



# THE DERELICT OF SKULL SHOAL

## A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed  
by Tom Stephens*

*Aboard a doomed ship in the Caribbean, Doc Savage hunts the evil perpetrators of the mysterious disappearance of cargo ships. Ships abandoned under sail after a torpedo attack vanish without a trace.*

## Chapter I

THE dog howled at three o'clock in the morning. It was a strange thing to happen. In fact, apparently an impossible thing, because the howl—low, quavering, as ghastly as a moan in a hospital at night—seemed to come from the sea, from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

The converted liner, the *Farland*, running blacked out, was making sixteen knots under a cloud-packed sky. *Farland* wasn't her peacetime name. The Navy had named her that after taking her over. Once she had made luxury cruises around the world. Now she was the *Farland*, carrying whatever the Army or the Navy wanted her to carry, and hauling it wherever the war was being fought.

Somehow the ship had missed her convoy. Nobody seemed to know anything about it, but it was strange. Whatever had happened, it was being hushed up. Wartime secrecy.

The vessel was ploughing across the Atlantic alone. She wouldn't be doing that unless she had missed her convoy. No one seemed to know anything more than that.

But the Atlantic these days was no place for a ship alone, not a converted liner with two three-inch guns and a half dozen Brownings in steel tubs, and no other armament.

Doc Savage heard the dog-howl. Doc was doing deck patrol at the time, pacing what had been the promenade deck, his duty being to make sure no lights showed from that part of the ship. The rest of the time he was to watch the sea.

He wasn't down on the crew-list as Doc Savage, or even as Clark Savage, Jr., his full name. He was Bill Doyle. He had papers to prove he had been a seaman, able bodied, for ten years. But there wasn't a word of truth in them.

His bronze-colored hair was dyed black and gray and his bronze skin was dyed a weathered, ruddy hue. Tinted optical glass—"contact" lenses—made his eyes a dull brown instead of their natural and rather unusual flake gold. The only thing he could do about his great size was slouch and limp slightly. The disguise seemed to be all right. Nobody had questioned his being Bill Doyle, A. B. Actually, there was no Bill Doyle.

The dog-howl somehow set him on edge.

He swerved over to the rail, stood there listening, straining to look into the blackness of the night.

The wind pushed warm and clammy against his face. The *Farland* was a few hundred miles south and east of Bermuda, ploughing through the warm Gulf Stream. Somewhat of a sea was running, white caps feathered the sea. It was too dark to see this, but he could tell from the soft rushing sounds as waves broke.

He saw nothing. Somehow he was not reassured in the least. The feeling of uneasiness was hard to understand, there being no solid reason for it.

A dog had howled, or seemed to howl, in the middle of the Atlantic. It was queer. That was all. It might have a completely logical explanation, something as simple as a passing vessel with a dog aboard. Only this had been a howl, not a bark.

But he was getting the strangest feeling about it. A sensation of hideous waiting, condemned man awaiting the verdict.

Something about to happen.

A MAN amidships began screaming. He yelled, "Torpedo! Off the port beam! Torpedo! Oh my God!"

The man's voice started low and climbed high, the way fear makes a voice behave, almost grotesque, overdone. Not quite natural.

From the crow's nest: "Torpedo-wake to port!"

From the forward well-deck: "Torpedo! Look out!"

Doc Savage, leaning far over the rail, strained his eyes to see. He saw nothing but blackness, only a soot darkness, not even the water. No sky, no clouds, no waves, nothing but the spongy night.

From the crow's nest again: "Torpedo to port!"

From the stern: "It's gonna hit amidships!"

Why couldn't he see this torpedo-wake?

He couldn't see a thing, and he thought for a moment that something could have happened to his eyes, so he brought his hands up close before his face. He could see them, their dark outline. Then he thought it could be the "contact" eyeglasses of tinted glass which he was wearing to disguise the distinctive color of his eyes. He got the little case out of his pocket, and used the suction-cup gadget to remove one of them. He peered about. It made no difference. He still couldn't see anything.

From the crow's nest again: "It's gonna hit! Watch it!"

From somewhere not more than thirty feet from where Doc stood: "It's hitting amidships!"

Doc Savage, harried by the strangeness of it all, made for that nearest voice. He tiptoed so as not to be noisy.

Then the explosion came. It wasn't amidships, quite, but more forward. A bit to the fore of the bridge.

An eye-aching salmon flash. The stricken wrench of the whole ship as it hit. The deck seemed to jump, to flinch like a stricken animal. The noise of the explosion wasn't much, a dull thud.

Doc Savage was knocked off his feet on the deck. The explosion was that strong. He picked himself up. He'd lost the little vacuum cup remover gadget for the "contact" eye glass, and the tinted eye-glass which it was holding. He explored about for the thing, but found neither it nor the eyeglass. That meant he would have no disguise for his right eye. It was questionable whether that would be important, now. But it bothered him.

HELL let loose through the ship. Afterward they could cite psychological reasons for it happening that way. Everyone on the ship had half-expected the terror of a submarine attack to come out of the black of night ever since they had sailed.

The *Farland* rolled slowly, like a great log, from the force of the blast on her forward port quarter. It seemed she would never stop listing, although it was no more than thirty degrees. She would roll more than that in a sharp turn, or in a storm.

She had not straightened herself when there was a blast somewhere down in the hold. A sound like a cough, with more jolting shock. A cough like that meant a lot of damage down in the steel guts of the ship.

Doc Savage ran for the bridge. The bridge was the nerve-center of the ship. It was the best listening-post.

The siren cut loose, a god-awful moaning that would take the hat right off a man's head. But it stopped short.

Scrambling up the bridge steps, Doc could hear Captain Winston Davis of the *Farland* cursing in a shrill voice. Swearing at an officer for sounding the siren.

"Keep your blankety-blank head, mister," Captain Davis was saying.

Already, Doc thought grimly, there was a trace of fear-hysteria in the skipper's voice. He had better keep his own blankety-blank head.

A sailor blocked Doc's way to the bridge.

“Who're you?” the sailor demanded.

“Bill Doyle, A. B. I want to—”

“Get back to your post and stand by for orders!” snapped the guard.

“But—”

“Get back!” There was a metal-against-leather sound as the man drew his service revolver.

Doc withdrew. The sailor was young and frightened and might shoot first and ask questions later. They had orders to do that in an emergency, anyway.

Doc stood in the darkness, frowning, half-tempted to disclose his identity. If they knew who he was, they'd let him on the bridge. They'd have to. If it became necessary, they would have to turn over entire command of the ship to him.

The *Farland* had sailed under sealed orders. Captain Davis had the envelope in his possession, with orders to open it only if he was confronted by a man who gave him the code words *three blind mice*. Once he opened them, he would find the man with the code was Doc Savage, whom he was to accept as his superior officer.

Doc smothered the temptation to reveal his identity. This might be the time for that, or it might not. He could not tell. He had to be sure.

He remained where he was, because he could hear most of what occurred on the bridge.

They had switched on the intercommunicator, the public address system that extended to all parts of the ship. Over the apparatus, the bridge could speak to any part of the ship, and receive information as well.

THE third explosion came now. This was another one deep in the innards of the vessel. The same shock as before, the same dull horrible force.

The interphone loudspeaker said: “Forward hold reporting. About seven feet of water already. Coming in fast.”

Captain Davis asked: “Where was that last explosion?”

“Engine room.”

“What the hell was it?”

“The shock must have weakened one of the boilers. It let go.”

“Any men killed?”

“No. Some scalded. The damned steam is going to drive us out.”

Suddenly the sound of screams came from below. Someone somewhere had opened a hatch so that the noise could come up. The shrieking was muffled.

In one of the machine-gun tubs, a signal gun popped, spouting fire. A moment later, a parachute flare blossomed and grew and threw down a wide cone of light. But there was nothing under the light but the

wind-troubled sea. No submarine.

Doc Savage searched the sea as far as the light extended. The dog howl had come from somewhere out there, and it didn't seem possible that another ship could have gotten out of sight in such a short time. Still, if the animal had been on a submarine—but they didn't keep dogs on submarines, did they?

From the forecastle deck: “Fire! Fire!”

From the bridge: “Look, Captain Davis! There! The explosion split open that hatch!”

Doc caught the smell of the smoke. A trace at first, then rapidly becoming stronger, now he could see it, yellowish, sulphur-yellow. Ominous-looking stuff. Stinking of chemicals.

“My God, that forward hold is full of T. N. T.!” Captain Davis shouted.

The skipper sounded terrified, as if his nerves were at loose ends.

Doc Savage had almost got to the bridge to take charge, to tell them to examine their sealed orders.

He didn't. Somehow he had a vague idea it wasn't the thing to do.

From the loudspeaker: “After-deck calling bridge. Hello bridge!”

“Go ahead.”

“There's a fire back here. A hell of a fire. It's got in some kind of chemicals.”

Doc turned his head. He could see the fire, or rather its smoke. Black smoke this time.

Another explosion thumped below.

“A second torpedo!” Captain Davis said hysterically.

But it wasn't another torpedo. It was an explosion of some kind.

“Abandon ship!” Captain Davis ordered.

DOC SAVAGE tried to reach the bridge then. The guard got in his way, gun drawn, and said get the hell back to his station and do it quick.

“Captain Davis!” Doc shouted.

The skipper came to the bridge rail. “What the devil do you want?”

“You are abandoning ship too soon,” Doc said. “Wait until you are sure you can't control the fires.”

“Listen,” said Captain Davis angrily, “this ship is packed with hell. There probably isn't a packing-case aboard that wouldn't blow up a ship twice this size by itself. Don't tell me what to do!”

“Get hold of yourself, captain!”

“Get hold of nothing! I had this happen to me on the Murmansk run. Out of a crew of forty, how many do you think got off alive? Three. The hell with staying with this ship. America has more ships than good sailors these days.”

Doc said, "*Three blind mice?*"

"Eh? What's that?"

"*Three blind mice.*"

The code identification didn't click. The skipper was evidently too upset.

Captain Davis told the guard, "Keep that man away from here. He's crazy."

The guard said, "You hear that? Scram. Better get to your lifeboat station."

Doc Savage withdrew. The flare sank into the sea, and black darkness came again. Doc stood thinking for a moment, then wheeled and ran along the deck.

Confusion had spread over the ship. The order to abandon ship had been given over the talker, so everyone had heard it and had caught the fear in Captain Davis' voice. It had been contagious, but no panic. Nobody was letting any grass grow under his feet getting to the boats.

Men bumped into Doc Savage as they scurried along the decks. Now and then somebody fell over something and cursed. The smoke became thicker, lung stinging.

The talker said: "No lights. Show no lights. We don't want that damned submarine shelling us."

There were encased gliders in huge crates along the promenade deck, and Doc Savage slammed into one. It irritated him, because he had walked that deck at fifteen-minute intervals every watch since the *Farland* had sailed from Charleston harbor, and he should have known where all the crates were located.

The loudspeaker again blared: "No lights. No lights. Keep the submarine from shelling us."

That was good sense.

As Doc was passing the midship companionway, a man burst out on deck yelling with terror. He screeched, "That fire's getting at the explosives! We'll all go to hell any minute!"

"Shut up, you yellow-livered so-and-so," someone told him.

The man paid no attention. He went down the deck howling in fright.

He came toward Doc Savage. Doc stopped, turned, moved to meet him. The man lunged into him, and Doc brought a left jab to the fellow's jaw. Doc hit it, but not too hard. Just enough to make the man as loose as a rag for a few seconds.

Someone, one of the crew, who heard the blow, said, "Good for you, whoever you are. Paste the yellow so-and-so one for me."

Doc said, "The one he got should hold him."

The man who had been hit was limp in Doc's arms for a while. Then he began squirming, and Doc shook him, said, "Now behave yourself."

"You slugged me, you blankety-blank!" the man whimpered.

"Stop yelling, then. We have enough trouble without a panic."

The man seemed to think it over. “You’re that big guy, Doyle, ain’t you?”

“That makes no difference,” Doc said. “You had better get hold of yourself. Keep squalling, and one of the officers will put a bullet in you and be justified in doing it.”

“Listen, if you was down there and seen the fire eating into that explosive—”

“Stop it!”

The man struggled. “All right,” he said, his voice more natural. “You’re right. Thanks.”

Doc released the man. The fellow moved away.

Doc moved down the deck, listening and watching, prodding the confusion with his interest and attention. Things seemed to be going smoothly enough. Order out of chaos.

But Doc was not satisfied. There was something here that he couldn’t put his finger on, something sinister. Something wrong about it all.

THE dog howled again about three minutes later.

Doc stopped short, listening to the trailing, mournful sound. It was the same as it had been before, a howl with an unnatural, a grisly quality. The thing was unreality itself.

One thing, though, the sound came from the ship, not the surrounding sea. The earlier impression that it had come from the sea was a mistake. The howl, heard in the darkness like this, was hard to spot as to source. But it was surely on the ship.

Doc stood frozen. The howl came just once. He was puzzled at his own reaction to the thing. Surprised that it should put nerve-tightness into his throat muscles the way it did. He wondered why? It wasn’t like him to be affected that way.

He stepped back against the deckhouse, stood there feeling that his alarm was senseless, yet making no attempt to put away the alarm because it was so genuinely real.

Then, with no warning whatever, he was struck down. There was just the whizzing hiss that ended in a sound that was jarring to his toes, followed instantaneously by an effect like a large firecracker exploding inside his skull. He didn’t really know where he was hit, or by what, or even if he was hit. He was, though, conscious of beginning to fall, but all sensibility left him shortly after he began to fall, and there was nothing but the abysmal and black.

## Chapter II

SOMEWHERE a ship’s clock struck two bells into the darkness. The gong was muffled, because all ship clocks were muffled for an ocean crossing in wartime. The sound was dead, flat, disconsolate.

Then it began to rain. The clouds that had packed the sky for days, promising rain, now opened up and the rain came. It arrived in the arms of a gusty rush of wind, a small howling hurricane that raged up and down the decks and picked up discarded lifeboat covers and slapped them against the deckhouse or sent them tumbling down the decks so that they sounded like unnatural things running.

The wind carried the rain in through the open door and far enough down the passage that it began to soak Doc Savage where he lay.

Doc was first conscious of the rain beating down on his face. It was cold. He tried to move his head, and there was enough wham-bang that he didn't try it again at once.

He kept his eyes open, though, and watched lightning pop and whizz and crash outside. Nor did this do his head any good, although the turmoil in the outer world reflected his own condition.

For a while he couldn't think, it being as if his mind process was stuck on a high center. Then he remembered where he was; he was on a ship at sea. That got the thought wheels rolling, and he remembered. Everything came to him in a rush, so swiftly that he became confused. He lay there organizing his thoughts.

There was some other sound, too, duller and lower, audible only between the loud angry noises of the storm in the sky. As his head cleared, he realized what this other sound was. The interphone.

The mechanical interphone talker that ran all through the ship, and it was saying, "Bill Doyle! Bill Doyle! Bill, where are you?"

Bill Doyle? Who on earth was Bill Doyle?

Then Doc Savage realized it was himself, the name he had taken, and he felt quite foolish. He must be hurt badly to be so stupid. He became alarmed about his condition.

The skin on his head was broken in two or three places. From the solid feeling of the blood which had matted in his hair, he knew he had been unconscious some time. The size of the welts on his head worried him.

He lay there thinking over the various symptoms indicating a fractured skull and comparing them to his own pains. The result was not cheering. Anyway, he was not dead.

"Bill Doyle," the talker said monotonously. "Bill Doyle. Bill Doyle, where are you?"

Doc Savage rolled over. The head injury was terrific, and he remained on hands and knees for a while. Finally, mostly by the grit of his teeth, he got to his feet.

It took him about a minute to get out on deck.

The rain pounded on him, the wind seized him. He was washed and pummeled about on deck, but his head cleared somewhat.

Slowly he moved toward the bridge. The lightning kept coming in flash after flash, one streak of electric flame stacked on another in the sky. By the weird flashing light he could see the littered deck, the boat covers, the slatting falls, the empty davits and empty lifeboat cradles.

There was one man on the bridge, a very short, very wide man with an extremely homely face and a remarkable growth of stubbled red hair. He had been speaking into the talker. He stared at Doc Savage unbelievably.

"Doc!" he yelled. Delight made his voice go shrill. Into the talker, he said, "Ham, Renny, here he is, all okay. Come to the bridge!"

THE homely man then stared more closely at Doc Savage and blurted, “Great grief, *are* you okay?”

Doc took hold of a stanchion and lowered himself to the deck. “Just a minute, Monk,” he said.

Monk Mayfair, the homely man, jumped to his side. “What happened to you? Good God, your head!”

“The head can't possibly look half as bad as it feels,” Doc said grimly.

“Something fall on you?” Monk demanded.

“Yes, in a manner of speaking,” Doc said. “Did I hear you say something to Ham and Renny over the interphone? Are they aboard?”

Monk said, “They're hunting for you.”

Ham was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, who had a world-wide reputation as a lawyer, and as a well-dressed man. He had sailed on the *Farland*, however, as Henri Gatley, cook's helper, disguised as a slightly comic opera Frenchman, accent and all.

Renny was Colonel John Renwick, as well known as an engineer as Ham was as a lawyer. He was on the *Farland* as George Washington Wilson Smith, a colored gentleman, oiler in the engine room.

Both Ham and Renny were, like Monk Mayfair, members of a group of five specialists who had worked with Doc Savage for years.

Doc Savage had been using his eyes and ears. Some of the ringing had cleared out of his ears. He asked, “Where is everyone?”

“The crew of the ship, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“In the lifeboats.”

“They abandoned the ship after all?” Doc asked.

“That's right. As far as I know, we're the only three aboard the vessel.”

“How did you happen to stay aboard?”

“We checked the lifeboats and couldn't find you,” Monk explained. “So we knew you had to be aboard. We figured you might have been hurt in one of the explosions, so we stayed to hunt you.” Monk chuckled grimly. “There was a little argument about my staying aboard. Ham and Renny just didn't get in their lifeboat. But that bullnecked bo'sun tried to throw me on a liferaft, so I hung one on his kisser, something I'd been itching to do. The guy had been riding me.”

Monk had also sailed on the *Farland* as an able-bodied seaman with an assumed name.

“Doc, what happened to you?” Monk continued. “Why didn't you make it into the lifeboats?”

Doc started to answer, then clamped back the words. The talker had gone dead. The instrument speaker had been making a low noise—the sound of flames somewhere, and the humming of the instrument itself—but this had stopped.

“The talker,” Doc said. “Dead.”

Monk went to the instrument. He fooled with the volume knob, punched the selector buttons.

“Dead as a doorknob,” he admitted. “Oh, well, the fire must have got to the wiring.”

“Where,” asked Doc, “were Ham and Renny hunting?”

“The forward hold. Where the torpedo hit.”

“That isn't far from here.”

“Not very.”

“They should be here by now, shouldn't they?” Doc asked.

“I should think so,” Monk said.

THEY waited in the darkness. This part of the bridge was glassed-in, and they could see, when the lightning blazed, the rainwater sheeting across the glass. The sky fire was reflected from the shining brass of the wheel, the telegraph, the binnacle, the multitude of gadgets to be found on the bridge of a modern ship.

Doc asked, “How long since the ship was abandoned?”

“About an hour.”

“Where are the boats?”

“Standing by out there somewhere, I guess,” Monk muttered. “They won't show any lights, because they figure that submarine might machine-gun the boats.”

Doc listened to the wind. He made an effort, and got to his feet, and stood with his face pressed to the bridge glass. By the lightning glare, he saw how high the sea was running.

“The boats,” he said, “will have trouble sticking together.”

“That's what I been thinking,” Monk confessed. “It won't be any picnic in the boats, that's sure. But it's better than staying on board and getting blown higher than a kite when the fire gets to that ammunition.”

Nervousness and impatience had come grinding into Monk's small and rather squeaky voice. He paced to the talker and fooled with it again, gave that up, and stood listening at the companionway.

“Ham!” he yelled. “Renny! Get a move on!”

His voice sounded puny in the storm. There was no answer.

Monk growled, “I wish they'd show up. There are at least two fires aboard, and the boat's down by the head. She's liable to go any minute.”

He threw open a glass panel toward the bow. Smoke swirled in, stinking smoke that bit their eyes like acid and put a stinging in their nostrils and sinuses. Monk slammed the glass shut with panicky haste.

“What's keeping Ham and Renny, blast it!” he gasped.

Doc said, “Monk?”

“Huh?”

“Did you notice anything peculiar during the torpedoing?”

Monk stopped pacing. He was as silent as death for a minute. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. Did you notice anything that struck you as strange?”

Monk was silent again.

“No,” he said finally.

THE wind and rain hit with fresh force. The wind was colder now. The lightning was not as plentiful, but the streaks were longer, the noise louder, and in the hot white blasting flashes they could see the loose lifeboat falls squirming like snakes in the wind, and a lifeboat cover sailed up over the superstructure like a great gray flapping bat, a grisly creature of the elements.

The yellow smoke crawled and swelled and twisted in the fitful lightning brightness. There was no flame, only smoke, squirming and unnatural. It enveloped the bridge at frequent intervals, jumping up to surround the bridge as if it was a monstrous hungry thing.

Doc said, “We had better go hunt Ham and Renny.”

Monk seized the suggestion eagerly. “I think so, too. I’ll leave a note. I’ll leave it here on the chart table where they’ll be sure to see it.”

He scribbled a note, *Gone to forward hold to hunt you*, on a sheet of paper, then stuck the paper to the chart table by stabbing a pair of compass dividers into it.

“Wait,” Doc said.

He waited for a lightning flash long enough to read what Monk had written. Then he tore it up, picked it into very small pieces with his fingers.

Then he wrote another note. He wrote, *Hunting you. Wait here*. He pinned that one down with the dividers.

Monk had read over his shoulder. “But it’d save time if they knew we’d gone to the forward hold,” Monk said.

“You knew they were in the forward hold, so they should be able to guess where we have gone.”

“Oh,” Monk said. He was puzzled. “That the only reason you changed it?”

“Could be,” Doc said.

THEY went down the companionway. Doc had to cling to the handrail, more because of a maddening dizziness that kept seizing him than because of weakness. But he was weak, too, and it was senseless, because his physical condition was excellent. He was in good shape. In as good shape as he had ever been in his life. It was just that his nerves were still too shocked to make his muscles obey.

Monk moved ahead, then came back, said, "You're feeling pretty rocky, aren't you?"

Doc said, "I'll make it."

And wondered if he would.

He got the pieces of Monk's note out of his pocket and strung them along the passage as he progressed.

They went down another companionway, through another passage. This originally had led to the third-class cabins in the lower decks and the bow. There was smoke, but not as much as there reasonably should be. They came to a part of the ship where cabin bulkheads had been knocked out to make cargo space.

Monk, it developed, had a flashlight. He said, "I guess it's safe to use the light down here. It couldn't be seen from outside."

He thumbed the beam on, waved it over neatly packed and lashed cargo cases. Crates and boxes packed to the ceiling, timbered into place.

They listened, but to no human sounds. There was just the slow creaking of cargo to the roll of the stricken ship. The disconsolate moan of wood against wood, or the screech of steel against steel.

Monk made his voice loud. For a small-voiced man, he could yell like a foghorn.

"Ham!" he bellowed. "Where are you? Renny! Answer me!"

The ship rolled sluggishly, reeling so they had to stand with feet more widely braced than was necessary. The silence was not silence, but gasping agony through which tendrils of smoke slowly crawled.

Renny spoke, almost at their elbows, it seemed.

"About time you got here," Renny said. "Holy cow!"

Monk was so startled he dropped the flashlight. Dropped it, grabbed, juggled it in the air, recovered it before it hit the flooring.

"Renny, where the dickens are you?" he demanded.

"Locked in this cabin right by you," Renny's voice said.

"You say *locked* in the cabin?"

"Yes."

"How come?"

"Holy cow, there's nothing uncanny about it!" Renny rumbled impatiently. "I came in here hunting Doc, and a draft must have blown the door shut. It locked."

Monk stabbed around with the flash and found the door. He went over and examined the lock. His grunt was disgusted.

"We need a key to get this open," he said. "Heck, I'll bust it in."

He threw his weight against the door. It rebuffed him. He drew back, scowling, rubbing his shoulder that the door had bruised.

Renny said, "If you could bust it down with your shoulder, don't you think I'd have been out of here?" He was trying to keep impatience out of his voice.

"I'll look for a fire ax," Monk said.

"Ham has one," Renny boomed from inside.

"Where is Ham?"

"Forward in the hold somewhere. He hasn't come back past here yet."

"We'll go find Ham and his ax," Monk said.

MONK went ahead, prodding with his flashlight. Doc Savage followed, thinking he might spot an ax or an iron bar which they could use to release Renny. He studied the packing cases for identification marks, thinking one might contain something in the way of a tool, and he saw Monk doing the same thing.

The smoke got thicker. It was smoke that stuck together in gossamery tufts and long yarns like surgical cotton being unrolled out of a bat. Except that no surgical cotton would be yellow, and stink the way this stank. The very odor and bite of the fuming smoke was redolent of danger, of explosive, of crashing death that would come, when it came, in a roaring succession of flashes. Sweat was standing on Doc's face and hands, and he saw that Monk was perspiring also.

Talk about walking in the shadow of death!

Then Monk screeched. He sprang forward with his cry.

"Ham!" he yelled shrilly. "Ham! Are you hurt?"

Ham Brooks lay pinned under a packing case. Ham Brooks, lean and trim-waisted, had the color of death on his face, but his fingers were moving a little, making half-opening and half-closing gestures. His cheek was against the flooring, his eyes closed, his tongue protruding a little from his lips. The packing case pinned his body from the waist down. It was about the size of a piano box.

"Ham!" Monk shrieked.

He leaped at the big box, drove his strength against it, and found his power wouldn't budge it. "Ham!" he moaned, and tried again.

Doc Savage lurched down beside him, set his own huge muscles to straining. The effort made something happen to Doc. Things didn't exactly go snap. But sickness, blackness, nausea came to him. He became helpless. Too helpless to stand, and he slumped down on his knees.

"We can't—do it—between us," he said, and was ashamed of the weak sickness in his voice.

Monk's breath was whistling. Monk thought a great deal of Ham Brooks, more than he thought of himself, probably. This would have surprised anyone who did not know them well, because under normal conditions Monk and Ham made it a careful practice never to say a civil word to each other if they could think of something that was an insult or a rib.

Casting his flash beam about, Monk found the fire ax. He seized the tool.

"I'll get Renny out," he said. "Renny can help Ham loose."

Monk ran back along the narrow aisle between the packed cargo, ran toward Renny's cabin prison.

Doc Savage followed Monk. It was still in his mind to find something in one of the cargo boxes that would serve as a tool. That was a fool's idea. Senseless. Monk already had the ax. They had their tool. But Doc was mentally dazed enough that for the moment he didn't realize they had the ax.

He heard the biting crash of the ax as Monk chopped down the cabin door. He heard Monk's howl, starkly unbelieving.

"Renny isn't in here!" Monk shouted. "Doc, Renny isn't in the cabin where he was. He's gone! He's disappeared!"

### Chapter III

DOC SAVAGE gripped his consciousness carefully, as firmly as if taking it in his two hands, so that it would not escape him. He felt as if he would faint, or worse, any minute. He lurched to the cabin door. Monk was dashing around in the cabin, prodding vainly with the flash beam in hopes it would disclose Renny after all.

Doc said, "Maybe this is a different cabin?"

"No, no, it's the same cabin." But Monk dashed out and looked to make sure. "Yes, it's the same cabin." Then he lifted his voice. "Renny! Renny, where are you?"

There was no response, nothing but the moan and grunt and creak of the tormented cargo as the ship slowly heeled with the hungry pull of the sea.

Monk, exasperated and confused, yelled, "Renny is six feet four and two hundred forty pounds and he can't get those fists in gallon buckets. How the blazes could a guy like that disappear?"

Doc Savage leaned against a bulkhead and cleared his head mostly by the force of will-power. Then he went to a knee, and examined the lock which Monk had chopped out of the door. What he found put a strange, unbelieving coldness in his body.

"Monk, look here," Doc said.

"Yes?"

"This is not a spring lock. You can only lock it or unlock it with a key."

Monk leaned down, breathless with disbelief, and said, "Well, what do you know!"

It was true about the lock. Most third-class steamship cabins do not even have key locks on them, just latches. But this lock had been probably put in with the conversion of the ship to war use; the purpose no doubt being to lock special cargo in this particular cabin.

Doc said, "Renny thought the door blew shut and locked itself."

"It couldn't do that!" Monk muttered.

"Not with this lock," Doc agreed.

MONK became less excited. His tenseness had tightened into the grim awareness of danger, of the mysterious. He moved slowly, using the flashlight beam, looking for details, but finding nothing that would elaborate the simple and incredible fact that Renny had disappeared.

Finally Monk said, "He might have found the key, let himself out, and absentmindedly locked the door again."

But he didn't say this as if he believed a word of it.

Doc Savage picked up the fire ax.

"We may be able to smash the case holding Ham down and take out enough of the contents to lighten it," he said.

Monk's jaw fell. "We should have thought of that before!"

They went back into the cargo hold. The yellowish smoke was no thicker than before, but it seemed thicker, more depressing. Monk thought of the fire, the explosives, and began to run. He disappeared into the smoke and darkness.

Doc Savage followed more slowly. It was hard for him to move. Each step took calculated effort. It was as if he was learning to walk again.

When he reached Monk, he was just standing there in the narrow cargo aisle. The flashlight was frozen in its stillness, the beam resting on the case.

Monk didn't say a word.

Ham was gone! Ham wasn't pinned under the case! The case was still there, but lying on the floor now, and with no one under it.

Monk said thickly, "He isn't here."

Doc really needed the statement. He wasn't sure but what he was seeing—or not seeing—things.

He gripped his mind deliberately and made it think. Ham gone. They had left him here. Under a packing case they couldn't move. Now he was gone. Ham couldn't have crawled out from under the case. Monk, with Doc's feeble help, hadn't been able to budge the box. Monk was very strong, and he had been frantic at the moment. That meant, then, the strength of at least two strong men, but probably more, had been needed.

His thinking effort got him nothing sensible, though.

"Monk," he said. "Monk, have you heard a dog howl?"

The question struck Monk, chilled him, and he jumped.

"I thought I did," he said. "But that was earlier, before the torpedo hit, and once shortly afterward."

THEY could hear the crackle of flames, the sighing sound of the draft that fed the fire. It was still forward of the point where they stood, under the main forward cargo hatch.

Doc said, "We had better see how bad the fire is, see what we can do."

Monk grunted. "All right. It'll be a relief to tackle something that isn't mysterious."

They worked forward, came to a bulkhead of steel with the door partially ajar. The smoke was coming through this. Beyond they saw flames for the first time. The flames looked lazy in the darkness.

Doc, feeling along the bulkhead where he knew a chemical fire extinguisher should be racked, found one.

"Here," he said. "An extinguisher."

Monk took the cannister, upended it, worked the pump and advanced on the fire. Doc held the flashlight. The smothering chemical leaped in a thin stream, hissed, foamed, and the flames retreated. And shortly there was no fire left. Only the smoke, and that began clearing.

Monk stood very still in the darkness.

"I can hardly believe," he said suddenly, "that there was no more fire than that."

Doc moved the flashlight, waiting. As the smoke cleared, they could tell more about the fire scene.

There had been more fire, quite a leaping quantity of it, because the steel deck beams were blackened, the paint blistered.

But all the cargo had been moved away from the spot where the fire had burned. This fact held them, startled them. It meant something.

Monk moved into the embers, playing his extinguisher a little more, kicking around in the litter. He examined what he found.

"Oil-soaked waste," he said. "Some chemicals dumped on it, mostly sulphur." He rubbed his jaw. "That's why such a dinky little fire made so much smoke."

"A set fire," Doc said.

"Apparently."

Doc said, "Get down in the hold where the explosion was. Find out how much water is coming in."

"Will you be all right?"

Doc said he would. "I don't feel quite up to making an inspection of the lower hold, though."

"You'll be right here?"

"On the bridge."

Monk did not like the idea of being separated. But he went off, following his flashlight beam, to see how near they were to sinking.

Doc Savage went to the bridge. It took him quite a while, and he had to rest frequently. By the time he reached the bridge, he decided his weakness would last some time. It made him angry, but it was something that couldn't be helped.

He leaned against the bridge windows watching the storm. The rain still bucketed down. There wasn't as much lightning nor as much wind. But the seas rolled high. Now and then one would slop against the *Farland's* hull and its foaming crest would jump up onto the ship's deck, with a wagonload or two of

salty water.

Doc went over to inspect the talker wires. The interphone had been installed at a late date, so the wiring wasn't buried in conduit. It was easy to trace. He followed it down to the floor, then went below—he was now in the third-class lounge, formerly—to pick up the wires again. He found them.

He also found where they had been cut neatly with a single chop from an ax.

DOC merely leaned against the bulkhead and looked at the severed wires, feeling too rocky physically to do anything about the matter. He was still there when he heard footsteps.

There was enough sense of caution in him to make him listen carefully to make sure the footfalls belonged to Monk. Monk had a stomp-stomp-stomp way of walking when he was bothered, as if he was a barrel of concrete with a couple of posts for legs. It was distinctive.

Doc went to the bridge and joined Monk, who was steaming with some information.

“The ship isn't going to sink,” Monk said. “Not unless she gets hit a lot worse than she has been.”

“The water is not rising in the hold?” Doc asked.

“It's not only not rising, but there isn't hardly any in the section aft of about the one-quarter point. In other words, the lower bow compartment is flooded. That's where the hole was blown in the hull.”

“You looked at the engine room?”

“Yes. Things are in fair shape down there. Steam is still coming out of a pipe that is broke.”

Monk fell silent. He scratched his head, blew out through his lips. He had something else on his mind. He got it out.

“Funny thing about that steam pipe,” he said.

“Yes?”

“If I was to make a statement about what happened to that pipe,” Monk said, “I would say there are indications that somebody put a stick of dynamite in a nest of the pipes and set it off. I thought maybe I could be wrong, but I looked close.”

Doc said, “The report came to the bridge during the excitement that the torpedo explosion probably had wrenched the pipe apart.”

“It wasn't a pipe that would come apart that way.”

“No?”

“And if that was a torpedo explosion,” Monk said, “I'll have one for breakfast.”

Having said that, Monk quickly turned the flashlight on Doc Savage's face. He wanted to see how his statement hit Doc.

“How crazy do I sound?” Monk asked.

“Not too crazy.”

Monk's sigh was explosive. "I began to think I was. I saw it looked phony, but I couldn't believe it."

"Any sign of Renny or Ham?"

"No. What could have happened to them?" Then Monk reached out and gripped Doc's arm. "Hey, you never did tell me how you got conked on the head. Something tricky about that, wasn't there?"

Doc Savage told him how he had got the head. He didn't use many words, but he did not leave out anything that mattered. From the howling dog to the inexplicable blow out of the darkness to the rain-in-the-face awakening, he put it all in.

"Blazes!" Monk gasped. "As Renny would say, Holy cow!"

DOC SAVAGE stood beside the bridge windows again, watching the wet, roistering night, listening. His eyes followed the long, water-coated deck, watching the rain skim along the planking in little whirling dervishes. He remembered how the wind had been making the ropes twist like snakes. . . .

He made the strangest sound, in his surprise. A gasp, which was more of a grunt of pain.

Monk whirled, startled because he was on edge. "What's wrong, Doc?"

The bronze man pointed. "Notice anything different about the deck?"

Monk growled, "Don't tell me there is more ghost stuff around here!" and stood staring. He said, after the lightning had crawled brightly in the sky a few times, "No, I don't see anything wrong with—wait! Hey! The lifeboat falls! They're up!"

The lines dangling from the davits, the lines by which the lifeboats had been lowered, had been hanging over the side earlier in the night. Now they had been drawn aboard. Hauled up. The running block was drawn up close to the fixed block on each davit, and each davit line was looped on deck and lashed there, to a cleat, so it wouldn't be working free and trailing overboard.

Doc said, "Monk, take the other side of the ship. Look for lines trailing over the side. I will look on this side."

Monk stood very still a moment, puzzled. "Sure," he said. "Oh! Oh, I see what you mean!" He understood, and he galloped off.

Doc Savage worked down the deck. He didn't have a flashlight but the lightning was still frequent enough that it was not much of a loss. There were no lines trailing over the side of the ship.

He went back to the bridge and Monk joined him shortly afterward.

"I wish I had a gun," Monk said grimly.

"What did you find?"

"Falls have all been pulled up on the starboard side, too."

Doc said, "So the men who took to the boats could not get back aboard, if they returned."

"That would be my idea why it was done," Monk admitted. "Say, this ghost aboard kind of wants to be exclusive, don't he?" He didn't sound as if he thought it was a joke.

## Chapter IV

MONK MAYFAIR found a deck chair and brought it to the bridge for Doc, then he made a visit to the hospital stores and came back with a bunch of stuff which he thought might be of help.

“Rest and sleep would do more good than anything, probably,” Doc said. “But it will wear off gradually, anyway.”

“You don't think there is a fracture?”

“Not likely, but of course there is no way of being sure,” Doc said. He sank into the deck chair.

Monk said uncomfortably, “There should be some guns on board. The Skipper had some in his cabin, because I got a look at them through the door one day. I'm going to see about that.”

“Good idea,” Doc agreed.

“Let out a peep if anything comes along.”

“I will.”

Monk left the bridge. He walked cautiously, and kept his back to a bulkhead whenever he could, and walked sidewise down passages, trying to look both directions. He was scared. He was a great deal more worried than he had let Doc Savage think. Probably he wasn't fooling Doc, he thought. But anyway, Monk thought, I'm packing a first-class jag of the jitters.

He didn't know what was happening on board. But it wasn't anything righteous, obviously. It was spooky. It was fantastic. But there wasn't anything intangible or doubtful about it. The thing was real. As real as knowing there was a black widow spider somewhere in your clothing, or listening to a bomb-whistle when you couldn't take to a foxhole.

Monk frowned, thinking.

This thing, he now believed, was why they were on the ship.

Damned if he was going to ask Doc Savage if it was, though. Monk didn't like going at something without half-knowing what he was doing. That was one of the big irritations in wartime. Hush-hush here and hush-hush there. Pretty soon even what you ate for breakfast was a military secret.

The hell of it was, Monk reflected, you couldn't tell when secrecy was really vital and when it was just the foaming of some half-baked bureaucrat who was holding the first job he'd ever had in his life at more than fourteen dollars a week. Take what you had for breakfast, for instance. Maybe they were feeding you a special ration intended to fix you up to cope with heat in a desert. That meant you were going to be sent off to a desert front, and soon. So what you had for breakfast would tell the wrong person where you were going and about when.

Anyway, Monk didn't know why he was on the *Farland*. He knew Renny and Ham didn't know, either. They had talked it over among themselves, and discovered they were all in the same fog.

Doc might know. He probably did. If he did, he hadn't said anything. You couldn't tell about Doc, Monk had long ago realized. Except that if Doc knew why they were on the *Farland*, and was keeping the information to himself, there was a reason for his silence.

Doc Savage was a remarkable man, actually. He always had a reason for what he did. Sometimes you didn't see the reason until the shooting was about over, then it would pop up, as big as a mountain and twice as important.

The fact that Doc was in bad shape from the blow on the head worried Monk. It affected Monk's own safety, and Monk was human enough to be bothered about that, too. Doc, in his present dazed condition, was about as effective as a sleepwalker, compared to his usual efficiency.

Monk had gotten in too many tight spots where only Doc's ability had gotten him out, not to be worried. He *was* worried.

THEY were on the *Farland* because of Army or Navy business. Something hush-hush, under the hat.

Monk knew it was Army or Navy business because of the elation with which Doc Savage had set off on the jaunt. Doc had been trying, ever since the war began, to get into uniform and into the shooting war. He'd had no luck, the War and Navy departments contending that he was of more value doing the same thing he had always done.

Being turned down for the war effort—the shooting part of it—had been agony for Doc, Monk knew. It was painful for Monk, and he'd howled his head off. So had Renny, Ham and the others of the group of five assistants.

You can best help the war effort by continuing at your usual profession, said the War and Navy departments. Or words to that effect.

Usual profession! Monk grinned. It was still strange to hear anybody call it a profession. Actually, it was the pursuit of adventure. The benevolent way of speaking of it was to say that Doc and his group righted wrongs and punished evildoers in the far corners of the earth when the wrongdoers were outside the reach of the law. But putting it that way sounded a little too Robin Hood. Mushy. Sappy.

It wasn't a sap thing the way Doc ran it. It was, in fact, an enormous business. Doc liked it, liked the yank and prick of adventure, the breathless suspense of danger. Maybe *like* wasn't the word. Probably no one liked such things. It seemed that you would be slightly insane if you did like them. Probably fascinate was the word. The love of excitement was like a dope habit that got in your veins or nerves or mind or wherever it got, and you couldn't get rid of it. Monk, when he occasionally had a sober-minded moment, was a little ashamed of the enthusiasm and delight with which Doc and himself and the others pounced on each new promise of fantastic adventure. God knows, they would go to any lengths to dig up something that promised plenty of trouble, promised the prospect of getting their heads blown off, their throats cut, their hair turned gray from terror. They went after it like kids after candy. They were all goons, Monk sometimes thought.

It was a crazy business they were in.

Monk loved it.

They all loved it.

Anyway, they were on the *Farland* because Doc Savage had told them they were to sail on the ship under assumed names. That was all Monk knew about it.

But he could tell from the gleam in Doc's flake gold eyes when he told them that it was finally something directly in the service of the Army or the Navy. And that there was a promise of high adventure in it,

suspense and danger to come.

The suspense and danger were here. Monk grinned. Then immediately thought: What the hell is there to grin at?

IN the Captain's private cabin, Monk found enough weapons to arm himself like a pirate. He felt a little like a pirate when he had decked himself out, too. The guns were part of the Captain's collection of old weapons. They were muzzle-loaders. There was powder and shot and caps for the cap-and-ball guns, and flints for the flintlocks. There were two huge cutlasses, and Monk added those to his belt. He could barely stagger under the load of armament. He felt like Captain Kidd.

When he went back to the bridge, Doc Savage wasn't there.

For a moment, there was an invisible crawling on Monk's nape.

"Doc!" he yelled.

Then he grabbed eagerly at an idea, whirled and, holding his cutlasses out so they wouldn't get between his legs and trip him, dashed down to the ex-third class lounge.

Doc was there, patching the talker wires.

"Whew! You gave me a start!" Monk said.

Doc Savage examined him. "What are you impersonating?"

Monk grinned and hitched his cutlasses. "There's something about having a sword in your hands that makes you want to chop somebody."

"Be careful you don't chop at a machine gun."

"Something as tangible as a machine gun would be a relief. You seen or heard anything of Ham or Renny?"

"No."

The bronze man went ahead splicing the talker wires. There was worry, as well as agony, on his face, Monk decided. He could understand the feeling. He had the same thing himself.

"Now," Doc said finally, "we will go back to the bridge and see if the talker will work. If it does, it will give us a way of eavesdropping on various parts of the ship."

"Your head any better?"

"Some."

"Doc," Monk said. "Why are we aboard?"

"Because I got knocked out and you stayed behind to—"

"Before that. Who asked us to get on this ship, the Army or the Navy?"

"The Navy."

Monk nodded, said, "That's question number one. Number two: Why?"

Doc Savage was silent. He seemed perplexed.

Monk grumbled, "Oh, all right, if you don't want to tell me, just act as if you didn't hear the question."

"It is not that, Monk."

"No?"

"I do not know myself."

Monk's small eyes protruded a little. "Blazes! You don't know either! Here I been figuring you knew!"

Doc started to shake his head, and the pain all but upset him. He clenched his teeth for a moment until the commotion subsided. "No, I think something must have gone wrong," he said. "We were to be approached after we got aboard and given details."

"Approached? Who by?"

"A representative of the Navy department. A secret operative, I suppose. Anyway, the code was to be *mice blind three*, or just the reverse, I was to use on Captain Davis in case I wanted him to open sealed orders which he was supposed to be carrying."

"Yeah, you said you tried the code on Captain Davis, and he seemed to have forgotten all about it in the excitement. You suppose he forgot about it on purpose—or never knew about it?"

"That is a difficult point. I think he was a nervous wreck, and forgot. I think that Captain Davis, like a lot of skippers these days, had undergone too much. He should have taken a rest before this cruise."

Monk nodded.

"Anyhow," he said, "this Navy representative never spoke to you?"

"No."

"The Navy give you any hint of what it was about?"

Doc said with some sourness, "They overdid the secrecy, in my opinion. Of course, we are always thinking that in war. Anyway, I was somewhat pompously told that a matter had developed which was important enough that the Navy thought it advisable to ask our aid. That was about all."

Monk wasn't exactly displeased.

"Important enough to ask our aid, huh," he said. "Well, that makes it important. We had schemes to win the war single-handed, but they didn't think *that* was important enough to turn us loose. This must be hot."

Doc said dryly, "Show me an American soldier who doesn't in his heart think he is going to win the war single-handed. That's what makes Americans."

They started back to the bridge to see whether the talker would work.

THE sun was coming up when they reached the bridge. They switched on the talker and, while it was

warming up, stood looking out over the sea.

The ocean was an unpleasant, troubled gun-metal blue, streaked with whitecaps that were showing now and then like threatening fangs. There were still clouds, but they were pale and empty, but somehow hard and aimless. The wind was still a noticeable force.

“There are some of the boats,” Doc Savage said abruptly, pointing. “They have drifted several miles.”

Monk watched carefully, then began distinguishing the *Farland's* lifeboats. It was surprising how hard it was to see a lifeboat on the troubled sea.

“I wish I had a pair of binoculars,” Monk said. “I can't tell where they are heading.”

“They are rowing back toward the ship,” Doc told him.

Monk muttered, “You've got better eyes than I have.”

The talker had warmed up. It made the tiny spewing sound which showed that it was alive, so they knew that splicing the chopped wires in the lounge had restored service on the gadget.

A tapping sound began coming from the talker.

The noise was dull, somewhat erratic, and Monk gave it no great attention.

Finally Monk did say, “That sounds like steam knocking in a pipe somewhere. There must be some steam pressure still up in the boilers. In fact, I imagine the ship would run if we could get the engines turned on.”

Then he discovered that Doc Savage was showing unusual interest in the thumping sounds.

“Code,” Doc said.

Monk started. He listened. “It's not dots and dashes—”

“Notice there is a difference between the sounds, some hollow, and others sharp. Try listening to the hollow ones as dots and the others as dashes.”

Monk did so. He began spelling, “R-E-E M-I-C-E.” Then he yelled, “Hey, it's the password! *Mice blind three!* Wasn't that the Naval operative's code?”

“Yes. Listen.”

They kept their ears glued to the tapping for several minutes. The sender kept repeating the identifying phrase, nothing else.

Doc said, “Whoever is doing the sending is within hearing distance of one of the talker speakers.”

“Sure. If we say something over the talker, we can be heard.”

“On the other hand,” Doc added, “if we use the talker, we will reveal that it is back in operation.”

“I think it's worth the risk.”

“So do I,” Doc said.

The bronze man set his finger down on the “talk” lever of the gadget.

He said, "All we need now is the location."

He let the "talk" lever back, and listened to the tapping continue. Now the tapping sent other letters. Monk shaped them with his lips as they came, and Doc found himself doing the same thing.

"Cabin A5," Monk blurted. "Boy, that'd be A deck, Cabin five. That's easy."

## Chapter V

MONK raced on ahead.

Doc Savage, following more slowly, but as fast as his condition would allow, finally came in sight of Cabin A5. He saw Monk standing in the corridor, and he knew immediately that something had jarred Monk.

The ship had drifted around until she was quartering into the swells, swinging a bit more into the trough. The movement was, considering the size of the boat, considerable. Enough that Doc, dizzy already, kept traveling an erratic course, glancing off first one bulkhead and then the other. He reached Monk.

Monk moved his hands foolishly. "In there. What do you think? Damned if I wasn't surprised!"

Doc Savage looked into the cabin, and understood why Monk was surprised.

He also understood why Monk was standing where he was, directly in front of the door, and not moving. It must be because Monk thought the girl might take a shot at him if he jumped.

"You might have warned me," Doc told Monk grimly.

"Come in here, both of you," said the girl. "Or are any more of you coming?"

"No more," Doc said.

"Then come in here."

Monk muttered, "Step into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."

"You're the humorist," the girl said, not sounding pleased. "I've heard of you." She moved the thing that presumably was a gun and said, "Get in here!" angrily.

Doc followed Monk inside.

"Close the door," the girl said.

She was a long blonde girl, and what of her showed above the bedsheet was interesting enough that what she was wearing under the sheet was becoming a monumental question in Monk's mind. She looked rather bedraggled. Give her a hairdo, a makeup case, an evening dress, and you'd have something you wouldn't mind marching into the Stork club.

The gun was interesting, too. If it was a gun. She was holding it behind the bedsheet, with the sheet making the right outlines for a gun. One darned sure thing, it wasn't just a finger she was pointing at them.

She looked at Doc.

"I never saw Doc Savage, but they showed me a picture. It wasn't you, except that you've got his size

and one of his eyes.”

Doc turned his head. The talker speaker was in the corridor, a few yards away. He said, “That talker might pick up every word we say and put it out on the bridge. I am going to disconnect this particular substation.”

She didn't look as if she liked that, but finally said, “Go ahead.”

Doc unhooked the station—it was nothing but a small PA speaker and a switch which you depressed with a finger.

The girl seemed relieved when he came back.

She asked, “What was the password?”

“You gave it,” Doc said.

“And what password were you to give Captain Davis?”

“No bananas today,” Doc said.

“That's the right answer—a lie,” she agreed. “Now one more: What officer in the Navy Department in Washington talked to you about your assignment?”

“Rear Admiral Splicer.”

She sighed. “That makes you just about okay.”

She smilingly showed them that it wasn't a gun in her hand under the sheets. It was a piece of wood moulding which she had broken off the side of the bunk.

Her wrists, however, were fastened to a chain with handcuffs, and the chain ran around the bunk and was padlocked.

“See if you can get these things off me,” she said. “And I'll talk in the meantime.”

Monk gaped, pointed at the handcuffs, chain and padlock. “What's the hardware mean?”

“I'll get around to that.”

SHE was well-dressed after all, to Monk's mixed disappointment and approval. She wore slacks and a kind of sweater affair which would give a censor an anxious moment.

“I'm Teresa Ruth Riggert,” she said. “And I like to be called Trigger, usually.” She indicated Monk. “You are Monk Mayfair, evidently. Where are the other two, Renny Renwick and Ham Brooks?”

“They disappeared aboard under rather unusual circumstances,” Doc explained.

“Before the torpedoing?”

“After.”

“Then I have an idea what happened to them.” She glanced at Doc. “What happened to your eyes? One is one color and the other another.”

“An optical contact glass cap, tinted to change the eye color,” Doc explained. “I dropped one when the torpedo hit, and couldn't find it.”

She nodded. “You fellows have got fine disguises. I knew what you were going to look like, in your disguise, Mr. Savage. But I didn't have a description of Monk, Ham and Renny. On the other hand, I had studied their pictures, the photographs on their identification cards with the Navy department, closely. I didn't recognize them aboard. Very good disguises.”

Doc Savage had found a bobby-pin in the feminine litter in the cabin dressing-table drawer. He bent it carefully preparatory to going to work on the handcuffs.

The girl said, “The ship really wasn't torpedoed.”

“We know that now.”

Monk jumped, for he was surprised. His mind had not yet quite accepted the off-trail idea that the ship had not been torpedoed, that it had been a staged fake.

Doc suggested, “Your story while I work on these handcuffs, eh?”

“Fair enough,” she said, nodding. “As I said, I'm a Navy operative. I'm not technically in the Navy, but I'm assigned to it, and have been for about four months. I was originally handed the job because I happened to know a man named Samuel Woll.”

Doc picked at the lock and listened.

“Samuel Woll,” she continued, “is a fellow whom I would call the product of a long line of failures, all the result of overdoing anything he attempted. Sam Woll is an ex-magician, an ex-Hollywood producer, an ex-racketeer of labor, if you take a charitable view of his activities. He has flopped every time because he overextended himself.

“I met him in Hollywood, where I was a private detective before the war. He never knew I was a private detective. He thought I was an actress of no importance. He sort of—well—he liked me. He gave me a play. That never got anywhere. But it was why I was picked for this assignment. Because I knew Woll, and he didn't know I was a professional sleuth.”

One of the handcuff bands went *snick!* and flew open.

MONK went to the cabin door. He was nervous. From the door, he kept watching the corridor, and listening for other sounds as well as listening to the girl's story.

“Samuel Woll,” said the girl, “had given a party for a Brazilian named Tramez. Several parties, in fact. The parties were given in Para, Brazil. Tramez was owner and captain of a schooner named the *Santa Gracia*, which was one of the boats that have disappeared.

“Then Woll gave a party for King Edward Wales Allen, a negro captain who skippered an inter-island trading steamer in the Caribbean, and Allen's ship was another that has vanished.”

The second handcuff link went *snick!*

“The Navy and the F.B.I. were investigating every possible connection,” she continued, getting off the bed weakly. “And that was why they put me on Woll. I had a few dates with him, watching for a slip of

the tongue. His tongue didn't slip, but one night he had Captain Davis, of the *Farland*, to a party. On the face of it, that doesn't sound like much of a clue. But I sensed something important about it. And then, almost immediately after the party, Woll disappeared. He went away."

She was having trouble standing. Doc helped her. It was plain that she had been a prisoner for some time, long enough to be cramped and weak.

She said, "So the Navy decided to put me on the *Farland*. They decided to enlist your help, too. The Navy was getting pretty discouraged. They couldn't quite conceive that anything would happen to the *Farland*, but I was sure something was planned. I was sure enough, as a matter of fact, that I asked for your help. As I said, the Navy was discouraged enough to want to call you in, too. And that is why you are here."

She began to walk carefully, grimly, to get circulation back in her limbs.

"I came aboard the *Farland* wearing a uniform. That accounted for my presence aboard. I casually mentioned overseas duty. Two days ago, I was seized. That was the day we missed our convoy. I have been held here since."

Doc said, "I have been wondering why the *Farland* missed the convoy."

"The ship went completely off course one night."

"How did that happen?"

"The compasses were expertly jimmied," she said. "And the radio-compass, or direction finder, was put out of whack for that night. It was a clever job."

"Captain Davis knew about it?"

"Yes."

"Why," Doc asked, "did you not let me know?"

She indicated the handcuffs. "They caught me before I could do that. I intended to."

Doc Savage frowned at her. "What about these ships disappearing?"

She spread her hands.

"It sounds fantastic, in this day and age, doesn't it?" she said. "But that's just it. Disappearing. There have been four or five we definitely know about."

"In wartime," Doc reminded, "ships get torpedoed and sunk at sea without a trace."

"Not recently. With the exception of submarines, for the past six months the whereabouts and the fate of every American ship is known—except these four. We'll call it four, because the fifth is in doubt."

"Where do these ships vanish?"

"Right in this part of the Atlantic, every one of them."

THERE were other questions in Doc's mind, a flood of them. But he pointed at the door, said, "It would

probably be better if we got out of here.”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “They might come to see how I am getting along.”

Doc, hit by a sudden thought, asked, “Didn’t you try yelling? You weren’t gagged?”

“Oh, yes I was.” She pointed at an affair of cloth and sponges and tape. “I got it out of my mouth about an hour ago. Then I was afraid to yell. I was afraid they would simply come in here and cut my throat if I did.”

Monk said, “Nice guys, eh?”

“Very nice, that way.”

They went outside. It was daylight now. No more rain, but the sunlight through the thin clouds was anemic, and the decks, undrying, were almost as wet as if it was still raining.

“What do they look like?” asked Monk.

“The guys, you mean? Oh, they’re not so tough looking when you first see them. It’s the way they act that makes your stomach feel empty.”

Doc worked around to the starboard rail. He wanted to see what the lifeboats were doing.

“Can you describe the men?” he asked.

“Call me Trigger,” she demanded. “You keep saying ‘you.’ Or call me Teresa, or even Ruth, although I hate prosaic names.”

“All right, Trigger. What do these mystery-men aboard look like?”

“There are two very tall thin ones called Long and Short, a medium-sized one with a gold tooth, and a shorter and fatter one who is always grinning. I think the one with the grin is really the snake of the lot.”

“Just the four?”

“That’s all, I think.”

“How did they get aboard?”

“The same way you fellows did. Shipping as member of the crew.”

“And,” Doc said, “you think they seized my two friends, Ham and Renny?”

“Obviously.”

Doc hesitated over the next question. It was troublesome. He was afraid of the answer.

But he said, “What will be done to Ham and Renny, Trigger?”

Trigger’s answer was slow coming. She evidently tried to think of something favorable, and couldn’t.

“I wish I could say they would be all right,” she said.

Doc nodded, then grimaced impatiently as the movement of his head caused a dizziness that all but upset him. He was very angry at himself for his weakness.

Monk also had unpleasant thoughts. He was looking fierce—and ridiculous, too, because of the bristling array of weapons dangling from his person—as they moved warily along the deck.

“Four of them, eh,” Monk muttered. “That explains why they've been keeping out of sight, like ghosts. They're afraid of tackling us.”

THE lifeboats had approached much closer, fighting the teeth of the wind. The nearest was about a mile and a half distant, the others farther back, considerably scattered.

Monk, seized suddenly by optimism, said, “They'll get aboard soon, and everything will be fine.”

The girl, Trigger, watched the boats. “That fat man, the fat one of the four aboard, is called Jolly Roger by the others. I forgot to tell you that.”

“Jolly Roger?”

“Do you suppose it would mean anything, have any significance?”

“A Jolly Roger is a pirate flag, and the name frequently applied to pirates themselves in the old days when there were pirates. But there have been no pirates of any consequence in nearly a hundred years, except on the China coast twenty years or so ago.”

“Well, they call him Jolly Roger. I was just wondering.”

Monk, pointing at the *Farland* lifeboats, said again, “What are we in a stew about? The crew will be back aboard in half an hour or so, then we can hunt out these four rascals, and continue on to Europe.”

Trigger shook her head. “I hope you're right.”

“What makes you so pessimistic?”

She lifted her face, there was fright on it. “You haven't been as close in contact with those men as I have. This thing isn't as simple as you just mentioned. It can't be. There is something much greater behind it, I am sure.”

“Oh, they slipped up when we stayed aboard,” Monk said, dismissing her worry. “That was the monkey-wrench in their scheme. If they had been alone aboard, they could have kept the crew from getting aboard, and maybe sailed the steamer off a few miles and looted it, or something.”

Trigger became a little angry at Monk's optimistic dismissal.

“You want to know something?” she demanded.

“Eh?”

“Those four men, Jolly Roger and Long and Short and the gold-toothed one, weren't a bit worried because you were aboard.”

Monk blinked at her, his ego punctured. “No kidding?”

Trigger said, “You scared them about as much as a seagull. That means they're self-confident.”

“They know who we are?”

“I doubt it.”

“That,” Monk said, “might account for their not being scared.”

Trigger studied him for a moment, then gave an opinion. “A shrinking violet.”

Monk looked uncomfortable.

## Chapter VI

THE submarine appeared at seven bells, or half past seven o'clock by landlubber time. Monk saw it first, and his guns and swords rattled like a junkman's wagon as he dashed to the rail to stare.

“Enemy submarine!” he howled, on the theory that any submarine was an enemy craft.

The sub had surfaced about a mile east, in the blinding eye of the morning sun. A wave had hit her, burst, shot up a conspicuous cloud of spray. Otherwise they might not have seen the U-boat for some time.

Trigger groaned. “That is what these four men have been waiting for! I told you they weren't scared!”

Doc Savage cupped his hands over his eyes and tried to get the silhouette of the sub. She was hidden in a trough, and when she rode up on a swell, there was another wave breaking between, so that he did not distinguish her at once.

He had a distinctly tight, cold feeling as he waited. The lifeboats were still too far to hope to reach the *Farland*, if the submarine tried to prevent them doing that.

But why should a submarine appear now? Not to torpedo or shell the *Farland* under the sea. That wouldn't make sense. The earlier torpedoing had been faked, and there had to be a reason for that. Probably there was a good and thoroughly sinister one.

American! The submarine was a Yank!

It came up on the crest of a great swell, standing clear against the blaze of the morning sun. And she was so definitely American you could almost see the U.S. Navy stamped on her gear.

“Get to the three-inch gun at the stern, Monk,” Doc said. “Fix it so it can't be fired.”

Monk hadn't identified the sub. “What—”

“American U-Boat,” Doc explained. “We want to get the guns out of kelter, so the sub can't be fired on. You take the stern one. I'll get the bow gun—”

“What about the machine-guns in the tubs?” Trigger asked.

“They can't harm the sub much with machine guns—” He broke off, yelled—and Monk yelled it simultaneously, “*Get down!*”

A man had risen up in one of the steel gun tubs. He checked one of the Brownings around toward them, toward the bridge.

Trigger stared foolishly. She didn't seem to realize what was happening. Monk came against her knees, upset her, grabbed her almost while she was still falling and rolled with her behind the armor-plate shield which was there to protect the helmsman and a navigating officer or two. Doc got under shelter behind

them.

Trigger protested, "Damn you, did you have to be so rough—"

The Browning made its iron gobbling noise. They hadn't realized that it had been so quiet on the ship, until the machine-gun let loose its noise, and bullets began to knock glass out of the bridge windows, chew splinters off the woodwork. They squealed like ghastly mice.

Monk happened to have a shoulder jammed against the shield, and it was not solidly fastened. As the gun poured bullets against the shield—it was one of the light Brownings, twelve hundred rounds a minute—Monk was shaken like a rat in the jaws of an incredible bulldog.

When the gun stopped, Monk looked around, then took hold of his teeth to see if they were all loose. He wasn't trying to be funny.

"Down the companionway," Doc said. "And be careful."

Hands tight to her cheeks, Trigger said, "They tried to murder us in cold blood!"

Which led Doc to eye her anxiously, questioning the state of her courage.

She understood his thought. "I'll try not to fold up on you."

He nodded. "Wait. Let me go first down the companion."

JUST inside the bridge, there was a locker for oilskins, handy in case any of the officers had to dash out into the rain to see about a deck job. Doc opened this, and found two garments inside, a long slicker affair and a sou'wester hat.

He buttoned the sou'wester strap through the top button of the raincoat, and left the hanger, a wire one, inside the raincoat. He borrowed the longest of Monk's cutlasses, and dangled the affair on the end of that.

"Stay behind me," he said.

He went ahead to the first corner, but did not round it. Instead he said loudly, "Come on, come on!" and pushed the raincoat-sou'wester affair out into view around the corner.

The raincoat got ragged, flopped madly, tore loose and was driven against a bulkhead. And the roar of the machine-gun set their ears ringing.

Doc had jumped back. His face looked strange, and probably only the dyed skin kept it from looking stranger still.

He said, more queerness in his voice than he wanted, "Rate of fire and sound seemed to make it a 45-caliber gun." The information seemed superfluous.

Trigger said, "They will hear this shooting on the submarine. They'll know something is wrong."

"By signalling, they can make the sub crew think they were merely attracting attention," Doc said.

"The thing for us to do," Monk muttered, "is warn the crew of the sub."

Doc said that was a good idea. The point was how.

Monk was optimistic. "If I can just find a stick or an oar and a rag and make a wig-wag."

"What about the radio shack?" Trigger asked.

"The apparatus is smashed," Monk explained. "I forgot to mention that. When I was looking over the ship earlier in the night, one of the first things I thought about was the radio shack. They smashed every vacuum tube, chopped into every condenser and coil, then poured storage-battery acid over the whole mess."

They didn't find an oar. But they did manage to wrench loose a section of the handrail from the passage wall. "A shirt will make a flag," Monk said. "Now if we can get to a porthole—"

A voice called, "Hey, you fellows!"

Monk heard, turned white and wheeled slowly. The voice had come from the interior of the ship somewhere.

"Uh—uh—" Monk had to clear his throat. "Ham? Ham, was that you?"

The undeniable voice of Ham Brooks, the lawyer, said, "Yes, it's me. But don't start hunting me! Be careful! They're using me for bait! They—ouch!"

The loud popping sounds must be hands slapping Ham's face.

"Ham!" Monk yelled.

Doc Savage reached out suddenly and grabbed Monk in order to restrain him from anything foolish.

Ham's beating didn't last long. Apparently he got kicked a couple of times at the end of it. After he was beaten, he was sworn at.

Trigger identified the man swearing at Ham. "That's the one they call Long," she whispered.

HAM said, "Doc, I'm all right. I'm just mad. Renny is all right, too, except he's madder than I am."

Doc said, "That's good. Monk was worried about you."

"I wasn't either!" Monk disclaimed, reluctant to have Ham think he was concerned.

Ham continued, "I'm just supposed to tell you that Renny and I are still in one piece. But don't let them use our safety to run any whizzer—"

A hand went *smack!* Ham said something he wouldn't say to a judge, and did something to a man that made the man yell in agony, and there was a struggle.

"The one who yelled is Short," said Trigger.

The commotion with Ham subsided.

Long's voice said, "Savage?"

"Yes?"

“You make one move to warn that submarine and we'll toss the heads of your two friends in there to you like they were footballs. And they won't be attached.”

The statement sounded bombastic, but the meaning wasn't. The meaning was completely purposeful. Doc Savage glanced at Monk. Monk's lips looked dry. Emotion was holding Trigger's face in a strange shape, her lips twisted. She tried to say something two or three times and when she got it out, it was, “Don't you suppose they'll kill us all, anyway?”

It would have been nice to know the answer.

Doc said, “We must warn that submarine,” in a low voice.

Monk nodded. “We got to get Ham and Renny loose.” His fingers curled with helpless rage. “Maybe, if I rushed them—”

Doc shook his head. “No. Let's try another scheme.”

They crawled back toward the bridge, but did not go up on it, because that wouldn't be safe. Instead, the bronze man found his way into the deckhouse immediately below the bridge. Here there were portholes from which they could see the submarine, which was approaching slowly, but still at least three quarters of a mile distant.

“Your flashlight,” Doc said.

He used the flashlight, aiming it at the submarine as best he could, thumbing the button.

But the flashes weren't seen. The morning sunlight, streaming in the port, was too bright. The flashlight wasn't distinguishable against that.

“Try to find a mirror,” he said.

They found a mirror, not a large one, but big enough, they hoped. It was about the size of a man's head. Doc worked with this and the sunlight, studying the angle of the reflection. To plane the sun-spot on the sub would take wild luck.

He warned the submarine to stay away. And not to answer. He sent that over and over, heliographing the code slowly.

Finally the sub swung off, turned away.

“Boy!” Monk breathed. “They got it!”

THEN one of the tub guns cut loose with a guttering roar, raking the bridge, then dropping down and raking the deckhouse. The bullets began coming through the bulkhead into the cabin where they crouched.

“Run!” Doc gasped, seizing Trigger's hand. They fled out into a small passage when there was no more safety in the cabin. This tub gun wasn't a Browning 30-06. It was a 50-calibre. Its slugs weren't much discouraged by bulkheads.

The three-inch let go. It sounded like a big firecracker in a barrel. There was some jar.

“If that sub just dived in time!” Monk yelled.

Doc said, "Monk."

"Yes?"

"Get down in the engine-room. You and Trigger. If there is still steam in the boilers, and there should be, you might use that to defend the passages."

"What about you?"

"I'll do what I can where I can."

"If we stay together—"

Doc vetoed that with, "If they got one of us, they would get all. No, split up. That's better sense."

"That's right," Trigger said. "The first thing the Field Manual on Protective Measures says about safety is to spread out, so one shot won't get everyone."

"You won't spread out," Doc warned. "You stay with Monk."

"Okay."

The bronze man indicated a narrow companionway. "They won't be watching this. Go down it, and you can eventually reach the engine room."

"What makes you think they won't—"

"Long and Short were with Ham," Doc reminded. "One man is running the 50-calibre, and another is on the 3-inch gun. There are only four of them. Who is left to guard this route?"

Monk said, "Any plan for me to follow, Doc?"

"Just make your own plan as you go."

"What about your head?" asked Monk anxiously. "You going to navigate all right?"

"I think I will be all right."

MONK and Trigger followed a narrow flight of metal steps downward. Halfway down they stopped and took off their shoes. At the first corner, Monk explored with his hat on cutlass. Nothing happened.

"This is slick," he whispered.

The next door was locked. Locked from the other side. Monk looked at the hinges, and grinned. "This isn't so tough, either."

He used his cutlass point on the hinge-pins, prying them out. Some more prying, and he simply took the door off its hinges, and stood it quietly to one side. The next corridor was empty.

They worked along that, and down another companionway.

Monk stopped.

"You know something?" he whispered.

“I know we'd better keep going—”

“No, wait. This luck is too good. We better make use of it. You know what I'm going to do? Circle around back of that Long and Short and get old Ham away from them.”

“Mr. Savage said get to the engine room,” Trigger reminded disapprovingly.

“I know.”

“Once we've got the engine room, we've got the heart of the ship.”

Monk was uncomfortable. He didn't want any common sense talked to him, because the sensible thing was to go ahead and barricade themselves in the engine room if they could. As she said, then they'd have the nerve-center of the ship.

“Doc said to make my own plans,” Monk said. “Remember?”

Trigger examined him. “I see you're going to use that as an excuse for some darned fool move,” she said.

That was so near the truth that Monk became indignant.

“I'm going to save Ham's neck!” he growled. “Now don't argue about it!”

Trigger shrugged. “It's your head they'll shoot off.”

Monk grinned to cover his guilty feeling and said, “Some experts have tried that, and it's still on my shoulders.” He began inching into a side passage.

“But getting a trifle big for your hat, I imagine,” Trigger said. She followed him.

The 50-calibre was still clattering. The gunner was firing short bursts now, a dozen or less cartridges at a time, so evidently his gun was getting hot.

The 3-inch kept jarring. With their shoulders against the bulkhead, they could feel the jar of its recoil.

In the distance, other guns were thumping. It was Trigger who first got the significance of the latter.

She said, “Hear the guns firing at sea?”

“One gun. A sub only has one deck gun,” Monk said. “They're firing back at the ship.”

“That's an American submarine,” Trigger said.

“Yes—”

“Don't you think an American gun crew would hit what they're shooting at—if the target was us, and less than a mile away?” she demanded.

Monk's jaw went down. And from the way he looked, his hair wanted to go up.

“Good God, what's happening!” he blurted, and scuttled about hunting for a porthole. Behind the first door was a steward's locker and the second let him into another cubby, but the third door gave to a stateroom, one with a porthole. The blackout cover over the port was stuck, and Monk fought it as if it meant him harm, got it open, hung his head out and complained, “Oh, great grief!”

The girl crowded beside him.

“Oh! Where did that boat come from?” she asked.

The question was exactly what anybody would feel like asking. Except that obviously the other boat had come out of the morning mists.

THE other boat was a gray-white, lean, thin-beamed, clipper-bowed yacht without a funnel. She wasn't Navy. There was something on her hull, an insignia, but Monk couldn't make it out. The yacht was obviously diesel powered for plenty of knots, quite a few of which she was making now. And the gray gun on her bow was making fire.

Monk moved his attention to the United States submarine long enough to see that her deck gun was out of action. Then he asked Trigger, “You ever see the hooker?”

“That other boat?”

“Yes. The yacht.”

“Never saw it before in my life.”

Monk said, “This gets more like a dream as it goes along,” and turned his gaze back on the scrap between the submarine and the yacht. The one gun on the *Farland* was pitching shells too, but the fellow doing the pointing should have done as well with a slingshot. He was as much a menace to the yacht as to the sub.

The lifeboats were not in sight because they were on the other side of the ship. But they should be getting close by now.

“It looks like more than four men are in this,” Monk said.

“I always knew there were more than four,” Trigger said.

“You told us—”

She interrupted, “There is Samuel Woll. He's mixed in it.”

“Woll isn't aboard?”

“No, there are only the four I told you—”

A new voice from the door said, “Sure, she thinks there are only four aboard. She is a little mistaken, though.”

The new voice was completely unexpected, so much so that Monk nearly jumped out of his collection of muzzle-loading pistols and cutlasses. Facing the door, he found a lean brown boy of certainly not twenty, a boy with a thousand years of villainy stamped on his face, standing watching them. He had an M-3 paratrooper's gun, cradled in his arms, pointing at them.

“Don't jump around, or you might jump right into Davy Jones' locker,” he advised.

“You'd shoot us?” Monk asked uneasily.

“Brother, and whistle while I did so.”

Monk asked the girl, "Which one is this?"

"I don't know," Trigger said. "I never saw him before."

The boy said, "I'm Babe."

"Babe?"

"That's right. You never did get down in the engine-room, did you? I was an oiler. Renwick would know me."

Monk, suddenly chilled, said, "Renny *would!* What do you mean? Isn't he alive?"

"Sure, he's okay. I mean he'd know me if he was here." He waggled the gun. "Want to put up your hands. Or want to hear this thing operate?"

Monk looked at the M-3. You didn't see many of them. They were the new lightweight 45-caliber submachine gun for paratroopers. They looked as if you had taken a grease gun, some rod and some sheet metal and made a weapon. In fact, it was said they could be manufactured for around twenty dollars. But they would turn out a businesslike 450 rounds a minute.

Monk lifted his arms.

Babe grinned at him and clucked wonderingly. "Boy, you got enough antique weapons on you to start a museum."

Monk asked, "What you going to do with us?"

"You won't like it," Babe said. "But it's better than being dead—maybe."

## Chapter VII

DOC SAVAGE lay as flat as he could on the sun deck behind a flat case which was labelled as from an implement factory in Peoria, Illinois. He hoped the box contained something bulletproof.

He wasn't sure but what they were looking for him. He had tried a flanking approach on the three-inch gun in the bow, had met some men, and been forced to retreat up here. Watching the marksmanship of the three-inch gunner, he saw he might as well have saved his effort. The fellow couldn't hit the stern of a bull with a paddle, as Monk would probably have expressed it.

The gunner seemed to know his shortcomings. After every miss—sometimes he came nearer the yacht than the submarine—he would curse all three-inch guns in a loud pained voice. Then he would bellow at the machine-gunner in the tub. "What the hell wheel do I turn now?" he would yell. Then add, "I told you so-and-sos I never saw one of these things before."

Now he had something jammed. The gun wouldn't fire. He spun wheels and cranks, with the result that he soon had the barrel pointed at the superstructure, including the man in the Browning tub.

The Browning gunner yelled sulphur and brimstone. "Get the hell away from that thing!" he screamed. "Don't touch anything! Get away! Scram, or damned if I don't machine-gun you!"

The submarine was in trouble. It had been badly hit. Not only was its deck gun out, but the hull itself had been holed. A man was wig-wagging from the sub deck, and others were breaking out a machine-gun,

one which had a bi-pod mount.

The yacht was circling like a hound around a treed bear. The yacht looked as if it was doing forty knots, which was an absurdity. But it did seem to jump right off the tops of some of the big waves.

“Get away from there!” the Browning gunner kept howling at the amateur cannoneer. “Let that thing alone!”

The lifeboats were now close in. The nearest about two hundred yards, the most distant not more than half a mile. The closest craft were backing water, while the occupants shouted demands to know what on earth was going on. They had identified the submarine as American.

The lifeboat occupants also thought the yacht was an enemy craft, and had made the mistake of believing the three-inch gun was firing on the yacht, a partly natural mistake in view of the marksmanship.

“Ahoy the lifeboats!” roared the Browning gunner. “Sheer off! You're not coming aboard yet!”

“Who're you?”

“Never mind that! Sheer off, or I'll let you have a belt from this gun!”

“Are you crazy!”

“I'm a damned good shot,” said the Browning gunner.

“Hey, I know you!” bellowed a voice from a lifeboat. “You're Jolly Rogers. You were in my watch!”

The Browning gunner—evidently Rogers—swiveled his gun suddenly and let go a burst that foamed the sea round the speaker's lifeboat. He drew a very good circle around the boat with his bullets.

“Now shut up!” he yelled.

There was nothing more from that lifeboat.

ON the submarine, they had given up wig-wagging the yacht. The signalman had turned, and worked his flag toward the steamer. He had one flag on a pole, to the right for a dot, to the left for a dash, a short pause with the flag vertical to indicate letter spacing, a dip to the front to show word spacing.

RECEIVED S O S YOU TORPEDOED IN NIGHT. CAME TO HELP. WHAT GOES ON?

The Browning gunner, Rogers, was disgusted. He shouted at the cannoneer, “Your lousy shooting has got them thinking we are a friend.”

From the submarine:

WE ARE SINKING. STAND BY. WE ARE COMING ABOARD.

Rogers, who plainly could read the wig-wag, yelled, “Like hell you're coming aboard, except as prisoners!”

To the cannoneer, he shouted, “Hey, cross-eyed, get me an oar with a cloth or something tied to it. I'll signal those guys they've got to surrender and come aboard as prisoners.”

The cannoneer said he'd do that, and added an impolite opinion of Rogers. The opinion was right out of a

gutter. It wasn't something one Navy man, enemy or otherwise, would say to somebody who was giving him orders.

The submarine, going down by the bow more and more, moved sluggishly toward the *Farland*. The yacht wheeled and raced in toward the *Farland*, keeping her deck gun trained on the submarine, but no longer firing.

DOC SAVAGE squeezed his aching head between his palms, wishing he wasn't surgeon enough to know that this wasn't a delirium. It would have been a relief to imagine the whole thing was a hallucination.

He didn't understand it at all. It wasn't the kind of a thing that made sense.

A torpedo into you at night was something to be expected, since there was a war.

A fake torpedoing, well-staged, was a different kind of a golly-woppus. It had been well-staged, too. Marvelously staged, with men who know how to act their part planted at just the right spots to spread word that the ship was sinking and on fire. Captain Davis had been a little jittery and quick on the trigger, but the thing had been good enough to fool all the other officers, so Captain Davis wasn't to be blamed too much. Doc Savage himself had thought the ship was torpedoed and sinking, and he had been primed for something shady. He knew the Navy Department hadn't put him and his aids aboard the *Farland* for an uneventful trip.

The submarine had heard the *Farland's* S O S. That explained the sub. It was an unexpected quantity. A complication nobody had looked for. The submarine crew obviously didn't understand their part in it.

Rogers proceeded to enlighten him. The cannoneer brought him an oar with a handkerchief tied to it.

"Listen, toad-face, they'll think a white flag is a surrender flag," Rogers told the cannoneer. He tore off his own shirt, disclosing a suit of underwear as red as the inside of a bullfighter's cape. He substituted the top of the underwear for the handkerchief, and began signalling.

He sent:

SURRENDER. STRIP TO YOUR UNDERCLOTHES. LET THE YACHT CREW BOARD US FIRST. THEN YOU CAN COME ABOARD AS PRISONERS.

From the sub:

WHO ARE YOU?

Rogers:

IM THE GUY ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE 8-BALL. YOU GOT FIVE MINUTES TO AGREE.

The sub:

UTSNAY.

THINGS stood at that for a while. The lifeboats were milling about. Captain Davis, sounding much more

possessed and authoritative than the night before, ordered them to scatter and withdraw out of machine-gun range. His boat would remain close until they found out what was going on, he shouted. The order was complied with.

From the submarine:

MUST KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

From Rogers:

JOLLY ROGER.

The sub:

ARE YOU ENEMY?

Rogers cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed pleasantly, "I'm my own worst enemy, sailor." Then he grabbed up the wig-wag.

He signalled:

FLAG OF IDENTIFICATION ON YACHT. LOOK.

Doc Savage jerked his eyes off the signal flag, swung his gaze to the yacht, then blinked unbelievably. This sort of thing couldn't really happen, was his first thought.

The flag was too big, in the first place. The black, startling hugeness of it, standing out dramatically in the wind, was too theatrical. The skull on it was too white and leering, and the two crossed bones under it too appropriate. It was something for a picture. For a cartoon. Not for reality.

A skull and crossbones, the traditional flag of pirates, and it was spectacular and ridiculous, standing out wind-flattened from the signal yard of the yacht.

The way the black ensign had been run up was timed too well for reality, like something that had happened in a musical comedy— *click!* went something in Doc's memory. Samuel Woll!

Samuel Woll. The product of a long line of failures, Trigger had called him. She'd said Woll was an ex-magician, an ex-Hollywood movie producer, and most producers got their start putting on stage plays, so it was safe to assume Woll had been in the theater, too. He'd flopped at all of those, Trigger had said, because he overdid it. He overextended himself. He gave everything too much. If such a man turned pirate in these troubled times, he'd probably give that too much, too. He'd probably pull something like this business of stealing an ocean liner in mid-Atlantic. And maybe he'd have a skull-and-crossbones flag along with the trimmings. So maybe that explained the flag.

Piracy. There was nothing to be relieved at, but Doc felt some relief anyway. It was something to know what was going on, to know what was behind the mystery.

Piracy, and the head-buccaneer had the habit of giving his projects a little too much in the way of trimmings.

Doc got to his hands and knees.

Now, if he could get to the stern 3-incher and put a H. E. shell in the waterline of that yacht.

MAKING his way aft along the sun deck would ordinarily have been as conspicuous a business as crossing a flat desert. The sun deck, the very highest deck on the ship, was a perfectly flat expanse with nothing jutting up except two funnels, some ventilators of the wind-scoop type and a few skylights. Far aft there was a tennis court, but that was wire and offered no concealment, nor did the dog kennel, which was a wire-enclosed affair amidships.

However, thanks to the overloading of ships in wartime, a little light cargo had been pegged down on the sun deck. There were a dozen very large crates which contained troop-carrying gliders, and several score smaller containers.

Doc worked his way aft like an Indian going from rock to rock. Nothing disturbed his progress.

The fact that he was not bothered didn't relieve him much. You only needed to be bothered once, by a 30-06 rifle bullet or a 50-calibre shell, to be permanently disturbed.

Once he paused to watch the submarine and the yacht. Both were drawing near the *Farland*. Otherwise the situation was about what it had been, the sub crew being ordered to surrender, and the yacht prowling warily, keeping a watch on things, while the lifeboat crews bobbed around in the distance wondering what had come over the world.

Doc resumed crawling, trying to make himself no thicker than a coat of paint on the deck. He came to the aft end of the superstructure, where an iron-railed and iron-runged companionway led down to the well deck, then up another similar stairway to the small poop deck where an emergency hand steering wheel and the 3-inch gun were located.

The only hitch was that two men, one of them with a submachine gun, had charge of the 3-inch gun. They were fooling with the weapon, trying to train it off in the general direction of the horizon, and fire it. Obviously trying to find out how it worked.

The man with the submachine gun looked in the direction of the spot where Doc Savage crouched, and waved.

He shouted, "Hey, Siegel, what you sneaking around the deck like that for?"

For about twenty seconds, Doc Savage thought he had been mistaken for somebody named Siegel.

The mistake nearly got him a pint of lead, which was about the quantity of bullets that poured out of Siegel's gun before the drum went empty.

SIEGEL had been crawling down the deck in pursuit of Doc Savage. Siegel was a lean medium-height man with dark hair and sun-glasses.

"It's Savage!" he shouted. "Watch out!"

The man at the 3-inch gun yelled, "Why didn't you shoot him in the back, you fool!"

"Dammit, I tried to!" Siegel said. "He heard the safety click off on the gun, or something."

Doc Savage meantime was moving. It was the fastest move he had made since the ship had been abandoned, and what it did to his head shouldn't have been done to a clay pigeon. He was in a bad spot for cover. There was nothing, in fact, that would shelter him from both directions—from Siegel and from the group at the 3-inch gun.

The submachine gunner at the 3-incher came up elaborately with his weapon, like the county champion at a blue-rock shoot, and let go a burst. He missed. Missed enough to take some of the platform manner away from him. He aimed in deadly earnest.

About that time, Doc Savage went up and into the funnel mouth of a wind scoop. The flared morning-glory mouth of the wind scoop was about six feet across, and the vertical pipe around four feet in diameter, and he went into the thing like a hurdler, feet first. He caught the outer lip to break the force of his leap. He could have hung there—and couldn't either, because the pipe wasn't bulletproof.

So he let go and dropped, with no idea of what lay below.

Siegel ran to the ventilator, busy clipping fresh ammunition into his weapon. He shoved the gun into the ventilator, pointed it down, and held back the firing lever. Powder smoke fogged the inside of the ventilator pipe and cartridge cases tinkled against the sides.

After the gun went empty, Siegel listened. Finally he put his head in the ventilator, after grunting and kicking with the effort of chinning himself.

He let himself back to the deck.

“Must've got him!” he yelled at the group around the 3-inch gun.

## Chapter VIII

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER ROSCOE KELLY, commanding officer of the U. S. submarine *Triggerfish*—the sub which was in the current difficulty—had been born on a Wyoming dry farm, a country where about the only rainfall came in a cloudburst once or twice a year. The nearest water to the Kelly dry farm had been Little Powder River, and that was thirty miles away. Water for drinking purposes had to be hauled five miles in a barrel, then the pollywogs and wiggletails had to be strained out, if a man was finicky about them, for consumption. Having grown to long pants in this environment, Roscoe Kelly had a wonderful psychological equipment to be a sailor. He wouldn't mind if he looked at nothing but water the rest of his life.

He was red-headed, bow-legged—bow-legged not from riding a horse, but because they let him walk too early in life—and gifted with a big grin, the blarney of an Irishman, and the kind of genuine patriotism for America that let him cuss the government, the president, the war, the admiral, the Navy in general, and fight like hell for all of them. He was liked by all his good sailors, and heartily cussed by the salt-water equivalent of the Army goldbricker. He liked to raise a little old-fashioned hades now and then, and he probably had more discredits against his record than any lieutenant commander in the Navy. His submarine and himself were also on the way to having more citations for one thing and another than any other sub. The admiral said he wished he had more like Roscoe Kelly, men with so much pleasant devil in them that you could just barely control them and the enemy couldn't do a thing with them.

At the moment, Lieutenant Commander Kelly had used up all the cusswords he knew, and invented several.

He'd been caught flat-footed, and would never forgive himself. He had approached the *Farland* cautiously, out of the sun, and he wasn't expecting the *Farland* to fire on him. The enemy wasn't in the habit of putting prize crews on its torpedoed steamers, which at first he presumed was what had happened.

He'd presumed that when the 3-inch forward deck gun of the *Farland* up and plunked its first shell squarely against his own deck gun. The second shell from the *Farland* had knocked a hole in the submarine that you could run a motorboat through, so that the sub couldn't dive. The same shell had blown the guts out of the diesels, so the power now was nothing but what juice they had in their batteries, and they couldn't get too far on that, nor very fast. About nine knots, which was just about enough to outrun a rowboat.

What burned Kelly was the fact that, except for the first two lucky shots, the deck gunner on the *Farland* hadn't been able to hit a barn. He'd been so lousy that Kelly had thought for a while the fellow was shooting at the yacht.

The yacht was a mystery to Kelly.

When he saw the black flag, the skull and crossbones, he understood that the yacht was holding itself forth as a pirate ship. He didn't believe it, hardly. It was goofy.

He had by now distinguished the markings on the yacht as Argentine. The craft had the label of Argentina, a neutral country, which was handy because it tended to keep the belligerents from blowing you out of the water as soon as they saw you.

The Argentine markings didn't mean a thing, Kelly knew. All you needed was some quick-drying paint and a brush. Doubtless the Argentine government would be amazed to know the yacht was sailing around under its colors.

As amazed, probably, as Lieutenant Commander Kelly was as he looked at the black flag.

FROM the yacht: "Strip to your underwear, sailors. And swim to the rope ladder and climb aboard!"

The yacht had put in close to the *Farland*, had lowered a power launch, and this had ferried three boatloads of men to the *Farland*. The boarders from the yacht were armed until they would sink like anchors if one of them fell into the water. With the sea running like it was, it had taken considerable agility of the monkey variety to get into the launch, then onto the *Farland*.

Kelly groped in his exhausted vocabulary for another cussword.

Finally he said, "Take your little panties off, boys. Do like the so-and-so says."

"We giving up?" a sailor demanded, with the freedom of speech and opinion commonly found on submarines. "That's a hell of a note."

"I'll think of words to say what kind of a note it is, some day maybe," Kelly said. "What would you advise?"

"We got machine guns."

"They got a 3-inch deck gun. We'd last about as long as a snowball in that place!"

"Yeah, I guess."

"All right. Pants off."

There was a generally angry, uncomfortable stripping for the swim. A huddle and some worry developed on deck in front of the conning tower.

“Five of the men can't swim!” Kelly yelled at the yacht. “What about them?”

“All sailors are supposed to be able to swim!” said the yacht voice.

“Listen, these men were in the Navy before anybody thought up that rule,” Kelly roared. “They'll have to take life preservers.”

“With hand grenades in them, maybe? Oh, no. Some of your men who can swim will have to help those who can't.”

That was the way they did it. The submarine was nursed alongside the *Farland*, about fifty feet to the lee, and close to a rope ladder. The men plunged overboard. They hated to leave the sub, but under the conditions, it was a good idea. There was no question but that the submarine would sink in another fifteen or twenty minutes.

As each man from the sub climbed up the rope ladder, banging unmercifully against the scabby, rusting gray sides of the *Farland*, he was covered by submachine guns from the rail. He was covered by more guns on deck. He was lined up with his comrades, facing the blank deckhouse, arms in the air.

He was assured in most convincing fashion that he would be shot into dog food if he so much as sneezed.

They were all taken below. They were locked in a hold.

THE regular crew of the *Farland*, who had been floating around dumbfounded in the lifeboats, were now picked up. When they found out what was happening, some of them weren't enthusiastic about being picked up, and tried to row off in the direction of the nearest horizon. The yacht, pushing a great snowplow affair of foam in front of her bows, and a machine gun gobbling from her deck, discouraged any kind of departure.

It was a big operation, and it was not accomplished immediately. The whole thing took about four hours.

At the end of the four hours, the crew of the submarine and the crew of the *Farland*, minus the men on the *Farland* who had turned out to be pirates, were all confined in the prison hold.

The hold had not been designed as a prison, but it could well have been. There were no portholes. The walls were all steel, and the watertight doors, when dogged tight from the other side, couldn't be forced by barehanded men. And everyone in the prison hold was certainly barehanded. The most any of them wore was a top to his underwear suit, and only two were that lucky. The rest had nothing but shorts. Hitherto they had thought it was warm out here south of the Gulf Stream, but now they began to feel it wasn't exactly tropical, not in the hold anyway.

There was much uproar as more and more prisoners were pushed into the place. Everybody wanted to know what the hell was going on, and everyone wanted to get acquainted with everyone else. Three fourths of the *Farland* crew didn't know the other three fourths, dressed in underwear shorts.

Gradually the gabfest wore itself out, and they realized that the compartment immediately forward of the prison hold was the one that was flooded. The one into which the water had been admitted by the phony torpedo explosion—no one of the prisoners had yet realized that the torpedoing had been fake, however—the night before. They could hear the water gurgle in the forehold as the ship rolled. Also, thin streams of the stuff kept squirting in around the watertight doors. The floor was slippery with water, clammy.

The accommodations in the prison hold were going to be a little less than the Ritz.

Now the deck hatch overhead was opened. This was better. It gave them air. However, a wave would break over the *Farland's* bow now and then, and deluge a few tubfuls of water down the hatch.

"This," said Lieutenant Commander Kelly, "is sweet." He thought of some words to tell everybody how sweet it was.

Such was the red-headed, hell-driving vitality and personality of Kelly that everyone was already looking to him as the leader. He was a natural leader of men, even in his underwear shorts.

Now they found out who was responsible for their predicament.

A MAN leaned in the hatch so all the prisoners could see him.

He said, "My name is Rogers. Jolly Rogers. Appropriate, wouldn't you say?"

Kelly put his fists on his hips and told him how appropriate it was.

Rogers laughed. "Take a good look at me, red-head. I'm the boy that gives you your orders. I'm not the boss. I'm just the leg boy around here, so I give you your orders."

No one said anything.

"I'm supposed to make a speech," Rogers continued. "We are pirates, I am supposed to tell you. Real old-fashioned cut-your-throat-as-soon-as-look-at-you pirates. The kind of guys you don't want to fool with."

He showed them his teeth. He looked like a bank clerk grinning at a swarm of depositors.

"Understand how it is now?" he asked. "We're pirates and you are our prisoners. From now on, one of two things can happen to you. One thing is to make trouble, and we will let you walk the plank. The other thing is behave yourselves, take orders, and maybe you won't like what will be done with you, but you'll be alive, anyway. And don't think I'm kidding about that walking the plank business."

He had a very attentive audience down below.

He added, "Now there's just one other thing I am supposed to say in my speech. I'm supposed to tell you who you are really dealing with, so you'll be impressed, so you'll know this isn't ten-cent business and so you'll think twice before you misbehave."

He grinned at them for a minute, letting their curiosity build up.

"The head pirate is a man named Doc Savage," Rogers said.

A number of unbelieving grunts came up out of the hold.

Rogers said, "I see some of you know Doc Savage, or know him by reputation. That's fine. You boys who know about him can tell those who don't. Tell them about Savage's reputation as a mental wizard and a muscular marvel and so on. Tell them all you've heard. No matter how hairbrained what you've heard, it probably isn't half as sensational as the truth. So tell everybody, boys."

He watched those in the hold. There was some whispering and muttering, but most of the attention was

still on Rogers.

Rogers concluded, "Doc Savage is the brains behind this. If you thought he was a plaster saint, you were just mistaken. You didn't know Savage. The way he operates takes a lot of money. Nobody ever knew where he got the money. This is one way he gets it, and you guys know that now, but the information won't do you a lot of good, particularly if you start cutting up on us. Now that ends my speech, except that I will say that you will be made as comfortable as we think you should be made, and you won't be in here too long, and that those of you who are sensible will get nice and healthy and sunburned and well-fed, and have enough excitement to keep life from getting monotonous. Thank you one and all for your kind attention."

Rogers waited long enough to hear what Lieutenant Commander Kelly called him, which was considerable, Kelly actually finding one bad word he hadn't thought of before. Then Rogers disappeared, after another cat-to-mousey grin.

Men began spiking iron bars over the hatch opening.

NOW a little fat bat-eared man became vociferous in the hold.

"I knew Doc Savage was behind this," shouted this individual. "I'm an operative for the U. S. Navy, a secret operative, and I know the facts."

Kelly said, "Where the devil did you come from? You're not one of my men."

"I was in the crew of the *Farland*."

Captain Davis pounced on that, and said, "I don't remember you!"

"Well, I was in your crew, and I'm a secret Navy operative," said the man.

"Prove that," invited Captain Davis of the *Farland*.

"Do you think I'm carrying credentials around behind my false teeth?" the man asked. "How the hell could I prove it?"

The small fat bat-eared man obviously did not have false teeth. But his other peculiarities included a little watermelon of a tummy, some stringy evidences of good muscular development in his arms and legs which indicated he could get around well if needed, and extremely large feet. His large feet and his ears were his prominent parts. Both belonged on a man four times his size.

"Savage is the head pirate," he insisted.

"Damned if I believe that," said Kelly. "I've heard of Savage, and I don't believe it."

"It's true."

"Rabbit feathers."

"Do you want the whole story?" demanded the bat-eared little man.

Kelly didn't particularly, but about everyone else did, so the funny-looking little man took the stage.

"Ships have been disappearing mysteriously," he said. "Some of the lost craft have been South American

and some English and some American. The United States Navy got very interested, and has had operatives on the case some time. Several clues led to Doc Savage, and we got to checking on him. He looked more and more guilty, but we couldn't get any real proof. To convict a man like Savage, you've got to have real proof. Doc Savage sailed on this ship. I was assigned to shadow him. I didn't do so good, I admit. Savage sailed on board as a man named Doyle, able-bodied seaman."

"My God!" exclaimed a man. "I knew Doyle. He was in my watch."

Another man said, "Doyle stayed aboard after the ship was abandoned."

The small fat bat-eared man looked around triumphantly.

"You see! Savage is head pirate," he said.

JOLLY ROGERS appeared at the hatch overhead, pointing his arm down at the small fat bat-eared man.

"Hey you, punkin-stomach!" Rogers said.

The small man jumped. He put his hands to his cheeks in a womanish gesture of terror.

"You!" Rogers said.

"W-what-muh-me?"

"Yeah, you, you little gabber," Rogers said. "Come over here under this hatch."

The little man held back. "What you want with me?"

"Why, I'm going to reach down and kiss you." Rogers suddenly shoved the muzzle of a submachine gun over the hatch rim. "Get over here, you fat little so-and-so."

The small man advanced with the greatest reluctance.

"So, you're a Navy snoop," Rogers said. "You know what we'll probably do now? Give you a medal, that's what."

The little man didn't care for the medal talk, and apparently thought less of it as Rogers described it in detail.

Rogers said, "Yes, sir, a medal made out of a nice iron bar tied around your neck, just before we let you jump overboard."

"I was lying!" the little man screamed.

"You what?"

"Lying! There wasn't a word of truth in what I said!" he shrieked.

"You're not a secret Navy operative?"

"No! Lies, all lies! No, I've never had a thing to do with the Navy. I was just lying."

"And why," asked Rogers with elaborate patience, "were you lying?"

“I—uh—I wanted attention. That's it. I wanted to take the stage and hold it. It's a psychological complex that I've got which makes me do that. I crave attention. Yes sir, a complex. If you were a psychoanalyst, you would understand.”

Rogers laughed. He wagged his gun. “I think I understand anyway, you damned liar. I mean you're a damned liar if you say you're not a Navy snoop.”

“No, no—”

One of the pirates tossed a rope down.

Rogers said, “Tie that rope around your waist, little liar. We're going to haul you up.”

“I won't—”

“You'd like to be shot down there, maybe?”

“You're going to shoot me?” the little man shrieked. “Oh, my God! No, please—”

“Tie that rope around you!” yelled Rogers.

The little man, jumping wildly as if he was afraid he was going to be shot where he stood, grabbed the rope and tied a granny knot around his chest. The granny knot wasn't so good, and slipped and the rope cut into his chest as he was yanked upward.

At the hatch lip, he was seized, hauled out by his arms.

Rogers said, “Take him to the rail, shoot him, then throw him overboard before he has time to bleed on the deck.”

The little bat-eared man began screaming. Those down in the prisoner hold could hear his screeching. The sound made some of them lose color, made all of them look uneasily at different things.

The final shot, and the awful gurgling scream that instantly followed, did nobody's stomach any good.

ON deck, however, the small, fat bat-eared man stood unharmed and grinning at Rogers. Unharmed, that was, except for the squeezing the rope had given his chest. That part of the thing had been genuine, and his howls of agony quite unrestrained and unacted.

“How'd you like that last howl?” he asked. “Even a Barrymore couldn't have done better. In fact, that was the same howl a Barrymore used once when he got his leg cut off in some picture or other.”

“Sh-h-h,” Rogers admonished. “If they would hear you down in the hold, Mr. Woll, it would ruin everything.”

“Ah, true,” said Mr. Woll, with the manner and voice of a Shakespearian ham.

They returned to a more private part of the deck, and went from there to the bridge, where two subordinates were waiting, apparently with reports, for one said, “I am ready with the information, Mr. Woll.”

“A moment, my man,” said Mr. Woll. He turned back to Rogers to ask, “Didn't you think I did excellently?”

Rogers, with the promptness of a Hollywood yes-man, said, "You did fine. I never dreamed it could come off so perfect."

"You believe they think Doc Savage is their enemy-in-chief?"

"Think! Hell, they're sure of it."

Mr. Woll nodded proudly. Someone brought him a dressing robe, and he put it on. "That is good. I thought for a while that the silly Captain was going to keep on insisting I was never a member of his crew, which was true. But he didn't. And if they think Doc Savage is to blame, that is fine. It will be a great help, if something should go wrong and worse should come to worse, to have the forces of retribution on Savage's trail instead of mine."

"That was sure slick," agreed Rogers. "Sure slick the way you walked into the hold with the other prisoners, and they thought you were one of them."

"Ah, thank you." Mr. Woll turned to his other satellites. "Your reports, please."

"Engine room manned. Steam will be up in twenty minutes. We can get way on her any time after that."

"Good. Sail as soon as you can."

From the other man: "Prisoners all accounted for and under lock and key."

"Good."

"No radio reports to indicate anything considered suspicious."

"Excellent."

"News report from Berlin reports torpedoing of the *Farland*, by a Nazi U-boat."

"Oh, perfect!" said Mr. Woll delightedly. "Those silly Germans taking credit for everything that goes wrong with the allies! What a help that will be. Now everybody will think a German sub really sank the *Farland* with all hands, and also sank the submarine which came to investigate. Oh, glorious!"

"We have no idea how the Germans found out about the torpedoing, so-called."

"Why, they heard the S.O.S. last night from the *Farland*, of course."

"Yes, sir."

A third man now came in to report, "A second and more thorough examination convinces us that Doc Savage was mortally wounded and committed suicide."

Mr. Woll didn't look too convinced. He looked like the man on the stage who thinks his wife might be cheating on him.

"I shall make an examination of your examination," he said.

MR. SAMUEL WOLL was a thorough tent-show ham actor, but he had other qualities. The god-awful Shakespearian hamming was what you noticed first, and the other qualities cropped up later; and as you began to see them and understand what they meant, the man completely ceased to be funny.

His men, his pirates, obviously didn't think there was anything funny about him. Nothing funny enough to laugh at, anyway. Some of them were plain-faced scared of him, and all of them jumped when he gave an order, and practically turned themselves inside out fawning over him whenever he gave the signal for fawning. That was one thing about Mr. Woll. He signalled when he wanted to be fawned upon, and when he wanted to be agreed with, or whatever other mood or state of compliance he wished. He told you exactly what he wanted, usually with so many words.

His minion told him, "Here is the lower end of the ventilator into which Doc Savage dived. Here are the marks made by the bullets which were fired down the ventilator, and here is the first trace of blood from Mr. Savage's wounds."

"I think we should be very careful about this, don't you, Rogers?" Mr. Woll said.

"You bet we'd better be careful," said Rogers, with some sincerity of his own.

So they examined the bloodstains.

"Are you sure they are human bloodstains?" Woll asked.

"We have no means of making a test."

Woll seemed to concede the point, and went ahead with his scrutiny. He traced the marks thoughtfully.

The bloodstains told a plain story. They seemed to speak with a factuality that was pitiful and gruesome. Because they led, only a drop or two at some points, but a plain smear most of the way, down a passage to a spot where a cargo port butterfly door was open.

This cargo port was directly in the hull of the ship, two doors which could be flung open in order to give admission to a gangplank when the ship was lying at pier. Such hull ports had been used the night before to load some of the lifeboats, and this one had been left open as a result.

The blood was puddled near the door.

Woll studied everything with patience and showy care. "The fellow was badly wounded," he declared. "You can tell that by the fact that the stains are smeared. The smearing means he had to drag himself. The puddle means he remained here for some time."

He indicated the stains which went to the door and ended there.

"He threw himself into the sea," he said. He made it sound dramatic, then struck a pose, frowned with the darkness of thunder. "Or did he?"

It was Rogers who found what he thought was the answer. "Bring a rope," Rogers said, after looking out of the hull-port for some time.

They dangled him down the side of the hull. Before they lowered him, he took out a white handkerchief and showed them how spotless it was. The handkerchief had a crimson stain which he'd rubbed off the hull when he came back.

"That proves Savage went into the sea," he said. "The ship was rolling and he hit the hull on his way down and left this stain."

Woll swore with relief. For once he wasn't theatrical. He was just plain relieved.

"Get the ship under way as soon as you can," he said. "Now we can go ahead as planned."

## Chapter IX

THE *Farland* sailed a south and southwesterly course for three days and four nights, most of the time making good speed. Not top speed, but as fast a clip as it was safe to travel with the skeleton crew, and not too experienced a crew at that, of pirates in the engine-room.

About noon the first day, Mr. Woll had the radio on the yacht transmit a message which he had concocted. The message was in German, and coded skillfully enough that the American decoding experts would think it was a genuine piece of German naval work when they got it figured out. The message reported that the German submarine, identified by a letter and numbers, had stood by and sunk the *Farland* by daylight, and also sunk an American submarine which turned up to investigate. There were no survivors, the coded message went on to relate, because the sea was running too high at the time for boats to be launched.

This message, as a matter of fact, served its purpose excellently, for it was picked up by Navy radio listening posts, handed to the decoding department and its meaning was solved. There was no suspicion that the message was a fake. An American destroyer rushed to the spot—the place was too far offshore for land-plane patrol, and there was no carrier in the neighborhood—and evidence from the submarine and the *Farland* in the shape of life preservers, an oil slick and floating gear bore out the truth of the bogus message.

Eventually the news was given out to the newspapers, and created no special stir in the minds of an American public that by now was foggy from the repeated blows of getting such news over a period of many months.

The *Farland*, of course, was far to the south and west by the time the destroyer investigated.

The newspapers did not receive the information that Doc Savage and three of his aids, as well as a woman investigator for the navy department, were aboard the *Farland*. For military reasons, this was kept secret. The secrecy was agreed upon at a strategy board meeting, where some of the remarkable research and inventive work of Doc Savage was dwelled upon at considerable length. It was just as well to keep the enemy in ignorance of the loss of such an important scientist by the other side, was the decision.

There was, as secretly as possible, some violent criticism of the Naval official directly responsible for involving Doc Savage in the mystery that led to the trip on the *Farland*. The official, a Rear Admiral, made the mistake at the board meeting of saying that it was a damned shame that somebody hadn't made use of a good fighting man's talents, meaning Doc Savage's physical ability rather than his inventive and other mental accomplishments, earlier in the war. This created a bad flavor with those who thought Doc shouldn't have been allowed on the *Farland* in the first place. The result was that the Rear Admiral was punished by being given a seagoing assignment in the part of the Pacific where the action was the nastiest. The Rear Admiral kept his mouth shut, because if this was punishment, he could use some more of the same. He'd been trying to get where he could take a shot at the enemy ever since the war started. Probably it was his own thirst for action which had led him to sympathize with Doc Savage in the first place, and assign the bronze man to the *Farland*. Privately, the Rear Admiral couldn't believe that Doc Savage was dead, drowned at sea, which was presumably what had happened to him since there were no survivors from the *Farland*, according to the decoded German submarine report to the homeland.

THE prisoners in the hold of the *Farland*, during the three days and four nights of the southwestward

cruise, got plenty of water to drink and nothing whatever to eat. They were husky, healthy men accustomed to eating the way American merchant mariners and sailors eat. So four nights and three days without food had them feeling as mean as bobcats and considerably hungrier than cannibals.

Their profane complaints got them nothing to eat.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day, the *Farland* and the yacht—the yacht had been steaming about two miles ahead the whole time—raised a group of ships on the horizon.

The distant craft were closely grouped, which was the first tip-off that they were not a convoy. No convoy would cluster that closely, unless in port.

Second no-convoy evidence was the type of vessels. Three were sailing craft of different types, two being schooners. One schooner was quite small, the other larger, and both had two masts. The third sailboat was still larger, and had three masts.

The smallest of the steamers was not a steamer at all, but a motor-driven cargo vessel. The remaining steamers were pretty much of a size, all being cargo vessels of the slow, modest type.

None of the ships were quite as large as the *Farland*.

On the bridge of the *Farland*, Rogers held binoculars to his eyes, and studied the strangely grouped ships.

“There's the signal,” he reported. “Everything is okay.”

Samuel Woll said, “Good. Set your course, and be very careful of the outside reef.”

“With the bang-bang stuff that's aboard, I'll say I'll be careful,” Rogers muttered.

The *Farland* took a course south by east, and a man set up a pelorus, a navigator's gadget for taking bearings on visible objects.

There was a good deal of eye-straining and finger-pointing over a chart, and consulting of stopwatches, while two men were heaving sounding leads for dear life.

Because the water was suddenly treacherous. It was amazingly clear water, clear the way the Caribbean is clear. You could have tossed a half-dollar overboard, if you were extravagant, and watched it sink through the water for a distance of possibly eighty feet. Water with the strange clarity of the atmosphere, almost. It wasn't unusual for the Caribbean.

It wasn't everywhere that the water was eighty feet deep. In places, many places, coral reefs and coral heads came almost to the surface. It was a marine cactus bed made of coral, except that any spike of that coral would impale and hold and ruin the *Farland* or any other ship.

The sharks began to appear. They could be seen swimming in the water, a few at first, then more and more, until the depths seemed alive with them. Little sharks and big ones. The little ones were only about eighteen feet long.

On the forecastle deck, a man began firing with a rifle.

“What the hell?” Woll exploded at the first shot, startled.

“That's Siegel,” said Rogers. “He starts that as soon as we get here, every time. Stands around all day and half the night and just shoots the sharks. I never saw such a guy after sharks. Claims one of them ate

his brother, one time.”

“I can't put up with that!” Woll snapped. “Stop him! Knock him over the head or something.”

Rogers said uncomfortably, “I told him to go ahead. I'm sorry, but I thought you wouldn't mind, and after all Siegel was the one who shot Doc Savage.”

Woll shrugged quickly. “Let him go ahead with his shooting sharks, then.”

THE clustered ships were about a mile away now. One of them, it could be seen, was a hulk, partially burned. This was one of the steamers.

All of the ships had a scabrous, unnatural look about them, an aspect of crippled helplessness. The rigging slatted frowsily on the sailboats, and there was no canvas on any of them. They weren't old ships. They weren't falling to pieces with rot. But even at that distance, they reeked of neglect, of lifelessness.

Lifelessness. There wasn't a man in sight anywhere. All the life seemed to be in the hideous, twisting, rolling horrors under the sea. The sharks.

The *Farland* suddenly changed course. There was an excited bellowing of commands. The heading was changed just exactly sixteen degrees.

Siegel, with the rifle, was firing methodically. A shot about every minute or so. He was using an automatic rifle, evidently a Garand, and once in a while he would pump two quick bullets instead of one, but never more than two. He was killing some of the sharks, because here and there back along the steamer wake, there were little areas of boiling turmoil where the sharks were tearing up and consuming one of their wounded comrades.

They were a half mile from the boats.

Now it was plain what gave the boats their crippled, helpless look. They were grounded. They were in a lagoon, jammed hard into a spike-bed of coral heads. They had been run upon the coral heads at full speed, their bottoms ripped, and wedged there.

Woll asked, “What is the bearing?”

“It's right on the head,” said the man at the pelorus.

“Full speed ahead,” said Woll. “Get everybody out of the engine room, away from the boilers.”

The talker—that gadget was still working—blared out the order.

THE *Farland* had good engines. She lifted her damaged nose a little, and surged forward. She gathered speed.

Men came piling up out of the engine-room. They weren't happy about this, and most of them stood near the rail, so that if the ship blew up they would have a chance of being blown into the sea.

Woll had the wheel himself. He stood spread-legged, head back, chest out, chin up. He wasn't grinning. His mouth had the sulky, dissatisfied, determined, arrogant set which Napoleon's mouth has in most of his portraits. This was his moment. He was theatrical. He was Captain Kidd. He was Morgan, Blackbeard,

Henry Teach, Llonious. He was a swashbuckling pirate doing his stuff.

Rogers said, "She's going to hit," into the talker. "Hang onto things."

Hit she did, but it was an anticlimax. The jolting, rending, grinding, moaning from the hull was muffled. At no time was the actual shock more than enough to make them take more than a single step to retain their balance.

But the damage being done to the underwater hull of the *Farland* must be awful. The coral heads and ledges, hard as so much glass, were scraping off plates, rending through frames, gouging the keel, breaking the keel, ruining the big vessel.

The *Farland* stopped. She was aground.

In the prison hold, the prisoners began to scream. The watertight bulkheads had collapsed, been torn open. Water was coming in on them. Death, they thought, was upon them, and they made the sounds men make when they think they're dying. Not pleasant sounds.

## Chapter X

DOC SAVAGE floundered around in the water. The water was in the forehold of the *Farland*, and it was for the most part the same water that had been in there since the night of the peculiar torpedoing. Maybe a little more was coming in through holes in the bottom.

Doc had been taken by surprise. He had realized that something was happening, but he didn't dare put his head outside in broad daylight, so he had remained where he was. The only comfortable place in the flooded hold was the hammock he had rigged far up under the big deck beams, a well-hidden spot. The hammock was one he'd collected from the forecastle, which was directly above, one night.

He had felt the ship hitting bottom, then a considerable tidal wave had been caused by the abrupt loss of momentum, and the wave had washed him out of the hammock.

The salt water didn't sting his wound, so he knew it was sufficiently healed. The wound was not of much consequence, anyway. It wasn't a bullet's work, but the result of his failing to dodge some of the brackets inside the ventilator shaft when he had gone down it three days ago.

The damage was mostly to his skin. But there had been enough blood to make the smears on the deck. Thank heavens his head had been clear enough to think of the trick which he hoped would make them think he had been mortally wounded and had gone overboard, either in delirium or to escape them.

The trick had worked. They thought he was dead. He had overheard two of the pirates talking while he was prowling the galley one night in search of food, and found out he was thought dead. He'd also heard that Woll and Rogers had found the bloodstain he had placed on the hull below the port doors. He was glad of that. He'd come near to actually falling in the ocean while hanging out dangling his coat and slapping the bloodstained sleeve against the hull, as far down as he could reach, to make the stain.

Altogether, he'd been lucky. He'd gotten out of the ventilator shaft a moment before the man emptied his machine gun down it. He'd had the presence of mind to get his coat off and toss it back into the shaft, spreadeagled so that in the poor light the gunner would think he'd got his target. Then he'd had time to make the bloodstained trail.

After that, it had just been a matter of staying hid out.

He'd resented that.

Hiding out when in trouble wasn't his habit. It was a policy, he was convinced, which got you nothing. It was something he had never done in the past.

This time, though, common sense had given him no choice but to hole up. It was his physical condition. The rap on the head. Maybe it hadn't fractured his skull, but it wasn't something you kept walking around with. He'd done almost too much galloping around in the early stages, the way it was.

For two nights, he had been delirious. For safety, he had lashed himself to the hammock. After that, he had improved.

Now, in the water, he swam easily, testing his own condition. He approved of what he found. No nausea, no head-swimming, no ringing in his ears. Physical strength fair enough.

He'd used good judgment in holing up in the hammock in the flooded hold, where no one had come. Now he felt equal to a little action.

IN the adjoining hold, Lieutenant Commander Kelly's voice was yelling.

“Quiet down!” Kelly roared. “The watertight doors into the flooded hold split open. The water ran in here. That's all that happened.”

Kelly had developed the voice shouting at steers in Wyoming. It was entirely adequate.

“Help those who can't swim!” Kelly shouted.

So the watertight door between the two holds had burst.

Doc Savage swam over to the bulkhead, dived, following a slight current. He found the hole, learned he could go through, and did so. He came to the surface quietly.

Kelly was roaring, “Here's a pipe along this side. The guys who can't swim can hold to that. Bring 'em over here.”

The water was somewhat over a man's head. But it hadn't risen enough for anyone to reach the deck hatch. That wouldn't have done any good. There were iron bars spiked over the hatch opening.

The daylight which came through the hatch was pale. It was almost dark outside, obviously.

Doc said, “Kelly. Oh, Kelly.”

“Who's that? Who wants me?” Kelly demanded.

“Stop yelling,” Doc said, “and come over here. Keep your voice down.”

“Blazes!” said Kelly. He swam over. It was dark where Doc floated. “You found something that'll help?” Kelly asked enthusiastically.

Doc asked, “You are the commander of the submarine?”

“You should know that by now,” Kelly growled. “Say, who are you, anyway?”

“Savage.”

“Who?” Kelly's voice got strange, as tight as a violin string. “Doc Savage?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you come from?”

“I have been in the forward hold. The door burst open and let this water in. I came through that way.”

“Oh.”

“Listen to me,” Doc said. “As a Navy man, you have the rank to be in charge here. So I am not trying to tell you to do anything as an order.”

“I see,” said Kelly, more strangely. “You're not taking command.”

As a matter of truth, Doc knew he had enough weight with the Navy Department to take command, but he decided to pass the point. He was puzzled by the queerness in Kelly's voice. “Naturally not,” he said.

“I see,” said Kelly again.

Doc said, “I would suggest, though, that you got your men together and told them not to get excited enough to try anything reckless. I have no idea where we are, or what these pirates plan next. But I am going to scout around, and see if I can get hold of weapons and arm you fellows. Then, if we take them by surprise—”

Kelly reached out and got Doc's neck.

“I'd rather take you by surprise,” Kelly said.

Doc knew nothing was right.

“What is wrong with you?” he demanded.

“Brother,” Kelly said, “I guess you forgot we know you are head pirate. I guess nobody told you that. I guess you didn't know they shot the little guy with the bat ears and big feet, who told us about you.”

He tightened his hold on Doc's throat. He tried to slug.

Doc sank quickly. He had his lungs full of air, and he stroked downward with all his strength, sinking rapidly and pulling Kelly after him.

Once under the surface, Doc stayed down. He merely kept them both under, held his breath and waited.

Kelly had good lung capacity. He lasted over a minute, which was wonderful considering the amount of energy he burned up trying to choke Doc. But finally Kelly had to let go.

Doc stroked to the surface a few feet away for more air, got his bearings, sank and swam through the waterproof door. He was able to close the door behind him. There were fastening dogs on the other side. He closed them, wedged them.

ON the forward side of the bulkhead, Doc pressed an ear to the metal and waited.

Soon he heard Kelly say, “He hasn't come up. I guess I drowned him.”

Somebody demanded, "Who was it?"

"Doc Savage." Kelly said quickly, "Now wait a minute! Nobody say a word about this! We don't want these so-and-sos knowing we knocked off their chief. Keep your traps shut."

That was fine with Doc. He didn't want the so-and-sos finding out he was alive after all.

The bronze man swam back, climbed into his hammock and rested. He didn't really need the rest. He was pleased to find that out.

It got darker. The night was going to be as black as a bat's nightmare.

There didn't seem to be much activity on the decks of the *Farland*. There were no sounds at all, in fact. In the prison hold, they had quieted down. If they were talking, the voices didn't reach Doc.

Doc left the hammock, paddled silently to an iron-runged ladder, climbed it, reached a small hatch, and eased out quietly on deck.

He expected the prisoners to be guarded.

They weren't being watched at all.

Instead, the yacht was standing in close to the stern of the *Farland*, with every light and searchlight aboard turned on.

The yacht searchlights were sweeping the surrounding sea, the strange, ominous assemblage of wrecked vessels. Doc stared at the derelicts in amazement. It was the first he had seen of them. Each vessel, he saw, was not only hard aground on the ribbing of coral reefs, but large holes had been blown in the hulls of each of them, either by shellfire or by dynamite.

The tensely nervous manner in which the searchlights swept the wrecks was strange. There was no one in sight.

A faint flickering blue light, glancing over the surface of the sea—here and there a reef was showing, for the tide was out—puzzled Doc Savage. He decided it was reflecting from a cutting torch inside the *Farland*.

He worked forward carefully, intent on finding out why the torch was being used.

He noted another thing. The pirates were mostly on deck, well aft, all heavily armed, all watching the sea and the ship nervously.

It was as if they were in the presence of some devilish peril.

The forward part of the *Farland*, Doc realized, was now entirely unguarded, which was also strange.

The cutting torch was about amidships. After creeping through endless passages, he reached a spot where he could see what was going on.

The big purser's safe of the *Farland* was being sealed with the torch. Sealed, not cut open. They were sealing it with the torch, fluxing the metal together at intervals around the rim of the door.

Rogers, who was overseeing the job, said, "Good enough."

The torch popped out. There was only the light from flashlights.

“All right, nobody can get into it during the night now,” Rogers added. “We can come back tomorrow and take our time opening it.”

“We could have got into her tonight,” said the man with the torch.

“Sure. And move the stuff in this dark, not knowing what minute those zombies would tackle us.”

“You suppose they're still around?”

“Them zombies? Sure. Hell, yes.”

“They haven't shown themselves.”

“Since when did they? Get your torch. Come on. You're sure there is no other torch aboard?”

“No torch,” the man said. “There were two others, but I sent them on the yacht.”

“Okay. Nobody will be getting into that safe tonight. Come on. Let's get the hell off.”

“What about them submarine guys and the others? Won't they maybe drown?”

“Nah, they're on their own now. Let the boogers get them, if they want 'em.”

The group departed, every man with a gun and a flashlight in his hands, and with uneasiness the most prominent thing on his face.

“Keep a watch for them creep-guys,” Rogers warned.

BY now Doc Savage had a furious case of curiosity. He trailed the retreating Rogers and his gang, but they did nothing more exciting than board the yacht, which nosed up carefully so that they could slide aboard down a line.

The yacht backed up, turned carefully, steamed for about three quarters of a mile. Rattle of the anchors came across the water.

Not a light went out aboard the yacht. The searchlights stopped waving, but they were pointed at the sea so that they flooded the water in all directions with brilliance. The yacht lay there that way, apparently settled for the night.

Around the *Farland* now was the darkness, heavy, warm, evil with a strange odor, macabre and semi-still. The semi-stillness of the night was a quality which impressed itself upon Doc's consciousness slowly. A thing that was hard to define, it wasn't pleasant. It was like the quiet around a carcass which maggots are consuming. Not exactly quiet at all. Something that soon got to crawling in your nerves.

The way he felt, Doc concluded, could be summed up with the word dumfounded. He hadn't expected the pirates to get off the *Farland* for the night. They had left as if they were afraid to stay aboard. As if there was something around that they didn't dare face.

He tested the air with his nostrils. The odor? Some of it was reef-smell, the odor of low tide in the tropics. Nothing threatening about that, once you knew what it was. But there was more. It was hard to define, and more ominous.

The smell of death? Not exactly. Death has a smell, as anyone who has been on a battlefield can testify.

Of course it isn't just death that smells, but the things that go with it.

Creepy, Doc reflected. It began to get him.

He found himself tiptoeing—he was barefooted—as he began hunting for Monk, Ham, Renny and Teresa Ruth Riggert, all of whom might or might not be alive still.

The talker. That was the sensible way to make a quick general search. If the pirates hadn't jimmed the thing, or cut off some of the drops, the talker extended to just about every part of the ship.

Doc made his way to the bridge where the talker master set was located.

Nothing happened to him. At every step, he had the feeling it would. He couldn't get rid of the sensation.

On the bridge, he stood and listened for a while. He strained his ears against the maggot sounds of the night, the working, macabre, creepy sounds, until his ears sang.

He looked toward the yacht for a long time. The yacht was a white blaze of lights. They were keeping those lights on for some reason. They were afraid to be without the lights.

He could see the shark fins. The water was quiet, almost greasy-slick, and he could see the fins cutting the surface. Not one. There must have been hundreds of them. More sharks, Doc thought unpleasantly, than he had ever seen off Morro Castle in Havana harbor before the shark fishermen got to thinning them out because their livers were bringing such a high price.

More sharks than he saw any sensible reason for there being in one area of water.

He hoped the talker worked from storage batteries. He turned it on. It did, for the pilot bulb lit. The talkers usually worked off batteries so that they wouldn't fail in an emergency which shut down the ship generators.

He had a thumb on the talk lever when it became obvious he wouldn't need to call. When Trigger began screaming. When she started shrieking in a way no one, no one in the world, should ever have to scream.

The shrieks came from the talker speaker, and the talker wasn't doing them justice probably. No doubt the gadget was leaving out some of the quality. But the screaming didn't need anything added.

And in a moment Monk Mayfair joined in. He was shrieking too. Doc had never in his life heard Monk scream in just that way, with such a stomach-emptying sound.

## Chapter XI

THE this-is-awful howling didn't last long. Twenty seconds or a minute, it was hard to say.

In the distance, a rifle went *bang-bang*, and Doc jumped and looked for the sound. It was from the yacht. Siegel must be shooting his sharks again.

Doc headed for the companionway, then realized he hadn't the slightest idea where to go. He leaped back to the talker, said, "Monk! Monk! Trigger! Where are you? What is happening?"

He ended up yelling the questions at the top of his voice and getting no answer but the maggot sounds.

Doc left the bridge, went down companions with his feet a rattle on the rungs, and ran to the foredeck, to

the hatch over the prison hold.

“Kelly!” he shouted. “I am diving into the forward compartment and unlocking the door that is underwater. Get your men out. Get them together. Arm them with whatever you can!”

Kelly said, “My God, it's you again!”

He probably said more, but Doc was dashing for the other hatch and didn't hear it. The bronze man went in headfirst diving, reached the door, undogged it, and shoved it open.

He didn't go into the prison hold, and he didn't linger. He climbed back on deck.

“Door is open!” he called down through the bars at Kelly.

Kelly bawled something. He sounded like an angry bull in a barrel.

Doc went on. He found a deck locker which he knew contained line, wrenched it open, found the line inside. It was three-inch stuff. He heaved the end overboard, took a pair of half-hitches in the standing part about a bit, then slid down the rope toward the water.

He didn't enter the water. That wasn't his idea. Up here, near the bow, he could get a silhouette—the shape of anything outlined against the flare from the yacht. Anything that came or left the *Farland*.

Nothing moved for a while.

He tried some gymnastics, and got one ear, just barely one ear, under the water. That was the better to pick up any sounds. Sounds carried better underwater, providing the noises were made in the water. But he heard nothing, and shark-thoughts made him stop.

Then he saw it.

The word “it” was a little melodramatic, but it was the one that popped into Doc's mind. Because he couldn't tell what it was he was seeing. Something that floated, all right. Not a shark. Something on top of the water, but not a boat. Just a low hulk, shapeless in the intensely black night, that moved silently away from the hull of the *Farland*—from a point about amidships, Doc judged—and vanished, being swallowed up in the vaster blackness around about.

Doc couldn't have been more puzzled, and the hair on his nape more disturbed, by the moribund passing of a black ghost.

DOC climbed the rope back to the deck.

Several men, either submarine crew or *Farland* personnel, were standing around on the deck wringing out their wet garments or flapping their arms to sling the water off, but looking like roosters flapping their wings and getting ready to crow with pleasure. Doc could distinguish their silhouettes.

Doc moved toward them quietly, veered well to the right and went around them.

A man saw him, demanded, “Who's that?” and there was a wild scramble for cover on the part of everyone. They weren't taking any chances should bullets come around.

Doc went on.

What he wanted was a lifeboat. He reached the boat deck, and spent five minutes learning that there were no lifeboats. The boats, apparently, had been dropped at sea before the ship arrived here.

Life rafts the same. There wasn't a life raft aboard, if his search was any guide.

He compromised on a hatch cover. Hatch covers are supposed to be the traditional rafts of shipwrecked mariners, but Doc spent an agonizing amount of time before he found one which wasn't ironclad and would float. He could find no oars. He compromised again, on a push-stick from a shuffleboard game.

He got everything over the side silently, and got aboard his craft. If he stood just right, it wouldn't tip over.

He paddled a few yards, then paused.

"Kelly!" he shouted.

Somewhere Kelly gave voice to some profanity. He came to the rail. "It's that man again," he said. "Lord, Lord, can't somebody find a gun?"

"Kelly!" Doc called.

The answer was a splash nearby. Kelly had found something to throw at him.

"Keep out of the water," Doc warned. "It is full of sharks. If you don't believe that, look in the direction of the yacht and try to count the shark fins you can see cutting the surface."

"Not all the sharks swim," Kelly said.

Doc said, "Search the ship. There may be something in the way of weapons. I doubt it, because I believe the pirates have spent their time the last three days stripping her of everything in the way of weapons or means of escape. They have disposed of the lifeboats and life rafts. But find what you can. And hunt particularly for three men and a girl."

"I heard a girl scream."

"That is the one."

"We'll search the ship," Kelly said. "We were going to do that anyway."

"Try to get used to the idea of me not being head pirate," Doc called.

"That," Kelly said, "will take some doing."

Doc paddled off into the darkness.

He shouted. "Get some kind of a light aboard, Kelly, so I can find my way back."

"Brother, we'll have a light and wide-open hangman's noose for you," Kelly yelled.

He sounded a little doubtful, though.

DOC pushed his raft ahead into the black stomach of the unknown. The push-stick from the deck shuffleboard set, if you called them push-sticks, had a handle about like a garden rake and a Y affair at the other end. As a paddle, it was slightly better than nothing.

Shortly Doc found that he could reach the bottom, so he poled instead of paddled. In the very shallow water, there was less chance of sharks getting him if he fell off the hatch-lid or the thing upset.

There was other life than sharks in the water, he found. He could hear trigger fish go skipping in the darkness, and caught the fluttery sound, like a baby clapping its hands rapidly, of a crawfish fleeing through a thin puddle.

Once also he got a devil of a start when suddenly his legs began stinging. It was as if they had been scalded with water from ankles to knees, both legs, and he teetered around wildly, unnerved in spite of himself.

When he reached down to find what was the trouble, he encountered something slimy and as tenuous as a fog, and his hands also began to sting. For a moment, in spite of himself, there was pulsing terror. Not fear, exactly, or maybe it was fear of the helpless, pulsing kind that you couldn't control. An emotion that was wild horses and writhing snakes and black awfulness in the night. He fought the sensation, seemed to hold it back with his teeth.

The stinging, he finally realized, was a Portugese man o' war. These sea organisms resembled a child's purple balloon inflated and floating, with a cluster of slimy strings dangling beneath. They were unlovely things, somewhat unusual looking, and very common throughout the Caribbean. There was an acid, similar to the body content of some jellyfish, which would sting you unmercifully when you came in contact with them. That was the way the things trapped their food. Actually they weren't much more than a nuisance.

But it was a shaking experience.

Doc went on. His raft grounded. He pushed off, continued. In the intense blackness, he couldn't see much. But he knew he had passed at least one of the derelict ships, since he could see the silhouette of the thing between himself and the brightly lighted distant yacht.

He maintained the most complete silence possible. He was convinced that Trigger, Monk, Ham, Renny, had all been taken off the *Farland*. He had no proof. It was only a guess, or maybe a feeling. He didn't know what could have taken them, except that it hadn't been pleasant.

When someone said, "Ps-s-s-t!" it was startling.

Doc stopped. He was very still.

"Ps-s-s-t! Hey!" It was a man in the darkness somewhere near.

Doc Savage made his voice low, formed the words as deeply in his throat as he could, so that it would sound as much as possible like a voice from the distance.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The voice said, "You better get over here. It isn't safe to go wandering around here at night."

"Why isn't it safe?" Doc countered.

"Brother, wait until you've been around here a day or two, and you'll find out."

"Who are you?"

"Name's Allen. It's not important."

Doc asked, "King Edward Wales Allen?"

"Huh! How'd you know?"

"I heard that a colored man, King Edward Wales Allen, was captain of an inter-island trading steamer which had disappeared in the Caribbean."

"That's right," said Allen.

He was evidently a Jamaican Negro, because his English was as perfect as Oxford itself.

"COME aboard," said Allen. "You're from the steamer. We could see the outline of your raft against the light on the yacht."

Doc paddled over. The hatch-lid was an extremely slow means of navigation. He reached out and found the rail of a small steamer which had sunk until the rail could be reached from the water.

"Where did you hear about me?" Allen asked.

"From a girl, a secret operative for the Navy, working on the mystery of these vanishing ships."

Allen grunted without humor. "They didn't disappear. They was brought here. You can see that."

"Where is this place?"

"It's just an old shoal 'way out in the ocean."

"What name?"

"Skull Shoal."

Doc wasn't surprised. He had thought they must be in some such section. He remembered the location of Skull Shoal, because he liked to study charts.

Skull Shoal was probably the most remote spot in the Caribbean in these modern days of airplanes and steamship lanes.

The place was on the road to nowhere. That accounted for its loneliness. The Bahama Banks, consisting of some islands, and a far greater expanse of water that ranged from two to three or four fathoms deep—twelve to twenty feet deep—covering an expanse of thousands of square miles, lay to the westward. The Bahama shoals were dangerous, and avoided like the plague by heavy ocean traffic. Traffic to the north followed the Gulf Stream of the Florida coast. That from Cuba, New Orleans, Panama, for Gibraltar and the Mediterranean went to the south. The New York to South America traffic kept outside, farther east, to avoid pushing against the current of the great Gulf Stream which sometimes flowed faster than a man could walk, and went on northeast to warm the coast of England.

This was no crossroads. No one going anywhere had a reason to pass through this part of the sea. The region had been charted, mapped, sounded, and nothing found but enough reefs to make navigation dangerous. The more reason to keep away.

Nowhere near here were there islands which could possibly serve as secret bases for the enemy, so there was no reason for a seaplane patrol. It was just a nasty, useless, reef-ridden lost end of the earth's ocean.

“Skull Shoal, eh,” Doc Savage said.

A RIFLE whacked twice in the distance. Siegel after his sharks. The reports came flat and death-like.

The black man, Adams, said, “That’s Siegel. The sharks ate his brother. Some day they’ll eat Siegel, probably. I think he is gradually going crazy.”

“If not, he is going to drive himself insane,” Doc said.

“Siegel never seems to sleep when he’s here. He shoots sharks all the time.”

“You may be right about insanity.”

“Come aboard,” Allen said.

Doc got on the ship. He had a small line, which he had tied around his hatch lid. He anchored the hatch lid with this, tying the end of the line around the rail.

Allen said, “You were lucky to find anything that would float you. They destroy such things.”

“They evidently have not finished their job,” Doc said. “They have not looted the safe of the *Farland*. They sealed it with a welding torch, and plan to come back tomorrow and loot it. For some reason, they were afraid to stay on the *Farland* tonight.”

“They’re afraid of the boogers,” Allen said.

Allen led the way across the deck. They were, Doc could tell, heading for the after deckhouse. Unexpectedly, they came upon a barbed-wire barrier.

“Our barbed wire fence,” Allen explained. “Wait, I’ll okay you. Then they’ll let us through.”

In a louder voice—they had been whispering, Doc suddenly realized—Allen announced that he had a man from the *Farland* with him, and to let them in.

Soon there was noise of the barbed wire being opened. Three or four men were doing it.

“Get in quick!” someone said, when the wire was open.

Doc and Allen went in.

The barbed wire went up again. It went up quickly, the men panting with their haste, hurrying to replace the wire, hurrying as if there was a horror beyond, creeping toward their barricade.

It was hair-lifting.

Allen said, “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Inside. We’re fairly safe now. Not safe, but fairly so.”

They went through a door, which was also closed by a curtain. There was darkness inside, and Doc realized that four or five men were sitting there, just sitting there.

“They're the next watch,” Allen said. “They sit in here for a couple of hours so their eyes will get used to the darkness a little better.”

Doc tried to get rid of the feeling of death waiting in the night outside, and went on. He entered a room which was lighted by an oil lamp, where about twenty men seemed to live.

## Chapter XII

THE men looked healthy enough. There was enough flesh on their bodies and good tan on their skins. It was their faces that gave a looking-at-a-grave sensation.

Allen began introductions. Allen was big, tough, with the thin-lipped features of an Arab, the skin color of a chunk of good anthracite coal.

“This is Robert Elvan,” he said. “This is Cole, Jameson, Captain Tramez, Captain Lee, Williams, Deedwilder, Poz, Nandez, Noccio, Stevens—” He went on around, giving only names.

Of the group, Doc Savage had heard of Captain Tramez. Trigger had mentioned him as one of the men Samuel Woll had entertained. Then Tramez's small ship had disappeared. One of the first. Tramez was Brazilian, Doc remembered.

Doc addressed Tramez in Portuguese, the Brazilian tongue. “You were one of the first victims?” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” said Tramez eagerly. “You speak my language well. Are you Brazilian?”

Doc shook his head. “I spent many months exploring the jungles of northern Brazil, and in the Guineas. And I had studied the language before that.”

The men had been staring at Doc Savage dully, but in friendly enough fashion. Now one of them jumped, snapped his fingers.

“Say, I'll bet I know who you are!” the man said. “I saw you once before, in New York, at a merchant seaman's meeting. You gave a talk on methods of staying alive on a life raft or in a lifeboat at sea, how to catch fish, how to get water out of them, and so on. You're Doc Savage.”

Doc admitted it.

There was a quick change in the atmosphere. They hadn't resented him before. They just didn't figure that he offered any hope. But the mere fact that he was Doc Savage, of whom some of them had heard, put a different light on it.

As in the case of the prisoners in the hold of the *Farland*, some had heard of him, and some hadn't. Those who had heard probably had distorted stories, judging from the way they brightened up, Doc thought grimly. He felt anything but a superman.

To quiet them down, to get in touch with the way they were feeling, he told them what had happened to the *Farland*. The whole story, beginning with the fake torpedoing.

“About that same thing happened to all of us,” Allen announced. “That is, of course, in different locations, and minus the submarine trimmings.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Varying periods,” Allen said. “Tramez has been here about a year, the longest.”

Doc indicated the outside. “Why all the barbed wire and the barriers?”

Allen grimaced.

“The ogres,” he said.

“What?”

“The goblins. Come on. I'll show you some of their handiwork.”

Allen guided Doc to the rear, and pressed open a door. Beyond there was a smaller cabin with more bunks, and in the bunks a few men lying.

Doc went over. The men had been roughly treated, tortured in ways that were intended to cause the most exquisite pain.

Allen said, “You're a doctor. How are we taking care of them?”

Doc went from one to another, making an examination of each. None of them, he concluded, were in any danger of dying. But they had been through something that would give them nightmares for quite a while.

“A doctor can do little more for them,” Doc said.

Allen was pleased.

OUT came the story of the goblins.

“Captain Tramez was sailing along the South American coast when the pirates got his ship,” Allen explained. “Tramez was carrying a fair amount of gold dust and a shipment of commercial diamonds, and some platinum. That was what the pirates wanted, why they took his ship.

“On board Captain Tramez' vessel also were about thirty natives from the jungles of the Guineas. They were wild devils. There wasn't a drop of civilization in a carload of them.

“These natives were being taken around and up the Amazon to scout for rubber. They knew what rubber trees were, and they could stand the jungles and the climate. They were tough. Their chief, who was a nice old guy who could talk English, had sold them on the idea of being rubber scouts. They trusted this chief. They'd do anything he said, anything.”

Allen stopped for a moment. They could hear Siegel shooting sharks in the distance. One shot at a time now.

“The natives would have been no trouble if the pirates hadn't shot their chief, but that is what the pirates did first thing,” Allen continued. “Since then, the natives have been strictly for themselves. You see, nobody can talk their lingo. Sign language or anything else, they don't understand.”

“They are frightened,” Doc said.

“Yeah, that's it. As soon as we were marooned here—and we're marooned, don't forget that for a minute; the pirates destroy everything that can be used as a float or a boat—the natives went off to themselves.”

“Just a moment,” Doc interposed. “What is to keep you from building a boat?”

“First, no materials to do the job quick. Oh, we could do it if we had time. But those pirates make the rounds every three or four days, armed like—well, pirates—and destroy any boats that are being built. The rest of the time they leave us alone.”

“Food?”

“Well, that's getting to be a problem. So far, there has been plenty off the boats. Now I guess there'll be another supply on the *Farland*, so we can make out for a few more weeks.” He grimaced. “But food supply is what got the natives down on us.”

“The goblins, as you call them?”

“Yeah. You see, they have been getting along fine on the food angle. They're used to the tough life. They seemed to get along on this reef as well as they would in their jungle. But not us. We were beginning to see where we were going to starve to death.”

Allen gestured grimly.

“I'm not proud of this next,” he said. “We decided to catch some of the natives, and make them do our food-getting for us. We—well—we didn't do it. We got hell licked out of us. We should have let well enough alone, because after that the natives hunted us, instead of us hunting them.”

“Do they kill anyone when they catch them?”

“Not yet,” Allen said. “They just work them over—like these fellows here. Then turn them loose. But what they do to you when they catch you makes you wish you could take an easy way out by dying, according to these men they've caught.”

“The pirates are afraid of them, too?”

“Oh, sure. As scared as we are.”

Doc Savage was grimly silent for a while. Then he described the screaming Trigger had done on the *Farland*.

“Poor kid,” Allen said. “The goonies got her. Got those three friends of yours too, probably.”

THEY went back into the larger cabin. The men, Doc Savage noticed, had made themselves crude weapons, mostly clubs and spears, although there were a few sets of bows and arrows. There were no guns.

“Allen,” Doc said after a while.

“Yes?”

“You want to go with me to talk to these natives?”

Allen jumped. “Offhand, I would say I want nothing less.”

“Suit yourself,” Doc said. “It probably is not necessary.”

Allen was uncomfortable. "I'm scared of them, you understand. That is why I want no part of them. But if you think it would help—"

"No. The raft I am using will hold two if they are careful. I thought you might go along and show me where the natives are camped. But I can manage, if you will give me some idea."

Allen eyed the bronze giant. "They'll just catch you and pull out your eyelashes and things like that."

Doc said nothing. He went to the door. Allen followed. There were different men in the darkened outer room. Evidently the guard had changed. Doc and Allen went on out into the night. They were passed through the barbed-wire barricade.

Doc untied his hatch lid raft. "If you will tell me about where to find the natives."

Allen spat noisily. He was very black and absolutely invisible in the night.

"I guess I'll go along," he said.

"Thanks."

The raft held them both. In fact, it seemed to balance better with two aboard than with one. Allen had a board for a paddle. Doc wielded the shuffleboard stick.

"I'll guide," Allen said. "You paddle."

They progressed slowly. The night was stiller now, except for the maggot working noises, which was probably just a sound characteristic of the reefs, the noises in microscopic amounts of the innumerable marine creatures which lived on the reefs.

Then the dog howled. It was the same sound Doc had heard before the "torpedoing" on the *Farland* four nights ago. It was distant.

"WHAT was that?" Doc asked.

"Eh?" said Allen.

"The dog howl."

"Oh that. That's Siegel."

"The same man who shoots the sharks?"

"Yeah. He gets to feeling wolfish. I've heard them say he only makes that noise before there's some excitement. But that's wrong. He howls at night. They used it as a signal, too, but mostly he howls at night. The guy is nuts."

"Signal," Doc said. "They use the howl for a signal?"

"I've heard."

Doc thought about it for a while.

"They used it for a signal on the *Farland*," he said. "Well, that clears that up. I had been wondering about the dog howling in mid-ocean."

Allen continued to manipulate the direction of the raft. There were no stars overhead, for it was cloudy. He kept a course by consulting the lighted yacht.

“We should be about there,” he said.

The words were no more than out of his mouth when there was a silent avalanche, and a smelly one, out of the surrounding blackness. Bodies, little bodies that smelled like tigers and were as tough as leather and wood. They landed upon Doc and Allen with silent fury.

“We *are* here!” Allen gasped, before they got him underwater.

### Chapter XIII

DOC SAVAGE made no effort to struggle. Instead, he listened for the first word of the native language.

The attackers didn't use any words. They saved everything for business. They didn't, as far as Doc could tell, even grunt.

Allen was fighting.

“Don't fight them,” Doc said.

“I didn't intend to,” Allen gasped. “But I'm scared.” They evidently got him underwater again, judging from the gurgling and spluttering. After that, he didn't struggle. He just swore moist, wonderfully picturesque very perfect English oaths.

The natives had attacked them from a reef, in very shallow water. Now that they were prisoners, they were guided along this reef, and came to a wooden boat. One of the bigger schooners. They were hauled aboard.

The natives were camped in the schooner hold. They had placed coral blocks together, put coral sand on that, and made themselves a place for a fire. A fire was burning. When they needed fuel, apparently they just knocked out another bulkhead.

Miss Riggert, Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks and Renny Renwick were in a corner. They weren't tied. They were perfectly free to do whatever they wanted to do. The only thing they would want to do was sit there, because in front of them was a nicely arranged hundred or so of sharp sticks, sticks which came to needled points and had the tips coated with something.

They looked at Doc with a mixture of pleasure and discouragement, a combination that was nerve-sickening.

Monk pointed at the sharp sticks. “Curare,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“They know the name of it.”

Allen said, “That's right. Curare. They tip their arrows with it. They had a supply when the pirates caught them. That's really why the pirates are so scared of them.”

Doc asked, “You all right?”

“I guess so,” Monk said. “Except for the prospects.”

“How about you, Miss Riggert?”

She tried a grin that didn't jell. “I'm just six times as scared as I ever thought I'd be.”

One of the natives, one who was by far the ugliest of the lot and apparently leader on the strength of that, spoke to the others. That was what Doc had been waiting for.

He knew their language!

He had been banking on that chance. On the possibility that he would be able to talk to them in their own tongue. It wasn't such a long shot. He tried to avoid snapping fingers for miracles when possible.

The truth was that he had spent many months doing exploration work in the northern Amazon section, the Guinea back jungles, the whole territory. Part of his work had been making sound transcripts of the native dialects, studying them, classifying them. Later he had lectured on the subject, and done a short book and a few scientific articles.

It was a piece of luck that had fallen in his lap.

Now if he could take advantage of it.

DOC SAVAGE said, as calmly as he could manage, which wasn't so calm at that, in their tongue, “The Little One Who Wrinkles was very good to me. He made me his spirit guide.”

The effect—both the shock of hearing their own language, and what he said—was more than he had hoped for. It was swell.

When he disengaged himself from the natives who held him, no quick moves, they let him go. He sat down on the floor, near the fire. He was tired, with nerve-ache in his legs.

He began talking in the lingo. He spoke for a while of the One with the Wrinkles. This individual was a chief in their part of the country, a fellow who had a reputation over many miles of jungle. He wasn't of the same tribe. But his name carried weight. It was something like a group of poor lost Republicans finding somebody who was a personal friend of Dewey.

The attention he got was rapt. It wasn't exactly friendly. But it was far from hostile.

Doc kept talking. He worked around to the present situation. He explained that there were bad white men as well as bad natives. He lambasted the pirates for a while.

He saved his clinching argument for the last—the fact that their native jungle wasn't so far away but that it could be reached in a week or so, if they got a boat.

The boat was the thing. And if they would all work together, the whites and the natives, they might be able to get the boat.

Knowing that if he stopped there, they would be smart enough to figure they were being sold a bill of goods, he continued talking. He explained that the white men needed help. In fact, they needed the natives to show them how to get food, and that was why they had been foolish enough to attack the natives earlier. That, of course, had been a mistake. Nobody knew that better than the white men.

He was perspiring mentally when he finished the job of selling.

There was a dead silence.

The ugly one said, "You will sail us back home? We do not understand these boats or how to find a trail across the sea."

Doc said he would. By the One with the Wrinkles, he would.

Suddenly every native got a wide grin.

"Damn me, upon my word!" exploded Allen, very black and very English.

Monk asked, "They going to help us, Doc?"

"Seems so."

Monk's grin broke from ear to ear. He could have hung his hat on either end of that grin.

"I haven't felt better since that chorus girl sued Ham for breach of promise," he said.

## Chapter XIV

THEY had quite an argument with Lieutenant Commander Kelly. He wasn't inclined to be cooperative about letting them aboard the *Farland*. Kelly leaned over the rail in the darkness and described the kind of a rat he smelled, going into sulphur-coated detail.

Doc asked, "Have you found any guns?"

"If we had, I'd let you aboard, then stage a massacre," Kelly said.

In the distance, the dog-howl sounded. It came quivering mournfully over the shark-infested water.

Kelly added, "I wish that guy would go back to shooting sharks."

"Find any explosives?"

"Nah," Kelly said. "If there were any aboard, they dumped them."

"What about fuel oil? The *Farland* is an oil-burner."

"Plenty of that. What good's it?"

"In a ship that size, there are a lot of containers—big kettles from the galley, water buckets, fire extinguishers that could be emptied."

Kelly said thoughtfully, "You sound like a guy with an idea."

Doc said, "There are wooden doors, crating, planking, hatches, to make rafts."

"You couldn't go to sea in such craft."

"Not very far to sea. Maybe far enough."

"As far as the yacht, huh?"

“Yes.”

Kelly thought about it for a while. “That's not a bad plan. Only I don't like the idea of making with fists against machine guns.”

“We could use fire bombs. And these natives have some curare, one of the most deadly arrow poisons in existence.”

“Hm-m-m.”

“It would take fast work. We would have to do it tonight, before dawn.”

More thought from Kelly.

“Wait a minute,” Kelly said. “I'll toss you down a rope ladder.”

THE first raft which was seen by the lookout on the yacht was to the seaward side. The side opposite the direction of the beached ships. The raft came slowly into the zone of illumination from the searchlights.

“Ahoy, a strange ship!” the lookout howled, making a slight error.

The alarm brought the pirates pouring out on deck loaded with a minimum of clothes and plenty of guns.

“There's another one!” someone shouted.

The next five minutes produced evidence that they were surrounded. About twenty rafts were approaching slowly. They came from all sides.

“We're surrounded,” Rogers complained.

“They can't be armed,” Woll said.

“No,” agreed Rogers dubiously. “But they might have pulled something out of a hat.”

Woll ordered, “Let them get fairly close. Then use the machine guns.”

It was a good idea, except that each raft suddenly began giving off a tremendous quantity of smoke. There were containers aboard every raft filled with fuel oil and anything else that would make a thick black smoke.

The breeze, which was very slight, drifted the smoke from the windward rafts toward the yacht.

Woll said, “Get the anchor up. Get way on her. We'll get out of here.”

“What about the reefs?” Rogers asked.

“Searchlights pointed at the water!” Woll snapped. “We can see where we are going.”

It worked fine. The yacht got under way. They could see the bottom by the searchlight glare, and easily kept in water thirty to fifty feet deep—until they ran into the smoke. Siegel sat on the anchor winch in the bow and dog-howled derisively at the rafts and was still doing it when the yacht went aground.

The yacht hit on coral sand, fortunately, and not hard. Just enough to stick her.

The black smoke began to thicken ominously around them. The panic started.

Woll bellowed, "Save your ammunition until you see them!" There was more fear than theatrics in his voice.

Then Rogers screamed. Actually screeched. Because a smoking iron keg was sitting on the deck near the rail, almost beside him, where none had been before. "They're putting the smudge pots right on board!" he howled.

The natives began coming over the rail. One white man. Just natives, except for the one white man. The white man, who was Monk Mayfair, didn't do any yelling. That was unusual because ordinarily Monk liked to howl like a panther when he fought.

DOC SAVAGE and Kelly had a few hard words. Their raft had upset, dumping them into the shark-infested water. The short time they were in the water—two and a half seconds at the most—gave them both gray hair.

"What were you trying to do?" Doc demanded.

"My oar broke," Kelly muttered. "Dammit, we're missing the fight!"

Doc listened. "There shouldn't be any fighting yet. Everybody was to wait for the signal. The signal hasn't sounded."

"You're damned right it hasn't," Kelly growled. "Because I was going to give it myself. But listen."

There was undoubtedly fighting on the yacht. Such a bedlam couldn't be anything else.

"All of the yelling," Doc said, "is being done by the pirates."

"Yeah. You remember them natives—how quiet they were when they operated?"

Doc had been thinking the same thing. The natives were undoubtedly doing the battling on the yacht. White men would have had more to say to the pirates, particularly Kelly's crew.

Doc said, "Monk had charge of the native contingent."

"He understood they were to wait the signal? Then everybody attack at once?"

"Monk was clearly told."

"Somebody jumped the gun," Kelly complained. "Come on! Lean on that oar! We'll miss the show!"

They didn't miss all of it. Afterwards, both men wondered what in the name of insanity had made them so wildly anxious to get into such a thing. The yacht was a hell-mess of choking black smoke, confusion, violence, death, fear, fight.

The other white men began coming aboard. They did plenty of bellowing.

Doc Savage had suggested a series of passwords. They began bellowing, "Damn! Damn! Damn!" when they came aboard. The idea was that nobody was to club, stab, or choke anybody else who was hollering, "Damns."

The pirates, of course, soon caught up. and began yelling, "Damns!" themselves. About the time they thought they had something, Doc whistled piercingly. The password instantly changed to, "Hitler! Hitler! Hitler!" This was the cue to club, stab, choke anyone who was still hollering, "Damns."

It was silly, but it let you know your friends.

Searchlight lenses were popping and jangling as they were smashed. The breeze by now was clearing the yacht somewhat of smoke. Since blackness was essential so that the pirates could not do effective work with their rifles and machine guns, all searchlights possible were being doused.

Doc himself took the light-cluster on the bridge. He had his makeshift raft oar, with which he did plenty of poking and swinging, downing the discouraging total of only one man who was still bellowing, "Damns!"

He got the bridge lights out. Then he caught Woll's voice, swearing at Rogers. Woll, no longer the hamming actor, just a mortally scared man.

Doc headed for the sound.

Woll and Rogers were trying to get the launch over the side. They had it swung out on the davits, and Rogers was in the craft, trying to pull Woll in also.

"Let go me!" Woll told Rogers. "We can't leave all that money in the cabin! I can run down and grab some, just a bagful—"

Rogers cursed him. "I'd lower this launch by myself, if I could, you greedygut!" Rogers snarled. "Thinking of money at a time—"

Doc landed on them.

HE took on Rogers first, on the theory that Rogers was the tougher, which was a mistake. Rogers caved almost at once, when Doc got a fist into his stomach. Woll didn't. Woll just grunted when he was hit in the middle. Grunted and wrapped his arms around Doc.

Woll was like a python. The constricting strength in his arms was terrific. That seemed to be all he intended to do, squeeze. He settled down to do it, and Doc's ribs sounded like cracking lath.

They got down in the bottom of the launch, in a flurry of cushions, life-preserver jackets and oars. Doc worked on such sensitive parts of Woll as he could reach with his fingers. Woll did plenty of agonized yelling. And squeezed harder.

The pirates were now shouting "Hitler!" everywhere aboard. Judging from the sounds, it was interfering with the successful progress of the battle.

Doc fought to get enough air to whistle. He finally managed to lunge and bang Woll's head against a thwart, and the man was discouraged enough to loosen his grip.

Doc whistled. The password was now, "Fooley!" and the attackers went to work on the "Hitler!" shouters.

Doc felt foolishly weak. It was still the effect of the rap over the head he had received in the beginning of the affair.

But Woll decided he wanted out of the launch. He wanted somewhere else in a hurry. He tore free, and

got out.

Woll seemed to think he was getting out on the side of the launch from which he could step to the yacht deck. He was wrong. It was the other side, and the waiting sharks got their dinner.

Doc Savage was crouched in the launch, panting and wondering if he was really going to die, when Lieutenant Commander Kelly came over to see how he was.

“We didn't get to change the password to 'Mussolini,’” Kelly said.

“How—come—out?” Doc gasped.

“I'm not complaining. The yacht's okay, too.”

“The cabin—money. See about it.”

“You all right?”

“If I don't die, I am.”

Kelly went away for about five minutes and came back whistling long, astonished whistles to himself.

“I didn't count it,” he said. “That would take a few hours. You'd have to weigh out the bulk gold, the platinum and stuff.” He leaned over the launch. “You going to die?”

“Not this time,” Doc decided.

Kelly nodded. He was lighting a cigar, one of a pocketful which he'd found in the cabin. “Say, Captain Davis of the *Farland* knows why the pirates took his ship. Gold. Carload of it in the safe.”

“Carload?”

“Well, maybe not. But four millions of it, whatever that would be. Me, I never seen enough gold to know. But it seems the U. S. A. was shipping this over to Italy to show those Italian bankers they had better stabilize their currency and stuff. I guess they were loaning the gold to them to stop the chaos. Anyway, the gold was just part of several shipments that are going over. Seems all ships bound for Italy now carry a little. Woll found that out.”

Kelly added, “This being a war, people think of gold as not being worth troubling about. I don't know. Me, I guess gold has been around too long as money base for old Hitler or anybody else to change it right off the bat.”

“It isn't to be sneezed at.”

Kelly laughed. “You don't hear me sneezing. Say, you hear what happened to that nut, Siegel?”

“No.”

“Right in the middle of the fight, Siegel howled like a dog and jumped into the ocean. He swam around for a while. Then he swam back and yelled for somebody to throw him a line, and somebody did. He climbed on board and surrendered. The sharks wouldn't even eat him. What do you know about that!”

Doc Savage asked, “What about Monk Mayfair?”

“The homely gimmick who was supposed to hold the natives back so everybody could attack at once?”

“Yes.”

“We can't find him.”

There is, Doc Savage thought exasperatedly, something phony about that. Monk, as a matter of fact, had instructions to keep the natives from attacking at all, if it was possible. The reason went back to a fundamental rule which Doc Savage had practiced for a long time. That of not taking life unnecessarily. The natives, armed with their curare-poisoned stabbing implements, would cause plenty of death in the fight. Hence the order to hold them back. The job shouldn't have been entrusted to Monk, Doc reflected, because Monk had a habit of having an accident, making a mistake, or something, which resulted in those who probably needed killing having just that happen to them. Monk was always quite innocent.

Doc lifted his voice. “Monk!” he shouted.

“Coming,” Monk's voice answered. Monk was out on the water somewhere. He approached, paddling innocently on his raft.

“What happened to you?” Doc demanded.

“I had trouble with my raft,” Monk said, as innocent as a cat with his head stuck in the cream-pitcher. “Missed the whole prayer-meeting.”

Monk climbed aboard. Doc examined him closely.

“Two black eyes, a lost tooth, no pants, no shirt, no skin on your knuckles,” Doc said dryly. “Trouble with your raft, eh? You better keep away from rafts, don't you think?”

THE END

#### THE WHISKER OF HERCULES

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