."

"Why didn't you blast him down out there in the palm grove?" Virginia asked. She had regained her color now; fear had dropped from her.

Doc smiled slightly, shook his head. He seldom explained his peculiar code, his set policy of never taking human life with his own hands. Nor did he make a habit of mentioning an interesting fact—that his enemies had a way of coming to untimely ends in traps of their own setting.

"Spotfield helped you some with your plant experiments?" Doc asked.

Jettmore nodded. "How did you know?"

"THAT explains the death machine. He undoubtedly studied plants intensely and noticed the peculiar species that draws water from other plants near it. His machine was built on that principle, only greatly intensified, and with electrical impulses taking the place of natural phenomena."

Doc opened Spotfield's shirt. Row upon row of small hose was about the man's body, the reservoir for the water drawn when the skeleton death was put into effect.

"You have nothing more to fear, Mr. Jettmore," Doc said. "I would suggest you transplant your entire colony to the United States. You will find the great American desert there with conditions almost similar to those here. Raise rubberkak and you will win the praise and admiration of your countrymen. Your secret is almost priceless."

"I'll do it, suh!" Jettmore promised fervently.

Virginia Jettmore glanced at the bronze man and saw something in his gold-flecked eyes that told her Doc was never for her.

Womanlike, she turned to Monk and dazzled him with a beautiful smile.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Chemistry broke it. He did a strange thing.

Long arms dangling, looking more like Monk than ever before, he lumbered forward, planted himself in front of Virginia Jettmore and gazed up at her with adoring eyes.

Ham's face grew red; he choked, then broke into peals of laughter as he glimpsed Monk's blushing face.

"Why don't you speak for yourself, John Alden?" he roared.

THE END