



# WEIRD VALLEY

## A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed  
by Tom Stephens*

### Chapter I

THE old man deceived Monk Mayfair completely.

In one sense, though, Monk deceived himself. This deceiving himself was a thing he did not often do. Ham Brooks, the lawyer, often contended that Monk Mayfair had been born deceived, as well as: sawed-off, box-bodied, small-eyed, big-mouthed, hairy, lop-eared and generally worthless. All but the first and last of these contentions were patently true, as a look at Monk Mayfair would show. The last adjective, generally worthless, depended on the viewpoint.

Naturally no man is born deceived, and Monk had acquired a suspicious nature. Ham Brooks was just prejudiced. Ham and Monk were great friends, in a violent way.

The old man paid them a visit one afternoon when Doc Savage happened to be away, out on Long Island looking through a microscope at a new germ some fellow had found.

The old gaffer came bustling in on them with a big grin.

“Hello, sonny,” he said to Monk.

Ham Brooks laughed at the idea of Monk, who was a world-renowned industrial chemist, being called sonny.

Monk was irritated. “Take another look, Pop. Do I look like your sonny?” he suggested sourly.

The old chap examined Monk. The old man was quite old indeed, and appeared to be constructed of

sinew, rocks and brown leather.

“God help me, no!” he said. “No, siree!”

Ham Brooks laughed again.

The laugh caused the elderly duffer to turn to Ham and ask, “What's so funny, pretty-pants?”

Which got Ham's goat. Ham gave a great deal of attention to his clothes. During normal times he had spent much effort pursuing the title of Best Dressed Man in New York City, and to win such a distinction, you had to be distinctly high-class with your dressing. It was crude and jarring to be called pretty-pants.

The old fellow looked at them. “Now you don't like me,” he complained.

“We don't like you or dislike you, because we don't know you,” Monk told him.

The old gentleman was becoming indignant.

“I come in here to be friends!” he said, his voice getting a little louder with each word. “And you get mad at me right off the bat.”

“We're not mad,” Monk said, “but you're hot on your way to getting us mad.”

The old chap flapped his arms.

“Get mad!” he bellowed. “Get mad and insult me! Call me a liar! Go ahead, call me a liar! Tell me I'm not two hundred and ninety years old!”

MONK said, “Oh, sit down and calm yourself. And if you've got any business around here, get it off your mind.”

The old gentleman snorted loudly. He looked around and picked out a chair and planted himself in it. “World gets more discourteous every time I come out for a look,” he said angrily.

Ham Brooks frowned at the ancient visitor. “What was that you said a minute ago about how old you are. Did I misunderstand you?”

“Why should you misunderstand?” yelled the old fellow. “Your hearing is all right, ain't it?”

Monk jumped, recalling that the old fellow had said that he was two hundred and ninety years old.

“Just who are you?” Monk asked.

“Call me Methuselah. Methuselah Brown,” the old fellow said.

“And just what kind of a gag are you trying to pull on us?” Monk continued.

“There you go—call me a liar!” yelled Methuselah Brown.

“So you're two hundred ninety.”

The old man snorted. “Don't like your tone. Shouldn't have come down here in the first place.”

Ham Brooks stood up and said, "Will you excuse Mr. Mayfair and myself for a few moments? Just wait right here, and we will be back shortly."

"Go ahead." The old fellow snorted. "Gonna put your heads together and decide I'm crazy. I know how it goes."

Monk and Ham retired to an inner room, which was Doc Savage's scientific library, and did just exactly that. They closed the door and lowered their voices.

Monk said, "The old coot is obviously a nut. You could tell that the minute he walked in and started getting his feelings hurt every time we said anything to him."

Ham Brooks as a matter of policy hated to agree with Monk about anything. But he was equally convinced that their visitor was mentally deranged.

"We can't be bothered with him hanging around here," Ham said.

"No, I've got some laboratory work to do," Monk agreed.

"Why don't you take him out for a walk, and maybe buy him a meal? Sometimes food quiets them. Find out where he lives and take him home to his folks," Ham suggested.

"Why me? What's the matter with you?"

Ham said, "Oh, all right. I'll match you to see who does it."

Monk sneered at him. "Nothing doing. The last six times we've matched, I've lost. You've got some kind of a trick coin or gimmick."

"Well, we can just put him out."

"Better talk to him first, and decide whether he's the harmless kind of lunatic or not. If he's not harmless, we'll call the birdie wagon. If he is, one of us will take him home, or something."

They went back into the reception room. Their elderly, leathery visitor looked at them with small blue eyes in which wrath sparkled. He was now smoking a large corncob pipe which was reminiscent of a polecat.

"Decided I was crazy, didn't you?" he bellowed.

"Oh, lower your voice," Monk said. "After all, the side might fall out of the building."

The old fellow flapped his arms again.

"Shouldn't have come here!" he howled. "Told that Doctor Frederick Rayburn I would just get insulted! Told him it wouldn't do any good!"

Ham and Monk exchanged somewhat slack-jawed looks. Doctor Frederick Rayburn was probably the most eminent physician in his field, his field being a broad one which could best be described as the chemistry of living organisms. Biochemistry was the word.

"JUST exactly why did you come here, Mr. Brown?" Ham asked.

“I was told to see a fellow named Doc Savage.”

“Who sent you?”

“I just as much as told you. Doctor Frederick Rayburn sent me.”

“Why?”

“Doc Rayburn told me Doc Savage would be interested in my case.”

“Interested because of what?”

“The old man spouted smoke indignantly from his malodorous pipe.

“Words, words, words!” he yelled. “All words and no action, like everybody these days! Is this where I find this Doc Savage, whoever *he* is, or isn't it?”

“This is where you find him.”

“Well, trot him out!”

Ham explained patiently, “Doc is not in right now.”

“Then get hold of him!” shouted Methuselah Brown. “I'm tired of talking to office-boys!”

Monk, who was not noted for patience, now did some shouting himself. “Listen, old-timer, you're aggravating us unnecessarily. We don't believe you, and nobody else would believe you, and either quit blaming us for that or quit howling at us. If you want to see Doc Savage, behave like a white man, and if we think it's worth while, we'll call him in. Otherwise, out on your ear you go.”

“You couldn't throw me out, sonny!”

“One of us would be mighty surprised if I didn't,” Monk assured him. “Now are you going to behave yourself?”

The old fellow surprised them by subsiding somewhat.

“What do I have to do to convince you children!” he demanded.

“The first thing,” Monk told him, “is just sit there and stink up the place with that pipe while we call Doctor Rayburn and find out how much of this is imagination.”

“Go ahead, kiddy.” With a snort.

Monk and Ham went back into the library to make the telephone call. The telephone had two pony sets there, so that they could both talk and listen.

“The screwball things that happen around here!” Ham said. He began to grin. “I don't know but what this is the goofiest one that has come along. Two hundred and ninety years old!”

“It's a gag,” Monk declared. “It's got to be a gag.”

“This Doctor Frederick Rayburn is a serious kind of a chap, with more dignity than a new congressman. Somehow I doubt if he would pull a practical joke on Doc.”

“I suppose the old bag of bones is two hundred ninety years old!” Monk said violently.

Ham laughed. The thing was beginning to strike him as funny.

He got Doctor Frederick Rayburn's office on the telephone, and a very staid-voiced office girl told him to hold the wire. Ham waited, mentally picturing Rayburn's ultra-swank offices on middle Park Avenue in a building which you hardly dared enter unless wearing a silk hat and cutaway.

Ham recognized Doctor Rayburn's rather preoccupied and over-dignified voice immediately. The man might sound slightly like a stuffed shirt, but he wasn't.

"I imagine you are calling about Mr. Methuselah Brown," said Rayburn self-consciously.

Ham said, "That's right, but this isn't Doc, it's Ham Brooks. We are checking up to see whether this is something we should bother Doc with."

"It is my opinion Savage should be called at once," Rayburn said. "Of course you can use your own judgment. But you might be interested in knowing how the case came to my attention."

"You bet we would," Ham assured him.

DOCTOR FREDERICK RAYBURN began, "I was born in the state of Chiapas, which is one of the states in southern Mexico, adjoining the Guatemala border. My father was doing research for a fever foundation fund at the time, and my mother had gone along as assistant. I lived there until I was seven years old, during which time I met an old fellow named Davis. He called himself Arctic Davis."

Ham asked, "Pardon me, Doctor, but is all this personal history a part of it?"

"I want to explain how I became involved," Rayburn said stiffly. "It is such an unusual matter that I would prefer to give such an explanation. In other words, if this turns out to be something other than it seems to be—and God knows, it seems utterly impossible—I should like for you to know exactly how I happened to meet this old man and send him to you."

"I see your point," Ham admitted.

Doctor Rayburn continued, "The section of Chiapas where I lived those years is very remote and very lovely, and it has always held a fascination for me. It might be, too, that there is something in man's psychic makeup which makes him want to return to the scenes of his youth. At any rate, all of my life I have gone back to Chiapas on visits. I think the longest interval that I allowed to elapse between visits was four years, when I was in Europe studying. On some of these visits, I would see this old chap, Arctic Davis, again. He liked me, I am sure. I can not say that I particularly liked Davis, but he fascinated me, because there was something strange and mysterious about him. I could never figure out exactly what it was, but the impression of mystery always persisted."

"This old fellow who says his name is Methuselah Brown—is he Davis?" Ham asked.

"No, no. No indeed," Rayburn said quickly. "Let me get to the point. Arctic Davis recently came to me here in New York."

"When was that?"

"Three days ago," Doctor Rayburn replied. "I was quite surprised to see Davis, because I had never heard him speak of leaving the Chiapas wilderness. But here was old Arctic Davis in New York—and he had a most remarkable request. He didn't call it a request. He referred to it as a gift. He said the thing

was so unbelievable that he would not attempt to convince me, or even tell me what it was, by the use of words. He would, instead, suggest that I examine a friend of his—he referred to the man as his very best friend, in fact—and draw my own conclusions. The man to be examined turned out to be this old Methuselah Brown, as he calls himself.”

“You examined him—Brown?” Ham asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you conclude?”

Doctor Rayburn's voice went up a few notches. And Ham suddenly realized that the specialist was laboring under considerable emotional excitement. Rayburn was actually wrought up about this Methuselah Brown business.

“I concluded that I had better have a man of Doc Savage's capability look into the thing,” Rayburn said.

Ham said, “But I would like to know exactly what—”

“Your curiosity is quite understandable, but I am sorry,” said Rayburn flatly. “I am going to keep my conclusions to myself, and I will tell you why: frankly, they make me wonder if I'm not mentally unbalanced. This is all the information I feel I should give you. You had better call Doc Savage. I'm sorry if you are displeased. Good bye.”

And the specialist hung up.

## Chapter II

MONK and Ham looked at each other blankly. The conversation with Rayburn was disturbing, because they knew the specialist was not a flighty man.

“Rayburn was worked up,” Monk said, voicing an obvious conclusion.

Ham nodded. “Well, he actually sent this old bag of rocks to see Doc. We found that out, anyway.”

“You suppose we had better call Doc Savage?”

“Two hundred ninety years old,” Ham said bitterly. He leaned back and frowned at the ceiling. “No, I don't think we had better call Doc. That old guy in there isn't two hundred and ninety years old, for the simple reason that nobody lives to be two hundred and ninety years old these days.”

“You figure it follows therefore that somebody is lying?” Monk asked.

“Or joking. This thing could still be a gag.”

“Rayburn didn't sound as if it was any gag.”

“You can't tell about that. These medical men pull the dangdest practical jokes on each other sometimes. Maybe Rayburn isn't the tower of dignity we thought he was.”

“That guy,” said Monk, “is so serious and dignified that he creaks.”

“Let's go in and give that old goat the third degree,” Ham suggested. “Maybe we can shake the joker out of the deck.”

Methuselah Brown was sitting blissfully in a fog of choking blue pipe smoke when they went back into the reception room.

“Got fooled, didn't you,” he said. “Found out Doc Rayburn sent me.”

Monk coughed. “What on earth are you smoking?”

“My private stock,” said the old man. “Grow it myself. Have grown it for a hundred and twenty years. Got it from an Indian named Potato, who once met George Washington.”

“My, my, so now you knew George Washington,” Monk said.

“Never said it. Met his half-brother, Lawrence, once, though. Lawrence raised George after he was about eleven years old. Just barely met Lawrence, though. Don't know a thing about him.”

Monk couldn't help grinning. The thing was absurd. “That's fine,” he said. “Knew Lincoln too, I suppose.”

“Stop kidding me,” the old man said. “I know you don't believe me. Wouldn't have good sense if you did, would you?”

Monk eyed the old gentleman thoughtfully, not sure exactly how to take Methuselah Brown.

“Are you serious about this thing?” Monk asked.

“What thing? Never get too serious about anything, on account of that's the way you get heart trouble and things.”

“I refer,” said Monk, “to the very dubious matter of you being two hundred and ninety years old.”

“Sure, I'm serious. Anyway, it's the truth. I guess that's what you mean.”

“If you're lying, we're going to find it out,” Monk warned.

“If! If!” The old man snorted. “Why say if? Just say you know I'm lying, why don't you?”

Monk told him patiently, “Look, Pop, we're giving you the benefit of the doubt, at the expense of making fools out of ourselves. So why not coöperate?”

“Coöperate how?”

“Tell us just who you claim to be, and what's on your mind.”

The old man popped a hand on a knee. “By cracky, why didn't you say that before! That's what I came here to do. Now you two kids just sit back and listen.”

HIS proper name, said the old gentleman, was Christopher Brown, and he was born in Colonial Salem in the year 1654. These were the days when old puritanical Salem was at its worst, when the burning for witchcraft was in full sway. Christopher Brown had apparently been a young man who sowed a wild oat or two, and was a non-conformist, as well as a practical joker.

His practical joking got him into trouble at the age of twenty. This was the year 1674, on November 24, when he was charged with holding conversations with the Devil. This was all an outgrowth of a plain lie

which he had told as a joke.

“What made me maddest,” said Methuselah Brown, “was that what really got me in the mess was saying that the Devil appeared to me as a gentleman, a fellow in genteel clothes and with decent manners. That really set those old Puritan witch-chasers up on their ears. The result was that I had to get busy as heck, tell another bunch of lies, and convince them I was fibbing in the first place. They took this witchcraft seriously in those days.”

He warmed up on the subject.

“Why, the year before, in 1673, a poor girl named Eunice Cole was tried on a charge of associating with the Devil. There was a whole cycle of Devil-meets-girl about that time, and—”

“How clearly do you remember all this?” Ham interrupted.

“Clear enough. Why?”

“With enough distinctness to describe Salem as it was in those days, and the people who lived there?”

“Sure.”

“Put on your hat,” Ham said briskly. “And if you're not lying, we'll darn soon know about it.”

Monk trailed along downstairs. Doc Savage's office was on the eighty-sixth floor of one of the prominent midtown skyscrapers. They maintained a private garage in the basement which usually contained several cars, all of them special machines which they had equipped for their peculiar needs. They took a dark sedan which was the least unorthodox of the cars.

They headed uptown.

“Hey, shyster, where we going?” Monk demanded of Ham.

“I've got a friend,” Ham said. “He's the world's leading authority on witchcraft, Salem, and the Salem period. What he doesn't know about Salem just didn't happen.” He glanced at Methuselah Brown. “We'll soon have our two-hundred-ninety-year-old friend smoked out of his bush.”

The old gaffer snorted.

“You're in for an awful shock,” he said.

HAM'S friend lived in one of the more impressive stone houses in Westchester County. By the time the ride up there ended, Monk and Ham were losing their confidence, and their patience with themselves along with it. They felt it reflected on their good sense to believe that there could be any truth in such a preposterous thing.

But the ride had given them a chance to inspect old Methuselah Brown at close range, and they could see unusual evidences of, if not ageless antiquity, at least something strange. His skin, for one thing, had a leathery quality that was not quite natural. In fact, the more they looked at it, the more it looked like a hide that might have been on a man for nearly three hundred years.

The old gaffer's teeth were worn off nearly to the gums. Not decayed. Worn off. They were sound teeth, but they were worn the way no man's teeth become worn in a normal lifetime, or even two or three lifetimes.



Monk caught Ham eyeing him, and grimaced, muttered, "We're getting sucked in to something."

Old Methuselah Brown chuckled. "You fellows are making fools out of yourselves, did you know it?"

"That's just what we were thinking," Monk assured him.

"No, no, by bein' so sure I am either crazy or a practical joker," said the old man. "That's what I mean."

Monk and Ham mentally threw up their hands.

"Here is where my friend lives," Ham said.

The witchcraft-collector friend was a tall, lean, spectacled gentleman with a merry smile and twinkling eyes. Monk liked him immediately, and kept on liking him until he discovered the fellow was one of the bluest of the bluebloods, controlled a fortune reputed to be more than a billion dollars, and was a society leader. After that, Monk's admiration cooled. There was no sensible reason for this. The man was still a fine fellow. But Monk had become so accustomed to grumbling at and about Ham's social-leader friends that he just couldn't stomach the idea of one of them being a nice guy.

The collector's name was John Winthrop Widman, and he was interested in witchcraft because his ancestors had been prominent witch-chasers around old Salem, Hampton, Newberry, Hartford and other centers of agitation.

After the hand-shaking and ribbing were over, Ham made a little speech in which he said, "Now look, Winthrop, I know you're going to laugh at us, but try to keep your sense of perspective while you do it, will you? We've been laughing at ourselves, and it isn't funny."

The collector laughed as they had expected him to do when he heard about Methuselah Brown being two hundred and ninety years old. He said, "This is a rib, of course."

Monk and Ham agreed that it probably was a rib, that it couldn't very well be anything else, but would John Winthrop Widman put the old man over the jumps, and unmask him now as a fellow who had never been near Salem in 1674, or thereabouts.

"Where was your father buried?" was the first question.

"In the new burying-point on the South River bluff," the old man said instantly. "He died in 1688. Name was Sebastian Brown."

The collector got out a book giving a listing of the headstones in Burying Point and Broad Street cemeteries. He grimaced, and looked vaguely surprised.

"The name there?" Monk asked.

"Yes."

"Doesn't prove anything," Monk said. "Anybody can read history."

JOHN WINTHROP WIDMAN seemed vaguely disturbed. He began firing questions: Did you know Roger Conant? What color eyes did he have? Hair? Did he know John Winthrop, the governor? No? Why not? What about Governor Phelps?

Methuselah Brown held up a hand.

“Now wait a minute,” he said. “In 1674, I got snaked into court on a witchcraft charge myself, which I’ve explained to Monk and Ham, here. Being tried like that made me mad.”

He grinned happily at them

“It made me so mad,” he added, that I cleared out of the Colony. I went to sea, and wound up in—well, where I wound up is the part of the story that comes after you decide whether I’m telling the truth.”

Ham asked the collector, “Have you caught him in a lie yet?”

“No,” said Widman irritably. “But wait until I get going on him. This stuff I’ve been asking could all have been dug out of encyclopedias or historical works on Salem.”

Old Methuselah Brown snorted. “Trot out your questions.”

The collector did that. He asked questions out of his head for a while. He began to perspire. He began to dig into books on the shelves. Once in a while there would be a question that wasn’t satisfactory, and there would be an argument about it, the argument invariably ending with Methuselah Brown shouting, “The guy who wrote that book wasn’t there. I was!” Or he would bellow, “How could one man know anything and everything that happened in town?” John Winthrop Widman swore and wiped his forehead.

“Caught him lying yet?” Monk demanded.

“No, darn it,” Widman snapped. “Why did you fellows bring him around. This is going to make me a nervous wreck.”

Old Methuselah Brown had been studying the face of an old Salem resident in one of the books spread open on the table. Now he pointed, “Hey, that says Bill Garritt. That’s wrong. That ain’t Bill Garritt. That’s old Custis Ewing.”

“Custis Ewing!” said Widman. He seemed to jump a foot off the floor. “My Lord! Oh, my Lord!”

“What’s the matter?” Monk yelled.

What was the matter was plenty. The fact that the man in the picture was Custis Ewing and not Bill Garritt was something that no one, absolutely no one on earth, but John Winthrop Widman could have known. The reason: Custis Ewing was a Widman ancestor on the maternal side, and he had been a common thief and had changed his name for that reason, a fact that had been kept in the family closet with the rest of the skeletons.

John Winthrop Widman looked at Monk and Ham with stunned acceptance.

“This old man really lived in Salem in 1674,” he said.

THAT was enough for Monk and Ham.

“Get hold of Doc Savage,” Monk said.

Ham made the call to the Long Island laboratory where Doc was getting acquainted with the new germ. Ham went to great pains to make Doc understand that they had left no stone unturned to prove the thing couldn’t be true, and that, actually, they still didn’t believe it.

But Doc was impressed.

"I will be right out," he said.

Even over the telephone, some of Doc Savage's unusual character was evident. He had a voice which, though low and casual, was obviously a controlled voice of great power.

Ham said they would wait, and see what else they could learn.

But he made the mistake of informing Methuselah Brown that Doc Savage was coming, whereupon the old fellow shut up immediately.

"I only been talkin' to get you fellers to let me see this Doc Savage," he said.

"Do you know Doc?" Ham asked.

"Nope. Never heard of him before Doctor Rayburn mentioned him, and so did my old pal Arctic Davis." The old man grinned and got out his pipe. "Wouldn't believe much this Doctor Rayburn told me, because I don't know the gent hardly. But if old Arctic says Savage is all right, he is all right."

"Does Doc Savage know Arctic Davis?"

"Doubt it."

"Where is Arctic Davis now?"

"Figure I'll tell Doc Savage that as part of my story."

Ham said, "Did you meet Arctic Davis down in the Mexican state of Chiapas?"

The old man winked elaborately. "I'll talk to Doc Savage. The story is too hair-raising for you boys to hear. Might give you nightmares."

He puffed on the cob pipe, filling the room with awful tobacco smoke which made everybody gag and cough.

Then the old man died.

HE died with a bang. There was a little fire, too, some flying sparks, smoke.

The first impression everyone had was that the old cob pipe had blown up, which somehow did not seem unreasonable. A thing with such a smell was likely to disintegrate by itself.

Methuselah Brown was sitting in a straightbacked chair at the moment, and he toppled backward, chair and all, exactly the way practical jokers hope their victims will do when they give them an exploding cigar or put a load in their smoking tobacco.

Monk leaped to his side, because the old man had fallen very heavily.

"Somebody put a load in his tobacco," Monk said. "Did you hurt yourself, old-timer? Here, give me your hand."

The old man didn't move.

With popping eyes, Monk watched a drop of blood crawl out of the small dark-rimmed hole which was a little off center of the middle of the old man's forehead.

“Somebody shot him!” Monk said.

### Chapter III

THE room was a big one, about fifty feet long, twenty wide, and with a correspondingly high ceiling. This was even large for a Westchester mansion. There were two doors in the place, about twelve windows along the outer wall, and no other windows. There were bookcases built into the walls, together with a few trophy cases, and exhibit cases of glass and walnut somewhat like the cases in museums. The place, in fact, was a private museum on ancient Salem and witchcraft during the Colonial era, with particular emphasis on Salem and the rest of the Boston vicinity.

Because bright sunlight would fade some of the old books, most of the windows were heavily shuttered and curtained, illumination in different parts of the room being furnished by fluorescent lights.

One surprising thing immediately developed.

Ham made a lunge for the windows—and found they were all locked on the inside!

The shot couldn't have come from either of the two doors. That was absolutely impossible. Monk tried the doors, remembering that Widman had unlocked the one through which they had entered.

He found spring locks on the doors, he was locked out.

Anyway, it was impossible for the shot to have come from any of the two doors, because the old man had been sitting behind a tall costume case which blocked the route to either door.

“My Lord, one of those locked-room mysteries!” Monk said.

Widman glanced at him disapprovingly, thinking Monk was being too light for the occasion. But there was nothing light on Monk's face. There was no humor in the situation for him.

“Maybe it was in that infernal pipe of his,” he suggested. They found Methuselah Brown's pipe, and sure enough, it was shattered.

But a cartridge hadn't been put in the bowl of the pipe for the heat to explode, as Monk had at first thought.

Ham said, “A cartridge wouldn't be exploded by the heat of burning tobacco.”

“Sure it would,” Monk assured him. “Particularly if a special primer was used. And don't tell me that a bullet wouldn't leave the cartridge-case with enough force to kill a man, because that could be taken care of by special crimping, so that the bullet wouldn't leave the case until the powder had developed considerable force, then would leave violently enough to go through a man's forehead.”

Widman said, “But the bowl of the pipe is intact!”

Which knocked that theory in the head.

Doc Savage arrived just then.

DOC SAVAGE'S most peculiar characteristic, probably, was the fact that he seemed to be of no more

than normal size when one saw him from a distance, but was a giant when he came close. He had regular, handsome features, was bronzed to a metallic texture by tropical suns, and had rather strange flake-gold eyes, eyes like tiny pools always stirred by little winds. This eye coloration was a family characteristic, and his only living relative, a young cousin named Patricia Savage, had the same unusual eyes.

As a whole he did not look as remarkable as he was. There was only a hint of the startling physical strength and agility which he possessed, the hint appearing mostly in the way the sinews jumped out on the backs of his hands and in his neck when he moved quickly, and in the general lightness of his carriage.

However he didn't look like a musclehead, which is a term common among show people, and applied to wrestlers, acrobats and others who make their living with muscular agility. There was intelligence in his face, and strength of character.

He certainly didn't show many signs of the immense amount of peculiar training which he had received in his lifetime, for he had been placed in the hands of scientists for training when a baby, and for the next twenty years had no normal life at all. As a result he was a combination mental marvel, physical giant and scientific genius.

It was an immense tribute to common sense, or whatever a man is born with, that he was a fairly normal fellow. He had few peculiarities.

"Someone killed the old man," Monk said. "He was shot. So far, it looks like one of those locked-room things they put in detective stories."

And Ham added, "We thought for a minute that the shell had been placed in the bowl of his pipe."

Doc Savage examined the pipe fragments for a while. His conclusion was that the only thing the pipe had to do with it was that it had been nicked, and shattered, by the bullet. He pointed out lead-marks on one of the bits of shattered stem.

"The old fellow was evidently leaning back, pipe tilted up, when the bullet hit him," Doc surmised. "And the bullet ticked the pipe in passing."

John Winthrop Widman said, "I think he was leaning back, as I recall."

"Facing which way?"

"The windows."

"But the windows are all locked," Monk said.

Doc Savage spread the heavy draperies over the windows, examining them. These were of velvet, and the powder marks which he finally found were hardly discernible, a mere scorching of the cloth pile.

Suddenly it became apparent how the bullet had come into the room. One of the glass panes, about six by eight inches in size, was missing from its place. It stood against the outside of the window, and scattered over the terrace floor outdoors was the litter of putty which had been cut out to remove it.

Ham sneered at Monk.

"You and your locked-room mystery!" he said.

OUTDOORS they found the tracks of a pigeon-toed man.

A flower bed was, by accident, situated so that anyone trying to approach the windows inconspicuously would have to leave footprints in the soft earth.

Monk made a couple of tracks of his own, and compared them with those they had found. Monk was somewhat pigeon-toed himself, but certainly nothing to compare with whoever had made these tracks.

Doc proved the prints were quite fresh when he found a bit of earth toppling into one of them. They were moist prints and further back, on the lawn, Doc found a blade of grass or two that was still straightening.

“Fifteen minutes to thirty minutes ago,” was Doc's opinion.

Monk said, “That would mean while we were in the museum—and about the time Methuselah Brown was killed.”

Doc said, “You fellows stay around here. Keep your eyes open.”

Doc Savage moved around the Widman estate, apparently without much purpose or aim. Then Ham, who had been watching him, noted that Doc Savage seemed to be progressing methodically from one bush to another, all the bushes being large enough for a man to conceal himself as he scouted the house.

“Doc's following a trail,” Ham decided.

Widman was skeptical. “But there isn't a sign of a trail on that lawn.”

Ham shrugged. What was the sense of an argument, particularly with a man who had never been in a jungle, who didn't know just what could be done in trailing by an expert sign-reader?

Doc stopped suddenly. His voice reached them loudly.

“This way! Quick!” he shouted, “Here are the tracks! Down the hill toward that creek!”

Monk and Ham began running instantly. Widman gasped, raced back into the house, came out with a repeating shotgun, and joined the race.

Doc Savage had disappeared into the brush which covered the sloping part of the estate that led down to the small creek. The undergrowth here was very thick.

Monk, Ham and Widman thrashed around in the shrubs, finally reaching the creek without seeing Doc Savage.

“Doc!” Monk called.

Getting no answer, they stood there, feeling confused and foolish.

Then, from the far side of the house: blows, a yell, a bush thrashing. At least two hundred yards away. Then Doc's voice.

“All right,” the bronze man called. “It worked.”

They found Doc Savage in possession of an old, pigeon-toed man.

THE old man was remarkable in that he was nearly seven feet tall and as skinny as Abraham Lincoln was supposed to have been in his youth. In fact, he seemed to be composed mostly of bones and

muscle-knots and covered with a hard-leather hide, much like that of unfortunate old Methuselah Brown.

Doc Savage said, "Sorry about the deception. But from the trail I was following, it was pretty evident the fellow had doubled back and was hiding in the house. It seemed dangerous to go in after him, since he might be armed. And if we pretended to run off and leave the house, it was logical that he would try to escape. Through this brush here was the logical route for him to choose to keep under cover, and a good place to waylay him. So—it happened to work."

The old man wore a loud checked suit, tan shoes, a movie cowboy hat, a yellow necktie. His mouth was large, his nose was large, and his eyes were blue marbles in beds of wrinkles.

Monk walked around, staring at the old fellow's feet.

"So pigeon-toed he could walk two ways at once," Monk said.

"Where's the gun he shot Methuselah Brown with?" Ham demanded.

The old man said instantly, "I didn't shoot old Met."

He had a deep rumbling voice. It sounded like a tuba.

Doc said, "I did not find a gun. But we will search him again."

The search was extremely thorough. It turned up nothing but a bull-choking roll of one-dollar bills. There was nothing, absolutely nothing else, in any of the old man's pockets.

They waited while Monk counted the money. "Five hundred ten, five hundred eleven, five hundred and twelve dollars," Monk said. "All in ones."

He held up the money, shaking it.

"And look, about half of it is in the old large-size bills," he added. "The government quit printing those nearly twenty years ago."

The old man was indignant and silent.

Doc asked him, "You want to answer some questions?"

"Tell you that when I hear the questions," the old fellow said.

"What is your name?"

"Davis. Arctic Davis."

"Are you the Arctic Davis mentioned by Doctor Frederick Rayburn, the specialist who sent Methuselah Brown to see us?" Doc asked.

"Could be," snapped the old fellow. "Wish I hadn't made that mistake."

"Methuselah Brown was a friend of yours?"

"Yep. Been a friend for about a hundred and ten years."

Monk blurted, "A hundred and ten—! Here we go again!"

Doc asked, "You know Doctor Frederick Rayburn?"

Arctic Davis nodded. "Know him since he was about so long." He demonstrated a space of about a foot with his two hands.

"Where was that?"

"Chiapas."

"That is a state in southern Mexico?"

"About six hundred miles south and east, as the buzzard flies, from Mexico City."

"What is your residence?"

"You might call it a cave."

"The place, I mean."

"You never heard of it. Name of the place is Tira Valley, near as I can translate it. It's in Chiapas state."

"HOW did you get that nickname, Arctic?" Doc asked.

The old gaffer scowled at them. "All right, I'll tell you, but the first time one of you snickers, I stop talking. I don't give two hoots in a barrel whether you believe me or not. Poor old Met did. He cared. He wanted you to believe him, because he thought the world ought to know what he knew, and that you fellows were the ones to give what he knew to the world. Me, I don't care. Every time I come out and look at the world, I think less of it. War, war, killing and suffering, murders and poverty, people trying to make other people do what they want them to do. This last time it's worse than ever. Another war, and the whole danged world mixed up in it." He stopped and glared at them. "How many has been killed in your latest war?"

Doc said, "The figure is not known yet. In the first World War, about eight million and a half killed, total of casualties thirty-four million, four hundred and ninety-four thousand and some."

"Then casualties in this one will pass a hundred million?"

"Possibly."

"Something to be proud of, eh?"

Ham Brooks shuddered and muttered, "I never heard the figures put exactly that way before."

Doc said, "You were going to tell us how you got the name Arctic?"

"All right, I started, but I got sidetracked," the old man said. "I just wanted to tell you why I don't think the world is worth giving the great thing that poor old Met wanted to give it. I was nicknamed Arctic because I was with Franklin, the Arctic explorer, in 1845."

"How old were you then?"

"Oh, I was a kid. I think I was eighty-seven, but it might have been eighty-six—"

"My, my, you're only a hundred seventy-six years old," Monk said. "Just in your swaddling clothes."

"Listen, are you laughing at me, bullape?" the old man yelled suddenly.



“I’m about to choke to death on something,” Monk said. “I don’t know what it is.”

Arctic Davis spat on the ground expressively. “Bugs to you, handsome. I came out of Tira Valley, and I was danged tired of the hot weather down there, so I thought I would see me some of northern Scotland, where my pappy was born. While in London, I heard about Sir John Franklin’s third expedition into the Arctic, and I thought the cold weather would be a fine change. So I joined up.”

He scowled at them. “Okay, don’t believe it. But I was on the Erebus when she sailed from Greenhithe on May 19, 1845. We raised King William’s island in 1846, and got in McClintock Channel in 1848, where we got icebound. Both ships, the Erebus and Terror, were deserted in April—I think the date was April 22, 1848. We had quite a time. I joined up with the Eskimos, and it took me seven years to get back. I don’t think there were any other survivors. By golly, after that, I just told everybody my name was Arctic Davis, because I figured I’d earned the name.”

Doc asked, “Will you coöperate with us in checking that story against historical records?”

“I will not!” the old man said explosively.

He went on to explain in detail, with some sulphur-coated adjectives thrown in, why he didn’t give a hoot in the hot place whether they believed him. Methuselah Brown had coöperated with them in checking up on his story, and look what had happened. He wanted no part of it. The devil with them. He sounded angrier and angrier.

“What is this thing Methuselah Brown wanted to tell us?” Doc asked.

“If I told you, you’d just start pecking at me to get it from me. Heck with you.”

Doc, a little irritated himself, warned, “You are likely to be convicted for the murder of Methuselah Brown.”

“Wouldn’t doubt it. I ain’t guilty, so they’ll probably convict me.” He shrugged. “What’s fifty years in the pen, or so. Wouldn’t bother me. Just give me a rest.”

“They might electrocute you,” Doc said.

Arctic Davis guffawed.

“Don’t scare me, kiddy,” he said. “They got to have a better case against me than they’ll get. Anyhow, after they heard me talk, they’d adjudge me insane and clap me in a boobyhatch, and in a little while, say twenty years or so, I’d escape.”

Monk put in, “You’re right about that. After one listen, they would call you as nutty as a pet coon.”

“Are you laughing at me?” the old fellow demanded.

“I’m in hysterics,” Monk said sourly. “Who wouldn’t be, being fed such a story.”

The old man leered triumphantly. “Then I ain’t talking no more. I warned you.”

“Warned us what?”

“First laugh, I’d shut up. You laughed. I’m shut up. Go peddle your papers,” the old man said.

## Chapter IV

AND he stuck to it. That was all he was going to say, and that was all he said. Doc Savage worked on him with considerable care for a while, trying to strike a responsive note.

The nearest Doc was able to come to getting the ancient to loosen up was when he urged Arctic Davis to give them some coöperation in trapping the killer of Methuselah Brown. That got a responsive flicker, but it didn't last long, for the old man scowled and said, "You fellows are convinced this whole thing is a lie or a hoax, and I don't give a ring-tailed hoot what you think. Poor old Met is dead, and he can't be brought back to life by catching any killer. I wash my hands of it all."

That was all he said. They couldn't get another word out of him.

Monk apologized to Doc, saying uncomfortably, "I guess I popped off once too often, and shut the old fellow up. I'm sorry."

Doc said, "He was looking for an excuse to quit talking, apparently."

"You believe his story?"

"Do you?" Doc countered.

"For the love of Pete, no! It's as preposterous as the story the other one, Methuselah Brown, was telling us."

The authority on witchcraft, John Winthrop Widman, was getting uneasy. He wanted to know, "Shouldn't we call the police?"

Monk explained that he himself, as well as Doc Savage and the others, had high commissions in both the metropolitan New York police force, and the state trooper organization. These commissions, while somewhat special in nature, were fully official. So, legally, the police were already in charge. Widman was satisfied.

Widman went into the house, and dug around in his encyclopedia. He came up with the sketch on Sir John Franklin, Arctic explorer. The facts which Arctic Davis had given corresponded with those in the encyclopedia, with the exception that no one was supposed to have escaped alive from Franklin's ill-fated expedition.

"Which just proves the old guy can read an encyclopedia," Monk said skeptically. "I tell you, it's just a practical joke—" He became silent, swallowing uneasily.

No joke. Not with a murder involved.

ABOUT two hours later, when they had given the whole vicinity an unsuccessful going-over in search of clues, and particularly for the gun with which Methuselah Brown had been killed, Doc Savage came up with a suggestion. It was then four-thirty in the afternoon.

While Widman was guarding Arctic Davis in another part of the house, Doc outlined his idea.

"This thing is so preposterous that we are obviously nowhere near the truth of it," he pointed out. "Right now, we are muddling around trying to be Sherlock Holmes and pick up a clue. That usually turns out to be the slowest possible way of reaching a solution, as any detective can tell you."

“To say nothing of the headache and eyestrain, plus the embarrassment if you don't find any clues,” Monk agreed.

Doc said, “Did you ever go quail-hunting? The birds all sit very quietly, until one flies, then they all fly. I suggest we toss a rock, get one bird to flying, and see if they won't all fly.”

“Specifically?” Ham asked.

“Give old Arctic Davis a chance to escape. Follow him. He might go after Methuselah Brown's killer himself, in which case he would start all our birds flying for us. Then they would be out in the open where we could see what was what.”

Ham rubbed a hand over his jaw thoughtfully. “You know, I sort of got the idea old Arctic is aching to go after Methuselah's killer himself. You may have something.”

“How'll we let the old gaffer escape so he won't suspect anything?” Monk asked.

Doc outlined a suggestion.

The proposal was that Monk start out with Arctic Davis, explaining that he was going to take Arctic to the county jail and lock him up.

In leaving the house, Monk would have car trouble. He would get out, lift the hood, look under the hood, and there would be a burst of flame. The flame would be gasoline previously placed in the spark-plug depressions in the cylinder-head, and Monk would ignite it with a common kitchen match. Monk would have on gloves, which he would dip into the gasoline. Then by beating the air around his head with the gloves, he could indicate considerable pain.

The plan functioned perfectly.

Old Arctic Davis drove away in the car at high speed, fire and smoke coming out from under the hood, leaving Monk howling in imitation indignation.

THEY left the specialist, John Winthrop Widman, standing in the yard waving them goodbye. The body of old Methuselah Brown was still in the museum, and he would have to explain its presence to the police. Winthrop looked rather glad to see them go.

Doc Savage, Monk and Ham, set out in two cars, Doc leading. The Widman driveway was a series of curves, and their tires made an almost continuous howling as they raced for the road in pursuit of Arctic Davis.

The actual following of Arctic Davis was to be a subdued affair.

The plan was for Doc Savage, in his own car, to use his radio direction-finder to keep tab on the stolen car which Arctic Davis drove. The radio transmitter in Arctic Davis' car was switched on, and Doc had twisted the connecting wires together with a pair of pliers so that the transmitter could not be switched off. The red indicator-light would not show the thing was on, and the microphone would keep feeding the modulator circuit.

They would be able to trail the car quite easily.

It was a fine idea, but like some other great ideas it lost no time blowing up in their faces.

Doc Savage was no superman, and he demonstrated it immediately by not seeing the steel cable—they called it a steel cable, but it was really a wire rope—which was stretched between a tree and one side of a bridge, slantwise across the road.

The first he knew of the cable was when he hit it. His car was doing about forty. It gave a mad wrench, the steering-wheel snapped out of his clutch, spun as the front wheels angled sidewise. Across the road went the car, rubber shrieking, metal wailing.

The car hit the end of the bridge a glancing blow, but loud as Doomsday.

The bridge was over a creek. The creek-ditch was about thirty feet deep to the water. Doc doubled quickly, protecting skull, face and other places he didn't want cracked. The car fell, hit on its radiator, turned a neat hip-hop, hit the water.

The water squirted high enough to wash the bridge and both creek banks. The water seemed to be about seven feet deep.

The car held together, which was nothing remarkable, because it was built like a light tank, even to armor-plating for floorboards. The armor-plating was a handy thing to have, because three men, who had been waiting under the bridge with rifles, began shooting into the car in the creek.

The men wore hunting-clothes. The hunting suits had blizzard caps, with cloth protections that came down over their faces, covering them entirely except for the eyes. The caps made quite effective masks.

Their rifles were sporting pieces, two of them with telescope sights, all of heavy calibre. They shot deliberately, aiming with care.

OVER the slapping of their rifles was the banshee shrieking as Ham slid all four tires of the car he and Monk were driving. It was a machine they'd borrowed from John Winthrop Widman, an old Rolls with more dignity than a Kentucky Colonel. Ham didn't get stopped.

He hit the wire rope, glanced along it, banged the bridge, and stopped there. Two tires of the Rolls blew out when they hit the rope, and for some reason or another a third waited until they were standing perfectly still, then it let go with a pow!

"Whew, we ruined a borrowed car!" Monk, confused, was thinking about the car fist.

A man stepped out in the road ahead, lifted a rifle, and put a bullet exactly between Monk and Ham. Evidently the marksman was confused by the windshield reflections, because nobody should have missed a shot like that.

"Oh, Lord be with us!" Monk croaked, and rolled out of the car on the right, hit the ground, jumped completely over the car with a combination leap and vault, and got into the grader ditch.

Ham, who was a smaller man, doubled down in the car, getting the motor between himself and the man with the rifle.

The man with the rifle calmly began shooting the motor block to pieces. A modern 30-06 rifle cartridge carries a muzzle foot-pound energy of close to three thousand foot pounds. They are the kind of thing the army despatches refer to as "light weapons." The motor block made an awful noise cracking, and the bullets a worse noise as they hunted for Ham.

Ham yelled, "Stop them from shooting, Monk! I've got to get out of here."

Monk didn't stop them, but he distracted them momentarily by lifting up and hurling a rock at them. It was a juvenile gesture, but it did draw the aim of the rifleman who was trying to blast Ham out of the car by main force. Monk was down before the fellow could hit him. And Ham was out in the ditch beside Monk an instant later.

"Let's leave here!" Monk said.

They left, going into the brush with frightened speed. They were scared. They were so scared they hadn't had time to get mad.

Bullets cut through the brush like angry hornets, fortunately missing them. They were fast, shifty targets, and wishing they were faster and shiftier.

"What about Doc?" Monk gasped.

"He's in a bullet-proof car," Ham said. "We're not. If you don't want to run, get out of my way and let me do it."

The neighborhood continued to sound like some of the hotter moments on Guadalcanal.

MONK and Ham, finally finding a ditch which would shelter them, landed in it. They lay still for a moment, getting themselves straightened out. What had just happened had occurred in possibly twelve or fourteen seconds, although it would take hours to relate and years to forget.

"Just what in the dickens happened?" Ham demanded.

"Somebody declared war on us," Monk said. "But I wouldn't know who or why."

"Not old Arctic Davis?"

"Not unless he's got more arms than an octopus and a gun in each one." Monk began crawling back the way he had just come. Ham grabbed his ankle, said, "What are you going to do?" And Monk muttered, "I'm beginning to get mad about this."

"Have you got a gun?"

"No," Monk said. "But if I get out of this alive, I'm going to buy one and chain it to me so I'll never be without it."

"I'm mad, too," Ham decided.

They worked back, intending if possible to spot their assailants, and waylay them if it could be done with anything approaching safety. Shortly they were in a position where they could see Doc Savage.

Doc's car was standing on its radiator in the creek, and it had filled with water about to the level of the back of the driver's seat. The rest of the car—the two side and rear windows—stuck out of the water.

The high-powered rifles were still going, knocking off paint and putting dents in the metal of the car. The windows had spider-webs of cracks where bullets had tried to get through.

Up on the road someone was shouting that the car was bullet-proofed. The shouter was using a jolly

English accent in a way that proved he was no Englishman.

Monk and Ham watched Doc roll down the back window of the car.

“I forgot Doc keeps an arsenal in there,” Ham said. “Watch the fireworks.”

The man on the road began shouting again. Now he was saying, “Watch out! Somebody shot Freddy! From behind us!” He was excited enough to forget his phony English accent. He sounded Harvard now.

Monk chuckled, and said, “They're shooting each other by accident, thank heavens.”

The words were no more out of his mouth than a man in plain sight on the road jumped into the air, screamed and fell down clutching his leg. The shot noise which accompanied this was not from a hunting rifle.

“There's somebody helping us!” Ham gasped.

The shouter who changed his accents bellowed, “This is a flop! Come on, let's get out of here!”

They snatched up the wounded man and raced out of sight.

DOC SAVAGE lost no time scrambling out of the car window. He had his hands full of gas grenades—tear gas—and he splashed ashore and hauled himself up the steep creek bank.

Monk and Ham, with easier going, reached the road about the same time as Doc.

Their bushwhackers were retreating into a copse of trees. Seven of them on their feet carried two who were having leg trouble.

A moment after they disappeared into the trees, a pair of small and almost identical sedans popped out and fled with them inside. There was mud smeared over the license plates, with enough mud splattered on the cars to keep it from being noticeably suspicious.

Doc threw one of his gas grenades, a piece of futility born of rage, because it fell short. It popped in the road well behind the two cars.

Both machines disappeared, beginning to rock with speed, down the road.

Doc said, “Ham, run and borrow another car from your friend Widman, so we can chase them.” And Ham sprinted back toward the witchcraft-Salem specialist's estate.

Monk waved his arms once, and just howled. He was in the habit of such apish displays when thoroughly angry.

Doc Savage was unfastening the wire cable which had brought them to trouble. “We might be able to trace this,” he said.

“Did you recognize any of those bushwhackers?” Monk demanded.

“No. The one who was doing the shouting had an educated voice and manner of speaking.”

“Sounded Harvard, didn't he?”

“That will not make Ham happy,” Doc said. “Ham is a Harvard man.”

Monk chuckled. "He'll squall like a panther. Watch and see."

Doc Savage had the cable, and he stopped to look at fresh bloodstains in the road. The spot was where the man who had jumped and screamed had been hit in the leg.

"Apparently someone drove them away," Doc said.

"Oh, they probably got to shooting each other by mistake."

Doc shook his head. He didn't think so. He said, "Why not see if we can raise whoever our friend is." He lifted his voice, called, "All right, you can come out. We want to thank you."

Monk did not expect anyone to appear, so he was in a state of mind to get full benefit when a young woman walked out of the undergrowth. She was a tall young woman, very chic, and she walked calmly toward them for about fifteen paces, then began to tremble, and reeled over to the side of the road and sank to her knees. She did not put her hands over her face, but gripped them together, and kneeled there, shaking uncontrollably.

## Chapter V

DOC SAVAGE went to the girl and took her wrist. She didn't resist. Her pulse wasn't bad, but her arm trembled in his hands. She looked up at him. She was very pretty—pretty and practical-looking, not luscious, if you liked them long and blonde and a bit on the glacier side.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," she said, making her voice work. "I was never like this before."

"Did you ever shoot a man before?" Doc asked.

"No," she said tremulously. "That must be it." For the next minute or two she tried to master herself.

Monk stood there and examined her admiringly. He could appreciate such a number, although he preferred them a little more chorusy.

She said, "Did I—did I hurt them—badly?"

"You hit each one of them in the leg," Doc said.

"I—I tried to do that," she said. "I—I used a twenty-two pistol. I've heard you can't hurt a man much with one of them. But they dropped so quickly when I shot."

"They were startled," Doc told her. "And I would not fret about it. They were trying to shoot us, and not in the leg, either."

"I—I know," she said. "I had followed them here. They didn't know about that."

She was fumbling at her blouse. She brought out a 22-caliber revolver of good make with a long barrel. She pushed the weapon toward Doc Savage. "Please take it," she said wildly. "I don't want to ever see the thing again!"

Doc took the gun.

Now a car came along the road. It was not Ham. It was just a motorist, and when Doc tried to flag him

down, he decided he wanted none of it, and put on speed. He went past with a roar and a rush.

But the next car was Ham. He drove a convertible. Doc took a look at the tires.

“Better not go over thirty-five in that,” the bronze man said, “or you’ll find yourselves wrapped around a telephone pole.”

“It’s the best Widman had,” Ham said. “I told him we’d blown out three tires on his other car, and piled it into a bridge. He wasn’t happy. He said he was going to give up witchcraft as a hobby.”

Doc decided, “Not worth chasing those fellows now. They have too much start.” He pointed at the creek. “Get the radio direction-finder out of that car. It is under water, but the set is waterproofed, so it should still work. Use it to trail Arctic Davis.”

The girl gasped.

“Yes, catch Arctic Davis if you can!” she said.

“Why?”

“He can give you the answer to all this—if he will,” the girl said.

She stepped forward impulsively and added, “Will you come with me to see my father, Mr. Savage—you are Mr. Savage, aren’t you?”

Doc admitted it.

Monk asked hopefully, “Doc, want me to go with the young lady to see her father while you and Ham chase that old gaffer?”

Ham gouged Monk in the ribs. “Come on, you missing link. You won’t get away with that.”

Monk went down with Ham to get the radio. They matched to see who would dive into the rather cold water after it, and Monk lost. They returned with the radio shortly.

“It seems to work,” Ham said. He got in the borrowed convertible with Monk. “We’re off. But where will we contact you, Doc. This radio hasn’t a transmitter, and you have no receiver.”

Doc glanced at the girl. “Where will we be?”

“The apartment of Peter Armbruster Funding,” she said.

Ham whistled.

DOC SAVAGE discovered why Ham whistled when they reached Park Avenue and the girl said, “This is the place. Pull in, and one of the chauffeurs will park our car in dad’s garage.” In that part of Park Avenue, the attics rented for fifteen thousand a year.

“Just who are you?” Doc asked. The girl hadn’t said a dozen words on the drive down from Westchester.

“I thought you knew.” She sounded surprised. “You don’t read the society pages, do you—and I’m not being conceited, I hope.



"I am Nora Armbruster Funding," she said. "My father is Peter Armbruster Funding. Have you heard of him?"

"No."

She seemed pleased.

"Dad's principal distinction is having more money than one man should have," she said. "He has never merged any corporations, never run for the Senate, never gone to a night club, never headed a reform committee. You will like him."

Doc admitted, "He sounds like too nice a guy to have a lot of money."

There was just the right deference in the doorman's greeting. And a liveried chauffeur popped out in a twinkling and took the car—the girl's, a fine coupé.

There seemed to be a private elevator for the Fundings. It was self-service.

"I must warn you," Nora said as the cage lifted them silently. "Dad may be difficult at first. He doesn't know that I involved myself in this."

"Was that a gun in the hip-pocket of your chauffeur?" Doc asked.

"That's right. There's an armed guard at the apartment door. And that fine old doorman will come up in a few minutes to see if everything is all right, and if we do not tell him it is by using certain words, he will know it isn't, and call a private strong-arm squad Dad has hired."

"Sounds as if you are having trouble."

"The word," she said, "is terror." She sounded grim. "And another word is weird."

"What is the story behind it?"

"That," she said, "is what we are going to trick Dad into telling you."

DOC SAVAGE had seen Peter Armbruster Funding before, he realized as soon as he met the man. He had seen him at board meetings of corporations with considerable holdings. And always Funding had been a quiet man who remained in the background, never making any speeches or threats, never trying any chiseling, and voting with the kind of common sense which goes almost unnoticed because it seems such a right way to do things.

Funding put down a book he was reading, or pretending to read, and came forward with an outstretched hand and a smile which seemed meant more to dismiss the door guard, a burly heathen whose clothes bulged with hardware, than a smile of welcome.

He knew Doc. "Good evening, Mr. Savage," he said. His voice was pleasantly cultured even with the filed edge of strain. "I have seen you often, but I do not believe I have met you personally."

He sounded like a man who had made up his mind to say a few words that meant no more than courtesy, then excuse himself.

His daughter started lighting her firecrackers immediately.

“Dad, I just shot two men,” she said.

“Really? Bringing the war close to home, aren't you?” But he didn't carry it off as a casual thing. For an instant, the firm flesh on his face seemed to come loose from the bones beneath.

“They were trying to kill Mr. Savage,” Nora said determinedly.

Her father stared at her. He seemed to realize how his face looked, and he seemed to be trying to make it solid again.

Nora continued, “Dad, they were the men you are afraid of—one of them threatened you yesterday. I heard him threaten you, and I followed him. I followed him to Fifth Avenue, and lost him, but about noon today I saw him again, watching this apartment house. He seemed to want to come in, but he didn't. And then he got in a car with some other men, and they drove up to Westchester. I followed them. They set a trap for Mr. Savage, forcing his car, and the car of his two friends, off the road. Then they shot at them with rifles. So I—I shot at them with my target pistol. I hit two. In the legs. Then I brought Mr. Savage here.”

Her father was a careful man. He waited until he could make his voice very steady, and his smile almost convincing. Then he told Doc, “My daughter has put me in a spot, hasn't she?”

Without waiting for an answer, he moved his head slightly. “Come into the sun-room. It seems I will have to make certain explanations.”

The sun-room was large and pleasant, with wicker furniture. Nothing looked too expensive for one to feel that it was comfortable.

Funding poured himself a glass of brandy, pouring slowly, apparently aware that his hand was shaking. Finally he poured the brandy back into the flagon and poured it out again. Abruptly he glanced at Doc Savage.

“You know, I think I'm going to be glad you came,” he said. “I think it may be—well—the answer we have been seeking to this.”

Doc said nothing.

“Just why did you come here, do you mind saying?” Funding asked.

“For information,” Doc said.

Funding nodded. “That is noncommittal, but inclusive.” He leaned back. “Do you know Oscar Ward?”

Doc shook his head, then said:

“But if he is the Oscar Ward who practically supports the better night clubs, and who was in a mess over a doctor giving him something to bring up his blood pressure so the draft wouldn't take him, I have heard of him.”

“That's the one,” said Funding.

Then he named seven other men. Four of them sounded blue-blooded, and the other three sounded like bricklayers.

Doc nodded. “You have named seven of the richest men in the country, or among the richest. But I do not personally know any of them.”

“I have named you a syndicate.”

“Eh?”

“Probably the weirdest syndicate ever formed!”

PETER ARMBRUSTER FUNDING seemed embarrassed that he had become dramatic, as if he were guilty of bad taste. “I had better tell the story straight,” he said. “It began some time ago when two old men came to me. Their names, as they gave them, were Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis, and they represented themselves as being two hundred and ninety years of age, and a hundred and seventy-six years of age, respectively.”

Funding paused to look more embarrassed.

“You can image what I thought of such statements,” he continued. “But something led me to check into their stories, just out of curiosity. And the more I went into the matter, the more fascinated—appalled might be the word—I became. Because I could find no evidence, no circumstantial evidence, of untruth. I am not saying I believed their statements, or that even now I believe them, but the only thing I can base disbelief upon is the preposterous sound of such claims.”

Nora had taken a chair. She was listening, wide-eyed. Apparently she had heard none of this before.

Funding went on: “Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis had a secret for sale, the secret of how to be ageless. I say for sale. That is wrong. Arctic Davis wanted to sell it. Methuselah Brown wanted to give it to humanity. They argued hotly about it, and finally Davis won out, and they agreed to sell it to humanity. And we formed a syndicate to handle it—the names of the men I have mentioned.”

Funding grimaced.

“The sale price was to be fifty million dollars,” he said. “Not all paid at once. A few million down—five was the figure most discussed. And the rest in time.

“To handle money like that, we had to have rich men. Rich men who were philanthropists, too, because it was my idea to give the thing to the world after we had bought it. Davis knew that, and he did not object. Methuselah Brown did not object either, because he had always wanted to give it to the world.”

Doc said, “The syndicate was composed of Oscar Ward and the other men you named?”

“Yes.”

“What went wrong?”

“The thing you would naturally expect. Greed. The idea of living hundreds, maybe thousands of years, has an incredible power over men.”

Funding leaned forward earnestly.

“Think about it a moment,” he said. “Think of it, and see if it doesn't begin to get hold of you. It's a greater thing than gold or jewels or being President or King or Dictator. It becomes, when you think of it, a madness, a desire that mounts and mounts until you want it so bad that you would do anything.”

“So trouble developed?”

“Someone is trying to seize the secret without paying for it,” said Funding.

“Do you know the ring leader?”

“I think—without being able to prove—that it is Oscar Ward.”

Nora made a sound now. It was low, gasping. And her eyes were shocked and her hands were fastened tightly to the arms of the chair in which she sat.

FUNDING looked at his daughter uncomfortably, and then he told Doc Savage, “Young Ward is a friend of my daughter's.”

Doc said, “Be specific, will you.”

Funding nodded. “Three days ago, I was shot at, in my office, by a high-powered rifle, the bullet coming from some other office building. The water carafe on my desk was shattered.

“That same evening, the waiter in my favorite restaurant told me he had been approached with an offer of high payment if he would put a powder in my food. He had been told it was a practical joke. He had the powder, and I took it to a chemist, who told me it was strychnine, enough to have killed me.”

Funding clenched and unclenched his hands for a moment.

“Then I found out every other member of the syndicate had had his life threatened, or claimed to have had.”

Doc said, “If the men trying to get the thing for themselves are members of the syndicate, it was a clever and necessary precaution that the culprits also claim attempts on their lives. Providing the would-be thieves are members.”

“If Oscar Ward is in it, they are members.”

“Dad!” Nora said.

Funding leaned back. Without looking at her, he directed his words to her. “Nora, I have never liked that young devil. I am trying not to let that influence me against him, though.”

Doc asked, “Have you seen suspicious persons?”

Funding grimaced. “I'm a scared man. When you are scared, you see danger and shadows everywhere—if you have an imagination. And I have.”

Doc said, “There is one suspicious angle?”

“Yes?”

“Every man in the syndicate having an attempt on his life. You say there are seven in it, eight including Oscar Ward?”

“Yes.”

“Eight attempts, and nobody killed,” Doc said, “is a little implausible. When a man is going to kill another man, generally the first thing he makes certain is that he will succeed.”

Funding said, "I have by no means clarified the mystery. It may not be at all as I think it is."

"Do you think those old men were as old as they claimed?"

Funding hesitated. "I have no reason not to do so." Then Funding leaned forward. He was earnest. "I am going to make some telephone calls. Will you excuse me, or better, listen-in on an extension. I have an idea."

## Chapter VI

THE thing Peter Armbruster Funding was trying to do became evident with his first telephone call. To each man, he explained that Doc Savage was interested in the affair, and outlined Doc's profession—the rather strange one of helping other people out of their troubles, if the troubles were unusual enough, and seemed to be outside the ability of the regular forces of law.

The secret was to be put in Doc Savage's hands for administration to the public, once it was obtained. That was the proposal.

Doc Savage listened on a pony phone to the conversations. He listened with concentration, memorizing voice peculiarities, mannerisms, reading what he could from the voices—whether the owners were scared, brazen or greedy. Most of them sounded worried.

Indeed they sounded as a whole exactly like what Funding had said they were, a bunch of wealthy men who had banded together for a great deed, and found themselves faced with sudden death and sinister mystery.

Like clockwork, each man agreed that Doc Savage was the individual to handle the thing, particularly since it was now evident that there was going to be plenty of trouble attached to the affair.

Funding had deliberately left Oscar Ward to the last.

Oscar Ward gave the one refusal.

He didn't mince words.

"I'm hanged if I'll agree!" Oscar Ward said violently. "And let me warn you—keep away from Doc Savage!"

Oscar Ward had a loud, emphatic voice which contained considerable character as well as power.

Ward added, yelling, "I'm warning you! Stay away from Doc Savage if you know what's good for you!"

Funding's voice changed. The iron in the man was suddenly in his tone.

"Ward, is that a threat?" he demanded.

"You're right it's a threat!" Oscar Ward bellowed, and hung up.

Funding looked at Doc Savage and shrugged. "You see what I mean."

"Has Ward been more outspoken than that at any time?" Doc asked.

"No. Strangely enough, that's about the general tone of his attitude."

“Well, something's bothering him,” Doc said.

Funding had been handling the telephone thoughtfully. He put it back on its stand. “Mr. Savage, I probably went at that backward, but I wanted you to hear the proposition being put to the other members of the syndicate, and see just how nearly unanimous was their desire that this fabulous secret—if there is a secret—be placed in your hands for administration.” He frowned at Doc. “Will you do it?”

“Will I administer the thing?”

“Yes.”

“By administer, you mean see that it is made available to mankind, without favor or discrimination as to color or wealth or poverty?”

“Exactly.”

Doc said, “It is impossible for us not to accept such a proposition. Of course we accept.”

“Good!” Funding's face was grim. “Now I feel a great deal better.”

Doc Savage stood up. “If you will give me Oscar Ward's address, I think we will call on the fellow.”

The telephone was ringing.

MONK MAYFAIR was on the telephone. “Doc, old Arctic Davis kept right on using our car, so Ham and I trailed him.”

“Where is he now?”

“Little town inland from Poughkeepsie. Right at this minute, he's in a lunchroom getting something to eat, and kidding the waitress. A few minutes ago, he made a telephone call. He put some quarters in the coin-slot.”

Doc said, “Is that a small town?”

“A village, yes.”

“Check with the operator immediately and find out who the old fellow called, if you can. Call me back.”

Monk said, “Right. The quarters mean a long-distance call.”

Nora was standing beside Doc Savage. She had put on her hat and coat. “I heard what you said about seeing Oscar Ward,” she said. “I am going along.”

Her father winced. “Nora, please. I wouldn't,” he said.

She said grimly, “I'm going.”

The phone rang again and it was Monk saying, “Arctic Davis called somebody named Oscar Ward in New York. Will you take care of that end of it?”

“Immediately,” Doc said.

To the Fundings, father and daughter, Doc said, "In view of this friction, it might be better if neither one of you went along."

Rather surprisingly, it was Funding who objected strenuously. "But if I am along, I can trip Ward up when he starts lying to you!"

His daughter said bluntly, "We'll both stay here, dad."

Funding winced. "You feel that I am trying to prejudice Mr. Savage against young Ward, don't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"Probably," Funding said. He sighed. "All right. We will both stay here."

Doc Savage left immediately. He got a cab downtown, to headquarters, where he disrobed and put on one of the alloy mesh undershirts which he and his aids had gotten in the habit of wearing when there was likely to be trouble. Wearing the shirt, a man wouldn't want to walk into the teeth of fire from army rifles, but the garments were fairly effective against anything smaller.

The bronze man also loaded his pockets with such gadgets as he thought might come in handy. Developing such contraptions as a thing that looked like a fountain pen, but could be made into a pocket microscope, a periscope for looking around corners, a tube for breath-getting when under water, and so on. Such gadgets were his hobby. He liked to pack them around. Whenever possible, he went out of his way to make use of one of them, taking much pride—slightly childish pride, he sometimes suspected—when they worked, and feeling extremely put out when they flopped.

He got one of his cars, a coupé, and headed for Oscar Ward's home.

OSCAR WARD opened the door himself.

But he said, "I am Felling's, the houseman. Mr. Ward just stepped out to buy some cigarettes, and will be back shortly."

Doc checked on the voice. This was Ward, all right.

The apartment was in the Village. One of those old-fashioned, genteel-looking brownfront houses that promise old lace and Chippendale inside, but are frightening when you actually get inside. This one was typical. The interior must have been done over by a modernist who had gone mad. Chrome and Lucite, blond mahogany and black ebony, leather and strange shapes. Colors of the rainbow where you least expected them to be. White rugs with a pile so deep that a dog could hardly wade it.

"May I wait?" Doc asked.

"Your name?"

"Clark Savage."

"Your business?"

"Private."

Oscar Ward bowed the way a stage-servant would bow. "Will you step into the other room, please."

Doc Savage stepped into the other room. It was worse. None of the statues looked like human figures ever looked, and none of them had a normal number of arms, legs or heads.

“Sit here, please,” said Oscar Ward.

The chair, lucite, looked as if it were made of glass and wouldn't hold a baby. It didn't even bend when Doc sat on it.

Oscar Ward sat across from Doc Savage and took an old-fashioned muzzle-loading cap-and-ball dueling pistol out of his waistcoat pocket and pointed it at Doc Savage.

He said, “I think this place is practically soundproof. At any rate, I had them put in what are known as floating studding and sound-absorbent material when they rebuilt it for me.”

Doc's first interest was in whether the old pistol was pointed at his body, which was protected by the chain mesh undergarment. It was. The only damage it would do would be knock the air out of him and break a few ribs if it shot him.

His second thought was insanity. He searched for signs of cyclic, confusional, emotional, epidemic, ideational or other forms of insanity. His research was not productive.

There was plenty of sign of plain terror.

Otherwise Oscar Ward looked remarkably healthy and capable, being red-haired, brown-faced, with a good jaw and a mouth that had grinned a lot. Around twenty-five should catch his age.

“What am I waiting for?” Ward said. Now strain was heavy and hoarse in his voice.

The aplomb, for some reason or other, was falling off him.

Doc said nothing. He was fascinated. He had spent a good deal of his life studying psychiatry, and one of the things which had most interested him had been the human emotions. He was seeing, as he watched Ward, as agonizing a parade of them as he had ever seen on a face.

The first emotion—when Ward met Doc at the door, and up until the time he had produced the pistol—had been determination, determination to the point of intoxication. The young man was drunk on it. Rapidly there had followed indecision, doubt, fear of ability to accomplish, nausea. Now it was defeat, inability to do what he had intended to do.

Watching the changes was like watching flesh falling off the young mans body, because the end result was a quaking wreck.

The whole series of changes probably occupied no more than two minutes of complete silence.

Then Oscar Ward leaned forward and made a low sound, a sound like a bubbling. He put the pistol on the floor, still cocked. He was crying.

## **Chapter VII**

MONK MAYFAIR and Ham Brooks were having what, for them, was a congenial time. There had been no serious disagreement for a couple of hours. Ham was driving. Monk handled the radio direction-finder.



Their task was child-simple. They had merely to keep the finder loop pointing out the direction of the radio transmitter which was switched on in the car Arctic Davis was driving. This was keeping them on the trail of Arctic Davis as effectively as if they had a compass-needle being attracted by a magnet.

Arctic Davis was driving directly east now, heading into upstate Connecticut, apparently with a destination in mind. The old fellow sounded happy.

They could hear him singing, or making a noise that he evidently thought was song. The microphone on the radio transmitter in the car was, of course, still on and modulating the transmitter, so that they could hear all that went on in the car. The gain was up fairly high on the mike, so they got most all sound from the machine.

Old Arctic Davis was no oriole. But the words he mutilated were plain enough. He went through "Nelly Bly," "Old Uncle Ned," and "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free."

The songs seemed to aggravate Ham Brooks. "The infernal old rascal!" he growled.

"He'll never give Crosby any competition, that's sure," Monk said.

"It's not the quality that bothers me," Ham explained. "He's singing those songs with the original words, and some of them haven't been popular for more than a hundred years."

"How come you know so much about music all of a sudden?" Monk demanded. "As a singer you make a good bullfrog. I've heard you."

Ham explained. "I once tried a case having to do with songs. My job was to prove my client stole the song he was being sued over from a pre-Revolutionary War song, instead of a later copyrighted one as he stood accused. I had to listen to old songs until I reeled and dripped them."

Monk frowned. "You mean the old gaffer is singing songs he would logically know if he was a hundred and seventy-six years old, as he claims?"

Ham nodded.

He added, "I think most men remember best the songs they learned in their youth. The old fellow is singing stuff he would have heard in those days."

Monk looked as if he had tasted something bitter. "Stop talking that way! People don't get that old, and that's all there is to it!"

Ham pointed at the radio. "But that old duffer is by himself. He doesn't know we are listening. He wouldn't be pretending now, would he?"

Monk groaned. "I don't want to hear about it. Shut up!" he said.

THEIR quarry led them to an airport in upstate Connecticut. When they saw their car parked at the field, they hastily drove on, turned into a farmer's lot from which they could still see the field. The farmer came out to see what they wanted, and they questioned him about the field.

The airport, they learned, had been very busy until a few months ago with a C.A.A. flight training project, but this had been discontinued. Some air-minded local men over draft age had bid in several planes, and were giving instruction and doing a charter business.

“A man could rent a plane there, then?” Monk asked.

The farmer said that was right.

Monk turned to Ham and demanded, “What did you do with that five hundred and twelve one dollar bills Arctic Davis had?”

“I put them back in his pocket.”

“Oh, Lord!” Monk said. “He's probably chartering a plane and will get away from us!”

“We better get over there,” Ham muttered.

It was possible, they decided, to reach the airport buildings and still keep out of sight, by working along a ravine, then through some low brush. They did this without delay.

There were several cars parked around the two hangars and the administration office.

A small tractor began towing a plane out of the larger of the two hangars. It was a plane of ancient vintage, a tri-motored transport, all-metal. A regular old air ark, but sturdy and capable of long-distance flights.

They discovered old Arctic Davis walking around and around the ship, examining it.

“Come on,” Ham whispered. “We can get into the back door of the office without his seeing us.”

In the office they found a fat man of about forty-five. Monk showed him a quick glimpse of a silver dollar, holding it so the man might think it was a badge, and said, “F. B. I. We want some quick information.”

They got it.

Arctic Davis had chartered the old tri-motor, and ordered the gasoline tanks filled.

Also Arctic Davis had exhibited the necessary flying license, together with the correct Class 4M endorsements time in multi-engined planes between ten and twenty-five thousand pounds gross weight.

“Where'd he get those?” Monk blurted. “That's danged funny. He didn't have them when we searched him. He didn't have anything but five hundred and twelve one-dollar bills.”

The fat man said, “I'm glad to hear he has the money. He still has to pay us in advance.”

“He'll be coming back in here?” Ham demanded.

Monk noted that the plane couldn't be seen from the office. He addressed the fat man angrily, “Listen, here's what you do. Don't say a thing about us being here. Not a word. When he comes in to pay, we're going to stow away. Is that little place in the back of the cabin where we can hide?”

“Sure. The crate used to be an airline job. The place is still in it.”

“Okay. You understand what you're to do?”

The fat man understood.

MONK and Ham went out the back door. They worked from one parked car to another, and got behind the hangar from which the tri-motor had been wheeled.

“Some day you're going to get thrown in jail for showing a silver half-dollar and telling people it's an F. B. I. badge,” Ham said.

“It was a dollar, not a half. F. B. I. badges are gold, I think. And being in jail would be a relief from things like two-hundred-ninety and hundred-seventy-six-year-old guys.”

Finally Arctic Davis nodded his head in approval of the plane. He walked to the office, disappeared inside.

“Now,” Ham said.

They ran to the plane.

“F. B. I.,” Monk said to the startled mechanics. “You never saw us! Tell that old guy we're aboard, and you'll go to jail for treason!”

The mechanics were properly impressed.

Monk and Ham found the place in the back. They got inside. Now they felt they were safely concealed, because it was not likely Arctic Davis would give the cabin another going-over. He had been in it once.

“You're getting to be an incredible liar,” Ham whispered.

“Probably comes from associating with a lawyer,” Monk assured him.

They waited in silence. Soon there were noises at the door of the plane. The first sounds were four or five soft thuds, as if something was being put aboard the plane. They wondered what.

Then the passengers got aboard. Not one. At least five!

“Blazes!” Monk was alarmed.

The motors, one after another, wailed their starters, then popped and coughed and settled down to methodical roaring. The old metal plane bumped across the tarmac, and rolled more smoothly on the black-topped runway. It stopped and they felt the wheelbrakes lock, then the motors thundered terrifically in the pre-take-off test that every pilot gives his engines if he wants to live long.

In the uproar, Monk told Ham, “I got a feeling if we're smart, we'll get out of here. Where'd the other passengers come from?”

“Too late,” Ham gasped.

The tri-motor was rolling. It hiked down the runway with its tail in the air, and took off. It climbed steadily, jerking a little with the air currents, for about three minutes.

In five minutes, a man was beating on the little door to Monk and Ham's hiding place.

THE man gave the door only a few wallops, then he spoke to them.

“Did you hear us put the parachutes aboard?” he shouted.

So that was what the five softer thumps had been. Monk and Ham kept the silence of death. They weren't sure the man was addressing them, but the possibility was unpleasantly probable.

"We've got â€ˆchutes," the man bellowed. "You haven't. We watched you get in. We know you haven't got â€ˆchutes."

Silence.

"Here's what we're going to do," the man yelled. "We're going to set this old cloud-buster on fire. Then we're going to bail out and let you have her."

Silence.

"What do you think of that?" the man shouted.

Silence.

"And to make you happier, we're going to shoot that little place where you're hiding as full of holes as a sieve," the man shrieked.

The silence hardly seemed necessary now.

"Of course, you could come out like nice guys," the man said.

Monk and Ham came out, like nice guys. It was the only thing to do, because the five men in the cabin had rifles and didn't look as if they had been fooling.

"That's fine," the shouter told them. "Now you'll get to go on a nice long flying trip with us, all the way to a place called Tira Valley, deep in the heart of Mexico, in case you're interested."

They began the business of disarming Monk and Ham and tying them hand and foot.

## Chapter VIII

OSCAR WARD had stopped crying. He had mopped the little creeks of tears off his face and he had held up his arms and Doc Savage had searched him.

That had been some time ago, and Doc's subsequent search of Ward's abnormally modernistic apartment had unearthed nothing bearing on the matter at hand. He had discovered the mate to the old dueling pistol with which Ward had intended—and Doc believed he really had—to kill Doc.

Ward had not spoken since he had burst out in tears. He did whatever Doc told him to do, obeying meekly. But he had not made a vocal sound.

Doc had put him in his car, and driven uptown, purposefully passing close to two police stations enroute. Ward had grown rigid when they were in front of the second police station, so apparently he had not recognized the first one for what it was. But he had maintained his strange silence.

Doc was puzzled.

Now they were entering the Funding apartment, and Nora and her father were greeting them. There was a difference in the greetings.

Funding frowned and said darkly, "I'd just as soon you hadn't brought the fellow here!"

Nora looked sick, and anxiety caused her hands to make a small gesture.

Oscar Ward's eyes were sick also.

Funding asked, "Have any trouble with the bounder?"

The news seemed to shock Funding somewhat more than was to be expected, Doc thought. And he was sure that Funding wiped the astonishment off his face with a quick and firm effort.

Doc filed away some thoughts for future weighing: One, Funding hadn't expected Oscar Ward to try to kill. Two, Funding was as scared as anything and covering it up. Three, Oscar Ward wasn't as much scared as he was sick over something in his own mind. Four, Nora was in love with Oscar Ward.

Not because he believed it likely, but because he wanted to see if it would loosen Ward's tongue, Doc asked, "Has there been any question in the past about Ward's sanity?"

Nora cried instantly, "Of course not!"

Funding, as if he liked the possibility, asked, "Why do you say that?"

"His behavior is strange," Doc explained.

"Hm-m-m." Funding was a man pondering. "You know, there could be such a thing."

Nora said, "No! No, Mr. Savage! Oscar Ward is fine, fine through and through. There have been some adverse things printed in the gossip columns about him, but there was a reason for those. He was disappointed, and angry, because he couldn't get in the armed forces. He was rejected in the draft, and when he tried to enlist, because he's blind in his right eye. When he talked to people about it, he was nasty to them, because he was ashamed and hurt. He insulted a columnist who is a notorious busybody, and the columnist started that story about Oscar taking something to make his blood pressure high so he could stay out of the army. That was a lie."

Oscar Ward broke his silence briefly.

"Thank you, Nora," he said.

The answer told Doc something that had been puzzling him. The young man was not demented. There was no question of that. Not that three words were conclusive proof of his rationality; they certainly weren't. Oscar Ward had some good and sufficient reason for the way he was acting, and Doc was beginning to suspect that it wasn't any danger to Ward himself.

THERE was a chance that Ward might not have a clear understanding of the situation, and that he might change his ideas if things were explained.

Doc decided to have a verbal roundup of the thing, and see what happened. It couldn't do any harm.

He said, "Suppose we go into the sun-room, sit ourselves down and let me talk for a while."

When they were in the pleasant sun-room, Doc seated himself so that he could watch the faces of everyone without too obviously doing so.

He said, "So far this thing has been like the piece of a puzzle blowing in a wind. Some of the pieces are fairly clear in shape, but others haven't blown along yet. Now, one sensible way of solving a

puzzle—take a jigsaw puzzle for instance—is to spread out what pieces you have and look at them and visualize a way that they might fit together.”

Funding was angry and trying to hide it; Nora was pale and worried, and Oscar Ward was still sick at heart.

“Keep in mind that I say *might*,” Doc continued. “Because this might not be the picture at all. But at least it is a picture, a visualization, something to begin thinking about.

“There is a valley in Mexico. Tira Valley, a place of mystery so far. Two strange old men come out of it. They are Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis, one claiming to be two hundred ninety years old and the other one hundred seventy-six.

“One old man has persuaded the other one they should give the secret of agelessness to humanity, so they approached Mr. Funding about it. Mr. Funding was interested and got together a syndicate of wealthy men who were financially able to handle the gigantic project which the thing would become. Up to that point, everything was fine.”

Funding had moistened his lips and nodded slightly. Otherwise the three listeners had remained motionless.

“But one or more members of the syndicate decided to steal the secret and keep it only for themselves. To do this, they first decided to kill off the other members of the syndicate who knew about the secret. They made genuine attempts to kill the men they wanted to kill, and faked attempts to kill the others, so that suspicion would not be drawn to themselves—Or himself, if the would-be thief is one man.

“When such a thing happened, it disgusted the two old men, Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis. They decided to have nothing more to do with the syndicate. Arctic Davis wanted to go back to Tira Valley and forget the whole thing.

“But Methuselah Brown wanted humanity to have the secret, and so he decided to approach me, and he did so quite sensibly by first interesting a famous specialist, a friend of mine, and the specialist recommending that I take him seriously.

“Methuselah Brown talked to my two aids, Monk and Ham, and while they were checking Brown's story for veracity, Methuselah Brown was killed. Who killed him? The members of the syndicate who had turned thieves, or their hired thugs. Why? To keep him from telling me the ageless secret.”

Oscar Ward lifted his head. He looked straight at Doc Savage and said, “That's good. That's mighty good. That's the answer to everything but—if I may be trite—the sixty-four-dollar question.”

DOC SAVAGE, hoping he had gotten the rise out of Ward, which was the whole purpose of his telling the story, asked, “You care to help?”

Ward's face had looked miserable before, but now there was a flood of misery on it.

He said slowly, and distinctly, “I can't. I can't. And God, I hope someday this sacrifice I am making is appreciated.”

He settled back. It was plain he had said all he had to say.

Doc was discouraged. He felt he had made a long speech, putting his neck out, for nothing. He rarely did

such a thing, advancing theories which he couldn't prove, and might be nowhere near the facts. He felt an urge to justify himself.

He said, "Now, there is another side to it. The whole thing smacks of a theatrical tinge. It rings of play-acting."

Strangely enough, that got more reaction out of Oscar Ward than anything else. Ward looked up sharply.

Doc continued, "I am referring to what you might call the purple passages in the thing. Take the name Methuselah Brown. Sounds like a name someone had made up for a not-very-good book, doesn't it? And the name Arctic Davis. Equally phony-sounding. And the idea of men being two hundred and ninety and one hundred seventy-six years old. There are, running through the whole affair, certain corny qualities which give it a phony ring."

Oscar Ward was staring at Doc steadily.

"I had the same thoughts in almost the same words," he said.

"Anything more than a suspicion to justify it?" Doc asked.

"No, damn it!" said Ward bitterly.

Doc said, "You know more than you have told us?"

Ward stared at Funding strangely. "I know a lot more," he said, even more bitterly. Then he seemed to realize he was letting himself get excited, that he was being drawn out, and he carefully leaned back in his chair. "It would be easy for me to know more. I haven't told you a thing."

The telephone began ringing. A servant came in, said, "For you, Mr. Savage."

THE speaker had the kind of a shrill voice which fat men often have. He said he was the manager of an airport near a small town in Connecticut.

"This all started when one of the mechanics here thought he recognized a man named Monk Mayfair," the fellow explained. "Then we called the F. B. I., and they said we had better call you, Mr. Savage."

Doc, suddenly sure something was wrong, asked, "What happened?"

"An old man came in here and rented a tri-motor plane from us," the voice explained. "His license was okay. While he was looking over the ship, two other men rushed in here and gave me the idea they were F. B. I. agents, but I've since found out they must have been two men named Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair, who work with you. They decided to stow away on the plane the old fellow was renting. When the old chap came in to pay in advance for the plane, Monk and Ham sneaked aboard the ship. But what got us stirred up—five more men all of a sudden got out of a car that had been parked around the place for a while. We thought the guys in the car were just sightseers. But the five climbed in the plane, carrying parachutes, with the old duffer. The plane took off."

Doc said, "What was that last? The five men got into the plane unexpectedly after Monk and Ham had stowed away?"

"Right."

"Then it looked like a trap?"

“That's what we thought. That's what got us worried. But at first like I said, we thought they were two F. B. I. fellows. But a mechanic here recognized Monk Mayfair on account of having seen him somewhere before.”

Doc asked, “Any trace of the plane since?”

“No.”

“Give me a complete description, and the gasoline load aboard, navigation instruments, charts and so on.”

The man described the plane, gave its number, and said the gasoline load was a full one.

“How long ago did this happen?”

The man named a time some four hours previous.

“What about charts?” Doc asked.

“They didn't have any charts of ours. The old fellow said he had his own. He told us he was chartering our ship to fly to Chicago, but now we don't know. We're worried about our plane. What would you suggest we do?”

“My idea would be to build a fire under everybody you think might possibly help you locate the plane,” Doc said. “And in the meantime, I will be doing the same thing.”

WHEN Doc hung up, Funding demanded, “Has something developed?”

Doc seemed not to hear the question, and began dialing on the phone. He called the C.A.A. weather station at La Guardia Airport. He asked for a general weather.

What he heard was discouraging.

There was warm air mass over most of the eastern and southern states, which meant fog, or ice crystal fog, low stratus clouds and considerable drizzle and mist. The worst kind of flying weather—but darned good weather if a plane wanted to go somewhere without being intercepted.

Doc arranged for a general alarm for the old tri-motor plane which appeared to have turned out to be a trap for Monk and Ham. The alarm would go quickly, because the teletype and radio hookup was remarkably complete.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Doc Savage had three other aids who normally worked with him. They were Renny Renwick, who for some months had been on an engineering job in China; Long Tom Roberts, electrical expert who was in Russia, and Johnny Littlejohn, eminent archaeologist and geologist, who was currently trying to open up a tin deposit in northern Canada.

Doc despatched messages to each of the absent aids. He confined himself to outlining, in a private code which they would understand, the situation. He added the information that they might be called on for help in case anything drastic had happened to Monk and Ham. But, as long as they were not called, they could assume the situation was not getting out of hand.



It took nearly two hours to get the coded messages through the various censors. The simplest way turned out to be sending them through diplomatic channels, and finally Doc did that.

AT a few minutes past midnight, the tri-motored plane was reported as having landed near the town of Valdosta, in southern Georgia.

The fifteen or twenty minutes the plane had been at the airport had been violent ones. First, the ship had flown over it, at which time the identity of the aircraft had not been known because of the darkness. But evidently two of the men aboard the plane had parachuted to the ground. They had appeared in the airport office with drawn guns, overpowered the guards, and signaled their plane, which had then landed.

A full load of gasoline had been taken aboard the old craft. And that was gasoline enough practically to empty the ninety-octane tank at the field.

The airport guard, and the one attendant there at the time, had been forced to lie face-down on the office floor. They had heard a voice yelling angrily for help, for assistance. The voice, a great bellowing one, had identified itself as belonging to Monk Mayfair. The men in the plane had not tried to stop their prisoner's yelling. They had considered it funny.

The two men at the airport were left bound and gagged when the ship took off. They had soon freed themselves—in about an hour—and had spread the alarm.

Doc Savage was in the Funding apartment when he received the news by telephone.

He said, "There are better facilities, radio and teletype among others, at my headquarters. I am going there. Naturally, I will take Oscar Ward along."

Without much apparent emotion, Ward asked, "What are you planning to do with me?"

"You are a prisoner until you tell a better story than you have told," Doc said shortly.

Funding said anxiously, "Mr. Savage, could I prevail on you to let myself and my daughter go with you? Frankly, I am much worried about this matter, and a good deal of the concern is for the personal safety of myself and Nora."

"You can come along if you wish," Doc said.

Oscar Ward, in the bitterest of voices, said, "Don't you trust your hired guards, Mr. Funding?"

"Of course I trust them," Funding said. "They are as reliable as I could hire."

They went downstairs to get into the Funding limousine.

ONE of the reliable guards put the muzzle of a revolver against the small of Doc's back and said, "This is where the road turns."

The apartment-house doorman, also supposed to be reliable, and the chauffeur, likewise reliable, had taken pains to have their hands under their clothing at the moment. They began getting out the guns they were holding.

Oscar Ward, for a fellow who had been sitting around looking sick and acting stupefied, moved with

good effect. He hit the chauffeur. The blow, partially effective, sent the chauffeur on his back beside the car, but only delayed him getting his gun out.

There wasn't another thing Oscar Ward could have done except stay around there and be shot. But in the excitement of the instant, it took nice judgment to see that. He saw it. Ward ran for his life.

"My car!" Doc shouted. "It is bulletproofed!"

Ward headed for Doc's machine.

The guard tried to shoot Doc in the back. Doc, on the good chance that would happen, had his hands in the air. The chain-mesh bullet-proof undergarment didn't protect his arms, which was why he had them up.

The mesh undershirt did protect his side where the gun muzzle rested. But, when the gun exploded, he thought for a while it hadn't. The bullet hit only a glancing blow, because he was turning, but he was knocked headlong. His whole side felt as if it was torn off.

He had the luck to swing an arm down and around and knock the man's gun out of his hand. But at the same time the bullet-shock sent him headlong.

Doc landed on his hands. The shock in his side was awful. He was afraid he was going to pass out from the effects. So he kept going. He put everything he had into reaching his own car.

Oscar Ward had taken his advice and was in the machine, had the doors closed.

Doc, running the way a man can run when his life depends on it, diving right and left to avoid bullets, reached the car.

All this was taking place inside the tunnel-like arcade which entered the apartment house on the south and went out on the north. The place was there for the tenants who used cars. Gunfire filled the arcade with crashing thunder.

Ward knocked a car door open for Doc. He went inside. Now the bullets just made loud bangings against the armor plate and made crack-veins in the thick special glass.

Funding and Nora were being hauled into the other machine.

Doc was in the rear seat of his own car. He had to climb over into the front. He found the switch key gone. Someone had taken it. He went down headfirst under the instrument panel to get the necessary wires tied together.

He heard the other car start. With extra luck, he got the correct two wires together. His own car engine whooped out.

But the other car was moving now. It popped out into the street. It slid its wheels to a stop, an unexpected thing to do.

Another car, waiting for that purpose, pulled suddenly into the tunnel-like entry, crossing it at an angle, hitting one wall, jamming there. The one man in this machine sprang out and clambered into the car in which the Fundings had been placed. And that car got going.

The car jammed in the tunnel burst into flame. Evidently there was gasoline in the back, and a match had been tossed in. Their pursuit of the Fundings and their captors was blocked that way.

Doc started backing toward the other end of the tunnel arc.

He found an old truck stalled there.

“We're licked,” Ward said grimly.

DOC SAVAGE'S headquarters on the eighty-sixth floor of the midtown building had, over a period of years, turned into a nerve-center. Built originally as an office and experimental laboratory, the nature of the installation had gradually changed as Doc and his aids tried out one idea or another. They were confirmed experimenters. One or another of them was invariably piddling around with some utterly improbable gadget.

Sometimes the gimmicks turned out to be nothing but an enormous laugh, as when Monk Mayfair worked out a gas which he thought was a sure-fire nerve gas, effective through the skin pores, and confidently tried it out on himself, with the result that he turned as green as a bullfrog and stayed that way several months. But a percentage of the gadgets turned out to be practical. Headquarters was, in fact, a hodgepodge of such things.

Doc Savage liked to work from the place, because when he needed something unusual, it was likely to be handy.

Furthermore he was now alone, and he knew the best way to tackle the thing for the time being was in an administrative capacity. About all he could do alone was spark-plug things, start machinery working.

The navy promised coöperation when he called them, which was as soon as he reached headquarters.

He got Mexico City on the telephone, and after some lengthy explanations, secured coöperation there. They would do everything possible to intercept the old tri-motored plane.

Doc made in the neighborhood of a dozen other calls in succession, all aimed at one of two things: First, finding Monk. Second, learning what he could about the background of Oscar Ward and the other wealthy men in the syndicate.

Oscar Ward listened to the calls with a sort of dry-mouthed interest.

Something new had been eating Ward since the Fundings had been seized and whisked away. This new feeling was an emotion. Rage, Doc thought it was. He couldn't be sure, but Oscar Ward seemed to be a man who was wracked with the most intense anger, and didn't know what to do about it.

The break in Ward's strained stoicism came unexpectedly.

It was after Doc got an unexpected call over the police-radio wave-length, saying, “A man and a woman answering the descriptions of Peter Armbruster Funding and his daughter, boarded a private plane, together with several other men, at an eastern Pennsylvania airport. The plane took off about an hour ago. None of the C.A.A. airways stations have reported it overhead, so it must be keeping off airline routes.”

This information, being by radio, came out of a loudspeaker so that Oscar Ward heard it.

He broke. He broke the way he had that first time, leaning forward, face buried in hands. He was sobbing.

OSCAR WARD'S attack lasted for a while, then he leaned back and said, "Oh, God!" two or three times in a low aching voice. Next he shut his eyes for a while. Eyes still closed, he began talking.

"I am going to tell you what is happening, and you have got to believe me," he said. "There is no reason you should believe me, because I haven't been coöperative, and I will continue to be exactly the same way—not at all coöperative. No matter how crazy the way I act looks to you, I have my reasons."

Doc said nothing. But he was plenty interested. He was convinced that Oscar Ward held the key to part of the mystery at least. He had intended, as his next step, using a truth serum treatment on Ward, undependable as truth serums were.

"They are all heading for Tira Valley, in Mexico," Oscar Ward said. "You have scared them. They have been worried about you getting involved in the thing, and they killed old Methuselah Brown to keep you out of it. But they were too late. Now they're frightened, so they're fleeing for Mexico."

"My two aids, Monk and Ham?" Doc asked.

"Will be taken to Tira, probably. My guess is that they will be afraid to kill them immediately, but will plan to use their safety as a club to curb your activities. I may be wrong. But I think that is the way their minds will work."

"And the Fundings?"

Oscar Ward turned strangely white.

"Will be in Tira Valley also," he said.

"The thing causing all this trouble is actually the secret of how to live to be two or three hundred years old in good health?" Doc asked.

"Naturally."

"Is there really such an improbable secret?"

"I don't know," Ward said. "All the evidence indicates there is. Myself, I have been hard to convince. I don't know."

Doc Savage was watching Ward intently. Weighing, judging, deciding, or trying to decide, what was truth and what wasn't.

What Ward had said sounded like truth—or at least what Ward sincerely believed. But it was hard to be sure about lies and truth. You could never be quite sure.

Doc said, "You have told me all this for a reason, have you not?"

"Yes, for a reason. I want you to go into Tira Valley after them. I want to go with you."

"You know where Tira Valley is?" Doc demanded.

"I have a map. Or a 35-millimeter film containing a picture of such a map, and enlargements made from this negative. Not too good, but I think it will get us into Tira."

"Have you been to Tira Valley?"

“No.”

“Where did you get this picture of the map?”

Again Ward went strangely white-faced. “That,” he said, “is one of the things I am not going to tell you.”

“Why?”

“No answer to that, either,” Ward said.

Elation, which had been building up inside Doc Savage, suddenly flooded him. This was it! This was what he should do. Instinct and judgment assured him that he should lose no time getting to Tira Valley, wherever and whatever the place was. There were arguments against it, and probably common sense was against it, but he decided to gamble.

“All right. We will start immediately,” he said.

Ward jumped to his feet. He looked surprised, shaky, but also intensely relieved that Doc knew he had not been lying.

“The pictures and the negative are in the safety-deposit box at my bank,” he said. “It’ll take some argument to get them out at this time of night. But let’s try.”

## Chapter IX

THERE is a monotony about a long plane trip that is stupefying. Pilots complain about it. Passengers sleep, or fret, or become increasingly nervous, according to their dispositions.

Oscar Ward was the stewing type. He had not been any pool of content when they started. In Miami, where they had refueled the first time, he had scorned taking food, which they needed by that time, and had worn a circle pacing around the plane while Doc ate.

Contrarily, when they landed in Belize, British Honduras, he had to eat or fall over from hunger, and he gobbled down a mess of tortillas, potted goat, cactus salad and other mysteries. The result was that he now had a tremendous case of indigestion mixed with grumbling.

The landing at Belize had been made on the Belize river, for this plane which Doc Savage was flying was amphibious, could operate from land or water. It was two-motored, and fast. Belize was built on the two banks of the river, but now they had left that city, with its houses on stilts and its generally lazy aspect, far behind.

They were over northern Guatemala now, which was flying in the back door of Chiapas State, Mexico. But the route was nearly as short as any, and the weather had promised better.

The weather, in fact, was good. Clear, visibility not quite unlimited, but nearly. The plane was bumping a little, because it was fairly low and flying over the Cahoon ridge country.

Oscar Ward hiccupped, said, “Blast!” He got out his photograph of the map and compared it with the air navigational chart which Doc was using.

“Blast it!” he said. “You can’t tell where this thing fits. The air chart doesn’t cover that country.”

Doc said, “It covers it, all right. But not in detail.”

The bronze man studied the photograph. The pictured map covered a small area, apparently, and the most aggravating thing about it was that there was no mileage scale on it, and no latitude or longitude markings from which a general idea could be obtained.

The map, however, had considerable detail. It had obviously been drawn for the purpose of finding Tira Valley on foot. The landmarks were jungle landmarks, and drawn the way one not too much experienced in map-making would draw such a thing.

“The Mexican border,” Doc said.

He began to climb the plane. He climbed until they had more than twenty thousand feet of altitude, which was about all the visibility conditions would allow and still let them see the ground. He got out a good pair of binoculars.

“You will notice on the chart that two rivers are shown, and that they have their beginning near the center, and one flows toward the bottom of the map, the other toward the top,” Doc said. “The logical conclusion is that the map includes a section near the Continental Divide, so that the one river flows into the Gulf of Mexico and the other into the Pacific. Whenever you spot two such streams, call my attention to them.”

Ward burped, said, “My God, why didn't I remember I can't eat tortillas!” He went to peering through the glasses.

Later, he made a little speech.

“Modern invention is wonderful,” Ward said. “Here I am in an airplane over what is supposed to be, and probably is, an impenetrable jungle and impassable mountains. But I don't feel, except for the uproar in my belly, much different than I would feel at the end of a ride in my limousine down a New York street. I have no feeling of distance, jungles or that sort of thing.”

Doc said nothing. He was watching the terrain below. The mountains below weren't high, but they were snagged, as if clawed by a monster. If their motors failed and they cracked up down there, they would be months getting out, in all likelihood.

FIVE times in the next hour, Ward thought he had found the right creek.

They both located the right one at about the same time. It was barely distinguishable, to the north, but the one to the south was more of a river. It was the north one they wanted.

Doc flew north for a while, checking with the photograph of the map.

“All right, this is the one,” he said.

Ward hiccupped loudly, and looked disgusted with himself.

The valley of Tira, as nearly as they could judge from the chart, was to the right, off the main stream. But the landmarks were intended to be recognized by foot travelers.

Doc sent the plane down. The mountains, which had looked like small snagged green spikes, grew and grew and became ominous monsters.

Doc followed the river. To slow the plane, he cracked the flaps, and kept just enough air speed to be

safe. The result was that, when they hit an air current, they would rise or drop sickeningly.

At a great height, such antics by the plane would have been vaguely unpleasant, but a passenger not air-wise would not have realized exactly what was happening. Here, with the canyon walls just off the wingtips, it was hair-raising to have the plane suddenly fall three or four hundred feet.

“Whew! Is this safe?” Ward gasped.

“Not very,” Doc said. “But keep watching for landmarks. The most prominent seems to be a large spike rock, like an island, in the river.”

The river was a boiling turbulence of muddy water, a twisting foaming snake that whipped between the canyon walls.

Suddenly Doc hauled up. The island. There it was, a bull-horn of stone sticking out of the river.

Doc kicked the plane to the right, for he could distinguish the gap in the wall through which they were supposed to go, according to the map, to reach Tira Valley.

Suddenly he hauled over, did a wild bank. The canyon was too narrow to fly into. He got the plane around, but if there was any dust on the rocky canyon wall, their slipstream blew it off.

“Oh, mother!” Ward gasped.

“Should cure your hiccoughs,” Doc said. “A scare is supposed to do it. We will go up and see about coming in from the top.”

Ward hiccupped.

Doc did tight climbing turns, the throttles wide open, then headed into the gap. It wasn't really a titanic gash in the earth; it just looked so because they were so close to it. The altitude of the surrounding mountains, checked against the sea-level setting of the altimeter, was nowhere more than five thousand feet.

For a while they flew over a narrow crack of a canyon that was impassable for anything less active than an eagle. Then, quite suddenly, the crack split, flung its sides wide, and there was a valley.

“A lake!” Ward yelled, pointing.

Doc frowned. It wasn't a lake. It was the backwater from a dam, a dam that didn't look as if it had been made by a natural landslide.

He put the plane down, and made a dragging run over the lake, watching the banks and the sharply sloping hills on either side. The jungle was fabulously thick, but nothing stirred in it.

“Not a thing in sight, dammit,” Ward wailed.

Doc said, “Keep your eyes open while we land.”

HE dragged the water again, searching for snags. The water, to his relief, was quite clear, and there seemed to be nothing dangerous.

He was flying now over the downstream end of the pond, and he tried to satisfy his curiosity about what

had caused the stream to spread out. He couldn't tell for sure. The jungle grew too thick.

He came back, banking sharply, and made a quick navy-type landing, a turn at the last moment. They sheeted up water for a short distance, then the plane settled. Doc cut the motors. They were hot, would start again instantly, and he wanted silence for listening.

He unplugged his ears—he had put cotton in them some time ago, so that he wouldn't be deafened—and yanked back the window.

“Hear anything?” Ward asked after a while.

“No.” Doc started the engines, and worked the plane over toward the left bank. He grounded the craft, got out on the nose, and pulled the mooring line out of its locker. He studied the current, then let the plane follow the drift of the stream for a while.

“The place looks deserted,” Ward complained. “My God, what if we've come on a wild goose chase!”

Doc said, “That dam still interests me.”

He went toward the dam. Ward got out of the plane also, then hastily climbed back in, and reappeared with a machete. He obviously didn't need the machete, because the jungle, while lush and thick, was not nearly the impenetrable maze of the tropics. This was semi-tropical. The dam was about two hundred yards away.

The rushing sound of water became audible. Not loud, not a waterfall. Doc reached the dam.

Ward crowded up behind him, stared, said, “Holy smoke!”

It was a masonry dam, great blocks hand-formed and put there a long time ago. It was no gigantic engineering work, but it was massive. And wonderfully put together.

Ward, a little pop-eyed, hurried over to look at the spillway, or rather at the whirlpool which was evidence that there was a short subterranean spillway. Then he scampered over to the other side of the dam.

“Come here!” he howled.

Doc joined him. They stood looking at a waterpower mill which was operated by the rushing stream through the spillway tunnel.

No modern mill, this. The grinding stones were just that—stones. The motive power was transmitted by an ingenious arrangement of wooden tiers from the big wooden waterwheel. Not a bit of metal was used anywhere, although it was true that the wood out of which the thing was made was almost as hard as metal.

Oscar Ward, in an awed voice, “A prehistoric grinding mill! What do you know about that!”

Doc Savage straightened out his face. “Hate to shatter your illusions, but it's hardly that,” he said. “These waterpower mills are in use in the back country today, and this one, for instance, is probably no more than two years old. The mill itself, I mean. The stonework is undoubtedly quite old, perhaps hundreds of years. But that is not unusual. The Mayan and Aztec waves of civilization which swept this country long before Christ carried excellent stone-working skill with them.”

He walked around the mill, which was out of gear and idling. He discovered a basket partly full of corn,



and another basket containing ground cornmeal from the mill.

Beside the baskets lay a shawl, one of the head coverings worn by so many in Mexico, and called a mantilla. Doc picked it up, examined it, said, "Want to be further disillusioned, Ward?"

Ward came and stared at the "Made in Mexico" stamped on the piece. He hiccoughed, swore, and said, "Well, I was expecting something prehistoric, but I guess I was wrong."

"What led you to expect that?"

"Why, that was what—" Ward stopped. The look, the same ghastly expression of soul-illness that had hit him in New York when the subject of what he knew came up, twisted his face. He said no more.

It was a little startling then to have two women and a man come out of the jungle.

THE trio were natives, Mexicans of Indian blood. There was nothing unusual about their looks or dress. They could have strolled down the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City, or ambled through the great enclosed market on Plaza Loreto, without attracting undue attention.

*"Sabe el castellano?"*

the man asked.

"I speak Spanish," Doc answered the query in Spanish. "We are sorry we startled you."

The man smiled quickly. He had good manners, and his Spanish was surprisingly pure. He introduced the two women, his wife and daughter.

"We ran and hid when your plane came so close," the man said. "I suppose we were foolish. But it was the war, you know."

"We are sorry."

"It is no harm."

Doc Savage, noticing that one of the women wore no mantilla, presented the one he had found to her. "Yours, Señorita, I presume," he said. "It is a very nice one."

The girl, the daughter, laughed. "It is my every-day one. I bought it at the Loreto Market, in Mexico City, last year."

Doc nodded politely. His interest was on something else. The girl looked young. But the old folks looked—well—old. They had a little of that ageless something which Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis had about them. Or did they? It was hard to be sure about Indians, even very intelligent ones as these obviously were. Doc knew his imagination was working overtime, and that he should discount his impressions.

He explained that he and Ward were from the United States, and that they were here on a friendly search for some companions who had fallen victims of bad men. He made the story as convincing and friendly as possible.

Working psychology to the hilt, they strolled back to the plane, and Doc presented the man with a very fine hunting knife with an aluminum-and-plastic hilt. It took the man's eye, but for that matter it would take anybody's eye. Doc gave each of the women a nice necklace.

This job of buttering-up done, he got down to business.

“We have reason to think the bad men brought our friends to Tira Valley,” he said. “Would you be so kind as to direct us to Tira?”

The result seemed fine.

The man hesitated, then he pointed to the west. “You are obviously friends. I will tell you. It is yonder—over that mountain pass.”

Doc said, “Ah, we thought this was Tira Valley. Then we were wrong?”

The man laughed amiably. “It is not an unnatural mistake, and one that others have made. We frequently have visitors come here who think this is Tira. I am sorry it is not, for you are fine gentlemen. But it is yonder, over the pass.”

“How far?”

The man looked apologetic. “I have not been there. I do not know. Perhaps not far.”

The note of vagueness was noticeable. The Indian seemed embarrassed.

“Perhaps you can describe the place to us.”

“But I have not seen it.”

“Oh, I mean what you have heard.”

The man looked at the ground. “I am so sorry. I have never talked to anyone who has really seen it.”

“If it is so close, how does that come?”

“It is a place no one ever finds.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“*Quien sabe.*”

The Indian fell back on the universal answer for vagueness. The equivalent of an American's “God knows” or, “I suppose it just happened that way.”

Doc suddenly knew the questioning was not going to get any more information. But he persisted, “Haven't you heard anything at all about the place?”

The Indian laughed.

“I have heard that men live forever there,” he said. “Isn't that silly?”

## Chapter X

TO Oscar Ward's astonishment, Doc Savage prepared to continue the search for Tira Valley on foot. Ward, eyeing the jungle, the mountains, said he didn't believe too much in exercise that could be avoided. Why not use the plane?

“*Quien sabe,*”

Doc said.

Ward snorted. "I understand Spanish and speak it a little, and if there's anything that aggravates me, it's that answer."

Doc said, "Just put it that we had better walk."

"You're practically as full of specific explanations as that Indian," Ward said. But he prepared to foot it with Doc.

The three Indians stood by. They were interested in the plane. It was not the first they had seen—in fact, the man asked several questions which showed he knew quite a bit about planes. He finally volunteered the information that he had been up in one, in a barnstormer's plane at a *fiesta* in San Cristobal, the capital of Chiapas State.

The Indians walked with Doc and Ward as they set out to the west. They helpfully volunteered the information that there was a road just a little in from the river.

The road turned out to be a trail, rutted by a few carts, but mostly a pack-trail for donkey trains. But it was a vast improvement over the jungle going.

When they had covered about two miles, the three Indians stopped.

"*Buenas tardes,*"

the man said. "I hope you have a pleasant journey, that you find your friends, too. This is as far as we know the route, so we will leave you here."

"*Para servir a V,*"

Doc said. "I thank you very much."

There were more thanks, very elaborate ones, and good wishes on the part of everybody to everybody else. The Indian said he would personally see that no one molested their plane.

The three Indians then went back down the road.

Doc and Ward continued on their way—as far as the first turn in the road. There, Doc stopped.

"You stay here," he said. "Better get under cover. And keep your eyes open."

"Huh?" Ward was astonished. He hiccupped. "What goes on?"

"Something's fishy," Doc explained. "You wait here."

The bronze man was gone immediately. He went into the jungle, and the first thing he did was strip off the rather impressive pack he had shouldered back at the plane. He left it concealed in a bush.

Now he ran. When the jungle became particularly thick, he went up into the trees and worked along, because it was quicker that way, using his really remarkable strength the way an aerialist would have used his.

He caught up with the three Indians. He heard them giggling, and talking. He slowed up, used stealth, and listened to what they were so pleased about.

The information he got amounted to:

First, they were delighted over having fooled Doc Savage and Ward. They had done an expert job of

lying, and sucked in their victims, they agreed.

Second, this was old stuff with them. They had deceived many a traveler who had come into this valley seeking Tira, by telling about the same story.

Third, this was Tira Valley!

DOC SAVAGE listened to all this, and he was not too surprised. There had been something false all along.

His plan at the moment was to do nothing in the way of direct action. He would, he decided, trail the three Indians and see where they went, learn more about the situation before he tried anything.

The plan blew up not more than thirty seconds later.

Oscar Ward let out a howl. Fright and rage were the outstanding emotions in Ward's voice. Fight noises followed.

“Savage!” Ward bellowed. “They've jumped me! A lot of Indians—” The way he shut up, it sounded as if strong hands had gotten hold of his throat.

Doc eased back quickly, intending to leave these three Indians, and follow Ward's captors instead. At least, find out what was happening to Ward. That idea hit a snag, too.

Because—out of the jungle came brown, determined-looking Indians. They had been concealed in the neighborhood, and very well concealed too, because Doc hadn't noticed them. For the most part, they had been in the trees. The best cover was the thick leafage overhead. The Indians had literally covered themselves with green twigs, in the best accepted style of camouflage.

They converged on Doc purposefully.

“*A que sirve eso?*”

Doc said sharply in Spanish, demanding what it was all about.

“Geeve up queeck, onnerstand?” said one of the Indians in not-so-good English.

Doc said sharply, “Look here, we are friends. Don't you understand that?”

A man said, “This is Tira Valley,” in Spanish. As if that was explanation enough.

THE three Indians, the man and two women, came charging through the jungle to the spot. The man demanded what went on.

“You did not fool anybody, you ignorant grasshopper!” one of the Indians told him—not in Spanish this time, but in an altered Mayan dialect which was often heard through this section and in Yucatan.

“Keep back,” Doc warned.

They didn't laugh. But they weren't impressed. They kept coming.

Doc searched for guns. He didn't see any in hands, but several of them had holstered revolvers. The

weapons were big and flashy—which didn't mean they weren't dangerous. Most of them had clubs, and some of them had the type of cast-nets used for fishing, twisted out of tough fiber. If one of those dropped over a man, it would handicap him considerably.

By now they had completely encircled Doc.

The bronze man, estimating his chances, decided he couldn't break through the ring. He lifted his eyes. There was small chance through the trees, too.

This was obviously time for a gadget. The one he liked best, and which he employed most often, was an anaesthetic gas, transparent and colorless and without a very distinctive odor. The stuff would daze a man almost immediately. He carried it in small glass globules which would shatter easily, in a special metal case with padded pockets for the pellets. He reached for the case—and couldn't find it.

The gas-container was in the pack which he had left behind.

The only thing he had was a package of concentrated food pills.

He said, in perfectly distinct Spanish, "Have you fellows heard of poison gas?" He let that soak in. "This is very potent stuff," he added, and began throwing the pills.

They had heard of gas. There was frantic dodging. As soon as Doc saw that, he raced toward the thinnest part of the circle, pegging pills, finally throwing the whole box.

He ducked a thrown cast-net, went behind a bush, put his head back and his chest out, and ran as he had run few other times in his life.

There was no shooting. But one knife went past him turning slowly, and two clubs. A third club whaled him in the back, and made him think for a moment he had been shot or knifed.

There was one large tree, a very large one, standing alone—or at least its trunk was alone—in the jungle. Doc ducked behind it.

There, back of the tree, he disappeared. The Indians, when they came racing up, seemed quite puzzled by it.

DOC'S vanishing had been accomplished by the simple act—it was really, there were a whole series of handily placed knots and branches for a ladder—of climbing the blind side of the big tree until he was safely out of sight in the top foliage.

From there, he ran out on a giant of a limb that seemed to be as long as one arm of the Brooklyn Bridge, from which he could step quite comfortably into the next tree. He continued in this fashion. There was enough disgusted howling on the ground to cover whatever sounds he accidentally made.

The howling was being done by an Indian who seemed to be the chief. He was using the best Spanish for the purpose. Better could not have come from the toughest back street in the eastern part of Mexico City.

His words should have made warts grow on his listeners. He had recognized the pills as concentrated food pills. Pills, he said. And they had thought it was gas. My, my, my!

Doc Savage continued his monkey-like progress, really not as difficult as it looked, until he caught sight

of Oscar Ward.

Ward had troubles. Fourteen or fifteen husky, pleased, swarthy men had tied four ropes to Ward, to his ankles and wrists. They were amusing themselves, when Ward tried to fight, by yanking him out and spread-eagling him on the ground.

This gentling process shortly had its effect. Ward postponed execution of violence. When a man pointed at the jungle and said, "*Hay muy mal piso,*" Ward got going meekly.

As the man had said in Spanish, it was bad walking. It was very bad. They were climbing, forcing their way through jungle tangle, and climbing over rocks of considerable size. Doc Savage had no objections, because their slowness made them easier following. Unfortunately, they soon came to a path.

This path wound around hill slopes for about three hundred yards, without climbing any higher, and came to a surprising village. The village was surprising for two reasons. First, it looked like any other town of stone houses. Second, it was very neat. Third, there were no dogs around. The population of dogs in these places usually ran about four per adult and fifteen per infant of squalling size.

The natives convoyed Oscar Ward down the main street. Women and children lined the street, and some men. The parade was uneventful, except that a couple of overripe tropical fruits were tossed at Ward, but smeared the guards instead, and the guards put a stop to that, mostly by swearing.

The central part of the town was distinguished by a large stone building, more impressive than anything else in the village. It was the only structure not like the others. The blocks of stone were oversized, and the second floor—it was the only two-story building in town—had a setback. It had few if any windows. None at all were visible on this side.

Oscar Ward was hauled into this building, and a moment later noise and confusion broke out inside the place. There were blows, things upsetting, men running, men yelling. Most of it was yelling.

As if the noise had scared them out of the place, which it plainly hadn't, Monk Mayfair popped out of one side of the building and Ham Brooks out of the other.

They were hotly pursued.

INSTANTLY, Doc Savage jumped out into plain sight. He yelled as loudly as he could, shouting whatever he could think of, mostly just giving it volume. He bellowed for imaginary policemen to charge and arrest everybody. He made an elaborate pretense of charging. The whole idea was to divide attention if he could, give Monk and Ham a better chance of escaping.

It was fifty per cent successful. Monk got away. Ham was caught.

Monk, short-legged as he was, had the running ability of a desert lizard. He could actually outrun any of their group except Doc, and occasionally he outran Doc. He went into the nearest brush, practically a streak of hair and gristle.

Ham Brooks made the tragic error of looking back to see how he was doing, stepped in a hole, and fell. He tried the old tumbler's trick of doubling up and going over in a somersault to his feet, but it didn't work. The Indians piled on top of him until he was buried.

Someone took a shot at Doc. The bullet, very close, sounded like a brittle stick breaking against his ear as it went past.

Doc veered right, got behind a house, and kept going. The village roared up behind him like a hive of bees that had been kicked over.

He shouted, using French, which Monk knew, “*A droite! Droite! Monk! A droite!*”

Hoping Monk had heard, and would turn to the right in his flight, Doc headed on a course that would intercept the homely chemist if Monk had got the words. Monk had.

Doc found Monk gliding through the jungle, silently now.

“You all right?” Doc demanded.

“Listen, I’m scared green,” Monk said. “Let’s make some more tracks before we talk about it.”

Monk seemed to know where he wanted to go. It was up the slope of the ridge. They ran in silence, giving all their attention to stepping where footprints wouldn’t show.

Twice they went into the trees, when the jungle was thick enough, and moved from limb to limb in the upper forest lanes.

When there were enough rocks below, they dropped to those, and traveled on them, climbing. The ridge was not high at this point. Near the top, Monk stopped.

Monk was out of breath. He sank on a rock, held his face, purple and leaking perspiration, in his hands. He did nothing but pump with his lungs for a while.

## Chapter XI

WHEN he had extra air for words, Monk used it to repeat, “I don’t know when I’ve been more scared. Poor Ham! Ham didn’t make it, did he?”

“From the way it looked, he stepped in a hole and fell. They piled on to him before he could get up.”

Monk shuddered. “That’s bad.”

“What gave you your chance to make a break?”

“They had tied us up with rope, and we had sawed through them with a piece of sharp rock. The little rock was what you call obsidian, I think, as hard as glass. Ham managed that.” Monk lifted his head. “Old Ham is pretty slick, you know that? You know how he got that rock?”

“How?”

“There was a stop for rest while they were marching us to the village. Ham saw this bit of sharp rock on the ground, and he worked it into the top of his shoe without anyone noticing. They’d already searched us. They didn’t search us again, and so Ham had the sharp rock. We sawed through the ropes. All we needed was a diversion to make our break.

“When they brought in that last guy—we never did see who it was—he created a rumpus. Our guards ran to see the fuss. And so Ham and I just blew out in different directions.”

Doc said, “The man they brought in was Oscar Ward.”

“Who’s he?”

Doc said, "We had better bring each other up to date on this."

Doc gave the first summary, telling the things Monk didn't know about. The two old men, Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis—the syndicate they had approached—the "attempts" on the lives of the syndicate members—the suspicion which financier Peter Armbruster Funding had built up against playboy Oscar Ward—Ward's strange behavior, his refusal to tell anything, but his knowing where the Valley of Tira was and his certainty that Funding and his daughter and Monk and Ham had been taken there. "The fact that we found the valley here proves Ward knows what he is talking about."

Monk nodded.

He said, "I'll begin with when I last saw you. That was when we went off on the trail of old Arctic Davis. We followed him up to a little Connecticut town, to an airport, where we pulled what we thought was a smart trick—and got sucked in."

"I found out you and Ham stowed away in a plane old Arctic Davis had rented," Doc said. "And then five other men got in."

"Yeah, the five were the jaws of the trap that got us," Monk explained. "The plane headed right for this valley."

Doc said, "Oscar Ward said that you would be brought here because we had scared the gang into flight."

"Oscar Ward was right," Monk growled. "I wonder just who this Oscar Ward is, anyway?"

"So they were scared?"

Monk nodded grimly. "But not half as scared as they are now. Or I am." He shuddered.

"What do you mean?"

Monk pointed toward the village. "The guys who brought me here—including old Arctic Davis—are prisoners back there, too." He shivered. "Poor devils. Poor Ham."

"When were they caught?"

"Same time I was—when the plane landed."

"Where did you land? We saw no sign of a plane or planes."

"Over the hill." Monk pointed. "There's a meadow over there. That's where I'm heading for." He frowned. "And what do you mean, planes? Is there more than one plane?"

"Oscar Ward seemed sure the men who seized the Fundings would head for this spot."

"They haven't gotten here." Monk stood up. "Let's go on to the meadow. Maybe we can capture that old tri-motor plane and get out of here for help." He wiped off perspiration nervously. "Doc, I hate to be an alarmist, but we're mixed in something we can't carry off without help."

THEY got going again. Doc was silent. Nothing that Monk had said had made his mind easy. Instead, he was becoming very alarmed.

Monk was a man who had what the psychiatrists would call primitive emotional paths. Another way of



saying that there was hardly anything that would scare him. Monk was frightened now. Doc had seen him scared a time or two in the past, and each occasion had been hair-curling.

Doc said quietly, "All right, Monk, what haven't you told me?"

Monk grimaced. "It's this valley. That village. Those Indians."

"They do not look so alarming."

"That's it. They don't *look* alarming. That's what got my goat. A fellow traveling through this country, coming on that place, would just think: Here's another backwoods Indian town full of Indians whose ancestors were Mayans and Incas and Aztecs, or whatever. I understand that's what happens whenever somebody happens on the place. They just think it's another Indian town, and go on their way."

"I gathered that," Doc said. "They tried the trick on me."

"They didn't know who you were, or they wouldn't have given you even that much of a chance."

Doc eyed Monk thoughtfully. They had paused again to rest. They were at the crest of the hill now, and Doc could see a long, open meadow below, about half a mile distant.

There was no sign of a plane.

Monk said, "Maybe I shouldn't have the jim-jams. Maybe it was the idea with which I came into this. I was expecting something exotic. Some kind of a lost world, or something, I guess. You're always hearing about some pot-head explorer finding a lost tribe of white Indians. Maybe that's what I expected. Or a bit of ancient Inca kingdom undisturbed by the centuries."

"What gave you the idea?"

"Several things. Those two old men, their talk about being two and three hundred years old, their talk about a mysterious valley. And then those guys in the plane coming down here—they talked as if it was a different world here."

Doc eyed Monk narrowly. The homely chemist, it was becoming more evident, was skirting the issue. He had something unpleasant in his mind which he didn't want to drag out and show.

Doc said, "Do you have to beat around the bush, Monk?"

"All right, it *is* a lost valley and a lost town," Monk said gloomily. "The world knows just as little about this place as it would if it was in a hitherto unexplored part of Tibet or on the moon."

He looked at Doc, and seemed to want to groan.

"Doc, everybody in this place actually lives to be hundreds of years old," he muttered.

DOC SAVAGE was startled. He eyed Monk narrowly, and Monk grimaced. Doc turned back to search the way they had come. He could not see pursuit, which did not prove there was none, because the jungle grew thick.

When Doc's gaze reached the little lake made by the stone dam, he got a jolt. His plane! It was being moved to the other end of the pond, to the narrow end, by a swarm of brown natives.

Monk continued bitterly, “The way I understand it—from hearing those guys talk on the plane coming down—is that up until fifty years or so ago, this valley was really one of those hidden valleys you imagine things about. An occasional traveler would “discover” the place, and the local boys would either knock him off or catch him and make him stay there. The place hadn’t been “discovered” very often up to that time, due to the fact that the Tirans, as they call themselves, had given the vicinity of the valley an unhealthy reputation. They went to a lot of trouble to scare people off.

“About fifty years ago, the Tirans were smart enough to see that the world was getting modern and they couldn’t stay completely isolated any longer. So what did they do but become, on the face of things, an ordinary village in an ordinary valley. Every man turned into an actor. Whenever a stranger turned up, he wasn’t molested, but he wasn’t encouraged to stay. If he was looking for the mysterious valley where people lived forever, Tira, he was told it was over the hills somewhere, and sent on his way.”

“Not a bad scheme,” Doc suggested.

“It worked fine, apparently.”

“What about Methuselah Brown and Arctic Davis?”

“Oh, they happened on to the valley when they were young men. They were seized, permitted to stay, and became ageless. The Tirans figured they were good guys, apparently, because they let them come and go from the valley. And that worked all right until the two old gaffers got the idea of giving or selling the secret to humanity.”

“Just what is the secret?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Monk said. “But it has something to do with that big building without windows, the one Ham and I escaped from. It’s in there, whatever the secret is. That’s the only place it is, and they guard the building like anything.”

“But you don’t know what it is?”

“No.” Monk got to his feet again. “Let’s see if we can grab the old tri-motor and get out of here for help.”

THE tri-motor plane was in worse shape than Humpty Dumpty after he fell off the wall. The Tirans had taken it apart.

Doc Savage heard a grunting and tramping, warned Monk, and they concealed themselves. A sweating, swearing gang of Tirans went by. They were carrying one of the plane’s radial motors.

“We’re sunk!” Monk whispered. “Those cusses know how to take a plane apart!”

Doc was thoughtful. It was fairly clear by now that they weren’t up against a bunch of ignorant natives. The Tirans seemed to be sharp fellows, well-practiced in deceit.

He and Monk seemed to be near a trail, because shortly another group of the dark fellows came from the direction of the village. At a fork of the trail, directly below, they paused for some final order-exchanging before they separated.

A man said in Spanish, “Get your men into the four towns to the north without delay. Have them drift into the town and casually mention that they saw Doc Savage’s plane flying over. Have you got the numbers

of the plane?"

The Tirans demonstrated they had the numbers by repeating them.

*"Bueno!"*

said the strawboss. "The purpose is this. We want to spread a false trail which will convince everyone that Doc Savage's plane flew some two or three hundred miles on to the north. The men who go out next will travel about two hundred or more miles, and they will take with them parts of Savage's plane. They will arrange a crash scene at some place where it will appear that the plane hit a mountain and glanced into a mountain stream. Then they will go into the nearest populated places with the story."

Someone said, "This seems like a lot of trouble."

"There will be a hornet's nest about our ears if we do not toss a bait elsewhere. Savage is a very important man in the United States."

"He may escape."

"Not a chance."

They separated and went on, and Doc and Monk were thoughtfully silent after they had gone. Until Monk shivered and muttered, "I don't like the way he said, â€œNota chance!"

Doc Savage was listening.

"Plane!" he whispered.

Monk gasped, "Hey, it may be those other guys with the Funding girl and her father."

He was all for dashing down to the meadow, running to the plane and getting in it, warning the occupants to escape, and escaping with them.

Doc didn't think the idea was so good. "The men who grabbed the Fundings weren't our friends the one time I saw them."

"It's them or these Tirans, and I'll take them," Monk said.

"No," Doc said.

"Listen, I've seen these Tirans—I've been had by them. You know what they're going to do? Kill us. Kill all of us, Arctic Davis included."

"You can try for the plane alone if you want to," Doc said.

"Huh?"

"If you think it will work—if you feel your plan is best—go ahead with it," Doc said.

Monk grimaced. "Now, that's a hell of a spot to put me in."

"Not necessarily. Just use your own judgment."

"You don't mind?"

"No."

“I don't like to see the Tirans get that girl,” Monk said. “On the other hand, I don't want to leave you—”

“There are two sides to it. The two of us together do not stand much more chance against all these Tirans than one would. If you could get out, bring aid, it would be fine. I don't think you can. But use your judgment.”

Monk blew out his breath slowly and shakily. “I'll try the plane,” he said.

## Chapter XII

MONK left Doc Savage and headed for the meadow. Within the first hundred yards, he thought of half a dozen times when Doc's judgment had been better than his own. I'm a dope! Monk thought. So he turned and went back.

Doc Savage was not there where he had been.

Monk peered all about, without seeing Doc. He imitated a bellbird softly a few times. They had used the bellbird signal in the past, because the bird was found in most of the Central American jungles, and its note was not at all human in quality. No response from Doc.

The plane was getting nearer. It passed almost overhead. Monk scratched his jaw and stared at it, wondering if it was the plane carrying the Fundings. The craft slanted down into Tira valley.

Monk hastily made for the meadow. If the ship was going to land, here was the only spot nearby and suitable. Monk went cautiously, sure the Tirans would be aroused and heading for the meadow themselves.

By now he was not thinking much of his plan. When he himself had been captured, the Tirans had waylaid them in the jungle after they left the plane. Not a Tiran had appeared on the meadow. The place had looked entirely deserted until they were out and away from their ship.

The meadow must be some kind of hardpan saturated with mineral, or possibly salt, so that nothing but coarse grass would grow on it. Monk thought it was the bed of an ancient lake, and that salt or borax or something of the kind had washed out of the adjacent mountains for centuries to make the lake-bed deposit that wouldn't support jungle growth. At any rate, it was a fine landing field.

Monk concealed himself on the edge, and waited. He had been there not more than five minutes when the plane came back, angled down and did a drag of the field. It banked back, dragged the field again.

Monk watched the pilot pull his flaps. The ship was going to land. Flat on his stomach, Monk began working out into the grass, about fourteen inches tall, which covered the field.

He knew about where the plane would stop its landing roll, and he headed for that point.

The ship came in lazily. She was a big single-motored job with a lot of wingspread, a roomy cabin. Slow and comfortable, and not too modern. The pilot was cautious. He revved up the motor briefly on the way in to clear its cylinders.

The ship landed, three points, settled on the grassy flat.

Monk had rolled over on his back at the last moment and was taking off his undershirt, which was white. Now he popped up, waving this white garment, and sprinted for the plane.

The plane stopped. Heads stuck out of its cabin windows. "Who're you?" a voice called.

Monk roared, "Keep your motor going! Don't cut your motor! There's danger! Help!" And he made for the plane as fast as he could.

They must have heard him. At least they didn't cut the motor.

"Help! Danger!" Monk squalled, just to keep them in the right frame of mind.

At this point, brown-skinned Tirans began getting up all over the meadow. They seemed to spring, armed and howling, from the earth itself. As if by devil-eye magic.

MONK was dumbfounded. He wasn't puzzled, but he was flabbergasted. There was no reason for being amazed, because he saw how the Tirans were getting there.

One of them got up almost under Monk's feet. The fellow had been lying there under a clever camouflage cover of nothing more unique than a painted board, large enough to make a lid for the hole in which he was lying. In this board was stuck enough tall, tough grass stems to make everything look natural.

The meadow seemed covered with Tirans. Actually, there were probably thirty.

For equipment, they seemed to have a long coil of thin tough line attached to a block of hardwood, and either a rifle or a revolver.

The plane was moving, trying to get away.

A Tiran stood in front of the ship, whirled his coil of line twice around his head and let fly. Part of the coil of line slipped down over his arm and tangled. The rest sailed into the plane propeller.

What happened next was sudden and bloody. The line tangled the plane prop. The arm was jerked off the Tiran as neatly as one could take a wing off a fly.

The man's arm, the block of wood which was at the end of the line, almost as instantly beat holes in the plane's wings, knocked off a landing wheel, and made one swipe through the front of the cabin, narrowly missing the pilot, and taking out most of the instruments.

The pilot shut off the motor.

The Tiran stood there without his arm and not making a sound. Weirdly, he was still on his feet. Jets of scarlet came out with each heartbeat.

A man in the plane broke the silence by screaming at Monk Mayfair, "You! You helped trick us!"

He leaned out of the window with a pistol to shoot Monk.

He was immediately hit in the head by a Tiran with a block of wood.

Monk turned to run. He made about forty yards, zig-zagging like a football player, before they brought him down, piled on to him, and clubbed him out flat.

A Tiran, in good English, addressed the plane: "You haven't got a chance! You start shooting, and we're going to finish it! Now think it over!"

The Tiran who had lost his arm fell, falling forward and not bending his knees, as stiffly as if he was a stick that had been stood on end, then released.

Peter Armbruster Funding and his daughter were among those who got out of the plane.

THERE were seven in the plane, all told. The other five were men and each had something tough-looking about him, not the same in the case of each, for they did not look at all alike. They ranged from fat to slim, tall to short. But about each—eyes, mouth, carriage, voice—there was one or more marks of the crook for hire.

When Nora Funding got out of the plane, her wrists were tied with cord. Her father was likewise tied.

Funding smiled at the Tirans, saying, “We are certainly glad you fellows rescued us.”

The Tiran who could speak English came over. “Who are you?”

“Peter Armbruster Funding.”

“And who does *that* make you?” asked the native. He sounded as if he had spent some time in New Orleans, because there was Dixie and Creole in his accent.

Funding looked embarrassed. He mentioned two or three corporations he controlled, and sounded foolish doing it.

“Were you looking for Tira Valley?” the native demanded.

“Oh, yes! Yes, indeed. That is exactly what I—”

The Tiran hit Funding in the mouth. The blow had feeling behind it. Funding, driven backward, stubbed his heels on the ground and went down, sitting, and wildly took his mouth and jaw in his hands. It took a moment for his head to clear, after which he removed something from his mouth and stared at it vacantly. It was a tooth.

Nora Funding, when her father was hit, kicked wildly at all the shins in reach of her expensive saddle oxfords, and managed to bark three of them before she was piled unceremoniously on the ground, sat on, and her ankles tied.

Monk was tied by now.

The English-speaking man who had hit Funding came over and kicked Monk in the ribs and on the behind several times, putting his heart into it.

“You are about six times as active as you look,” he told Monk when he finished the kicking. “Where is Doc Savage?”

Monk laughed at him, but put no humor into the laugh.

Men came out of the jungle and began dismantling the plane.

Other men, different ones, went back to the holes in the field which were covered with the planks out of which stuck the grass stems.

Monk asked, “You catch many planes that way?”

He didn't expect an answer. He just spoke because he was scared, and didn't want them to think he was scared.

“Oh, we caught an army pilot who'd got lost, about a year ago,” said the Tiran. He grinned. “We let him go, though, after making him think we were just being patriotic and thought he was a Nazi.”

Monk scowled at him. “You are pretty well educated, aren't you?”

“I should be. I went through Louisiana State University. Remember Huey Long? I was there when he was running the state. Great guy, that Huey, if you like the type.”

They had brought Funding close and he had been listening.

“Where are we?” Funding's voice was lisping because of his hurting mouth. “Is this Tira Valley?”

The English-speaking Tiran went over to him, saying, “How would you like the rest of your teeth kicked out?”

Funding subsided, and they were carried over the hill to the village.

MONK set the example by refusing to walk, so that the Tirans would have to carry him. Funding and the others followed suit. As a result, the Tirans were indignant, and would strike anyone who opened his mouth.

Nora Funding impressed Monk. He decided he was going to like her. It required considerable nerve to show no more alarm than she was showing.

And then another thought hit him, a chilling one. Maybe there was a reason for the girl not being alarmed. Maybe she wasn't in danger at all. Maybe she knew it. Maybe she was working with these Tirans in some kind of a devilish setup which Monk didn't understand.

There wasn't much sense to the idea of the girl being a crook, but the thought got stuck in Monk's brain and remained there like a cactus.

They reached the village. They were planted in the middle of the dusty street and left there while some kind of a pow-wow occurred inside the large windowless building.

The villagers soon surrounded them, a staring circle of women, children and old men.

Monk caught the girl's eye and grinned. It cost effort, that grin. “They look perfectly ordinary, don't they,” he said.

“Is this Tira Valley?”

“Yes.”

“But I was expecting a—a sort of a lost world!” she exclaimed, surprised.

“You know, that's exactly what I told Doc Savage,” Monk said.

“Oh, is Mr. Savage here?”

“If they haven't caught him yet, he is,” Monk said uneasily.

The guards seemed inclined to let them talk now, so Monk made what progress he could with the girl. Monk was no authority on Mexico, particularly southern Mexico, but he didn't let that hamper him.

He told her that the hut roofs were thatched with maguey leaves, that those trees yonder were chaca, and the others zapote trees. He pointed out the reed mats some of the more lazy spectators had brought along for seats explaining they were called *petates*. The watertight basket the woman over there had was a *pataqui*, and was a common means of packing belongings. Her jacket was a *huipil*.

He was going on the subject of food when something happened that made him wish he'd kept his mouth shut. He was describing the way the meat had been cooked, and how it wasn't bad. Nora Funding said, "Yes, it's very delicious when cooked under sakokum leaves, the way they do it."

Monk stared at her. "Oh! You know about their food?"

"I've been in Yucatan before," she said.

Then, catching the weird expression on Monk's face, she paled.

"I've never been *here* before!" she said quickly.

THE other time he had been in the windowless building, Monk had seen nothing but a long tunnel-like hall off which opened a number of rather small rooms that had served as prison cells for himself and Ham, although that wasn't what the little rooms had been built for, apparently. What was in the rest of the building, he didn't know.

Now, when they were picked up and carried into the place, they were taken to a different section. First there was a short flight of steps, then a twisting hall, then they came to a slot—not a door, a slot—leading through about fourteen feet of solid stone, with a turning in the slot, first to the right, then the left.

Monk was puzzled about the slot until he lifted his eyes and saw spearslits overhead. They would do for gunfire, too. One or two men could defend the slot against an army—if the army didn't have hand grenades or bombs.

The room beyond startled him.

Ancient, was his first thought. The room was circular, with a solid windowless, or skylightless, ceiling supported by nothing at all in the center, and by stone pillars along the walls. There were eight of the pillars.

To the right there was what might have been a small fireplace, except that there was an upright rock in front of it, like a tombstone, to deflect the heat. A fire blazed brightly in this, and gave the only illumination.

In the center, Monk discovered a circular hole, around which was an ornate rim.

A gasp from one of the Tirans drew Monk's attention. The man acted as if he was about to faint, then dashed for the entrance waving his arms and yelling. The cause of the uproar—they had been about to bring the girl, Nora Funding, into the room.

Evidently having a girl in the place was against the rules. They yelled and squabbled about it for two or three minutes. The compromise consisted of leaving Nora in the passage.



The meeting came to order. There were about forty Tirans in the room. It was not hard to get the idea that the thing was serious.

THE first speech that was made enlightened Monk as to what it was all about.

A very old-looking man said, in Spanish, "Bring in the other prisoners, that all may hear the charges against them, and hear sentence passed."

Not a thing about defending ourselves, Monk thought.

A few minutes later, old Arctic Davis was jammed in through the passage, together with the men who had helped him.

Ham Brooks was brought in last. Ham, Monk was relieved to see, wasn't badly battered.

Monk glanced at old Arctic Davis again, then at the Tirans—and something hit him.

"Holy smoke!" he exploded.

The natives, the inhabitants of Tira, didn't have the same look of agelessness that Arctic Davis had! Some of them looked very old. But there was not that leathery, dried look of years about them.

Monk scowled at Arctic Davis. The old devil! The old fellow must have dyed or oiled his skin, or something, to give it that look.

The native who had spoken in Spanish made another speech.

For ten thousand years, said the old fellow, the Valley of Tira had been a sanctuary for him and his people. This was evidently a figure of speech, because in the next breath he described how his umpteenth great-grandfather had found Tira by following a white eagle, a "great white eagle like a cloud" over the mountains into the valley.

The legendary white eagle, said the ancient dramatically, had disappeared into that hole in the rock. He pointed at the ornate pit in the center of the room. But before the eagle descended into the pit, he had spoken, in the language of their forefathers, that they should dwell here forever, and drink, once each day, as much as they could hold in the palms of both hands, the magic water which would fill the pit and continue filling it forever.

This had been done, said the old man. And health and peace and long life had come to Tira. They lived in Tira as much as twice or three times the life span of ordinary men.

Monk frowned here. This was a little different. Life in these Central American jungles, and this was virtually a part of Central America, was notoriously short. Climate and disease took a quick toll. Probably forty or forty-five years was a normal life span today, and in the old days it must have been a lot less.

An old man then, in Tira, would be a hundred and twenty years old!

Monk scowled at Arctic Davis. Old Arctic scowled back. You old liar, Monk thought. What the dickens was your game, anyhow?

Funding, in a quarrelsome voice, said, "Why don't they speak English? I can't understand what they are saying."

Evidently speaking was a sacrilege, because at least twenty natives screamed at him to shut up, and made threatening gestures.

THE rest of it didn't take long.

Tira must be preserved, said the old man. It was their hope, as it always had been, to live in peace and tranquility. If they couldn't do it one way, they would do it another.

Violence was not their way, he continued, and would never be their way. The few cases of violence that had occurred in the past were sincerely regretted.

Funding tried to shout, "Speak English!" again, but only got it out once before threats silenced him.

Monk eyed Ham. Ham, with his lips only, asked, "What does this peace talk mean? I figure they intend to knock us off."

Monk didn't know quite enough lip-reading to get it, but he surmised what it must have been. He shrugged.

The old man speaking Spanish cleared his throat.

"Therefore," he said, "there will be no violence on these men from our hand."

He made a signal. A brown-skinned man went to a niche in the wall and brought out a waterbag made out of a goatskin.

The goatskin waterbag was the conventional water container of all primitive peoples. It struck Monk as incongruous when they filled this one using a very modern shiny tin funnel.

The water out of the pit looked clear, pure. There was no ceremony about filling the bag. They just filled it.

The old man who had done the talking calmly pointed to a thin-faced thug.

"Give it to him," he said.

The thin-faced man was one of the gang who had seized Monk and Ham at the Connecticut airport. One of the five who had been working with old Arctic Davis.

The fellow's eyes protruded. "You mean—this is mine?"

"Yours," said the old man in English. "Yours alone. There is not enough to share. For you alone, there is enough."

Funding shouted, "If you can talk English, why haven't you spoken it all along? What's going on here?"

The old man smiled at Funding, not very pleasantly. "This is our way of revenge on you. One of you has enough of the water of Tira to make him live forever. All of you will now depart in peace, he with you."

"This is ridiculous!" Funding exploded. "Why don't you give all of us some of this stuff—that water of Tira. Then we will leave you alone."

The old man shrugged.

“This way,” he said, “none of you will get out of the jungles alive. It has happened so in the past.”

Fifteen minutes later, all of them were standing in the jungle at the edge of the village. The Tirans left them there.

But the Spanish-speaking old man gave them a parting bit of information.

“There is a loaded revolver for each of you two hundred yards down the trail,” the old fellow said. “And also a knife and a tube of poison for each.”

He scowled at them.

“Your plane is on the pond,” he added. “So after you kill some of yourselves off, the rest of you can get away in it. We let you use the plane because we want you as far from here as soon as possible.”

Then he went away.

### Chapter XIII

THEY stood there on the trail. They were alone. Monk and Ham, Nora Funding and her father, Arctic Davis and his five friends, and the five who had brought the Fundings. And Oscar Ward.

Seventeen of us, including me, Monk thought. And I wish I was somewhere else!

He could hear a bellbird sounding somewhere in the jungle. The sound didn't click in his memory, didn't mean a thing at the moment. Because Monk was horrified.

Not scared. Horrified. His eyes moved over the faces around him, and what he saw put ice in his stomach.

Ham Brooks moved over to Monk, said in a low voice, “This is the last thing I expected.”

“Can you think of anything worse they could have done to us?” Monk muttered.

Ham shivered. “I wouldn't want to be the guy with that sack of water.”

Monk eyed Ham thoughtfully. “Wouldn't you?”

Ham returned the stare for a moment, dropped his eyes. “My God!” he breathed.

“There you are,” Monk said grimly. “You're thinking the same thing I am. As long as somebody has got to have that water sack, why not you? You're thinking that already. So am I. I don't like this.”

The sound of the bellbird had ceased.

Peter Armbruster Funding cleared his throat. “I have a suggestion,” he said.

Every eye was on Funding instantly. “Let's hear it,” someone growled.

“Destroy that sack of water.”

THE man with the sack reacted instantly and violently. “No, you don't!” he shrieked. And he whirled and

sprinted down the trail toward where the guns were waiting.

Arctic Davis shouted, "He'll kill us all!" He dashed after the runner. And then everyone was running, making a mad race for the weapons.

There were no guns. The knives were there, and the poison, the latter in little bamboo tubes. But no guns.

Madly, men snatched up knives, poison. Some of them got two knives. One man got three. They stood there silently, glaring at each other, clutching whatever weapon they had obtained. Those who had none sidled away. But the unarmed ones did not leave.

Funding broke the silence again. "This is insane," he said. He had a knife.

The man with the water bag had lost the weapon race. He had nothing. His face was the color of old lead, with the sweat like drops of grease.

Monk was looking at the ground. He moved a few feet to the left, and seemed to find something sticking to his shoe. He scuffed the shoe around, as if getting the object off the sole.

"What became of the guns?" someone asked in a strange voice.

"Obviously they didn't leave any," Funding said.

Monk knew the guns had been there. That was why he was scuffing around, to wipe out traces of where they had been lying.

Now he remembered the bellbird call. He caught Ham's eye, and jerked his head slightly. He and Ham moved a little apart.

"You heard that bellbird a few minutes ago?" he asked.

Ham nodded. "Doc?"

"Must have been."

"Then Doc got the guns."

"Looks like it."

ARCTIC DAVIS strode over belligerently, yelling, "All right, all right, what are you guys framing up?" He shoved his wrinkled face out at them. "Talk so we can hear what you're talking about!" The old man had a knife.

Monk stared over the old man's head, suddenly shouted, "There he goes! Stop him!"

As a trick, it was probably older than Arctic Davis claimed to be. But it sucked in Arctic Davis. The old man wheeled. Monk tripped him, calmly stepped on the old duffer's wrist, and took the knife away from him.

Arctic Davis broke then. Strength, will and desire all seemed to leave him. He made no attempt to get on his feet. The tears came to his eyes and his mouth was loose. He spoke Spanish now, not English.

"I didn't want nothing, nothing but to get back here and live," he said, and there was such a stuttering of

fright in his voice that they could hardly understand him.

Monk had no sympathy. “You started all this—you and your wanting to sell the secret of this water.”

The old man still spoke Spanish. He spoke it as if he had used it for so many years that it had become his natural tongue.

“I’m not a hundred and seventy-six years old,” he mumbled. “I ain’t even seventy-six.”

“How old was Methuselah Brown?” Ham demanded, also in Spanish.

“Younger than me.”

“Why did you claim to be so old?”

“It was all a scheme to sell this water to some millionaires,” Davis said bitterly. “We studied up on our parts. We spent nearly a year in the New York public library, and the library in Washington. Brown studied up on Salem and witchcraft, and I got posted on that Arctic stuff. We fooled them, too. We should have—with a year of preparation for the act.”

Ham demanded, “Why did you grab Monk and me and come here?”

“I was scared. Doc Savage scared me. If I could get back here, I figured I would let the whole thing drop. When Methuselah Brown was killed, that’s what scared me.”

“Who killed Brown?”

“I do not know. One of the syndicate—whichever one it was decided to doublecross the others and steal the thing for himself.”

“Oscar Ward?”

“Maybe. He looks most likely.”

Funding came over and said angrily, “Why does everyone keep talking Spanish. I don’t understand Spanish. What are you saying?”

Monk, in Spanish, asked, “Davis, what about these five fellows who came with you?”

The old man said, “They’re bad, bad.” He began to blubber. His nerve was completely gone.

In the jungle, the bellbird called softly.

Ham told Monk, “We’d better see about that bird.” They went into the jungle together.

THEY found Doc Savage—or rather, Doc was suddenly with them—after they had gone about a hundred yards. Doc had stripped to trousers as a relief from the heat. “What happened to you?” he demanded.

“Those darned Indians!” Monk growled. “They gave one of us a sack of this water that’s supposed to make you live a long time, and turned us loose. All of us—those ten thugs—the Fundings—everybody together. With guns and knives.”

“I have the guns,” Doc said.

“We figured you had—”

But Doc was going on, saying, “Get Funding, his daughter, Oscar Ward, Davis. Bring them here.”

“Davis has gone to pieces,” Monk said, not understanding, wanting to ask questions. “What do you plan—”

“Get them,” Doc said.

Monk and Ham went back to the group. They found no one had stirred. The man with the water sack was still there, so they were staying there.

To each of those Doc had named, Monk and Ham whispered, “Come with us. Doc Savage wants to see you. Doc has the guns.”

Monk had the grisly suspicion that no one would have gone with them if they hadn't heard about the guns. That did it. The guns.

No one seemed to care when they moved off into the jungle. They were sworn at. But no one offered to follow them.

Doc Savage had the guns when they found him. The weapons filled his fists and stuck out of every trouser pocket.

Doc gave a pistol to Oscar Ward.

“Ward, take Nora with you,” he said. “Go back toward the village. Go back about three hundred yards, and wait there—and keep Nora there—until this thing is settled.”

Oscar Ward looked at Doc Savage strangely. His face was white. “Do you know what you're doing?” he asked.

“Let's hope so,” Doc said.

“Yes, let's hope you do,” Ward said strangely. “Because you are going to die if you don't.”

He went away. Nora went with him. She seemed glad to go with Ward, and yet afraid. But her fear was not of young Ward.

DOC SAVAGE waited until Ward and the girl were out of sight, out of hearing if they kept their voices down.

Then the bronze man said, “The rest of this should be simple. We have guns, they haven't.”

He distributed the guns. The weapons were all revolvers. One to Funding, one to Monk, one to Ham.

Funding asked, “What are you going to do, Mr. Savage?”

“Make those thugs prisoners. Get the bag of water.”

“But then what?” Funding asked.

“Take the stuff back to New York and analyze it, if we can get out with it.”

“And then?”

“Why, follow out our agreement,” Doc told him. “The chemical analysis should give us the content, the secret of its efficacy. Then we will be in a position to see that the medical profession has it, and they in turn can administer it to humanity in general.”

Funding pointed his gun at them.

“No,” he said. His face showed no particular expression. “Drop those guns!”

No one moved.

“Drop them,” Funding warned.

Monk and Ham waited until Doc let his gun fall. Then they released theirs.

Doc said, “So it was you, Funding.”

“Me, what?”

“Who killed old Methuselah Brown.”

Funding was not smiling, but his teeth showed slightly. “That's right,” he said.

Doc breathed inward deeply. “Young Ward suspected that. Ward is in love with your daughter. That is what has been on his mind.”

“Did you guess that just now?” Funding asked. He was a cold man, purposeful, controlled, and only a little of the contempt he had for them, his wild pride in himself, got in his voice.

“It was fairly obvious all along,” Doc said quietly. “Oscar Ward was sickened by something he knew, and it was logical that the reason was his certainty of your guilt. But he couldn't give away the father of the girl he loved. He couldn't make himself do that.”

“For which I shall shoot Ward,” Funding said.

“Where did Ward photograph the map?”

“What map?”

“The one of Tira valley.”

“Oh, so he did that, too.” Funding frowned. “I wondered how you found the place.” He cursed quietly for a moment. “So it was that lovesick young boob who broke into my private safe several days ago. I didn't understand it when nothing was disturbed. So he photographed the map, did he?”

“Where did you get the map?”

“I took it away from Methuselah Brown,” Funding said. “Any other questions?”

“No.”

“Fine,” Funding said, and began pulling the trigger of his revolver. He pulled the trigger until the gun had snapped completely around, and the loudest noise he got was not much more violent than the popping an old-fashioned kitchen match-head makes when stepped on. No bullets came out of the gun.

To Funding, now gripped by terror, Doc said, "It was obvious you were the one Ward suspected. So I took the bullets out of your cartridges."

MEN came out of the jungle then. They came in a wild rush, the ten hired rascals. They had crept close in the jungle, and apparently had overheard what had been said. They wanted the guns.

Ham Brooks dived for the gun he had dropped, got it, came up yanking the trigger.

Doc shouted, "There are no bullets in any of them!"

The news came too late. Ham got a knife in the arm, through the forearm muscle. Ham grabbed the knife wielder's wrist. The fellow kept hold of the blade, trying to slash a larger wound. They wrestled until Ham used his knee. The man backed away, croaking his agony. Ham kicked him again, and the man fell.

Ham, jumping back, hit his heels against a twitching body and sprawled over it. He turned as he fell, landing on hands and knees across the body, and his knifed arm caved. For a moment he lay on the twitching body of the dying man, before he could push himself away.

The dying man, Funding, had a knife sticking from his back.

The man who had stabbed Funding said bitterly, "He was the kind of a guy who would have doublecrossed all of us." He spoke in a far-away voice, then fell to coughing, with each cough blowing a scarlet spray past his lips. The knife Funding had carried was in this man's upper lung area.

Doc Savage said loudly, "My gun is the only one with bullets."

He had to say it again, louder, then shoot a man in the foot before the fighting stopped.

Then they ran, all nine of the hired men. The one Ham had kicked went along. The one Doc had just shot ran as well as the others, even gaining a little on them.

The goatskin had been put aside for the attack. Doc Savage followed them far enough to see them pick it up. He aimed carefully, and his bullet broke the arm of the man with the bag. They all ran on, leaving the goatskin.

Doc went back, carrying the goatskin.

The man who had been coughing had stopped and was lying back loosely, as still and dead as Funding.

Ward was shouting, bellowing to know what was happening, what should he do.

Doc said, "Come here." Then the bronze man met Oscar Ward, told him gravely, "Funding is dead. He was knifed helping us."

Nora Funding made a small out-breathing sound and Ward caught her. She made the out-breathing again, and passed out.

Ward's eyes searched Doc's face unbelievably. "But Funding was—wasn't—"

"Wasn't," Doc said. "You were wrong about him."

Relief came to Ward's face, like a light turned on inside him. After a moment, he smiled foolishly, mumbled, "That's—that's fine—that's—" Then he keeled over in a faint of his own.



Monk told Doc, "That was the biggest lie I ever heard."

Doc said, "They are in love. The truth would have ruined things for them."

Monk grinned. "It was a good idea."

Ham Brooks started to say, "Sure, that was the only thing to tell—" His voice changed to an anxious note. "What about those natives?"

Doc dug cartridges out of his pockets. "These will shoot. Load up. And we will try to make the plane."

Monk muttered, "Do you suppose that old guy was kidding when he said it wouldn't be guarded?"

The old fellow hadn't been kidding. They found the plane intact, moored to the pond shore. Nor were they molested in taking off.

DOC put the plane down later at Villa Hermosa, which was a pleasant place, with a good hospital. Both Nora Funding and Oscar Ward needed hospitalizing because of nervous shock. And Doc wanted the use of a good laboratory.

He was in the laboratory with the goatskin of water for a continuous twelve hours.

He came out with a queer expression.

"Well?" Monk demanded.

"A few years ago, that water would have been worth millions of dollars and thousands of lives," Doc told him. "Worth, in short, everything Funding and the others were willing to do to get it."

"What's it worth now?"

"Nothing."

"Huh?"

"Oh, as a scientific curiosity, it is worth something," Doc admitted. "But as a matter of fact, any up-to-date doctor can sell you the same stuff, as much of it as you would find in a barrel of that water, for a couple of dollars."

"What the dickens is it?" Monk demanded.

"The water contains nothing but the ordinary minerals spring water contains, plus two of the sulfa drugs in solution."

"You mean sulfa, like in sulfanilamide and sulfathiazole and stuff like that? The new drug the army and navy is using to stop infection? The stuff everybody is figuring is going to cure colds and everything else?"

"It does not cure everything," Doc said. "But that is what I mean."

"Damn it, you mean those Indians just were healthy in that valley because they had sulfa drugs in their drinking-water?"

"That seems to be all."

Monk grinned sheepishly. "I wish you hadn't told me that for a couple of days. I was having a great time thinking I was going to live forever."

Ham Brooks snorted. "Come to think of it, maybe it's a good thing the world is spared that."

"I'll think of an answer," Monk grumbled.

THE END