

The Freckled Shark

A Doc Savage Adventure
#67

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Dent]
1939

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A SUSPICIOUS WOMAN

Rhoda Haven knew that Doc Savage was an unusual man whose occupation was righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, frequently traveling to the world's far places to do so. She had heard that Doc Savage, sometimes called the "Man of Bronze," had been trained scientifically from childhood for his career, trained so successfully that he was an almost superhuman combination of inventive genius, mental wizard and physical giant.

Personally, Rhoda Haven doubted a great many things she had heard about Doc Savage. He seemed too perfect, too much of a superman. She suspected a good deal of that was hokum.

THE FRECKLED SHARK

Books by Kenneth Robeson

THE MAN OF BRONZE
THE THOUSAND-HEADED MAN
METEOR MENACE
THE POLAR TREASURE
BRAND OF THE WEREWOLF
THE LOST OASIS
THE MONSTERS
THE LAND OF TERROR
THE MYSTIC MULLAH

THE PHANTOM CITY
FEAR CAY
QUEST OF QUI
LAND OF ALWAYS-NIGHT
FANTASTIC ISLAND
MURDER MELODY
THE SPOOK LEGION
THE RED SKULL
THE SARGASSO OGRE
PIRATE OF THE PACIFIC
THE SECRET IN THE SKY
COLD DEATH
THE CZAR OF FEAR
FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE
THE GREEN EAGLE
THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND
DEATH IN SILVER
THE MYSTERY UNDER THE SEA
THE DEADLY DWARF
THE OTHER WORLD
THE FLAMING FALCONS
THE ANNIHILIST
THE SQUEAKING GOBLINS
MAD EYES
THE TERROR IN THE NAVY

DUST OF DEATH
RESURRECTION DAY
HEX
RED SNOW
WORLD'S FAIR GOBLIN
THE DAGGER IN THE SKY
MERCHANTS OF DISASTER
THE GOLD OGRE
THE MAN WHO SHOOK THE
EARTH
THE SEA MAGICIAN
THE MAN WHO SMILED NO MORE
THE MIDAS MAN
LAND OF LONG JUJU
THE FEATHERED OCTOPUS
THE SEA ANGEL
DEVIL ON THE MOON
HAUNTED OCEAN
THE VANISHER
THE MENTAL WIZARD
HE COULD STOP THE WORLD
THE GOLDEN PERIL
THE GIGGLING GHOSTS
POISON ISLAND
THE MUNITIONS MASTER
THE YELLOW CLOUD
THE MAJII
THE LIVING FIRE MENACE
THE PIRATE'S GHOST
THE SUBMARINE MYSTERY
THE MOTION MENACE
THE GREEN DEATH
MAD MESA
THE FRECKLED SHARK

THE
FRECKLED
SHARK

A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

THE FRECKLED SHARK

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Chapter 1

THE TOUGH LUCK OF JEP DEE

MATECUMBE is one of the largest of the string of islands extending south from the tip of Florida and called the Florida Keys.

Jep Dee came to Matecumbe. He stayed two weeks and nothing out of the ordinary happened, except that he did a lot of crawdadding—every day, once in the morning and once in the evening, Jep Dee went hunting crawfish.

That is, he pretended to go for crawfish.

The Caribbean lobster—called crawfish—really looks much like a crawdad from a Missouri creek, although it is served in restaurants and cafeterias and called “Florida lobster”; and there are recorded instances where these tropical lobsters have weighed fifteen pounds, which is fully as large as the regular Northern lobster. But it is always called by the natives, crawfish. Properly cooked, the tropical lobster, or crawfish, makes a very savory, succulent and appetizing viand.

True, Jep Dee never ate any of the crawfish he caught.

As a matter of fact—but that was a secret—he never caught any crawfish. He bought them from an old cracker who lived on a nearby island. The old cracker made a living, such as it was, by crawfishing for the market.

Jep Dee never made any effort to catch a crawfish.

He did tell a lot of lies about how he caught them. He would tell how he reached into coral holes and under ledges in the daytime and pulled the big ones out.

He told how he sculled his boat over the reefs at night with a gasoline lantern burning in the bow, until the eyes of the crawfish gleamed like the eyes of cats in automobile headlights along a road at night, after which he giggered them with a little three-tined spear. He was a liar. All he ever giggered was his leg, by accident, one night.

Jep Dee had a nose and fists that looked as if they'd had accidents in the past. He had a mouth that never said much; it had thin lips. Suns had burned him. Sea brine had turned his hide to leather. He was about a foot shorter than an average man, also a foot wider.

One night Jep Dee got drunk and said he could whip his weight in wild cats. There were no wild cats available, but he did very well with four tough crackers and three big yacht sailors who got tired of his chest-beating and tied into him. They still talk about that fight on Matecumbe; it's the main topic of conversation. The main topic used to be the big hurricane of 1934.

Jep Dee paid fourteen dollars and ninety-five cents for the boat—twelve feet long, cypress-planked, rusty iron centerboard, two oars, a ragged, dirty sail—in which he went “crawfishing.”

He came to Matecumbe, and every day for two weeks he went out and came back and said he had been crawdadding, until finally he found what he was looking for.

Jep Dee went out on one of his usual nightly crawdad hunts, and found what he sought, and never came back.

A COLLEGE boy in a yawl was the next person to see Jep Dee. This was weeks later.

At first, the college boy thought he was seeing a wad of drifted seaweed lying on a beach, and his second opinion was that it must be a log. Fortunately, he put the yawl tiller over and went in to look.

The college boy was sailing down to Dry Tortugas to see the flock of flamingos, birds that are getting about as scarce as buffaloes. He was on vacation. He was just passing a tiny coral island about sixty miles from Key West, Florida. The island had no vegetation—it was almost as naked as Jep Dee.

Jep Dee could not talk enough to give his name. So he became, in the newspapers, “an unidentified man.”

The only thing Jep Dee wore was a rope about four feet long and an inch thick. It was tied to his neck. Not with a hangman’s knot, however. From head to foot he was a mass of blisters and sores, the result of exposure to terrific tropical sun and salt water, and the fact that the crabs had not waited until he was dead before starting to eat him.

He had no hair, no eyebrows, no eyelashes, no fingernails. These items had been plucked off.

Also, Jep Dee seemed to be insane.

He had just enough strength to kick the college boy in the face; and while the astonished young alumnus sprawled on his back, Jep Dee got up and ran. His sense of direction was bad, and he dashed into the sea, where he floundered until the college boy caught him.

They had quite a fight. Jep Dee had no strength, but he knew all the evil tricks of brawl fighters, many of which didn’t require much power.

Jep Dee did much yelling during the struggle. Most of it was incoherent, but now and then a phrase was understandable. Once he screeched:

“Damn you, Horst! You go back to the island and tell Señor Steel—”

Just what he wanted a man named Horst to tell one named Señor Steel was unintelligible. The fight went on, in water about waist-deep. Once more, Jep Dee spoke understandable words.

“I’ve seen men being tortured to death before,” he screamed, “but the way these—”
He did not finish that sentence, either.

The college boy got him overpowered, rolled him into the dinghy and rowed out to the yawl and spread him under the cockpit awning. Jep Dee lay limp and sucked in breath, making weak whistling sounds. It seemed remarkable that he should be alive.

“Hey, fellow,” the college boy said, “you have had some tough luck, haven’t you? How are your eyes? Can you see me?”

As the doctor explained, later, Jep Dee couldn’t see anything. He was temporarily blinded.

“Who is this Horst?” the college boy asked. “And who is Señor Steel?”

No answer.

“What about men being tortured to death?” inquired the young man. “What did you mean by that?”

Jep Dee went on breathing with whistles.

“You’re pretty far gone, old boy,” the college boy said kindly. “I’ll untie that rope from your neck, and you’ll feel better.”

The college boy took hold of the rope, and Jep Dee began to fight again. He fought with a whimpering desperation, wildly and unceasingly, as long as the other made any attempt to get the rope loose.

Jep Dee wanted to keep that rope around his neck more than he wanted to keep alive.

THE yawl sailed into Key West, and they put Jep Dee in a hospital that stood in a nice part of town in a grove of palm trees.

“Exposure,” the doctors said. But this was before they looked more closely at Jep Dee. After a better examination, they stared at each other in bewilderment.

“Hair, eyebrows and eyelashes have been—pulled out,” one doctor said.

“And fingernails plucked off,” another stated.

“Take the rope off him,” said the head doctor.

So Jep Dee began to fight again. He struck at them, and although his eyes were swollen shut, so that he couldn’t see, his hands managed to find a tray of medicines; and he threw bottles at the spots where he imagined doctors would be until he grew so weak that his most furious heaves barely got the bottles over the edge of the hospital bed.

“Mental trouble,” the head doctor said. “Thinks he has to keep that rope around his neck.”

“What’ll we do about it?”

“Humor him. Let him keep it for a while. The man is in very bad shape, and there’s no need of exciting him by taking away his rope. I doubt if he lives.”

But Jep Dee did live. He lay on the cot on his back, and during the hours when he was awake, he stared fixedly at things in the room, as if he were trying to see only them, and not something that his mind kept trying to resurrect.

For days, he did not sleep. Sleep-producing drugs seemed to have no effect. And when, finally, he did sleep, a nightmare seemed to come upon him at once and he kept making mewing sounds of horror.

He got better.

“Now,” the head doctor said, “we can untie that silly rope from his neck.”

Three doctors and a nurse got messed up in this attempt before it came to an end with Jep Dee still in possession of the rope, which he kept tied around his neck. It was a thick rope, and when he slept he kept it coiled neatly on his chest, like a snake.

They had not yet identified Jep Dee.

Off a drinking glass they took his fingerprints, distorted prints, because his fingertips had swollen and festered as a result of the plucked-off nails. They sent these to the Key West police, also to the headquarters of the State police at Tallahassee, and to the department of justice in Washington, and from the latter place they got a telegraphic answer that read:

OUR RECORDS SHOW MAN'S NAME JEP DEE. RECENTLY SENTENCED TO BE SHOT IN CENTRAL AMERICAN REPUBLIC OF BLANCA GRANDE. SAVED BY INTERVENTION OF AMERICAN CONSUL. UNDERSTAND PRESIDENT-DICTATOR OF BLANCA GRANDE HAS STANDING OFFER OF TWENTY-FIVE-THOUSAND-DOLLAR REWARD FOR DEATH OF JEP DEE. IF REWARD OFFER IN ANY WAY RESPONSIBLE FOR PRESENT CONDITION OF JEP DEE, AMERICAN GOVERNMENT IS GOING TO BE INTERESTED BECAUSE IT IS ALREADY NOT ON GOOD TERMS WITH PRESIDENT-DICTATOR OF BLANCA GRANDE.

After this telegram came from the department of justice, they questioned Jep Dee. He could now talk. That is, he had been asking for food and swearing at the doctors.

"Go to hell!" he said.

"If the president-dictator of some South American country ordered you tortured," the doctor said, "they want to know about it in Washington."

"You heard me!" Jep Dee snarled.

"But you should tell—"

"It's none of your damn business," Jep Dee said.

"But—"

"G'wan away!"

"You might at least let us remove that rope—"

"Scram! Vamoose!"

IN the dark and quiet hours of that night, Jep Dee reached under his pillow and got a pair of scissors—small scissors which a nurse had used to snip off his innumerable bandages when dressings were changed and which Jep Dee had stolen and hidden. With the scissors, Jep Dee carefully cut the rope loose from his neck.

He did not cut the knot in the rope. He untied it. With infinite care—and pain too, because of his missing fingernails. The untying took almost an hour. Just before he finished untying it, he listened intently and looked all around, taking great precautions not to be observed.

Twisted between the rope strands, in that part of rope which had been tied in the knot, where it could be discovered only when the rope was untied and untwisted, was a piece of dried shark skin.

The shark skin was freckled.

Whether the shark which was original owner of the skin had been freckled, or whether the freckled aspect of the shark skin came from some other cause, was impossible to ascertain at a glance.

Jep Dee was still quite blind. He fingered the piece of shark skin carefully and caressingly, as if he enjoyed feeling of it.

He did something which no one had heard him do before. He giggled. Not hysterical giggling, nor mad; just the elated chuckle of a man who had put something over.

He got out of the white bed. He was stronger than anyone had thought. He went to the window and dropped the scissors outside, listening carefully to see how far they fell, and by this, concluded that the window was on the first floor. He crawled out, dropped to the ground and felt his way through the grove of palms until he fell over a low hedge, beyond which was a sidewalk.

Jep Dee wore white hospital pajamas. He walked two blocks, feeling his way. Because Key West, Florida, was a winter resort, it was not unusual for people to be seen on the streets in beach pajamas, or suits of slacks that looked very like pajamas. The white hospital pajamas of Jep Dee attracted no attention.

He walked until he heard footsteps approaching, when he stopped and listened. Heavy footsteps. A man's.

Jep Dee said, "I'm not walking in my sleep. I'm a blind man. Will you help me to the post office?"

"The post office is closed at this time of night," reminded the man Jep Dee had met.

"I know," Jep Dee said. "I want you to stop me at a drugstore and loan me a dime for an envelope, a sheet of paper and a stamp."

The man laughed pleasantly, said, "Sure, I'll accommodate you," and took Jep Dee to a drugstore, where he got paper, envelope and stamp, then to the post office.

Jep Dee could write legibly without the aid of his eyes, but it must have been agony without his fingernails. On the paper he scrawled:

SHARK SKIN TELLS EVERYTHING

He folded the piece of freckled shark skin inside the paper, inserted it in the envelope, and addressed the missive to:

Miss Rhoda Haven
Tower Apartments
New York City

While Jep Dee was licking the stamps and sticking them on the envelope and putting the envelope in the mail slot—the letter went air mail—the good Samaritan who had led him to the post office went out and called a policeman, because he could see that Jep Dee was the next thing to a dead man, and had no business up and running around. The cop came.

Jep Dee got the idea the cop intended to retrieve the letter which he had mailed, so there was a rousing fight there in the Key West post office, before they got Jep Dee back to the hospital.

News of the mêlée got to the papers, and a reporter came and took a picture of Jep Dee.

Chapter 2

THE WAMPUS-CAT

BY the barest margin, the story—picture included—caught the final edition of the morning newspaper, the one that the newsboys sold on the streets around eight o'clock, to people who were going to work.

However, one newspaper was purchased by a man who did not happen to be going to work. He had been up all night raising hell, as a matter of fact, and was going out to a drugstore—before he went to bed—to buy a box of aspirin, experience having taught him how his head might feel when he awakened.

He looked at the Jep Dee story and forgot all about aspirin.

“Damn!” he croaked.

He put his head back and ran like a pickaninny who had been walking through a lonesome graveyard at dark midnight when he heard a deep groan. He got out in the street and ran, because people were in his way on the sidewalk. He bounded aboard a ritzy, streamlined cabin cruiser moored to one of the yacht docks.

He fell down a companionway into the cruiser cabin in his haste.

Half a dozen men were in the cruiser cabin. They began laughing.

“Horst is seeing things!” one man chuckled.

“After the way he drank last night, I don’t wonder,” said another.

The man who had been in the market for aspirin—Horst—lay on the cabin floor and panted and glared.

Horst had the look of being twin to the devil. Twin to the pictures that depict the devil, at least. Horst was a little heavier than the devil, thicker through the neck, possibly not so tall, and did not have quite the same pointed dog ears with which artists equip their devil pictures. He was a rather brown devil.

“Stop that laughing!” Horst snarled.

The mirth died. Suddenly. As if ice water had been dumped on the chucklers.

Horst got up and took a gun out of his clothing, a large gun that was as black as the murder-mood in Horst’s eyes.

“Who thinks this is funny?” he asked gutturally.

No one said anything. For a minute, terror walked around and around on feather-light feet.

At last a man took hold of his courage and said, “We came to Key West to throw a party and celebrate the last of Jep Dee. Nobody meant anything when they laughed, Horst.”

The men had been a little drunk. They were shivering sober now.

Horst said, “Listen to me.”

He didn’t need to tell them to do that.

“Jep Dee is alive,” Horst said.

TEN minutes later, the occupants of the cabin cruiser had scattered to check on the newspaper story. None of them had slept, for they had caroused the previous night through, but now there were no thoughts about sleep. Some went to the post office where they stood around looking innocent and asking casual questions.

Horst and another man went to the hospital, where Horst told a glib story about a pal of his who resembled the published picture of Jep Dee, a ruse that got him a close look at the blind castaway whom the college boy had found on a desert island.

Horst stood looking down at Jep Dee, and he put a hand in his pocket, resting it on the black gun. But there were too many doctors around. Not to mention two policemen who stood out in the hall. The cops were asking a doctor when Jep Dee would be able to answer questions. It seemed that Jep Dee had fainted and not yet revived.

Horst went back to the big, sleek, fast cabin cruiser.

His men joined him.

“It’s Jep Dee, all right,” Horst snarled. He looked more devillike than ever. “The sharks didn’t get him. He must have made it by swimming.”

One of the men who had gone to the post office reported, “I talked to the guy who led Jep Dee to the post office. Jep Dee mailed something in an envelope.”

“Mailed what?”

“It looked,” the man said, “like a piece of freckled shark skin.”

“Like what?”

“A chunk of hide off a freckled shark. That’s the best description I could get, and this guy who led Jep Dee to the post office had a good memory.”

“Oh, damn!”

Horst made unpleasant faces while he thought.

“You say the guy that led Jep Dee had a good memory,” he continued. “Good enough to remember the address on the envelope? Or did he see it?”

“He saw the address.”

Horst scowled. “Well?”

“The piece of freckled shark skin,” the man explained, “went to Miss Rhoda Haven, Tower Apartments, New York City.”

Horst acted as if he had taken a hard hammer blow between the eyes. His mouth fell open slackly, his arms dropped, and he sank on a transom seat.

Small waves hit the boat hull and made the sounds of a kid with an all-day sucker, sea gulls circled around outside and gave their rather hideous I-feel-like-I’m-going-to-die squawks, and inside the cabin the boat clock clicked steadily.

“Damn, this is bad!” Horst croaked.

Suddenly he bounded to his feet.

“Call the airport,” he yelled. “Reserve places for all of us on the first plane to New York.”

“But what about Jep Dee?”

Horst said, "He's helpless. He won't be leaving the hospital. We'll leave a man to watch him. Hutch, you do that."

"Any preference about how I watch Jep Dee while you're gone?" Hutch asked.

"Use your judgment," Horst snapped. "Call the airport, somebody."

"You have to go to Miami," a man reminded him, "to catch the regular air line."

"Then charter a fast private plane!" Horst yelled.

WHILE one of his men was finding a plane and chartering the craft, Horst paid a visit to the cable office. He spent some time composing a cablegram, which he dispatched.

The cable was in code, and there was almost two pages of it.

The plane they rented was fast, so they ate dinner that evening in the restaurant at the airport where they landed on the outskirts of New York City. The dinner was grim. All of them were worried, Horst most of all.

They were dressed in dark, discreet business suits, the coats of which were cut full under the armpits so as not to reveal the firearms that rested in shoulder holsters. They spoke little.

Two of them, who had a distinct accent that marked them as South Americans, spoke not at all when there was any stranger near enough to overhear. Horst and the other two spoke excellent English, so much so that it was difficult, even after a conversation with them, to say whether they were native Americans.

There was an air of viciousness about almost everything they did. They did not have to act vicious. They *were* vicious.

From the airport, Horst went to the main New York cable office. He asked for a message for Jerry Shinn, stated convincingly that this was his name.

There was a cablegram, and it was in code; had been sent from the South American republic of Blanca Grande, was in answer to the message Horst had sent from Key West.

Riding uptown in a taxicab, Horst translated the cablegram. It said:

GET THAT FRECKLED SHARK SKIN, THEN WIPE OUT THE HAVENS
AND EVERYONE CONNECTED WITH THEM

STEEL

The men gazed at the message dubiously.

"Get the shark skin, eh?"

"And wipe out the Havens."

"That last order," Horst said grimly, "may be easier to give than to carry out." He leaned back and thought in silence for a few moments, and what he was thinking about must have been unpleasant, because he shivered.

"That Tex Haven," he said, "is an old wampus-cat."

Chapter 3

THE DIRTY TRICK

THE “wampus-cat” being an imaginary creature, its exact measurements and specifications and qualities are necessarily indefinite. It may be long or short, high or low; and it may bark or mew or squall, as the circumstances require. But generally the qualifications state that it is an eat-’em-up kind of an animal.

But it was hard to look at Tex Haven and imagine a wampus-cat of any kind.

The man looked mild. He had a long face that was as benign as the countenance of a village parson. He had a long body that looked as if it had been constructed to fit inside a judge’s robes. His teeth showed a lot, his brownish hair was always tangled, the light of sunny Ireland was always in his blue eyes; and one looked at him and naturally expected him to laugh and chuckle more than he was silent. In truth, he rarely spoke a word; and when he did, it was a low-voiced one.

Tex Haven spoke gently to men, spoke loudly and pleasantly to babies, and hardly ever spoke to women. He kept away from high windows, looked four or five times each way before he crossed a street. He never drank. He swore terribly. He smoked a corncob pipe.

He did not get a letter during the time—six weeks—he had lived at the Tower Apartments, until the missive came from Jep Dee. Tex Haven got it out of the mail box.

“Rhoda!” he called gently.

His daughter came.

She was a tall girl, as long and gentle-looking as her father; but whereas old Tex Haven’s construction ran a bit too much to bones, the daughter was streamlined. Her hair was deep and coppery and always perfectly waved, her eyes were gentle, her mouth sweet and kind. There was a Madonnalike gentleness about her face. She dressed well, but with almost nunlike severity. She never drank. She swore only when it was necessary. She did not smoke, and whenever she got hold of one of old Tex Haven’s corncob pipes, she invariably took a hammer to it—then threw away the pieces.

“Jep Dee,” Tex Haven said, and extended the letter.

Rhoda Haven read Jep Dee’s letter.

Rhoda Haven had degrees from four of the world’s greatest universities. She had explored the Inca country of South America, and written a book which was used as a text by archæologists. She had nearly lost her life in experiments with a terrible tropic fever, and had come out with a cure for the fever, something that had previously baffled scientists. She had written a treatise on governmental administrative science that would probably win a Nobel prize.

A great sculptor had said that her head was the perfect type of patrician beauty.

The president-dictator of the South American republic of Blanca Grande had offered one hundred thousand dollars to anyone who would bring him Rhoda Haven's head—without body attached.

“FROM KEY WEST,” RHODA HAVEN said of the letter, “with no name signed.”

Tex Haven sucked thoughtfully on his corn-cob pipe.

“Be from Jep Dee, figures like,” he said.

“I think so, too.”

They examined the shark skin. It was thin, so it must be the skin off a very young shark. It was also stiff, and had a tendency to curl. The freckle spots were not regular, but scattered; some of them were rather large and others were small. All freckles were shades of deep-brown or black.

Tex Haven said, “Mean anythin' special to you?”

“Not a thing.”

“Here, neither.”

“But the note,” Rhoda Haven pointed out, “says that the shark skin explains everything.”

Tex Haven took his corn-cob pipe out of his teeth and gave it a look of mild reproach.

“Kinda looks like there might be a headache comin' up,” he said.

The telephone began to ring. It rang steadily. Tex Haven went over to it, an ambling, peaceful-looking tower of a man, picked up the instrument, said, “Hello, hello?” several times, then stood holding the instrument and looking mild and patient.

“Tarnatin' thing just goes on ringin',” he said.

The telephone rang and rang. About five minutes later, knuckles tapped the door politely.

“Yes,” Rhoda Haven said.

A voice outside the door said, “Telephone man. There's something wrong with your phone that makes it ring steadily. May we come in and fix it?”

Gentle-looking old Tex Haven started to open the door.

His daughter grabbed his arm, breathed, “No!”

To the man on the other side of the door, the girl said, “Just a minute, until I get into a robe. I'm taking a bath.”

Tex Haven knocked the fire out of his corn-cob, poured the smoldering tobacco into a tray, put the pipe in his pocket.

“'Twould have fooled me,” he said in a voice so low that it was hardly audible.

Rhoda Haven said, “I may be wrong. But I think trouble of this kind only originates in the mechanical ringer at the switchboard. I doubt if it would be our instrument.”

Each day since coming to the Tower Apartments, one of their first morning acts had been to carefully pack all their belongings in two handbags.

Tex and Rhoda Haven moved swiftly, got the two bags, whipped to a window and went down a fire escape. From the bottom of the fire escape, they dropped into a garden where the shrubbery was thick and where pigeons fluttered and cooed.

Three men stood up in the bushes. They held guns.

One gun-holder said, "We figured the phone gag might not work, in which case you'd maybe be going this way."

Tex Haven eyed them mildly.

"You-uns downright serious about this?" he asked.

"What do you think?" one said. "Horst sent us. We want that piece of shark skin."

Tex Haven said, "Waal, in such case—"

QUITE a number of people had seen old Tex Haven go into a gun fight at one time or another, and not many of them had ever been able to explain where he got his guns. There was apparently some kind of magic about it. One minute the mild-looking old codger's hands would be empty—next they were full of spouting iron.

Tex Haven fired once with his right hand and once with his left. One man barked and turned around from the force of a bullet in his shoulder. A second man stood for a moment very stiff and dead, hit between the eyes, before he fell.

Rhoda Haven doubled down, scooped a handful of soft dirt, sent it toward the face of the third man. He snarled, tried to turn his head from the flying dirt and shoot the girl at the same time. His shot echoes gobbled into the echoes of Tex Haven's shots. The bullet missed the girl.

Tex Haven flicked his guns at the man.

A fourth man came into the garden fifty yards away. It was Horst. He lifted a long-barreled revolver deliberately.

Tex Haven saw Horst aiming and suddenly flattened. The man Haven had been about to shoot ran away. Tex Haven let him go; Haven seemed to have more respect for Horst's marksmanship than desire for the life of the running man.

More men came into the garden. The place began to convulse with ripping shot crashes.

Tex and Rhoda Haven crawled slowly and carefully. Old Tex kept his gun ready. Neither seemed particularly excited, and each dragged one of the suitcases. They got behind a fountain which was spouting three streams of water into a concrete bowl that overflowed into a fake brook, that trickled across the garden and eventually vanished into a sewer through a grille. Tex and Rhoda Haven got into the brook, were very wet by the time they reached the grille.

Horst and his men had lost track of them. When the Havens came up, they had the advantage of surprise. Horst had climbed on a garden bench, was staring. He had nerve, at least. But he flung himself off the bench when old Tex Haven leaped up and fired.

Shot sound again slammed through the garden. Bullets knocked red dust off bricks, broke two windows, frightened the pigeons anew.

Tex and Rhoda Haven dived into a narrow passage that led to the back street. They ran down the street.

Inside the apartment house, residents were very quiet, although occasionally one stole a furtive look from a window. A woman had been screaming, but had stopped. The snarling sirens of police cars were already approaching.

The Havens got into a subway and took a southbound train.

THERE was no trace of excitement in the manner of Tex Haven or his daughter. Sitting beside her suitcase, the girl idly contemplated the allurements of a tooth paste as set forth by a car poster, and old Tex Haven even purchased a tabloid newspaper from a newsboy who was working the subway train, and calmly scanned it.

Once Tex Haven said in a low voice, "Nobody 'cept Jep Dee knowed we was livin' at them Tower Apartments."

"Jep never told Horst," Rhoda Haven said quickly.

"Betcher life he didn't. Horst likely learned from that letter. He 'peared to know a piece of shark skin was in it."

They changed subway trains three times, shifted to taxicabs and used four different cabs.

The hotel to which they went eventually was small and respectable, had a proprietor notable for the size of his stomach and the proportions of his black mustache, who nearly fell over when he saw his guests, then exploded a delighted, "Tex Haven, you old bobcat in a rabbit skin!"

"Professor Smith and daughter be the names," Tex Haven said mildly.

"Oh, ho! So you're charming snakes again?"

"Bein' charmed, more like."

The Havens were shown to a suite of two small rooms, which were on the upper floor so the windows could not be shot into conveniently, and which had a handy fire escape.

Tex Haven called his daughter's attention to an item in the tabloid newspaper which he had bought in the subway.

"Be a mite clearer, you read this," he said.

Date-lined Key West, Florida, the newspaper item told of the mysterious man named Jep Dee, who had been found, a torture victim, on an uninhabited coral island.

"Poor Jep," Rhoda Haven said in a low voice.

"Looks as if," Tex Haven said, "they ketched Jep Dee."

He got out his corncob pipe and filled it with fragments of poisonous-looking black Scotch tobacco which he tore, with difficulty, from a plug that was about the shape of a fountain pen, and fully as black and hard. Then he leaned back in a chair and let out clouds of smoke that smelled as if it came from a fumigator's smudge pot. Later, he cleaned and reloaded his guns carefully. There were five of the guns, of assorted sizes, and carried in different places about his long person.

By that time he appeared to have finished his thinking.

"Jep Dee found what him an' us are after, figures as if," he said.

"Yes," said Rhoda Haven.

“They ketched Jep, an’ treated him sort of poorly. We don’t know why they treated him that way, but we might smack a guess.”

“They were trying to make Jep tell them where they could find us,” the girl said.

“I’d smack the same guess,” old Tex Haven stated mildly.

Tex dragged several seething, acid-tinted puffs of smoke from his pipe, then took the corncob out of his teeth and contemplated it lovingly.

“Such industry needs reward, strikes me,” he said.

His daughter eyed him sharply. “What do you mean?”

“Ever hear of Doc Savage?”

“*Doc Savage?*”

“Yep.”

RHODA HAVEN took hold of her lower lip with neat white teeth. She got up, went to the window, passed a hand over her forehead, then came back. Her mouth was grim.

“Look,” she said, “when you defied the Japanese army and they chased us all over Manchuria, I didn’t object.”

“Come to think of it,” old Tex Haven admitted mildly, “you didn’t.”

“And when you dared the German and Italian navy and landed a shipload of guns in Spain, I still didn’t object.”

“There for a while, I was kinda wishin’ you had.”

“The point,” the girl said, “is that you could arrange for us to stage a single-handed duel with the U. S. marines and I would string along with you.”

“You’re tryin’ to say—”

“Haven’t you ever *heard* about this Doc Savage?”

“In certain circles,” Tex Haven said dryly, “more people’ve heard of Doc Savage than know about Mussolini and Hitler.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Strikes me,” Tex Haven said, “that in two hundred years from now, there’ll be more in the school books about Doc Savage than there’ll be about Mussolini and Hitler.”

“Maybe.”

“Will, if civilization advances any. Times I doubt if it’s gonna.”

Rhoda Haven stamped a foot.

“Quit beating around the bush,” she snapped, “and tell me what you’ve got up your sleeve.”

“We’re going,” Tex Haven said, “to do Horst and Señor Steel a dirty trick.”

“Dirty trick?”

“We’re going to sick Doc Savage onto ’em. Give ’em somethin’ to do besides devil us.” Old Tex Haven looked at his daughter and assumed the expression of a gaunt tomcat surrounded by canary feathers. “Right pert idea, don’t you think?”

“Which one of us is going to sick Doc Savage onto Horst and Señor Steel?” Rhoda Haven demanded.

“You, I reckon. Deceivin’ a man is a woman’s work.”

Rhoda Haven frowned. “If I tell Doc Savage the truth, he will be likely to cut loose on *us*, instead of Horst and Steel.”

Old Tex Haven grinned.

“There won’t,” he said, “be a splinter of truth in anything you tell Doc Savage.”

Chapter 4

THE MISSING MAN

ABOUT an hour later, Rhoda Haven stood on the sidewalk in front of one of New York's highest buildings. By tilting her head back and straining her eyes, she could just discern the topmost—the eighty-sixth floor—windows, partially enveloped in a low-hanging cloud. Quite a number of people, she imagined, knew that behind those windows was Doc Savage's headquarters. She, herself, had known the fact for some months.

She knew that Doc Savage was an unusual man whose occupation was righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, frequently traveling to the world's far places to do so. She had heard that Doc Savage, sometimes called the "Man of Bronze," had been trained scientifically from childhood for his career, trained so successfully that he was an almost superhuman combination of inventive genius, mental wizard and physical giant.

Personally, Rhoda Haven doubted a great many things she had heard about Doc Savage. He seemed too perfect, too much of a superman. She suspected a good deal of that was hokum.

It was also reported that Doc Savage took no pay for punishing the evildoers and righting the wrongs, and Rhoda Haven doubted that, too. It did not seem sensible. It was all right for men named Galahad and Lancelot to ride around in medieval literature doing such things, because they possibly never did actually exist. In real life, people expected to get paid for what they did.

Rhoda Haven compressed her lips.

"Still," she remarked, "where there is smoke, you generally find a fire."

By smoke, she meant the reputation of this Doc Savage, a reputation that gave nightmares to crooks, international or otherwise, whenever the name of the Man of Bronze was mentioned. She knew that mention of Doc Savage really scared certain kinds of people. She had seen it happen.

Rhoda Haven entered the skyscraper lobby, which was as vast as the interior of some cathedrals, and took an elevator that traveled upward so swiftly that she had to swallow wildly to equalize the pressure against her eardrums. She found herself standing in a corridor which had one door, an unobtrusive, bronze-colored panel lettered simply:

CLARK SAVAGE, Jr.

"At least," Rhoda Haven said with some approval, "he doesn't put on much of a show."

As a matter of fact, she had heard that Doc Savage dodged newspaper publicity so assiduously that it was almost impossible for a reporter to get an interview with him.

"I wonder," she added, "if he believes female lies?"

She knocked on the door.

The door was opened by a man who bore a striking likeness to an extremely long skeleton coated with some sunburned hide.

"Consociative accolades," he remarked.

"I hope," Rhoda Haven said, "that *you're* not Doc Savage!"

"An apocryphal hermeneutic," said the long string of bones.

"Eh?"

"A corrigendum."

Rhoda Haven narrowed one eye.

"I must have got off on the wrong floor," she said. "I wasn't looking for a walking dictionary."

With some evidence of reluctance, the string of bones lapsed into ordinary words.

"I am trying to explain that you have made a mistake," he said. "I am not Doc Savage. I am William Harper Littlejohn."

"And what else," Rhoda Haven inquired, "might you be?"

"One of Doc Savage's associates, or assistants, or whatever you would call the five of us who work with the bronze man."

WILLIAM HARPER LITTLEJOHN stood back politely for the young woman to enter, and she did so. The room into which she came was equipped with a large inlaid table, a very big safe, and a scattering of comfortable leather-upholstered furniture. It appeared to be a reception room.

The room was not as interesting as the man who had opened the door. Rhoda Haven stared at him.

"Revelatory peroration is ultraprofitious," he stated.

Rhoda Haven blinked.

"When they made you," she said, "they must not have had any materials left but bones and big words."

"A deleterious—"

"Whoa!" said Rhoda Haven. "What do I do to persuade you to use little words?"

"You just explain who you are," William Harper Littlejohn said, again reluctantly using small words, "and state your business."

"My name is Mary Morse," said Rhoda Haven.

"And—"

"I came here to see Doc Savage."

"Why?"

"That," the girl said, "is something I will only tell to Doc Savage."

"I see. Well, good-by."

"What do you mean—good-by?"

“Doc Savage isn’t available. He is missing. He frequently becomes missing, and none of us know where he is. It happens often enough that we do not get alarmed. Furthermore, when he isn’t here, he just isn’t here; and we have no way of getting in touch with him.”

Having ridded himself of this explanation with an air of injury at having to use such small words, William Harper Littlejohn turned to the inlaid table and picked up a massive book titled, “Influence of Lepidoptera on Ancient Decorative Design,” which he appeared to have been reading.

Rhoda Haven said, “I need help.”

“Eh?”

“My life is in danger.”

William Harper Littlejohn put down the large book.

“Why didn’t you,” he said, “say so in the first place?” He took the girl’s arm, led her to a chair. It was a very massive chair, and apparently extremely heavy. At least, it would not budge when the girl hitched at the chair to move it. She let the chair remain where it was.

“What is the trouble?” asked William Harper Littlejohn.

“Some men are trying to kill me and my father,” Rhoda Haven said.

“Why?”

“We don’t know.”

“Who are the men who want you dead?”

“We don’t have any idea,” Rhoda Haven said, and looked as if she were telling the truth.

William Harper Littlejohn wore, attached to his coat lapel by a dark ribbon, a monocle. He never put this in his eye, and a second glance would disclose that the monocle was really a strong magnifying glass. Now he absent-mindedly whirled the monocle around by its ribbon.

“Just a moment,” he said.

He passed through another door. This admitted him to the Doc Savage library, a large room crowded with cases that were in turn jammed with books, most of them scientific tomes.

William Harper Littlejohn made sure the girl was remaining behind. Then he went close to a large bookcase, which was really a panel that could be swung outward and reveal a niche in which a man might remain comfortably seated without his presence being suspected by anyone who might pass through the library.

“Doc?” said William Harper Littlejohn in a low voice.

THE voice which answered from inside the hidden niche was deep, and although controlled down to a whisper, it gave an impression of remarkable power.

“Yes, Johnny,” it said.

Johnny used small words—he always used small ones when talking to Doc Savage, for some reason or other—and asked, “I had our visitor sit down in the chair that’s

wired up with our new lie detector. Is the gadget working all right? You're watching the various indicator dials in there, aren't you?"

"It seems to be working," replied the striking voice of the man inside the niche.

"Has the girl told the truth?"

"Only once," Doc Savage said. "And that was when she said some men were trying to kill herself and her father."

"Do you want to go in and talk to her, Doc?"

"No. You do that."

"But—"

"And if she thinks she needs help, you might as well help her."

Johnny asked, "Shall I call in Monk and Ham? They're the only two members of our gang that are in town. Renny and Long Tom are in Czechoslovakia trying to build a dam and electrify it."

"Monk and Ham would want you to call them."

"I'll say they would. But I hate to think about the way they'll squabble. This girl is pretty. Every time she smiles at Monk, he'll have to fight Ham, and vice versa."

"Call them, anyway."

"All right," John said. "But what are you going to be doing?"

"I will try," Doc Savage explained, "to think of something."

WILLIAM HARPER LITTLEJOHN rejoined Rhoda Haven in the reception room with a big smile and the request, "Call me Johnny. Everyone does."

"I will," the girl said, "if you promise to use small words."

"Now just what has happened to make you think your life is in danger?"

"Some men," Rhoda Haven explained, "attacked us in our rooms at the Tower Apartments. We escaped down the fire escape. There was a shooting affray in the garden where they tried to head us off, but we got away."

"I'm superamalgamated if I—I mean, I don't see why you didn't go to the police."

Rhoda Haven knotted and unknotted her handkerchief, and worked her mouth, looking very scared. For a girl who had behaved in her calm fashion during the gun fight, she looked very frightened indeed.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that one or more of our attackers were killed in the garden."

"They were?"

"Yes. The police would put us in jail for it, we were afraid."

"And you don't deserve to go to jail?"

"Oh, no indeed."

"In that case," Johnny said, "I'll have to help you."

He got up—he had been in shirt sleeves—and put on his coat, which fit him with about the same effect as a flag draped about the top of a flagpole on a windless day. He looked almost completely like a scarecrow. Certainly he did not resemble one of the most eminent living authorities on the subjects of archæology and geology. He gave his

monocle-magnifier a flourish, bowed low—pretty girls were not without their effect upon him—to Rhoda Haven, and escorted the young lady to the street.

“Primigenously, we colligate ancillary—”

“You promised,” Rhoda Haven said, “to stop using such words.”

Johnny nodded reluctantly.

“First,” he said, “we collect help in the shape of Monk and Ham.”

“I never heard of Monk and Ham.”

“Most people,” Johnny said, “have trouble keeping from hearing them.”

They got into a taxicab and drove off.

A man who had been standing on the sidewalk, taking candid-camera shots of pedestrians and passing out coupons which entitled the receiver to a picture providing the coupon and twenty-five cents were mailed in, came to sudden life. He was a short, swarthy man, rather well-dressed for an itinerant photographer.

He ran to a parked car which had another dark man at the wheel.

“Follow that cab!” he barked.

“The girl—”

“She went to Doc Savage. Horst must be a mind reader.”

The car—it was a rent-a-car sedan—snooped downtown after the cab, and the two swarthy occupants of the machine watched William Harper Littlejohn and Rhoda Haven enter a tall office building near the Wall Street district.

“Better call Horst,” one said.

The other man got out of the car, hurried to a telephone. He said, “Horst, what in the devil ever made you suspect the Haven girl would go to Doc Savage?”

Horst swore. “Did she?”

“Nothing else but.”

Horst swore some more, said, “I figured old Tex Haven was fox enough to try to sick somebody else’s dog onto us. And this Doc Savage was the logical dog. For a long time, we’ve been afraid someone would set him on us.”

“You mean this Doc Savage is tough?”

“Haven’t you heard of him, you fool?”

“I . . . uh—”

“Where is the girl now?”

“She came out of the building with the longest and skinniest guy you ever saw—”

“That one is Johnny Littlejohn, who is famous for archæology, geology and big words.”

“And they went downtown and entered an office building—”

“What address?”

The man furnished Horst with the address.

Horst cursed a third time, said, “There is where Monk Mayfair, the chemist of Doc Savage’s organization, has his lab. They’ve gone to get Monk.”

“What do we do?”

“Get them. Take them prisoners. I don’t care how you do it, but get it done.”

“How,” the man asked, “will I know this Monk Mayfair?”

“Just look at him,” Horst snarled.

Chapter 5

IMPULSIVE MR. HENRY PEACE

ANDREW BLODGETT—MONK—MAYFAIR was never mistaken for any other person. Upon occasion, when Monk was seen in dark alleys and other spots where visibility was poor—there had been one particular occasion when he was swimming nude in a tropical river—he had been mistaken for an ape. So definite was the resemblance that, on the swimming-in-the-jungle instance, a specimen-collecting naturalist had shot at him repeatedly with a rifle that fired mercy bullets.

Monk's face was fabulously homely, but fortunately it was a pleasant kind of homeliness. Dogs wagged tails at him, and children, who logically could have been expected to be frightened to death at sight of such a face, chuckled in delight. Babies always cooed and wanted to smack Monk's nose with their little fists, although much larger fists had already knocked the nose rather flat, as well as made some permanent changes in the shapes of Monk's ears.

Furthermore, there was some quality about the face that seemed to fascinate pretty girls. By grinning, smirking and crinkling his small eyes, Monk imagined he could increase his appeal.

He grinned, smirked and crinkled for Rhoda Haven.

The display moved Brigadier General Theodore Marley—Ham—Brooks to make a remark.

"The more I see of you," Ham said, "the more I'm reminded of a famous scientist."

"Who?"

"Darwin," Ham said.

Monk bloated indignantly. "Say, that's the guy who thought men came from monkeys."

The pair scowled at each other.

Ham Brooks was a wiry man, wide-shouldered, with an orator's large mouth, a high forehead—a man who was as completely Monk's opposite as one could be. He carried an innocent-looking, dark sword cane. He dressed always—he changed clothes a dozen times daily, if necessary, to be properly garbed for each different occasion or activity—in the most expensive and correct of attire fashioned by the most famous tailors. In fact, tailors had been known to furtively follow him down a street, just to watch clothes being worn as they should be.

Ham Brooks looked what he was, one of the most astute lawyers Harvard had ever produced—in contrast to Monk, who was one of the greatest living industrial chemists, and didn't look it at all.

"Who," Rhoda Haven asked Ham, "are you?"

Monk said, "He's an overdressed shyster lawyer named Ham Brooks, and while I hate to be disagreeably frank to another man's face, you want to watch him. He comes

from a long line of ancestors who were not to be trusted. They were lawyers.”

“Listen,” Ham snapped, “my family springs from the best stock around Boston.”

“My family never sprang from anybody!” Monk said. “They sprang *at* ’em!”

WHILE MONK and Ham halved their time impartially between scowling, giving each other man-eating glares, and smiling with utmost pleasantness at Rhoda Haven, the girl told the same story which she had earlier given to Johnny. The story from which much truth was missing. The tale about persons unidentified attacking her and her father at Tower Apartments for reasons unknown. She lied nicely throughout.

Johnny said, “The thing for us to do is go to Tower Apartments and see if we can pick up the assailants’ trail.”

“You’re very nice to help me,” Rhoda Haven said delightedly.

They had held the conference in Monk’s penthouse, which was also his chemical laboratory, as well as an example of what a garish imagination could do with modernistic decoration.

“Wait’ll I get my pig,” Monk said, and called, “Habeas! Habeas Corpus!”

Habeas Corpus was a shote with long legs, wing-sized ears, and a snout built for inquiring into the bottoms of tin cans. Habeas was an Arabian hog, of indefinite age, who probably would never get any larger than he was—about the proportions of an average-sized bulldog. He was Monk’s pet.

Habeas appeared, accompanied by Chemistry, who was Ham’s pet.

Monk didn’t care for Chemistry, probably because Chemistry was a chimpanzee—if not a chimp, then some member of the baboon family—which bore a disquieting likeness to Monk himself. Seen far apart, so that they could not be distinguished by size—Chemistry came little above Monk’s knees—there was likely to be confusion of identity.

Monk quarreled continually with Ham; Habeas Corpus squabbled perpetually with Chemistry.

“Let us,” Johnny said, “extravasate.”

Monk translated, “He means let’s go to the Tower Apartments.”

They extravasated to the penthouse elevator and eventually out on the sidewalk.

“We’ll take a taxicab,” Ham said.

While they were looking for a taxicab to flag, a man approached.

The man wore overalls, carried a huge paper-wrapped package on one shoulder. His face was soiled. A closer scrutiny would have shown that he was the same man who had been taking sidewalk photographs in front of Doc Savage’s headquarters skyscraper. Unfortunately, no one gave him the closer scrutiny.

The man fell down. Flat on his face, he flopped. Directly in front of Monk, Ham, Johnny and Rhoda Haven. The man hit the sidewalk hard, and the box he was carrying hit even harder.

The box burst. Fumes came out. The vapor was the color of the insides of rotten eggs.

The fallen man took hold of his mouth and nose with both hands and pinched, so he could not breathe.

Monk, Ham, Johnny, Rhoda Haven—all stared in astonishment until the fumes came up and enveloped them and were breathed into their lungs, when they realized what was happening—knew that the vapor was gas—after which they ran in different directions, but blindly, bumping into things.

From assorted hiding places nearby came four men who wore gas masks and carried blackjacks, and a fifth man who drove a bakery delivery truck.

The gas-masked men with the blackjacks slugged Monk, Ham, Johnny and Rhoda Haven to the sidewalk. They loaded the senseless forms into the bakery truck.

By that time, there was a good deal of excitement around about, what with pedestrians who had walked into the tear gas, and people yelling for cops. But the bakery truck got away.

WHEN MONK was able to sit up, he felt of his left eye, and having had black eyes before, he knew its condition.

“Gave you a black eye,” Ham said.

“They must have,” Monk admitted. “I don’t remember fighting for it.”

“That tear gas was a nice trick.”

“Nice enough,” Monk snarled, “that I’m gonna pull some legs and arms off some bodies.”

“Don’t be impulsive,” advised one of the four men who had worn gas masks.

The vanlike inside of the bakery truck was larger than a casual exterior glance indicated. The four former gas mask wearers stood in strategic corners holding large and unquestionably efficient revolvers.

The man who had dropped the gas package sat on the floor near the prisoners and rubbed his leaking eyes. Monk gave him a kick. The man yelped, whipped out a knife, stabbed the floor where Monk’s leg had been an instant before.

Monk howled disagreeably—his fights were always noisy—and took the knife-wielder by the throat with a pair of rusty-haired hands that could straighten horseshoes.

A man stepped forward, smacked a revolver down on Monk’s bullet-shaped head. Monk dropped.

“Hell, shoot him if he cuts up again,” another man advised. “People will think the motor backfired.”

There was silence, and no action except the jumping around of the truck as it moved fast. Judging from the lack of traffic noises, they were outside the city, and on a country road not too well maintained. Only twice did cars pass them, one of these blowing several times for a share of the road, which must have been narrow, judging from the swearing their drivers did. Finally the car stopped.

One of the men got out.

Five minutes later, he put his head back in the truck.

“Old homestead sure gone to hell since I was raised here,” he said. “But nobody ain’t ever filled up the old cistern.”

“Cistern?” Ham said.

“Deep, lined with old brick, and easy to cave in,” said the man. “With large green toads in the bottom.”

“Any water?” another man asked.

“Hell, don’t need water. We can use a knife on them first.”

The prisoners were now tied with white cotton rope, while the men stood by with ready guns.

They were dragged out of the bakery truck, whereupon they saw a very seedy-looking farm, the principal crop on which seemed to be five-foot-high weeds. The house, two stories, was leaning southward, and the barn had apparently laid down years ago. Both buildings were minus about everything that could be pried off.

The man had removed old rotting boards from the top of the cistern. The captives were dragged close enough that they could smell odor—probably of unfortunately curious rabbits—that came out of the depths.

“YOU’VE got,” growled the man who seemed to be spokesman, “one chance to eat dinner tonight.”

“What’s that?” Ham asked.

“Prove to us that there’s no need of killing you.”

Ham looked at the man indignantly. “How do you expect us to prove something we don’t know? We never saw you thugs before. We have no idea why you seized us.”

“You haven’t?”

“No.”

“It was because you were with this girl,” the man explained. “Now that we’re being frank, suppose you answer a question for me.”

“Shoot.”

“How much do you know? How much has old Tex Haven and the girl here found out? How much has Jep Dee told them?”

Ham said, “Who is Jep Dee?”

“Is that your answer?”

“The answer,” Ham snapped, “is that we’re completely puzzled. The girl just said mysterious men were trying to kill her and her father, and she wanted us to protect her.”

Rhoda Haven said disgustedly, “And you can see how much protecting they did.”

The girl, considering their situation, was remarkably calm. Much more so, in fact, than either Ham, Monk or Johnny; and they were accustomed to danger, having faced it with spasmodic frequency during the time they had been associated with Doc Savage. They also liked excitement, it probably being the strongest bond which held them to Doc Savage, next to an intense admiration for the capacity and character of the Man of Bronze. But they had an embarrassed suspicion that the girl was the calmest of them all.

They were beginning to see that Rhoda was a very remarkable girl.

“They don’t know anything,” the questioning captor decided suddenly. “The girl didn’t tell them the truth. It’s like Horst figured. She and old Tex Haven just tried to sick Doc Savage onto us.”

“So now we do what?”

“Into the cistern with them.”

“We could just as well have taken a machine gun to them when they came out of that office building near Wall Street.”

“Hell, we had to learn how much they knew, didn’t we? Give a hand.”

They darted for Monk first, probably because he had made the most trouble. They had enough respect for Monk’s fighting potentialities that all of them gathered around for the task of throwing him into the well.

The big red-haired stranger must have decided this was his opportunity. Because now he came out of the weeds. He did not make much noise.

The red-haired newcomer had two men disarmed practically before they knew he was with them. After that, there was no doubt about his presence.

THE fiery-haired stranger dived into the cluster of men surrounding Monk. Blow sounds, bleats of pain, profane yells, ripping clothes noise jumped out of what soon became a large ball of arms and legs and dust.

The stranger was big, much bigger than any man in the group. His shoulders were wide; his hips were lean. His strength seemed to flow as lightning. His actions were as flaming as the red of his hair.

His grin was big and cheerful through all. If he laughed once during the fray, he laughed a dozen times. Which meant that he laughed often, because it did not last long.

His eyes were blue. His teeth were white. His nose had a few freckles. His red hair needed cutting, and was tousled this way and that on his head.

When he waded out of the mêlée, walking on two stupefied faces as he did so, he carried all their guns. His hands were very large, but the guns made almost more than handfuls, even hanging on his fingers by the trigger guards.

He aimed at a man and shot.

Certainly he was no gunman. He was terrible. He missed a man he could almost have hit with his fist. His target got up and ran. He shot again and missed that man, too, and the fellow got up and ran, making dog-yelp sounds of terror as he went away.

The red-headed stranger did some more shooting, and his untouched targets did more running. By the time he had emptied one gun—hitting nobody—all Horst’s men had departed like shot-at rabbits into the tall weeds.

The fiery-haired giant kept on pointing guns which banged loudly and futilely.

“Drab nab it!” said the redhead cheerfully. “I keep missin’ ’em.”

Rhoda Haven made whizzing sounds of disgust. “Such shooting!”

“I ain’t so hot at puttin’ holes in guys,” said the red-headed young man.

“You couldn’t,” said the girl, “hit the side of a barn!”

"I sure like to hit 'em with my fists, however," the redhead advised.

The big stranger's attack, the routing of Horst's men, had happened so fast that the dust had not settled. But now the dust blew away and Monk, who had partly served as a platform for the fight, stopped howling and groaning. He sat up. His small eyes batted at the stranger.

"Who are you?" Monk demanded.

"Henry Peace."

"Peace?"

"Don't," said the redhead, "let the name mislead you."

"WHAT are you doing here?" Monk rapped.

"That might be *my* business."

"Huh?"

"If you had kept that nose out of other people's business," said Henry Peace, "it might not look so funny."

"What's the matter with my nose?" Monk yelled.

"Looks like something the cat gnawed on," Henry Peace said. "And don't yell at me."

Monk was a man who formed sudden and violent likes and dislikes. Apparently he had acquired a large, instantaneous dislike for Henry Peace.

"If somebody will take these ropes off me," Monk bellowed, "I'll show you that I can yell at anybody, and they'll like it!"

The exhibition that followed, under the circumstances, was probably childish; under other circumstances it might conceivably have been comical. Henry Peace untied Monk. Monk got up, squared off with his fists, and was promptly knocked flat on his back by Henry Peace.

Henry Peace then picked Monk up with remarkable ease and hurled him into the most convenient clump of weeds. Monk lay there, howled, kicked, tried to get breath back.

Henry Peace looked at Ham and Long Tom.

"I don't like you guys, either!" he said.

He untied Ham, examined Ham's perfectly tailored coat with disapproval, then took hold of the coat tails and tore it up the back. Ham screamed rage.

Ham was a skilled boxer of the stand-off-and-jab-'em-blind school. He started to use his technique on Henry Peace. A split-second later, to his bewilderment, he was sprawled in the weeds near Monk.

Henry Peace untied William Harper Littlejohn, picked him up and threw him in the weeds, before Johnny could get organized.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny gasped.

"That's a good word to run away with," Henry Peace said.

Monk got up, showed renewed fight intentions.

“Drag it,” Henry Peace ordered. “Vamoose! Beat it! Scram! Make tracks!”

The old cistern had been surrounded with a coping of bricks, and this had disintegrated with the years; so that a number of bricks were scattered handily. Henry Peace began picking up this Irish confetti and heaving it at Monk, Ham and Johnny.

Having narrowly escaped being hit by several bricks, Ham and Johnny took their flight. Monk reluctantly followed them.

“I can throw a brickbat,” they heard Henry Peace say proudly, “straighter than I can shoot a gun.”

Having reached safety some distance away in the weeds, Monk, Ham and Johnny held a conference.

“When I get hold of that red-headed guy,” Monk growled, “I’m gonna massacre him!”

“You already had hold of him once,” Ham reminded.

Monk glared.

Johnny, big words apparently knocked out of him, said, “I think we better try to trail those guys who were going to throw us in the cistern.”

“But the girl—”

“If that red-headed guy can’t protect her, nobody can,” Johnny stated. “Anyway, if we go back there, we’ll just waste time fighting him.”

“Henry Peace,” Ham admitted, “didn’t seem to like us.”

They wandered off through the weeds, seeking the trail of Horst’s men.

Chapter 6

THE NOSE BUMPER

HENRY PEACE stood with a brick in each hand and peered at the weeds hopefully.

“Looks like the excitement’s played out,” he said in a regretful tone.

Rhoda Haven, still tied on the ground, looked as if she wanted to forcibly relieve her rescuer of a fistful of red hair.

“Does it occur to you,” she said violently, “to untie me?”

“Sure. That occurred to me back near Wall Street.”

“Near Wall Street?”

“Yep. When I seen you grabbed. I was lookin’ at you when that fellow fell down on purpose and broke the tear gas bottle in his package. I seen ’em grab you. So, thinks I, as long as I’m not doing nothing, I might as well pitch in and rescue you.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, I was in love with you.”

“You *what*?” Rhoda Haven gasped.

“Smitten. Bit. By the love-bug.” The red-headed young man’s grin wrinkled his freckled nose. “Soon as I saw you.”

Rhoda Haven squirmed, snapped, “Untie these ropes!”

“Don’t you think I done me a nice job trailin’ them fellows?” Henry Peace asked. “Lucky I had me a car handy.”

“Are you, or aren’t you—”

“Sure, sure. Keep your jaw still a minute, and I will.”

Rhoda Haven held her tongue with some effort while the large young man took his time untying her. The frankly admiring way in which he looked her over caused her teeth to make faint grinding noises.

“Say, I’ve got good taste, don’t you think?” Henry Peace asked cheerfully.

“What do you mean?”

“In picking you to fall in love with.”

Rhoda Haven knotted small fists.

“You affect me,” she said, “like the ocean.”

“You mean because I’m awe-inspiring, and toss things around?” said Henry Peace.

“No. You make me sick.”

Big Henry Peace’s freckled grin remained undisturbed. “You’ll change for the better. I grow on people.”

Rhoda Haven looked him up and down frostily, made a half-admiring mental note that if he grew much more, they would have to start making doors wider at shoulder height. She kept any trace of admiration off her patrician features, however.

“Just who are you?” she asked.

“Henry Peace. But don’t let the name fool—”

“You said that once. I don’t care anything about your name. What is your business?”

“Right now, it’s rescuing you.”

“And after that?”

A big grin came over Henry Peace’s sunny face.

“Marrying you,” he said.

Rhoda Haven controlled an impulse to see how hard she could hit him in the eye.

“How do you make a living?” she asked, holding to her patience.

“Sometimes I don’t,” Henry Peace admitted cheerfully. “I’m a guy with a hobby instead of an occupation. The hobby is hanging black eyes on people I don’t like.”

Rhoda Haven considered for a moment.

“Am I,” she inquired, “going to be infested by you?”

“You ain’t gonna get rid of me, if that’s what you mean.”

Rhoda Haven sighed, shrugged her shoulders, nodded—all three gestures indicating that she had surrendered to the inevitable.

Next, the young woman walked over to the cistern, looked into the depths—emitted a strangled cry of horror. She drew back from the cistern mouth, trembling. Her whole manner radiated horror.

Henry Peace, rushing forward, said, “Don’t get the shakes! Nobody’s going to throw you in there now.”

Rhoda Haven, trembling more than before, pointed at the cistern.

There were gasps between her words. “There’s already . . . someone . . . down there!” she choked.

Henry Peace rushed to the cistern, looked, and because it was dark in the depths, got down on all fours the better to peer.

Rhoda Haven put a foot against the handiest portion of his anatomy and shoved. Henry Peace managed to turn, clutch the edge of the cistern with his hands, hang there. Rhoda Haven calmly kicked his fingers loose.

Henry Peace fell into the cistern, which was not very deep. Judging from the volume of the young man’s indignant roars, he was unharmed.

“We’re going to see,” Rhoda Haven said grimly, “who gets rid of who.”

WHEN RHODA HAVEN walked into the small hotel where she and her father had established themselves, old Tex Haven got away from the fire escape near which he had been standing. He wore his smoking jacket, a heavily brocaded, very elaborate Chinese mandarin’s robe which had been in his possession for years—in fact had been given to him by the Korean emperor before the Japanese took possession of that country. He was particularly satisfied with his corn cob pipe, and fumes from the thing had the hotel suite smelling as if a poison-gas shell had exploded.

“Reckon you made out right pert at sickin’ Doc Savage and his men on Horst and Señor Steel?” he asked.

Rhoda Haven went to a mirror, with feminine concern over her appearance, and examined herself. Then she went over and dropped in a chair.

“When I was a kid,” she said, “I took a stick and poked it in a hornets’ nest.”

“There’s smarter things to do,” old Tex Haven said.

“What we’ve done today,” his daughter told him, “amounts to the same thing.”

“Eh?”

She told him what had happened. Her voice was disgusted when she explained that Horst had been clever enough to divine that they would attempt to involve Doc Savage. When she came to the appearance of Henry Peace, she crackled rage.

“The big red-headed hooligan,” she said, “seemed to expect me to fall on his neck.”

“Can’t blame him.”

“Well, I didn’t care for his manner.”

“’Pears you’re a mite prejudiced. Mind explainin’ what was wrong with his manner?”

“He wanted to marry me.”

“That,” said old Tex Haven, “sure don’t prove he was crazy.”

“Yes, but he told me his intentions thirty seconds after he met me.”

“Reckon you never seen a sparrow after a bug,” Tex Haven said. “A sparrow don’t waste no time.”

“I’m the bug, eh?”

Tex Haven took his pipe out of his teeth, contemplated it, rubbed his jaw.

“Last you seed of Doc Savage’s men, they was bein’ run into the weeds by this Henry Peace?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Likely as not, they’ll start followin’ Horst’s men.”

“They’re fools if they don’t. Horst’s men were going to kill them.”

Old Tex Haven took a long, luxuriant drag of vile smoke out of his corncob pipe, released it to further befoul the air of the room, and smacked his lips.

“We came out all right, figures as if,” he said. “We hankered for Doc Savage to take after Horst. He’s after ’im.”

“His men are.”

“Same thing.”

“Which brings us around,” Rhoda Haven said grimly, “to what we do next, whatever it is.”

Tex Haven went to the window shade and pulled it down. The bit of shark skin, which had been rolled up in the shade, fluttered out. He caught it.

“Jep Dee sent us this for a reason, strikes me,” he said. “Jep Dee ain’t the boy to do things without reason.”

His daughter took the piece of dry, freckled-looking hide and scrutinized it thoughtfully. She felt of it, held it up to the light, shook her head.

“Beats me,” she said.

There was a knock on the door.

Tex Haven blinked, muttered, “Last time somebody knocked on the door, hell broke loose.”

He hastily rolled the bit of freckled shark skin up inside the window shade.

Then he looked at his daughter.

“You positive,” he asked, “that nobody could’ve followed you back from that place where they was gonna throw you in the cistern?”

“Positive,” Rhoda Haven said firmly.

The room was L-shaped. Old Tex Haven got at the angle of the L, stood there where his hands could get at his guns freely. He knew, from the construction of the hotel, that there was a steel beam at the angle of the L, which would stop bullets.

Rhoda Haven got out on the fire escape.

The knuckles banged the door again.

“Come in,” Tex Haven called.

Henry Peace brought his big, freckled grin into the room.

OLD TEX HAVEN was standing slack-shouldered and sleepy—his deadliest attitude, incidentally. His long jaw sagged, his corncob fell out of his teeth, and one of his palms cupped instinctively and caught it.

“Drat it!” he said.

Henry Peace squinted at him. “What’s the idea? Ain’t I welcome?”

Old Tex Haven swallowed, apparently could think of nothing to say.

“Where’s my fiancée?” asked Henry Peace.

“Your what?”

“My future wife—your daughter,” Henry Peace explained.

Rhoda Haven came in from her hiding place, her heels tapping the floor angrily.

“I’m getting tired of that wife stuff!” she snapped. “The more I see of you, the less I can stomach you. In fact, you distinctly irritate me.”

“Them pains you feel,” Henry Peace assured her, “are probably the sprouting of a great love.”

Rhoda Haven turned angrily to her father. Knowing old Tex as she did, she thought it might be a good idea to explain again that she felt that it was impossible for Henry Peace to have followed her here.

She said, “This air-minded tramp couldn’t—”

“Air-minded—nothing!” Henry Peace interrupted. “I hate airplanes.”

“What I meant is that you have air where a mind should be,” the girl explained carefully.

Henry Peace looked so indignant that old Tex Haven chuckled gently. That chuckle turned out to be an error—it distracted his attention. Too, he hadn't expected Henry Peace to jump him, which was what happened. They hit the floor. Tex Haven's bony frame made a sound somewhat as if an arm-load of stove wood had been dropped.

Tex wrapped long, bony arms and legs, octopus fashion, around Henry Peace.

"I sure hates," he said, "to embarrass a young lad who thinks he's handy."

He tightened the grip, his rosy old muscles rolling something like a jungle snake starting to swallow a pig.

Henry Peace at once emitted several yelps of pain.

Old Tex Haven had at one time spent some months in a Japanese prison, and his cellmate had been a Japanese strangler who, as jujitsu expert, was probably the greatest ever to live. The Jap strangler would have been world-famous, except for a failing for getting into fights in which he choked his opponents to death. From the Nipponese, Tex Haven had learned about all that could be learned of the art of administering agony.

Also, age had not weakened the wirelike ropes that served Tex as muscles. The years, if anything, had improved them.

The two men went around and around on the floor. A table upset. Henry Peace gave more pain yips.

Then Henry Peace began taking hold of old Tex Haven in various strange ways. Tex started squawking like a setting hen. Tex had been showing great willingness to mix it with the large, red-headed young man.

Now Tex showed great willingness to let loose of Henry Peace. He had, he was discovering, caught a Tartar.

The two suddenly separated and got up, scowled at each other with mutual respect. Henry Peace had possession of all Tex Haven's guns.

"Standin' there, all ready to shoot, when I came in, wasn't you?" Henry Peace asked. "I didn't like that none."

Rhoda Haven frowned at her bony parent, said, "You must be slipping, dad."

"Not slippin'," Tex denied. "I just got me a hold on a right tolerable man."

"He's a clown!" Rhoda said, and sniffed.

Henry Peace, having rubbed various parts of his anatomy which probably hurt, grinned cheerfully at the Havens.

"I'm beginnin' to think you're gonna make a better daddy-in-law than I expected," he said.

HAVING ridded himself of that declaration, Henry Peace pulled down his sleeves, straightened his coat and felt of one of his ears again to be sure it had not been pulled off. Then he gravely shook hands with old Tex and his daughter. The latter showed no enthusiasm.

"What's the idea of this hand-shaking?" Tex Haven asked.

"You were shaking the hand," Henry Peace explained, "of your new partner."

Tex jumped.

“*What?*” he yelled.

Henry Peace grinned at the gaunt old hell-raiser and soldier of fortune. “I’ve heard plenty about you.”

“You heared of me?” Tex asked dubiously. “Warn’t nothin’ degradin’, if war true.”

“I’ve heard,” said Henry Peace, “that you and this daughter of yours—my future breakfast companion—make yourselves about over a million dollars a year, one way or another. I heard, too, that you always turn right around and lose it. That’s where I’m goin’ to be different. I ain’t gonna lose my share.”

Old Tex Haven got out his corncob pipe and looked at it as if it had betrayed him.

“And what would you calculate your share?” he asked mildly.

“One third.”

“Third of what?”

“That is what you can now tell me,” Henry Peace said.

Old Tex Haven made faces and snorting sounds, and continued to eye his corncob pipe as if it had suddenly poisoned him.

“Ain’t nothin’ to tell,” he said.

“You mean,” said Henry Peace skeptically, “that you’re entirely innocent of schemes?”

“Yep.”

“You ain’t doin’ nothin’ that you wouldn’t describe to a policeman?”

“Nope.”

“About that, we’ll see.”

Henry Peace went to a window and lifted it. The tops of trees were thick outside, but through them he could see a policeman standing on the sidewalk at the end of the block. Henry Peace raised his voice. The policeman looked as if he were having a dull afternoon.

“Help, help,” yelled Henry Peace. “Police! Help! Murder! Bandits!”

The cop jumped. But his jump was nothing to the one Tex Haven gave.

“You durn fool!” Tex yelled.

“He’s crazy!” snapped Rhoda Haven. “I told you so. Remember?”

Henry Peace stood still, grinned big.

The Havens flung a glance at the window shade which held the shark skin. They glared at Henry Peace.

The young man with the red hair and the freckles showed no inclination to do anything except stand and grin.

The Havens snatched their ready-packed suitcases, rushed for a back-window fire escape. They vanished down the fire escape.

When they were out of sight, Henry Peace went to the window, pulled the shade down and caught the bit of shark skin when it fluttered out. He pocketed the shark skin.

Chapter 7

FLORIDA RACE

HENRY PEACE went to the window that faced the street—the same window through which he had yelled for help and the police—and watched the cop charging into the front door of the little hotel.

The street below was one of the few in New York that had remained tree-lined through the years. The trees were large; some of them had branches as thick as elephant legs.

As soon as the cop disappeared, Henry Peace climbed on the windowsill, crouched, sprang out into space. Fifty feet or so below was the sidewalk, of hard concrete.

Doubled slightly—something like a high-diver with a jackknife half completed—Henry Peace plummeted into the top of a tree. He let two or three smaller branches whisk past, then his hands clamped a limb. The bough bent; disturbed leaves went *swoosh!*

Then Henry Peace was dangling safe, swaying slightly. He swung like a trapeze artist, sailed a few feet and fastened his hands to another branch. With ease and agility that could have been bettered very little by an experienced ape, Henry Peace dropped through the tree to the sidewalk.

He dusted off his hands, straightened his coat, and sauntered away. In his pockets were the many guns which he had taken from old Tex Haven, and these clinked together.

Henry Peace's sauntering gait was deceptive; he did not seem in a hurry, but in a short time he was in the wake of old Tex Haven and his daughter. Tex Haven and Rhoda hurried down side streets, leaving the vicinity.

They rode uptown in a bus, and Henry Peace was perched on the rear bumper, wrinkling his freckled nose at the exhaust fumes.

Tex and his daughter engaged adjoining rooms in a small theatrical hotel. There was a discussion with the clerk over the selection of the rooms, Tex insisting he had a deathly fear of burning to death and must be near a fire escape.

Henry Peace came into the lobby—he had found a back door—and stood intently watching the hotel clerk's lips.

"Rooms 912 and 914 are exactly what you want," the clerk said. "Near a fire escape."

Henry Peace was apparently a lip reader, on top of his other accomplishments. He took to the stairs until he found Room 912.

The hotel owner probably thought his door locks were thief-proof, but the one on the door of Room 912 delayed Henry Peace no more than thirty seconds. Henry used his key ring, which he straightened out.

Henry Peace stood in a clothes closet until the Havens were installed. He heard Tex Haven say, "Waal, we're finally shut of that red-headed idiot."

"He isn't an idiot!" Rhoda Haven retorted unexpectedly.

"Eh?"

"Henry Peace," said the young woman perversely, "struck me as being rather clever."

Tex Haven snorted. "Women are the cussed-mindedest creatures."

Henry Peace came out of the closet. "That may be," he said, "but one woman is showing good judgment."

HENRY PEACE'S unexpected appearance caused Tex Haven to give a wild jump and grab successively for three or four of his guns, forgetting they were no longer in his possession. Then he recovered from his surprise, sidled to a chair, collapsed upon it, and looked at Henry Peace much as a rabbit might inspect a dog which had chased it into a hole.

"Now what do you want?"

Henry Peace put large freckled fists on his thin, capable hips and thrust out his lower lip. "The same thing as before. I want to be your partner."

Old Tex Haven rubbed his leathery jaw and squinted one eye at his daughter, who walked over and kicked her suitcase.

"I guess we're licked," she said in a resigned tone.

Tex asked, "You mean let him hang around?"

"Have you noticed us stopping him?"

Henry Peace grinned at them. "Now that I'm officially one of your gadgets," he said, "what are we all mixed up in?"

Tex Haven stuffed his pipe with black tobacco and applied a match.

"Try to figure it out by yourself," he suggested. "Be right helpful exercise for that handful of fleas you call a mind."

Tex put on a wide-brimmed black hat which he habitually wore, a hat that made him resemble an undertaker who depressed his profession.

He drew his daughter aside. "Calculate I better go back an' get that shark skin," he explained. "Dern thing don't make sense, but it's important, or Jep Dee wouldn't have sent it."

The girl nodded. "Good idea."

She watched her father leave the hotel. Then she inspected Henry Peace with no approval.

"You," she said, "are going to regret haunting us."

"There's two sides to every question," Henry Peace pointed out. "Why don't you be reasonable?"

"There's two sides to fly paper, too," the girl said grimly. "But it's important to the fly which side he lights on."

Henry Peace opened his mouth, but no word came out; so he shut it. This was the starting point for half an hour of deep silence.

When Tex Haven came back, he was galloping. Apparently he also had been running.

“Gone!” he yelled.

Rhoda gasped. “The shark skin was gone from the window shade?”

“Hide an’ hair.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” Henry Peace asked innocently.

The Havens ignored both question and the author.

Rhoda Haven compressed her lips.

“Horst?” she said grimly.

“Maybe he’s the one got it,” said old Tex. “And maybe he didn’t.”

Rhoda said, “Two things we can do. Hunt Horst, take the shark skin away from him. Or head for Key West and get the straight story from Jep Dee.”

“Yep.”

“Key West sound best to you?”

“Yep,” said Tex promptly.

The Havens grabbed their suitcases and rushed for the door.

Henry Peace exclaimed, “Wait for me!” and trotted after them.

Tex Haven stopped. He took Henry Peace by the necktie and pulled their faces close together.

“You know how much is involved in this?” Tex snarled.

“No. I—”

“The lives of thirty-one or thirty-two people—”

“But—”

“And maybe between forty and fifty million dollars.”

Henry Peace’s jaw sagged and remained down. “Uh—”

Tex finished, “You throw in with us, and eleven chances out of ten you get your head shot out from between your ears. Take your choice.”

Henry Peace swallowed several times, mumbled something almost unintelligible about fifty million dollars and the lives of thirty-one or thirty-two people.

“Why, blast it!” he said. “You couldn’t keep me away from this kind of mystery and excitement.”

They hurried out and got in a taxicab. The cab ran several blocks.

“You reckon,” Henry Peace asked, “that I better make my will?”

“Be a fairish idea,” Tex said.

“Stop the car!” Henry Peace barked abruptly. “There’s a post office. I’m goin’ in, write out my will, and mail it to the executor.”

Somewhat unwillingly, the Havens halted the taxi and Henry Peace went into the post office.

“Drat that red-headed feller,” grumbled Tex. “For triflin’ little, I’d drive off an’ let ’im hunt for us.”

Rhoda Haven smiled slightly. “Don’t,” she said. “I think the young man is going to be interesting.”

“Interestin’? Heck, what we’ve got on our hands is interestin’ enough.”

“He can fight, too,” Rhoda reminded.

Henry Peace, in the post office, was doing something interesting. He was *not* writing any will, however.

He was putting the piece of freckled shark skin in an envelope, and addressing the envelope, which he mailed with a flourish.

He went back to the Havens.

“Get your will taken care of?” asked Tex.

“All taken care of,” Henry Peace said.

NEW YORK postal service is fast. Henry Peace mailed the bit of freckled shark skin at five o’clock in the afternoon, and at six thirty it arrived in the central post office at Thirty-second Street and Eighth Avenue, where a postal clerk picked it up and noted the name to which it was addressed. The name meant something to the clerk. He walked quickly to a special pneumatic mailing tube, shoved the letter into a bullet-shaped container.

Another postal clerk came over.

“That marked important, or something?” he asked.

“The letter,” explained the first clerk, “was addressed in the most unusual handwriting I ever saw. The writing was machine perfect, like script.”

“A lot of queer mail goes into that special tube.”

“Boy, don’t it!”

“I guess still queerer things happen as a result of the mail.”

“Yeah, from the rumors that get out. Still, you don’t read much about him in the newspapers lately. Maybe he doesn’t follow his queer profession any longer.”

“Don’t let that fool you. He avoids publicity. But every crook in the world is still scared of him.”

“Ever seen him?”

“Once. When this special mail tube was installed in his headquarters.”

“What does he look like?”

“Doc Savage,” said the second clerk, “has the strangest flake-gold eyes. His skin is bronze, hair a little darker bronze. There’s a silent way about him that—well, once you see him, you never forget him.”

Air pressure whisked Henry Peace’s letter through the pneumatic tube, under streets and sidewalks, then up vertically for eighty-six stories in a skyscraper, and it landed in a container, which caused a signal light to flash.

“An ultramontaneous anacoluthon,” remarked gaunt William Harper Littlejohn solemnly.

Monk was the only other human occupant of the room. The two pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, sat on the floor and looked at each other in an unkind way.

The two animals had been rescued from the Wall Street district where Horst's men had worked the gas trick.

Monk turned around and glared.

"Stop talkin' that foreign language!" he shouted.

"That's English," Johnny explained with dignity. "Anyway, what are you so touchy about?"

"Ham." Monk took his bullet-shaped head in his hands. "For hours now, we haven't heard from Ham."

"Ham is all right."

"How do we know he's all right?" Monk groaned.

"Well, he is trailing the Horst gang. We figured one man could trail them with less chance of being noticed, and we matched for the job, and Ham won."

"I'm worried," Monk muttered.

His homely face was a battleground for various kinds of concern.

Johnny snorted. "Earlier in the day, I heard you promise to knock all of Ham's teeth out and use them for marbles. Now you're worried."

"Ham is the best friend I've got in the world," Monk said emphatically.

Johnny, having opened the newly arrived letter, emitted a startled grunt. He held the fragment of freckled shark skin up for inspection.

"An acromatical involucrum," he muttered.

"Eh?"

"A puzzling piece of hide," Johnny said, using small words.

Monk examined the shark skin. "What makes you think it's hide?"

"Ratiocination."

"Eh?"

"A little common sense."

"If you don't stop using them words on me when I'm worried, I'm going to make you into something longer and thinner than you are," Monk said disagreeably. "Probably I'll just strew you out."

The homely chemist picked up the sheet of paper which had accompanied the shark skin fragment in the letter. There were words on the paper, saying:

THIS PIECE OF SHARK SKIN SEEMS TO BE THE KEY TO THE
WHOLE MYSTERY, SEE IF YOU CAN SOLVE IT.

There was no signature on the note.

"Heck, you read this first, and that's how you knew it was a piece of hide," Monk complained. "What are these spots on it?"

"Look like freckles."

"There ain't no such thing as a freckled shark," Monk pointed out.

THE question of whether or not there was such a thing as a freckled shark had gotten to the stage of consulting the encyclopedia when a green light flashed.

“Probably Ham!” Monk exploded.

The green light was attached to a short-wave radio receiving set—hooked up through a sensitive relay which operated when a certain combination of clicking noises were received—and announced that they were being called by another radio. The green light served the same purpose as the bell on a telephone. To make it function, the operator of a sending set merely switched on his apparatus and, with his fingers close to the microphone, made the proper combination of snapping noises.

Monk reached the radio and cut in the loud-speaker.

Ham’s voice said, *“Boy, you better move fast! They’re headed somewhere.”*

“Why didn’t you tell us where you had been, you rattle-brained shyster!” Monk yelled indignantly.

“You oaf! Don’t start yelling at me.” Ham said over the radio. *“I was busy trailing that Horst gang. They’re out on Long Island.”*

“Where on Long Island?”

“The airport. The one that last transatlantic flier crashed on. Remember?”

“What are they doing?”

“Hear that plane motor warming up? They’re getting in it.”

“In ten minutes,” Monk said, “we’ll be out there.”

The congested city location of Doc Savage’s skyscraper headquarters had its inconveniences. One drawback was the fact that traffic made it difficult to leave the city quickly in an emergency. However, Doc Savage had largely overcome that handicap by installing what Monk called the “flea run.”

Monk and Johnny got into the bullet-shaped cartridge of the flea run. Monk had grabbed Habeas by one wing-sized ear, his habitual manner of carrying the pig. He also made a grab for Chemistry, the ape, but the latter dodged away distrustfully. At the last minute, Chemistry ran and jumped into the cartridge.

Monk jerked a lever. There was a sound as if an elephant had coughed through his trunk, and the cartridge gave a terrific jump. The bullet-shaped car, which was so small that even two of them crowded it, traveled through a metal tube at a speed of considerably over a hundred miles an hour, driven by pneumatic pressure. It swayed, shook, and the noise was deafening. When it stopped at the other end, the shock rendered the occupants breathless.

“That blasted thing,” Monk complained, “is worse than a mole’s nightmare!”

They were now in Doc Savage’s water-front hangar—a huge, grimy brick building with a sign across the front that said “HIDALGO TRADING COMPANY”—where the bronze man kept his planes and such boats as he had occasion to use.

They took a plane that had practically no wings and twice the usual amount of motor.

The ship was a seaplane equipped with retractable landing gear for use on land. The wheels up, the craft lunged across the surface of the Hudson, and climbed like a big

bumblebee into the sky.

DOC SAVAGE and his associates used a short-wave radio habitually. All their planes were equipped with transmitters and receivers. Monk switched on the one in the speed ship.

“We’re on our way,” Monk said.

Ham said, “*I see that the sky looks kind of funny over in that direction.*”

“That,” Monk said, “isn’t a good gag.”

The plane bored on up into the sky and dived into low-hanging clouds.

So fast was the ship that almost at once it was circling toward the airport, but at some distance.

Ham’s voice came over the radio again.

“*Something funny about this,*” he said.

Johnny said, “Hermeneuticalize.”

Ham, who understood such words, knew that Johnny merely wanted an explanation.

“*Horst’s men,*” Ham said, “*apparently followed somebody out here.*”

“Followed somebody?”

“*Well, not exactly. What I mean is that they seem to have had somebody watching the airport, and they rushed out here when the fellow called them. They chartered a plane.*”

“Are they there now?” Monk asked.

“*No. Horst and all his men left in the plane about three minutes ago.*”

Monk was flying the speed ship. He slanted it down, bumped the wheels on the tarmac, and braked to a stop near the administration building, which was small.

An old man in rags came out to meet them. The small old man had whiskers that looked like soiled angora goat wool, and spectacles that magnified his eyes into ostrich eggs. He looked as if his home were behind an ash can in some alley.

This was Ham in disguise.

Ham said, “I think I found out why Horst and his men rushed out here and took off in a plane.”

“Why?” Monk demanded.

“Come over here and listen to a greaseball tell it.”

The mechanic wore greasy overalls, had a distributor in one hand and an insulating screwdriver in the other. Apparently, he also had an observing nature; likewise an eye for profit, because it took two dollars to loosen his tongue.

He referred to Horst’s men as “them last guys.” “Them last guys,” he said, “took off to follow another plane that left earlier. The other plane belonged to a long, drawly old guy, and he’s been keeping it here some time. Sweet ship, too.”

“Was there anybody with the long old guy?” Ham asked.

“Boy, there was a honey!”

He described the “honey,” and it was obvious that she was Rhoda Haven. The mechanic also described a large young man with freckles, red hair, and an impulsive disposition.

“When I catch that last one, I’m gonna take a souvenir off him,” Monk said. “One of his legs or something.”

Ham snapped, “We’re killing time. We had better follow them.”

They ran back to their speed ship. It took the air.

“They went south,” Ham stated.

It took them something like forty minutes to pick up a dot in the sky ahead. Ham used powerful binoculars, said, “That’s the Horst plane.”

Monk sent the speed ship into the clouds, and after that dropped down only occasionally to spot the craft ahead. It became dark soon and they could see the flying lights of the plane ahead, which simplified the trailing. They merely extinguished their own lights and flew a mile or so in the wake of the other plane.

HORST was flying a rented ship. He was handling the controls himself, and doing an experienced job. It was a cabin craft, and there were seven men with him. One of the seven came forward to the cabin pit.

“Be tough if anybody reports we’re flying south,” the man said. “We told the guy who we rented this crate from that we were mining engineers, and that we were going up to Canada.”

“Who’s going to report anything? Airplanes aren’t news any more.”

“Well, I just thought of it.”

Horst scowled. In the subdued light glow from the instrument panel, he looked like an intent satan. He gave the throttle an angry bat with his palm, but the thing was already wide open.

“Damn it!” he snarled. “We’ve got to overhaul old Tex Haven.”

“Tex’s ship is fast.”

“Don’t I know it!”

Horst looked so enraged that his followers saw the need of placating the chief with a little praise.

“You made a darn smart move, Horst,” someone said, “in putting a man to watch old Tex Haven’s plane. The old hell-raiser had given us the slip entirely. If you hadn’t thought of watching the plane, we probably wouldn’t have got on the trail.”

Horst was susceptible to praise. He showed his teeth appreciatively. “You know what I think?”

“What?”

“The Havens are on their way to Key West to get hold of Jep Dee.”

“Then the thing for us to do is get Jep Dee first.”

Horst swore. He could swear more profusely in Spanish, so he used that language.

“Thing for us to do,” he snarled, “is shoot old Tex Haven’s plane out of the sky. Tell ’em to get the machine guns ready.”

“You got any idea who the new guy is?”

“You mean that lug with the red hair and the freckles?”

“Yes.”

“I got no idea who he is,” Horst said grimly, “but he is no more bulletproof than the next man.”

“It’s risky to pull killings here in the States.”

Horst said, “There’s enough at stake that nothing is too risky.”

The man went back in the cabin. The craft was not soundproofed, and was very noisy, and he had to bellow in each man’s ear the order Horst had given.

Their machine guns, dismantled, were in large suitcases. They got these out, put them together. They were modern weapons, the size of the conventional submachine gun, but they fired a more high-powered bullet than the conventional sub gun of .45 caliber.

They flew five hours and picked up the riding lights of a plane. One of Horst’s men had a marine telescope, through which he peered for some time.

“The Haven ship!” he said.

Horst said, “Get set, boys! It won’t take long to finish this!”

Chapter 8

BAT BRAWL

THE HAVEN plane was sleek from the tapered cowling of its air-cooled motor to the trailing edge of its stabilizer fins. It had been built in a European factory. Tex Haven flew it himself and complained frequently.

“Blasted foreign ship,” he grumbled. “I keep thinkin’ about havin’ to land it. Landin’ speed is damn near a hundred miles an hour.”

Henry Peace said. “Why did you buy it, if you don’t like it?”

“Didn’t buy it. Stole it.”

Rhoda Haven explained. “It was a personal ship of Señor Steel. We had to leave his country in a hurry.”

Henry Peace scratched in his thatch of red hair, which seemed to be his habitual gesture when he wanted to think.

“There’s a Señor Steel who is president of the South American republic of Blanca Grande,” he remarked. “Any relation?”

“Same.”

Small hard knots of jaw muscle gathered under each of Rhoda Haven’s smooth cheeks. She suddenly looked more grim than Henry Peace had seen her before.

“He’s no president!” she snapped. “He’s a dictator. A tyrant.”

Henry Peace eyed her.

“Offered a hundred thousand dollars for your head, didn’t he?”

Rhoda Haven blinked. “How did you learn that?”

Henry Peace opened his mouth to answer—and gave a wild jump. Simultaneously, there was a snarling sound, somewhat as if a big bulldog had been turned loose. The plane trembled. A respectable collection of sievelike holes appeared in the plane cabin.

Tex Haven turned around, eyed the holes, yelled, “Looks like the ants have gone to work on us.”

“Lead ones,” Henry Peace agreed.

OLD TEX came back on the plane control stick. The little foreign plane arched up, hung in the sky by its moaning nose.

The other ship, the one from which the storm of machine gun lead had come, pointed up and stood on its tail not fifty yards away. The ships were probably climbing, but the illusion was that they stood still.

“That’s Horst!” Tex Haven yelled.

For a split-second, the planes hung motionless in easy stone-throw, but the force of their up-swoop held the occupants temporarily helpless.

Tex Haven drew his six-shooters—Henry Peace had given him back the guns—and tried to knock out one of the cabin windows so he could fight. The glass, nonshatter, would not break. Tex lowered a window.

By that time, the other plane had climbed above them, was sliding over and its cabin windows were opening, machine gun muzzles protruding.

“Watch it!” Henry Peace yelled.

Tex Haven was “watching it.” He stamped left rudder, rocked with the stick. The plane flipped around and dived like a hawk that had folded its wings and was making for a chicken on the ground. Passing wind moaned, then became a siren scream.

“You running away?” Henry Peace yelled.

“I ain’t stackin’ six-guns against machine guns,” Tex shouted. “I tried that one time.”

Speed-shriek lifted higher and higher. The night-smear'd earth came up, seeming to bloat toward them.

Henry Peace looked at the air-speed meter. The needle stood close to five hundred.

“Five hundred—great blazes!” Henry Peace squalled. “We’re goin’ five hundred miles an hour. No plane ever went that fast before!”

“It’s a foreign crate, so the air-speed dial is marked in kilometers, stupid,” Rhoda Haven told him.

Their plane leveled out and streaked south. The earth was about a thousand feet below.

Eastward lay the sea, a vast expanse that was like dull, frosted glass; and somewhat nearer was the coast, a succession of small, buglike islands, each with a wide, white beach on the seaward side. Below the plane, there seemed to be swamp; the swamp was veined with creeks, and splotted here and there with a lake.

Henry Peace wiped his brow with first one forearm, then the other. “I’d give a lot to be safe on the ground,” he muttered.

Tex scowled at him. “Getting scared?”

“I always have been of planes.”

Old Tex Haven craned his neck and squinted, then began to do something which he rarely did, but which he could do well—curse. He swore steadily, none of his words particularly profane by themselves, but connectively producing a blood-curdling effect. Toward the last, he speeded up until he sounded like a tobacco auctioneer.

A single bullet hit the left wing of the plane. A moment later they saw ahead of the ship tiny stars that seemed to fly as if they were pursued by the craft, red sparks that raced ahead and vanished.

“Tracer bullets!” Tex growled.

Henry Peace took a look backward, said, “Hey, that plane is catching us! It’s faster than we are!”

The other ship overhauled them, got below them. More bullets pounded the craft. Tex banked. The other ship banked also. Tex came up and over in an Immelmann turn,

but as the ship turned level at the top of the half loop, the other craft was almost beside them.

“Tarnation!” Tex growled uneasily.

The other pilot could fly.

It became evident in the course of the next two or three minutes that the other ship could fly rings around the foreign craft. They could not outrun them on straightaway, could not outmaneuver them in dog fight.

Henry Peace said, “If this keeps up, we’re gonna be shot to pieces!”

He started for the cockpit.

Old Tex Haven turned around and showed him the business end of a six-shooter. “You can’t fly,” Tex growled. “Don’t you come up here and start telling me what to do.”

Henry Peace retreated into the cabin, sank into a seat. He fished in a pocket, brought out a metal box the size of a tobacco can, but about half as high. From this he extracted what might have been a sponge. He put this in his mouth. In the can with the spongelike object was a small nose clip. Henry Peace closed his nostrils with this. The Havens had not noticed.

Out of another pocket, Henry Peace took a bottle. He uncorked it, splashed the contents on the cabin floor. The stuff was liquid and it vaporized to gas quickly.

After a little while, Rhoda Haven looked sleepy and sank to the cabin floor, and soon Tex Haven was lolling back in the cockpit seat, his eyes closed.

THE plane windows had been closed. Henry Peace opened them, letting the rush of air sweep out the gas which had been in the bottle he had uncorked. The nose-clip had kept the stuff from entering his nostrils. He had done the necessary breathing through the chemical-treated filter—the spongelike object which he had put in his mouth.

Henry Peace had said he could not fly.

He took the plane controls now and flew the craft. He did not go through aerobatics with the Horst plane. He sent the ship into a tailspin. It fell, turning over and over, toward the earth below. The chase had led inland somewhat. There were farms below now, hilly weed-grown farms, the red soil gullied, the fields edged with trees and bushes.

Henry Peace stabbed a thumb down on the landing light switch. One light had been shot out, but the other drove a white sheet.

Once what was below had been a cotton field; now it was eroded until it looked like the Dakota Sand Hills in miniature. There were level stretches, but not many. Henry Peace selected one.

Coming in, Henry Peace kicked rudder to throw the plane from side to side—fishtail it—until it all but stalled. With flying speed gone, but enough left for control, he sat down. The ship bucked, jumped, ran up a short and steep hill. It lost speed there, and Henry Peace locked wheel brakes.

The plane came to a stop under a tree that looked as big as a cloud sitting on the ground.

Henry Peace scooped Rhoda Haven up with an arm, clutched old Tex Haven's collar, got the two limp figures out of the plane, and ran with them. Raced for cover.

The Horst plane came down a moonbeam, as noisy as a rocket, exhaust stacks blowing sparks. Machine gun muzzles stuck from its windows and gobbled.

Bullets broke clods and knocked up dust around burdened Henry Peace. Then he lost himself in the trees.

In landing the plane, Henry Peace had acted with flash decision and unhalting execution, as though the landing of the racy-looking but not-too-efficient foreign ship had been a simple matter.

It had not been simple.

It was feat enough that Horst flew over with landing lights throwing a racing glitter before his plane—and decided not to attempt it. His plane was larger, needed more room to sit down. And that field down there was small and rough.

Horst began flying around and around while his men tried to shoot the bushes and trees to pieces, hoping to riddle Henry Peace and the Havens.

Then the third plane came down in the sky—the Doc Savage ship.

HAM BROOKS—HE was flying the Doc Savage craft—had been flying off to the west, and high, inside a cloud. Fortunately, he had dropped down out of the cloud in time to see the end of the air brawl. Had they remained in the cloud, they would have gone on and missed everything.

Monk yelled, leaned out of the plane window with a machine pistol. Monk liked to yell before a fight, as well as during it. He aimed carefully, caressed the trigger.

The machine pistol felt like a large bumblebee buzzing in his fist. The ejector fed out a streak of empty brass cartridges, and the gun itself made a moan like a huge bull fiddle.

Every fourth bullet was a tracer; they stood in the sky in a red-hot wire, and the wire waved and touched the cabin of Horst's plane.

Gaunt Johnny reached, knocked Monk's arm, spoiled his aim.

"What's the idea?" Monk yelled.

Johnny used small words.

"You know blamed well Doc Savage has a rule against trying to kill anybody," he snapped.

"Doc wouldn't know anything about it," Monk said with cheerful reasonableness.

By that time Ham was upon the tail of the Horst craft. The tail of a commercial plane is its blind spot; these were commercial jobs.

Monk said, "If we're gonna be finicky, I'll just shoot some holes in his wings."

He proceeded to do this. He had charged with a drum of Thermit-type incendiary slugs. They splashed like drops of liquid fire on the wings of Horst's plane. Fortunately, the wings were of metal and while the incendiaries did not do the wings any good, the only real harm was a dozen or so melted holes. But the Horst party didn't like that.

For four or five minutes, there was dog fight in the sky. Horst found his ship hopelessly outclassed, himself completely outflown.

Then Horst arched his plane, pointed south, opened throttle. He was going to try a straight, running escape.

Ham said, "We'll make him think he's standing still!"

Monk had been hanging out of the windows so far that it seemed remarkable he hadn't spilled out. Now he jerked back, clamped hold of Ham with one hand, pointed with the other.

"That light is talking!" he barked.

The light he meant was on the dark earth, in the clearing where the Haven plane had landed. It seemed to be the landing lights of the Haven ship, switched off and on.

"Dots and dashes," Ham said, after looking.

Monk spelled out the message: "*H-e-l-p. I a-m m-a-n w-h-o m-a-i-l-e-d y-o-u s-h-a-r-k s-k-i-n. H-e-l-p.*"

There was an astonished interval between Monk, Ham and Johnny.

"We better land," Ham said.

Monk yelled, "We can't let that Horst gang get away."

Ham ignored Monk, pointed their ship toward the earth in a long spiral.

The plane carrying Horst and his men droned off to the southward and escaped.

Chapter 9

SCRAMBLE FOR JEP DEE

HENRY PEACE, having observed that one of the two planes above was spiraling earthward, stopped jacking the light switch and sending out Morse code. He climbed out of the Haven plane cockpit and narrowed one eye at the sky.

“I hope,” he muttered, “that the men in that plane are who I think they are.”

Having put feeling into that remark, he tramped through the weeds toward the spot where he had left the Havens. En route, he was hooked by some bushes which had thorns. He examined these.

“Blackberries,” he muttered. “Ripe.”

Ripe blackberries gave him an idea and he gathered handfuls of them, squeezed them and got dark-red juice. He poured blackberry juice in his hair, smeared it down the side of his face, made rather a gory-looking mess.

“I’ve been shot!” he said in a loud, worried voice.

He wasn’t surprised to find the Havens stirring, trying to sit up. The gas was rather harmless, producing unconsciousness which lasted only a short time.

The Havens sat up. Tex patted the ground and felt of it, apparently amazed to find the solid earth under him. Rhoda peered at Henry Peace until she made sure of his identity.

“You are shot!” she gasped.

“Ain’t serious,” Henry Peace told her.

“Let me see it!” Rhoda commanded.

Henry Peace withdrew hastily. “Ain’t nothin’,” he insisted. “A bullet just hit my head and careened into space.”

“I suppose you got it out,” the young woman said.

Henry Peace decided the remark meant she believed there was only space inside his head, so he grinned at her. The grin irritated the young woman.

Rhoda Haven tried to stand. The effect of the gas still had hold of her muscles and she failed to stay erect. Having slumped to the ground, she was even angrier.

“What happened?” she snapped.

“I don’t know,” Henry Peace lied cheerfully. “I was unconscious. I guess my prospective daddy-in-law here landed the plane.”

“That’s a lie,” Tex barked. “Something put me to sleep.”

“You must have done some flying in your sleep then,” Henry Peace assured him.

There was a swooping roar, and the moon shadow of a plane passed low overhead. Its landing lights dived upon them like white monsters. Then the ship banked steeply, pointed down and the pilot began fishtailing it. It was going to land.

After taking one look at the smallness and roughness of the field, however, the pilot decided several more looks might be sensible. The plane zoomed up, circled again.

“That isn’t Horst’s plane,” Rhoda Haven exclaimed.

Tex yelled, “I don’t care whose it is. Can’t have nobody grabbin’ us now. Too much at stake!”

Henry Peace picked up both the Havens, galloped into the brush and reached a tree. It was huge and hung with Spanish moss. Carrying Rhoda Haven only, Henry Peace clambered into the tree. Perhaps fifteen feet up, he found a well-hidden cradle of boughs and put the girl there.

“Think you can hang on?”

“Yes,” she said.

Henry Peace departed and a moment later returned with Tex, who, like his daughter, was still physically helpless from the effects of the gas. He left the Havens there in the tree. “Aren’t likely to find you,” he said.

“Reckon not,” Tex admitted.

Henry Peace said, “Me, I’ll try to see what I can do about the situation.”

THE darkness then swallowed Henry Peace. He made very little noise, did not appear in the moonlight again, but shortly he was back at the Haven plane. He took a scrap of paper from his pocket, a pencil, and wrote on the paper:

You will find something interesting in the big tree a hundred and ten yards southwest. Don’t tell them about this note.

The tree described was the one in which he had left the Havens. He stuck the note in the edge of the plane door where it was not likely to escape notice.

The darkness swallowed him again. He made hardly more noise than was made by the occasional cloud shadows that passed. Lying among the weeds, he watched the Doc Savage plane swoop three times and rake the field with its floodlights, while the pilot decided upon the safest method of landing.

Then the plane came down, bumped the ground, rolled up the little hill, following exactly the same procedure that Henry Peace had used in landing the Haven craft. This ship was bigger, faster, but scientifically designed wing flaps gave it a much slower landing speed. It rolled to a stop thirty yards or so from the Haven ship.

Monk, Ham and Johnny dived out.

Ham leveled a machine pistol at the Haven plane, yelled, “Come out of there!”

“It’s empty, you shyster,” Monk told him.

They ran to the plane, found the note which Henry Peace had clamped in the door. They read this.

“Now what in blazes!” Monk exploded.

“Whoever the fellow is,” Ham said, “he’s trying to help us. Let’s look in that tree.”

They stalked cautiously through the brush. They carried small spring-generator-operated flashlights of a type which Doc Savage had developed, and these stuck

whiskers of light through the underbrush.

Monk led with Ham crowding him, with Johnny having more trouble because his gaunt length kept getting tangled in the underbrush. They had a little trouble with their direction and missed the tree. They were standing in the thicket, pawing Spanish moss off their shoulders—the stuff was like cobwebs, except that it was as thick as baling wire—when the motor of their plane unexpectedly began banging.

“Our ship!” Monk squawked.

They struck out wildly for the craft. Shrubs tripped them, boughs knocked against their heads and thorns hooked into their clothing. Monk got sidetracked in a blackberry thicket and stood there screaming and bellowing.

Their plane motors were hot, so the thief did not need to delay to warm them. He simply locked left wheel brake, revved right motor and snapped the plane half around. Exhaust stacks poured flame, the ship leaped forward, and the little hill threw it into the air almost like a catapult. Even then its wheels almost scuffed the tops of trees on the other side of the little field.

Monk and the others stood and gaped at their departing ship.

“Superebullitive!” Johnny exclaimed.

“This is no time for one of them words,” Monk growled.

“We’re in a fix!” Ham said.

THEY rushed back and removed enough ignition wiring from the Haven plane to make sure that no one would fly off with that one.

“You know what?” Monk growled.

“What?” Ham scowled at him.

“That note in the plane door was a trick. It sent us off looking for that tree so they could steal our plane.”

“Then there’s probably nothing in the tree,” Ham said.

“We might make sure of that,” Johnny suggested, using small words.

Five minutes later, they were holding their flashlight beams on the Havens. Tex and Rhoda Haven had not yet mastered enough physical strength to take flight, but there was nothing wrong with their voices; and old Tex had moved his hands enough to get them full of guns.

“Calculate you better start runnin’,” Tex advised, “while you’re able.”

Monk muttered, “Say, that’s the girl who came for us to help. Show her who we are.”

They turned one of the lights upon themselves, giving the lens a twist so that it fanned a wide beam. Their appearance did not impress Tex Haven, because he had not seen them before. Rhoda grabbed one of her father’s gun hands.

“Those are Doc Savage’s men,” she said. “Don’t shoot!”

“I don’t care who they are!” Tex brandished his guns as much as his muscular instability would allow. “I been messed with too much by different people!”

There was an argument between Monk, Ham and Johnny on the ground, and the two Havens up the tree. They compromised on the Havens remaining armed and suspicious, but climbing down out of the tree with the assistance of Monk, who had to show plainly that he carried no weapons. They all walked out onto the small field and stood in the brilliant moonlight.

Tex Haven peered at Monk suspiciously in the moonglow.

“You send one of your gang ahead in your plane, chasing Horst?” he asked.

“No, blast it!” Monk said. “Somebody stole our plane.”

“Eh?”

“We don’t know who it was,” Monk added.

Tex Haven felt of his pockets to make sure that his corn cob pipe and stick of black Scotch tobacco had survived. Then he eyed his daughter.

“Henry Peace,” he said, “ran off and left us.”

His daughter kicked a clod indignantly.

“If he did,” she said, “it wasn’t because he was double-crossing us.”

“He said he couldn’t fly,” Tex reminded her reasonably.

Rhoda Haven made several starting-to-say-something noises, but apparently could think of nothing satisfactory.

Tex continued, “You take the cussedest attitude toward this Henry Peace. When he’s around, you act like he was flu germs. The minute he’s out of sight, you start stickin’ up for ’im.”

Rhoda Haven said nothing to that. Monk, who had a great deal more brains than his appearance indicated, realized that this fellow named Henry Peace must have been making some headway with attractive Rhoda Haven. The idea did not appeal to Monk.

Monk said, “We found a note stuck in the door of the plane—*ouch!*”

Ham had kicked Monk’s shin. “The note said not to mention it,” the lawyer whispered.

“The fruit of the peanut bush to you and Henry Peace both,” Monk said. He proceeded to tell the Havens about the note.

“Blast that Henry Peace,” Tex Haven yelled indignantly. “He framed it so that we’d be caught by you fellows while he got away in your plane!”

Rhoda Haven went into a deeper silence. Monk assayed two or three casual remarks, intended to break the ice, but she did not seem appreciative of what he had told her about Henry Peace.

Habeas Corpus and Chemistry had been ranging the brush. They approached. Habeas, the pig, came up and rooted at Monk’s leg. Monk picked the shote up by an ear and exhibited him proudly.

“My pet,” he explained.

Rhoda Haven remained silent.

“This hog,” Monk announced, “couldn’t love me more if I was an ear of corn.”

That remark did not impress Rhoda Haven either. Monk was mildly disgusted.

“Let’s get going,” he said.

Tex Haven blinked. “Going where?”

“Why, we’ll just keep on following them other two planes,” Monk declared.

Chapter 10

PEOPLE IN DUNGEONS

HENRY PEACE, the man who had said he could not fly a plane, made a perfect landing at Key West, Florida. It was also a remarkable landing, because it was on a golf course instead of an airport. The plane skipped a sand trap, rolled down a fairway, and came to a stop on a green, where its wing tip pushed a flag over.

Henry Peace had told a fib when he said he couldn't fly a plane. He had told large fibs about several things. He seemed to be enjoying it.

He vaulted out of the plane.

Henry Peace seemed to have a remarkable knowledge of the layout of Key West. As a matter of fact, his knowledge of other cities over which he had flown—Miami, Key West, Jacksonville, Charleston—had been just as complete, although there had been no occasion to exercise the knowledge.

The plane had landed less than a hundred yards from some palm trees. Behind the palms was the home of the best-posted detective in the Key West police department, the man who probably knew more about what went on in Key West than any other man.

Henry Peace walked to the detective's home, knocked, and the detective appeared in a nightshirt.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked. "What the blazes you want?"

Henry Peace walked in and took a comfortable chair.

His voice changed when he spoke. It took on a completely different personality.

He said, "You must be doing well. You've put on a little weight since the Albergold kidnapers were stuffing you in a canvas sack and tying it to a weight."

The detective jumped. He eyed Henry Peace, and his eyes flew wide. His mouth also fell open.

"Bless me!" he yelled. "You're—"

"Henry Peace is the name now," Henry Peace said.

The detective seized Henry Peace's hand and pumped it. He was profoundly moved. In fact, something happened to him that had not occurred in years—his eyes became damp with gratitude.

"Believe it or not," he said fervently, "I still get down on my knees and give thanks for your saving my life that time."

"Forget it."

"I wish I could forget the way those kidnapers tortured me before you appeared."

Henry Peace said, "Know anything about a man named Jep Dee?"

The detective nodded. "That's the fellow that a college boy found on an island. Jep Dee had been tortured. He refused to tell any kind of a story. For a while, he had a mania for keeping a piece of old rope tied around his neck. But one night he took the

rope off; and that same night, Jep Dee had a fight in the post office with a cop because he thought the cop was trying to get a letter that Jep Dee had just mailed. We found out that the letter was addressed to someone named Rhoda Haven, in New York City. They took Jep Dee back to the hospital. He's blind, but the doctors seem to think he'll be all right eventually. The sun burned his eyes, or something, and he has nerve shock."

Having listened to this long speech in silence, Henry Peace was satisfied that he had the whole story briefly.

"Then Jep Dee is something of a mystery," he said.

"Very much so."

"What hospital?"

The detective told Henry Peace the hospital where he could find Jep Dee.

THE hospital must be busy, because there were many lighted windows, although this was a late night hour. On the seaward side was a pleasant shelf of a veranda, and interns and doctors came and stood on this frequently and smoked cigarettes or gossiped.

The Gulf Stream, that current of incredibly blue water fifty miles wide and a mile deep flowing past the tip of Florida, was quiet tonight. There were almost no waves—only swells—and these came in like fat, slow-moving blue elephants that turned to a yellow color as the water shoaled, and broke on the beach, each time sounding as if someone had stepped into a wastebasket full of paper.

A trailer stood on the beach. There was nothing unusual about that, parked trailers being found almost anywhere in Florida. This one was above high-water level, and had been there some days. Palm tree shade made it rather dark.

It could have been a coincidence that the trailer stood in the spot from which the hospital could be watched most thoroughly.

Henry Peace appeared in the darkness beside the trailer. He had made absolutely no sound.

"Hello," he said.

The trailer tenant gave a violent jump. He had been sprawled in a canvas chair just inside the trailer door, where he could watch the hospital.

"What the hell!" he exploded.

He also reached into the pocket of his beach robe, where there was a gun.

Henry Peace said, "I came on ahead of Horst."

Which was more truthful than some of the statements he had made.

"Who're you? I ain't seen you before."

"Lots of things you ain't seen, maybe," Henry Peace said. "At least, I think I'm ahead of Horst. He in town yet?"

The trailer tenant was a small, dark, useless-looking fellow. He considered for a while before he answered.

"Horst's plane should be somewhere between here and Jacksonville," he said, "judging from the telephone call I got when they refueled in Jacksonville."

“You’re watching Jep Dee?” hazarded Henry Peace.

“Sure. We’re going to take him out of the hospital when Horst gets here.”

“What room is he in?”

The man pointed, “Second floor, third from left. Room with storm shutters over the window.”

Henry Peace did not comment. He was silent, thinking. There had been some excitement and action since he first contacted the Havens, and the mystery of Jep Dee. But he had not learned much, really. The mystery of Jep Dee was still just that—mystery.

Henry Peace assumed his most convincing tone.

“I’m a new man, just getting into this,” he said. “You are supposed to give me the low-down.”

“What low-down?”

“Everything. Explain it.”

The other snorted. “Listen, bud, there’s more millions of dollars involved in this than you can shake a stick at.”

“Yeah, I heard the rumor—”

“And almost forty people have got to die. They won’t, if things go wrong. In which case, our names will be mud.”

“I heard that rumor, too, but—”

“But—nothing!” snarled the trailer tenant. “I ain’t telling you a thing. The hell with you, partner! I don’t even know you.”

The man’s manner was determined enough to show that he had made up his mind to talk no more.

Henry Peace held his fist in front of the man’s nose.

“You see what’s in this?” Henry Peace asked.

The man did the natural thing—peered at the fist.

“Hell, no, I don’t see—”

Possibly he then saw stars. Or maybe it was just blackness. He lay down backward on the floor, hard enough to shake the whole trailer. Henry Peace blew on the right fist, with which he had hit the man.

“Carrying this Henry Peace character too far,” he muttered. “Fool around and break my knuckles if not careful.”

He tied his victim with the trailer clothesline, also gagged him. Then he consulted his watch.

“Better get Jep Dee before anything else,” he decided.

Two policemen had been assigned to watch Jep Dee, on the possibility that he might try to leave the hospital again, also on the chance he might decide to talk. The two cops split each day in twelve-hour watches. It was considered a soft job.

Jep Dee had not been giving any trouble. In fact, he frequently seemed glad to have the officers around.

Furthermore, the hurricane shutter had been put up at Jep Dee's window. The shutter was constructed of steel, could be fastened from the outside. It made the room a jail, literally.

The hospital wall below the window—Jep Dee's room was on the second floor—was not considered climbable.

Henry Peace looked the wall over, then took off his shoes and socks. He had remarkably long toes, and they seemed to be trained, flexible, and incredibly strong.

He climbed the wall that was not considered climbable. Unfastening the hurricane shutter was merely a matter of sliding a bar.

He got into the room. Jep Dee slept. Henry Peace grabbed Jep Dee's mouth with one hand, the man's nose with the other, and lay on Jep Dee so he could not make a commotion.

"I'm helping the Havens!" Henry Peace said.

He said that several times.

Jep Dee was silent, except to take in a great rattling gulp of air, when he was released.

"Horst is coming to get you," Henry Peace said.

Jep Dee said several words about Horst's character that should have made the air smell of brimstone.

"I've got to move you," Henry Peace explained.

Jep Dee said, "I'm willing."

Henry Peace scooped Jep Dee off the bed, went to the window, and in a moment stood poised on the ledge with his burden. The slick, silver bole of a palm tree slanted past a few feet from the window. Henry Peace jumped, clamped himself and his burden to the palm, and slid, not fast enough to friction-burn his long powerful legs, to the ground.

A few minutes later, he lowered Jep Dee in the shadow of the palms along the beach—but some distance from the trailer.

"Eyes improved any?" he asked.

"Not much," said Jep Dee. "Who the dickens are you, anyhow?"

Henry Peace now began talking. His tone was persuasive, and no one would have guessed from his words that he was anything but a lifelong acquaintance of old Tex Haven. Very casually, he mentioned anecdotes concerning Tex Haven's soldier-of-fortuning in China, Korea, Manchuria, Spain and South America.

"Of course," said Henry Peace, "I don't know much about what Tex has been doing in South America. He just took on my help unexpectedly."

"That must explain," muttered Jep Dee, "why I haven't heard Tex mention you."

"As a matter of fact," said Henry Peace, "Tex didn't have time to give me a full account of this present proposition. He said you'd do that."

"What shall I begin with?"

"Start off with that piece of shark skin. What does the thing mean?"

“You saw it?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t need to explain. It explained itself.”

Henry Peace said, “I’m darned if it did.”

The man lying on the sand put both hands to his eyes. He made an enraged snarling noise.

“If I could just see!” he gritted. “Boy, did they give me the works before I got away! And to think I put in weeks finding that island, while the Havens waited in New York!”

Henry Peace, suddenly alert, prompted, “Oh, yes, you looked for the island while the Havens waited in New York. Just what did you find on the island? Old Tex wants to know that.”

“I think the place can be entered,” Jep Dee muttered. “I imagine the pay-off would be over ten millions.”

“Ten millions,” said Henry Peace, “is a lot of money.”

“My guess is that there are forty people in the dungeons. Some of them have been killed already. Most of the others undergo daily torture. Some of the dungeons are rigged up with the damndest torture devices you ever saw. Did you know that rats will eat a man alive?”

“I don’t believe,” said Henry Peace, “that any rat would have nerve enough to eat a live man.”

“Well, you’re as wrong as a war. I saw ’em. They let me watch. They pulled off my fingernails and pulled out my eyelashes, then they took me down to watch the rats eat a man. They were letting them eat a little of the man each night.”

Henry Peace was silent a moment. “That is too horrible. I don’t believe it.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Suppose,” said Henry Peace, “that we get the whole thing clear in my mind.”

“How do you mean?”

Henry Peace suggested, “You go back to the first and explain the whole thing. Start at the beginning.”

Jep Dee lay very quiet for a while.

“Hell with you!” he said.

“But—”

“I’m wise to you now!” Jep Dee snapped. “You don’t know the first thing about this mystery. You’ve been stringing me along. So the devil with you! I don’t tell you anything more.”

Henry Peace made a gesture of disgust.

“That makes two of you,” he said.

“Two?”

“The other one,” Henry Peace explained, “is in a trailer.”

A fight followed. Jep Dee had regained some of his strength in the hospital, and he put up an impressive scrap. He knew every vicious trick of hand-to-hand combat, and he used them all.

Henry Peace got Jep Dee flattened out in the sand and tied and gagged with strips of his own hospital nightgown. The strips took almost all the nightgown.

“You better stay here,” advised Henry Peace, “because you’re pretty naked, and it might embarrass somebody if you start wandering.”

There was not much chance of Jep Dee leaving. About the only thing he could move was his ears.

Henry Peace walked back to the trailer with no more noise than a shadow.

The man was lying on the trailer floor, exactly where he had been left. Henry Peace bent over him.

The prisoner instantly reached up and took Henry Peace by the throat.

“C’mon, Horst!” he yelled.

Out of the back of the trailer, and out of the front, where they had been concealed, men came leaping. They piled upon Henry Peace. They had clubs, knives, ropes, all ready for the combat.

Henry Peace was hopelessly outnumbered.

Chapter 11

THE VIOLENT MR. PEACE

ANDREW BLODGETT—MONK—MAYFAIR was walking down a Key West Street, closely trailed by his pet pig with the large ears and long legs. They both stopped.

“Listen!” Monk exploded.

They were close to the sea, so near that swells breaking on the beach frequently shoved out tentacles of white spray that reached almost to their feet. Palm trees around them were, in the night, like giants holding up hands with fingers distended.

The hospital where Jep Dee had been confined was over a hundred yards distant, and on the left. They had called at a morning newspaper office and learned the story of Jep Dee, as much of it as the newspapers knew. It had been a quick source of information; the trouble was that the newspaper now knew some Doc Savage aids were in town, and reporters would haunt them for stories.

The sounds seemed to come from a spot in front of the hospital. There were grunts, yells and thumping noises.

Long-bodied, long-worded Johnny cocked an ear.

“A tintamarrous bombilation!” he remarked.

“Sounds more like a fight to me,” Monk muttered.

Ham said, “That, short-and-hairy, is what he meant.”

Ham, who was noted for being suitably dressed for every occasion, was attired in what Monk termed the “tom-cattin’” suit. This was a black suit with black accessories—shirt, tie, socks, handkerchiefs, and hat, all black—which matched the harmless-looking black sword cane that he always carried. Chemistry, Ham’s pet chimp, was rather dark by nature and matched his owner.

They stood there in the darkness, listening to the fight, debating what to do.

The fight seemed to be in progress around a trailer.

The Havens, father and daughter, kept a disgruntled silence. They weren’t enthusiastic about being with Monk, Ham and Johnny, but they had not been able to do anything about that. They had been haunted by the Doc Savage associates since they had been found in the tree following the aerial dog fight.

Ham nudged old Tex. “Good time for you to tell us what all the scrambling is for.”

“’Tain’t, neither.”

“Might save us all a lot of trouble if you explained the mystery.”

“Rootin’ under that log,” said old Tex, “won’t get you nothin’.”

Monk was more than ever intrigued by the qualities of Rhoda Haven—not the least of these being her figure—and he was also convinced that he had a rival in the person of the missing Henry Peace. Monk had been making derogatory remarks about Henry Peace. He made another one now.

“Henry Peace,” said Monk, “has disappeared, so he probably got scared and cleared out.”

Rhoda bit her lip, snapped, “Listen, you robin-eyed—”

“Whatcha mean—robin-eyed?”

“Eyes that are always resting on limbs,” the young woman said coolly. “Henry Peace is worth a squad of some of the people I’ve reluctantly become acquainted with.”

Monk stood torn between two desires—the yen to make passes at a pretty girl, and his always-strong liking for a good fight. The fight yen won.

“C’mon!” Monk barked. “Let’s see whether that scrap needs our attention.”

THE bedlam at the trailer stopped suddenly.

Almost complete quiet followed. They could hear the waves making the sounds that were like someone stepping into a wastebasket of paper. Their own feet crunched sand.

They came to the trailer, and blazed flashlight beams.

Johnny had a favorite word when he was astounded. He used it now.

“I’ll be superamalgamated!” he exploded.

The door had burst off the trailer. Inside the bunks had been torn loose, windows knocked out, dishes broken, pots and pans trampled out of shape. Everything that could be used to hit a man over the head apparently had been employed for that purpose.

Ham jumped around with his flashlight, counting the senseless men who were scattered about.

“Six!” he exclaimed.

Monk gazed at broken noses, scuffed faces, torn clothing.

“Brothers,” he said, “a human hurricane sure went through here.”

He took another look at the six victims.

“These are Horst lugs,” he announced. “Some of them were with that gang who tried to throw us in a cistern on Long Island.”

Old Tex Haven had been doing some eager inspecting for himself.

“But Horst ain’t among ’em!” Tex said disgustedly. “Depend on the head skunk to be out of the den when the roof fell in.”

“I’ll bet,” said Rhoda Haven triumphantly, “that Henry Peace did this.”

“Humph!” Monk said.

They looked around the vicinity for some trace of the hurricane—Monk stated an unnecessary number of times that it couldn’t be Henry Peace—that had done all the damage. They found no one.

A Horst thug stirred, groaned, sat up, wanted to know, “Where’s that red-headed devil?”

“You see!” Rhoda Haven ejaculated triumphantly. “It *was* Henry Peace!”

“Rats!” Monk said grumpily.

Ham walked over to the hospital and entered. When he came out and joined them, he looked so downcast that Monk commented on the fact.

“You went in there like a lion and came out like a postage stamp,” Monk said.

“Like a postage stamp?”

“Licked.”

“This is no time for such cracks!” Ham snarled. “*Jep Dee is gone from that hospital!*”

THERE was a prompt rush for the hospital, where they put barrages of questions that got them no information of value. The visit to the hospital did, however, impress Rhoda Haven with a point. The information that Monk and others were associated with Doc Savage worked wonders with the hospital people. They fell over themselves to offer any service. There were comments of the highest character regarding Doc Savage’s ability.

“This Doc Savage,” Rhoda remarked when they were outside, “must be quite an individual.”

Monk nodded violently. “For once, you’re right in your judgment of somebody!”

Johnny rubbed his bony jaw.

“Perscrutination seems pragmatical,” he stated.

“Put it in English,” Rhoda Haven requested.

“I suggest,” said Johnny stiffly, “that we now resort to asking questions of people—you included.”

“I see.”

“The questioning to be coupled with such persuasive violence as may be necessary,” Johnny added.

“I see,” Rhoda Haven repeated coolly.

A man walked up boldly in the darkness.

“You Doc Savage’s men and party?” he asked.

“You said it,” Monk told him.

“A guy named Henry Peace sent me,” the stranger explained. “He said to tell you he’d taken somebody named Horst, and was waiting for you with a man named Jep Dee. He said for me to show you where he was waiting, and to bring you if you wanted to come.”

Monk scowled blackly, said, “We don’t want to come.”

“Try not to be as simple-minded as usual,” Ham advised the homely chemist. “Of course, we want to go.”

Rhoda Haven turned a flashlight so Monk could see the triumphant expression on her attractive features.

“I notice,” she remarked, “that most of the accomplishing around here seems to be done by Henry Peace.”

Monk looked as if someone was feeding him worms. He did not say anything.

Ham and Johnny loaded unconscious Horst thugs into the trailer, tying them with bed sheets, fishing lines and anything else they could find.

“Inchoation is contiguous,” Johnny remarked.

“Eh?” said the messenger.

“Maybe he means,” Monk suggested, “that now we start.”

“Why didn’t he just say so?”

“He only speaks English when he has to.”

“Oh. One of them kind of guys, eh? I don’t see why these foreigners who come over here can’t speak American.”

The car attached to the trailer was a shabby-looking old heap, but at the first traffic light, Ham sprang out to inspect the motor in amazement. Instead of the wheezing four cylinders he had expected, he found sixteen polished ones that were snorting out at least two hundred horsepower.

Their guide was a rather hungry-looking fellow in overalls and a straw hat. He seemed somewhat dumb in almost every way.

He directed them to a lonesome, sandy road that led through some palmettos to a clump of lonesome-looking palms that stood up stark in the white moonlight. There he told them to stop.

The guide got out.

“There’s five or six army machine guns covering you fools,” he said. “You stopped your car over a buried case of TNT that’s wired to explode when a switch over yonder is closed. If you want to get tough, just hop to it!”

Having delivered this news, he dived behind a convenient palm tree.

Chapter 12

THE BRONZE MAN

AFTER lightning strikes, there is usually a moment of everything-stopped silence. This one lasted about twenty seconds.

Then a machine gun stuck out a tongue of red flame from the palm thicket and gobbled ear-splittingly. In the next quarter minute, possibly two hundred bullets hit the car engine. The hood came loose, flopped, banged, and finally flew up and away and the big motor itself broke in places. Impact of the bullets shook the whole car until the occupants held to things.

When the bedlam stopped, Monk was yelling. He thought the others were being murdered wholesale, the bullets missing him by some miracle.

But shooting was only to put the car engine out of commission.

“Come outa there!” a voice rapped angrily. “That car being armored won’t do you any good!”

That was the first they knew about the car being armored.

“Let’s fight ’em!” Monk gritted.

The voice yelled, “We wasn’t kiddin’ about that TNT under you!”

“I don’t think they are,” Ham muttered.

Johnny, shocked into using small words, said, “They surely don’t plan to kill us immediately, or they would have cut loose with the machine guns. We better surrender.”

Monk growled, “What puzzles me is why they don’t go ahead and try to kill us?”

They learned why after they left the car, after they stood with their arms in the air, and were relieved of weapons, and after the captors discovered that Monk, Ham and Johnny were wearing bulletproof undergarments of a chain mesh. These were torn off with some difficulty, leaving the late wearers almost embarrassingly unclothed. They learned the reason they had been kept alive when a captor barked:

“Where’s Jep Dee?”

Monk looked around for some trace of Horst, but the master mind did not seem to be in sight. The head skunk, Monk thought savagely, was staying out of sight whether the hole was falling in or not.

“C’mon!” the captor snarled. “Only reason you’re alive is because you can tell us how to git hold of Jep Dee.”

Monk began, “There is where you’re mis—”

And Ham kicked his shin, hissed, “Want to make us dead, stupid? They find out we don’t know where Jep Dee is, and they’ll kill us.”

Monk saw where it would be wise to let their captors think they knew where Jep Dee could be found, if they wanted to think that. He said no more. The others also

clamped lips.

They were slapped and kicked and threatened for five minutes.

“This is gonna take time, so we better get ’em on the boats,” a man growled. “No tellin’ who might show up to investigate that shooting.”

The sea was close, it now developed. The prisoners were led a short distance, then shoved through mangroves for fifty yards, coming out on the bank of a tidal creek on which floated four varnished dinghies.

“Whar might the head polecat be?” old Tex Haven inquired.

“Horst?” A man laughed. “Boy, he don’t know what minute Doc Savage is going to turn up in this thing. He don’t want to be around when that happens.”

“He skeert of Doc Savage?” asked Tex.

“He ain’t nothin’ else!”

“He’s not alone, either,” another man muttered. “Right off, I can’t think of anybody I’d be more scared of.”

The prisoners were shoved close to the four dinghies, and after a grunted suggestion by one of their captors, it was decided to take them two dinghy loads at a time.

Monk, Johnny and Rhoda Haven were loaded in two of the dinghies, along with four captors, a pair to each little craft. The dinghies—twelve feet long, of light lapstreak construction, the wood varnished—were standard yacht tenders.

The two dinks paddled along the tidal creek, and the creek swung sharply left.

Just after the pair of small boats rounded the corner, the rearmost one—the boat containing Johnny and Monk—overturned.

It happened suddenly. No warning. Before the occupants could even yelp, they were in the briny creek water. It was too sudden and violent for any accident.

The men in the lead boat turned. One of them splashed a white flashlight beam.

They saw a swimmer making for them. He seemed to travel with fish speed. But there was more about the swimmer than speed.

And there was more about him than his giant size.

There was, probably most striking of all, his bronze complexion. Bronze was the swimming giant’s color motif, his hair being a little darker bronze than his skin.

His eyes—when he was very close to the dinghy, the flashlight glare disclosed his amazing eyes—were a strange flake-gold tint. Flake gold that seemed stirred by tiny winds.

“Doc Savage!” a man yelled.

Doc Savage put hands on the dinghy rail. The hands were barred with sinew, the arms above them incredibly muscled. He jerked. The dinghy upset.

“Monk, Johnny—swim this way!” Doc Savage called.

The bronze man’s voice had a crashing power, as arresting as lightning.

Rhoda Haven floundered in the water. Her wrists were lashed, as were the wrists of Monk and Johnny. A dropped flashlight was still glowing on the bottom of the creek,

about eight feet down. The water was very clear, and the flash glow diffused and made them seem to swim in milk.

Rhoda saw Doc Savage dive swiftly. The next instant, she was seized, dragged beneath the surface. She had enough mind presence to hold her breath.

Doc Savage slashed her wrists free.

She did not, for an instant, realize what else the bronze giant was doing. He shoved a clip on her nose; it closed her nostrils tightly enough to hurt a little. Then he shoved a mouthpiece between her teeth, a mouthpiece to which was attached a rubberized pouch. She knew what it was, then.

She swallowed the salt water that was in her mouth, after which she was able to breathe, underwater, as long as she did not take deep breaths, with the mechanical "lung." Chemicals in the rubberized pouch, in the mouthpiece-filter, purified her breath and furnished oxygen.

By swimming downward, she kept on the creek bottom.

Doc Savage had already reached Monk and Johnny and struck at their wrists lashings with his knife. He merely jammed a mechanical lung into Monk's hands, another into Johnny's clutch. They knew what to do with them. Doc himself donned one of the lungs.

The three of them—Doc Savage, Monk and Johnny—sank beneath the surface together. They found Rhoda Haven, faintly discernible on the outskirts of the glow that came from the waterproofed flashlight on the creek bottom.

Monk seemed inclined to stay and drag some of their late captors below the surface.

Doc Savage jerked at Monk's arm, discouraging his ideas about lingering.

It was probably fortunate that Monk did not stay. The other two dinghies rushed into view, foam at their bows, loaded down with men who had machine guns.

The swimming Horst followers were hauled aboard the newly arrived dinghies.

The submachine guns roared and mowed down surrounding mangrove thicket.

The men heaved hand grenades overside, which burst, causing the creek to vomit water high in the air; and dead fish began coming to the top and floating bellies-up, and a nurse shark that had been in the creek made an agony-maddened threshing.

Some distance down the creek, Doc Savage led the others out into the mangroves. They listened to grenades burst, and men swear.

"A tintinnabula," Johnny remarked.

Monk said, "If that means a devil of a noise, you said it!"

There was more moonlight around them than they cared for.

Rhoda Haven gripped Doc Savage's arm.

"You . . . you are Doc Savage?" she breathed. "How on earth did you come to turn up now?"

Doc Savage did not answer that, because there was an interruption—Monk gave a great horrified start. The homely chemist had remembered his squabbling mate, Ham Brooks, was still a Horst prisoner.

“Ham—we’ve got to rescue Ham!” Monk gasped.

Rhoda Haven added something grim and imperative about saving her father, too.

“Crawl through the mangroves,” Doc Savage said. “Keep going due south.”

The bronze man then vanished. There was no commotion, no elaborate flourishing of arms or leaping into the tops of mangroves. The metallic giant merely walked a few paces—and suddenly could no longer be heard or seen.

“Doc’s going after Ham and Tex Haven,” Monk explained.

“Hadn’t we better help him?” Rhoda Haven demanded.

Monk snorted.

“There’s only twelve or fifteen of Horst’s gang back there,” the homely chemist said. “Doc won’t need any help.”

“Are you crazy?” Rhoda Haven asked incredulously.

“No, I’ve only seen Doc Savage in action,” Monk explained.

They began creeping through the mangroves, heading south, as the strange bronze giant had directed. The mangroves were almost without leaves; none of them were more than ten feet high nor much thicker than Monk’s thumb. They were as tough as iron. They grew in a solid mat, the boughs interlacing. There was usually about a foot of space between the lowermost branches and the mangrove swamp mud. Monk, Johnny and Rhoda Haven started mud-crawling southward.

ABOUT this time, the Horst men stopped shooting and throwing hand grenades into the mangrove creek.

“They got away!” growled the man in charge. “We better see they don’t grab Ham Brooks and old Tex Haven from us!”

Both dinghies were paddled back furiously to where the other two prisoners had been left. The Horst men were frightened now.

They had seen Doc Savage finally, gotten a sample of the bronze man’s work. Back in New York, when they had first learned they were pitted against the mysterious and almost legendary Doc Savage, they had been afflicted somewhat by the creeps. But as the hours passed, and Doc Savage in person did not appear, there had been a reaction; and they had been inclined to beat chests and say, “Hell, we ain’t scared of this guy!”

Simply because the bronze man had not appeared, they had started to think what they hoped in their hearts was true—that the reputation of Doc Savage was a myth, a soap bubble blown by hot air from gossiping tongues.

But now the bubble had burst.

And there stood their personal devil, just as big and bronze as they’d heard he was.

With fright-driven haste, the Horst men seized Ham Brooks and drawly old Tex Haven, flung them into the dinghies, and rowed back down the mangrove creek.

They heaved hand grenades into the water as they progressed. The blasting grenades made concussions that would have killed any man, even Doc Savage, attempting to attack the boats by swimming below the surface.

Their flashlights raked the mangroves. Their machine guns lead-ripped every lump of dark shadow.

What saved them was their gas masks. They had donned these—all but the prisoners who had been in the trailer, and who naturally had been rescued. The latter had no masks.

The men without masks collapsed unexpectedly, every one of them. It happened at a point where the creek was narrow. The men with masks were terrified. Their machine guns ran out thunder and lead until the barrels turned red-hot. They heaved grenades as fast as they could dig them out of pouches.

Doc Savage—he had laid down the barrage by heaving small, marblelike capsules of gas from a distance—was forced to flatten in mud under mangroves. He was no more bulletproof than the next man.

The dinghies—carrying all of Horst's men and Ham and Tex Haven—got out of the mangrove creek. Digging oars drove them for the yacht.

THE yacht was sixty-five feet long. Also deceptive. From the water line up, she was a two-masted schooner, with a clipper bow, a nice hull line, and a clean stem. Her sails were all jib-headed, and raised and lowered on neat tracks instead of the old-style mast hoops.

Outwardly, she looked like some moderately rich man's plaything, a schooner capable of a top speed of ten knots at the very most. Except that the masts were hinged like a Dutch canal boat, so they could be lowered.

If one got close to her when she rode in very clear water, and looked at the hull lines below the surface, the impression was a little different. The water-buried part of her was built like a Harmsworth trophy contender. More than half the boat was engine room, crammed with the newest high-speed Diesel equipment.

When the dinghies had been hooked to davits and yanked aboard, the yacht anchor came up, and the craft gathered speed until she was jumping from one wave to another.

An investigation showed that the gas victims seemed merely to be unconscious.

The man in charge went below and got on the short-wave radio. It was a very modern radio, equipped with a "scrambler"—a mechanical-electrical device which made it impossible for any listener-in to understand what was being said.

The man talked to someone on the radio for some time. Then he went on deck and made a speech to his men.

"We're going to the island," he said.

"But that will leave Doc Savage untouched," a man reminded him. "And it will leave Jep Dee running loose, somewhere. To say nothing of that Henry Peace, whoever he is."

"That's all right," said the man who had talked on the radio. "Something new has turned up."

"New?"

"*Señor Steel is here.*"

The listeners, to a man, looked as if a cold wind had come down out of the north.

“Here—on this boat?” one croaked.

“No, no,” said their informant impatiently. “Señor Steel is in Key West.”

The news of the coming of Señor Steel seemed to have spread poison over the city of Key West, as far as they were concerned. Every man was obviously glad that the schooner-speedboat was leaving the vicinity.

Chapter 13

SEÑOR STEEL

WHEN JOHNNY LITTLEJOHN, MONK MAYFAIR and Rhoda Haven were convinced they had crawled ten miles through the mud and mangroves—it was probably a full half mile—they came to a road.

“Bivouacial quiescence,” Johnny remarked.

“He means,” Monk explained, “that here is a good place to rest.”

They flopped down on the coral sand of the road. They had heard the powerful Diesel motors of the yacht and guessed what they were; but that sound was gone now. Enough of a breeze was blowing to rasp mangrove boughs together occasionally, a sound somewhat as if skeletons were being moved about.

No one said anything. They were too tight with strain, wondering what had happened to Ham Brooks, Tex Haven and Doc Savage, to feel like making words.

Suddenly, they heard a strange sound. It was a trilling, pitched low, and possessed of an exotic quality that made the nature of the sound difficult to define. It was weird, might have been the work of a vagrant wind in the naked mangroves and it had a ventriloquial quality that made it seem to come from everywhere.

Monk sprang up.

“I better go,” Johnny said, using small words.

“Huh?” Monk said.

“I better go,” Johnny repeated, more firmly.

Monk muttered something about going ahead if he was so danged anxious, and sank back to the road sand.

Rhoda Haven reached out and gripped Monk’s arm, asked, “What was that strange noise?”

“It might be the wind,” Monk told her, and was good enough a liar to make it sound truthful.

Johnny walked down the sandy road, taking quick steps with his long bony legs. He did not know from what direction the sound had come, but he did know it had been made by Doc Savage.

That weird, exotic trilling note was a characteristic of the man of bronze, a thing which he did unconsciously in moments of mental stress, and sometimes made deliberately to indicate his presence.

Having gone some distance, Johnny stopped. A moment later, without any noticeable sound, Doc Savage was a bronzed tower in the darkness beside the gaunt, big-worded archæologist and geologist.

Doc Savage said, “They got away with Ham and Tex Haven. Boat. A fast boat.”

Johnny said several small words. They were not profane words. They were just short words that showed how desperate and puzzling he considered the situation.

“I want,” Doc Savage said, “your advice.”

“My advice?”

“Do you think I had better let the girl know that Henry Peace and Doc Savage are the same persons?” the bronze man asked.

JOHNNY gave the query some consideration. He was by nature something of a psychologist, in contrast to Monk, who liked to bump people around with his fists, or Ham, who liked to sway people with his agile tongue and was not averse to bumping them with his fists or pricking them with his sword cane, either.

Johnny said, “You put on a disguise and called yourself Henry Peace in the first place because—”

“When Rhoda Haven came to us in New York, she did not tell the truth,” Doc Savage explained quietly. “I hoped to take the personality of Henry Peace, just a knockdown-and-drag-out young soldier of fortune, and join Rhoda Haven and her father, and thus learn what it was all about.”

“And—”

“It did not work,” the bronze man said disgustedly.

“Maybe it’s nearer to working than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“The girl,” said Johnny, “is in love with you.”

Doc Savage made a sound that was dubious.

“You’re mistaken,” he said. “Whenever I’m around, she acts as if ants were in her oatmeal.”

“Yes, but when you’re not there—”

“When I’m not there—what?” Doc demanded.

Johnny rubbed his long jaw. He found this situation interesting.

“Just the same,” he said, “I think it would be advisable to turn into Henry Peace again and join us.”

Doc Savage did not seem enthusiastic about that. “I doubt if she will tell Henry Peace anything.”

“I’m betting she will.”

“Well—” The bronze man changed feet uncomfortably. “Oh, all right. Henry Peace will turn up again, then.”

“When Henry Peace shows up,” Johnny said dryly, “he had better watch out for Monk.”

“What’s the matter with Monk?”

“He’s acquired an elephant-sized dislike for Henry Peace.”

“Maybe,” Doc Savage said thoughtfully, “I had better tell him who Henry Peace is. I didn’t tell him earlier because I knew that as long as the Henry Peace disguise had

Monk fooled, it would fool anybody.”

Johnny snorted.

“It would be more fun,” he said, “if you didn’t tell him.”

This terminated the conversation, and Johnny went back to the other two. He found Monk telling Rhoda Haven what he thought of Henry Peace, which was practically nothing.

“When I get through with that Henry Peace,” Monk said, “he’ll be pounded down small enough to get lost in caterpillar fuzz.”

After this promise, Monk drew Johnny aside. He knew, of course, that the long archæologist had gone off in the darkness to consult with Doc Savage.

“They got Ham and Tex Haven,” Johnny explained.

He did not add that Doc Savage had decided to go on being Henry Peace. Monk did not know that Doc Savage was Henry Peace. Monk detested Henry Peace. It was going to be interesting when Monk found out who Henry Peace really was. Ham Brooks, who had spent years squabbling with Monk, would like to see that.

Johnny shivered. He suspected that unless they did something drastic in a hurry, Ham Brooks might not live to see anything much.

Shortly, Doc Savage appeared. One moment there was moon-silvered darkness about; then the bronze man stood silent beside them.

“We have not much time to waste,” he said quietly. “The Horst men will keep Ham and Tex Haven alive for a while and torture them in an effort to learn the whereabouts of Jep Dee. But they do not know where Jep Dee is, so they will eventually be killed.”

RHODA HAVEN was a soldier of fortune’s daughter. She had the temperament, the courage, the fatalism for her profession. She was something of an axman of fate; like her father, she could attack something gigantic and chop away at it, and when the terrible moments came—the moments when there was no telling where the giant would fall, or what it would crush—she could clamp her lips, put up her chin, and take what came, and know that what had happened would not have occurred if she had not used the ax.

“Do you know where they took my father?” she asked in a level voice.

“How could I know?” Doc Savage countered. “You did not tell my men the truth when you first came to us in New York. You have not told them much since.”

“I have not told them many lies,” the girl countered grimly.

Doc Savage came to the point. He put a blunt statement of facts.

“You and your father and Jep Dee are after something,” he said. “Jep Dee hunted for it here in the Florida Keys, while you and your father waited in New York. Jep Dee must have found what you sought, but he was caught by Horst, and barely escaped with his life. He was delirious, and muttered stuff about thirty-some people being in imminent danger of death. He had a piece of freckled-looking shark skin on him when he was found. He mailed it to you and your father. Horst came to New York and tried to get the shark skin and kill you. You came to me and tried to get me and my men to

chasing Horst. Obviously, that was to keep Horst occupied while you and your father went ahead with your original plans to get something down here in the Florida Keys.”

“You have,” said Rhoda Haven levelly, “learned a lot.”

Doc Savage put a question as blunt as his statement of facts.

“What is the something?” he asked. “What are you after?”

Rhoda Haven hesitated.

“You want to know what the piece of freckled shark skin is?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And you want to know what my father and I are after?”

“Yes.”

“And about the thirty-some people who are going to die if something isn’t done?”

“Exactly.”

Rhoda Haven compressed her lips. She was thinking. She thought of all that she had heard of this remarkable man of bronze—things which she had thought fantastic when they first came to her ears, but which she was beginning to realize were true. Through her mind ran the legends of the feats he had performed, of his strange career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers throughout the far corners of the earth.

These legends of the doings of Doc Savage were many, and some of them were fantastic, but all had one thing in common. Those who fought the bronze man with tremendous treasures at stake—always lost them. The bronze man’s wealth was fabulous, she had heard, a great hoard piled up of the treasures, the great inventions, which he had taken in the course of his adventures.

The thought of losing everything that she and her father were fighting for settled on her mind an ice that froze any warm impulse she felt to confide in him. She was a fighter. She would continue fighting.

She said, “My father and I are fighting for tremendous stakes, part of which are rightfully ours. We knew the chances we were taking when we began.”

“But—”

Rhoda Haven lifted a silencing hand.

“I’m going to do what dad would want me to do,” she said. “I’m going to refuse to tell you anything.”

“You—”

“We’ll solve our own problems. We always have.”

Doc Savage’s strange, flake-gold eyes studied the young woman. “Mind telling me why?”

“Greed, maybe. When we risk our lives like we have—I’m referring to my father, Jep Dee and myself—we expect to get what we’re after.”

“At this stage of the game,” Doc Savage reminded dryly, “you are almost licked.”

That was true. The girl could think of no effective answer. Except one. A gesture of verbal defiance.

“Don’t forget,” she snapped, “that Henry Peace is still running around loose and doing things!”

AS a result of that remark, it was a perfectly natural move for Johnny Littlejohn to drop back alongside the bronze man after they had started along the road in the direction of Key West. Johnny made sure that neither Rhoda Haven nor Monk would overhear him.

“You see,” Johnny told Doc Savage.

“See what?”

“She’s that way about Henry Peace.”

After this remark, Johnny watched the bronze man with interest. He could see that Doc was flustered. In fact, the bronze man stumbled over a rut and almost fell down.

“Blast it!” Doc said.

Johnny did not think he was referring to the rut.

“The thing for you to do,” Johnny advised, “is to turn into Henry Peace again.”

“Nonsense!” Doc said too promptly.

Johnny said grimly, “It’s the only way we’ve got of maybe learning enough to save Ham.”

Doc thought that over.

“You’re probably right,” he said, with somewhat the resigned air of a Christian about to be thrown to the lions. “I’ll turn into Henry Peace.”

Doc Savage walked on ahead of the party, to scout their course. The first street lights of Key West were not far ahead.

Johnny rejoined Monk and Rhoda Haven, and after glancing at the young lady, felt like sighing. Doc Savage might be a scientific genius, a mental wizard and a muscular phenomenon—but his knowledge of women put him in about the same category as a babe in arms. That was, of course, the result of the bronze man’s determination to avoid feminine entanglements.

Doc Savage held the conviction that, if he ever fell in love, his enemies would strike at him through his sweetheart or wife.

Probably he was right, Johnny realized. So it was a good idea. But Johnny was also convinced that any good idea can be carried too far, and Doc had overdone this one. He’d had absolutely nothing to do with femininity. The result was that Doc had acquired an abysmal ignorance, Johnny believed, of the fair sex. Doc was also scared of them.

Doc Savage had protested a great reluctance for becoming Henry Peace again, and making passes at pretty Rhoda Haven.

Johnny secretly suspected that the bronze man really liked the idea. He did, or he wasn’t entirely human. Johnny thought he was human.

They reached an avenue lined with palms. In the palm shadows, it was very dark. Doc was still leading.

Suddenly, from ahead, there came a yell.

“Get your hands up, dang you!”

It was Henry Peace’s voice.

Blow sounds followed. A crash of palmettos, as if someone had been knocked into the vegetation under the palms. More blows. Then running feet hammered the ground.

Doc Savage’s voice crashed out.

“It’s Henry Peace!” Doc shouted. “He’s running. Wait there!”

A crashing went away through the brush. It sounded very much like Doc Savage pursuing Henry Peace.

Monk snorted, for Rhoda Haven’s benefit, said, “Your red-headed, freckle-faced hero bumped into a real man. And there he goes. Runnin’ like a rabbit.”

“Henry Peace,” said Rhoda Haven indignantly, “will make this Doc Savage look tame before he’s done!”

Monk snorted so loudly that he hurt his nose.

“All your bragging about Henry Peace,” he said, “goes in one of my ears and out the other.”

“That,” Rhoda Haven said coolly, “is because there’s nothing in between to stop it.”

Henry Peace came out of the palm shadow into the moonlight. He had a revolver. He pointed the weapon at Monk. But he spoke to Rhoda Haven.

“After we’re married,” he said, “we’re gonna lead a more peaceable life than this.”

Rhoda Haven, in view of the way she had been holding up for Henry Peace, reacted in a strangely contrary fashion. She walked over and tried to slap Henry Peace. He caught her wrist and held her easily.

The young woman stamped a foot indignantly.

“I wish,” she snapped, “that I had been made a man.”

“You have,” Henry Peace assured her cheerfully. “I’m him.”

Doc Savage had put on the Henry Peace disguise while walking down the road ahead of them.

WHILE RHODA HAVEN maintained an indignant silence, Monk and Henry Peace exchanged a few words. They did not swear, exactly, but there was enough acid in their tones to bleach the surrounding tropical vegetation.

“You do what I tell you!” Henry Peace warned Monk, waving his revolver.

“You can’t hit the side of a barn with that!” Monk growled. “I saw a sample of your shooting on Long Island!”

“I should have let them throw you in the cistern that time!” Henry Peace told him.

Evidently Monk’s confidence in Henry Peace’s bad marksmanship was not as strong as he claimed, because he let himself be made a prisoner.

Henry Peace marched them off to the right, to a lonesome spot on a sandy beach. He bound Monk and Johnny, ankles and wrists, with their own belts. Then he addressed Rhoda Haven.

“About time,” he told the young woman, “that you give me the truth on this mess.”

She had been thinking over the situation. And she had reached some conclusion.

“You got Jep Dee out of the hospital?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“Where is he?”

“Little place down the beach from here.”

Rhoda Haven said, “Go get him.”

“Why?”

“Jep Dee is the only one who can help us. He knows the meaning of that piece of freckled shark skin. He knows the whereabouts of the spot to which Horst’s men probably took my father.”

Henry Peace nodded grimly. “I’ll bring Jep Dee. You watch these two Doc Savage men.”

He walked off into the night.

The moment Henry Peace was out of sight, his way of carrying himself changed, and his stride altered—he became Doc Savage in everything but appearance. Acting the part of a personality as different as Henry Peace was a mental and physical strain, and he was glad to relax.

Henry Peace had not told the exact truth about where Jep Dee had been left. Henry Peace, in fact, did not stick exactly to the truth in a great many of his statements. This was in marked contrast to Doc Savage, who never told anything but the truth, even when a lie might be convenient to mislead an enemy.

Jep Dee was in a tourist cabin near the center of town.

Doc Savage was thoughtful as he walked. He was puzzled with himself. He was rather enjoying being Henry Peace. He didn’t approve, exactly, because Henry Peace was an untruthful rascal who had a weakness for a pretty girl. Henry Peace was boastful, insolent, and made love at every opportunity.

It wouldn’t do, Doc Savage decided uneasily, to play Henry Peace with too much enthusiasm.

It might become too pleasant.

To get his mind off the distressing idea that Doc Savage, the man of determination, might be tempted to really turn into an untruthful rascal named Henry Peace, the bronze man stopped and bought a morning newspaper. He wanted to learn how much commotion the events of the night had created in Key West.

He saw the advertisement at once. It was half a page, hence hardly to be missed. It said:

DOC SAVAGE
JOHN DOE WISHES YOUR HELP. THIS NEWSPAPER WILL TELL
YOU HOW TO GET IN TOUCH WITH HIM.

Chapter 14

HAVENS—CROOKS

INSTEAD of going on for Jep Dee—who would be safe enough where he was awhile—Doc Savage removed his Henry Peace disguise, then called the newspaper.

“The advertisement,” he explained, having identified himself, “seemed rather imperative.”

“I presume it is,” said the voice at the newspaper. “John Doe is waiting at the Caribbean Hotel.”

When Doc Savage looked it over, the Caribbean Hotel seemed a respectable hostelry of some size.

He spent twenty minutes going to different places around and in the hotel, standing and looking and listening. This satisfied him that, if it was a trap, the trap was inside the room.

“Mr. Doe,” the hotel clerk said, “is in the penthouse suite.”

“Thank you,” Doc Savage said, “but I think it is rather late in the night to make a call.”

He walked out, leaving the impression he would be back later. He went around to the back of the hotel, took out a small grapple attached to a silk cord, tossed it and snared the fire escape, to which he climbed. He took his time, made no noise, and reached the roof.

The roof was a garden. In the center stood a Spanish type of bungalow, rather small, very neat, very flamboyant, and probably stunningly expensive.

All the bungalow doors were closed. The bungalow itself was dark.

Doc Savage produced—from a vest which contained a number of pockets holding unusual gadgets—a contrivance which resembled a small bicycle pump, but which had a long needlelike spout.

He filled this oversized hypodermic from a nonbreakable metal bottle which was also in the vest, and squirted the contents under a door. He refilled the hypo and squirted more fluid under all the other doors he could find.

He ambled over to the penthouse balcony and stood looking at the Gulf Stream. The sea was moon-kissed, stretched away and seemed to blend with the sky, and the riding lights of boats in the harbor were scattered sparks that bobbed a little.

When the gas he had squirted under the doors had had time to take effect, he put on the underwater lung, which was also a gas mask, walked to a door, took hold of the knob, and without much apparent physical effort, tore knob and lock out of the door. He walked in.

There was only one man there, so he must be John Doe.

John Doe would make a good football player, of the boy-he’s-not-big-but-can-he-carry-that-ball type. Unquestionably, he was in good physical trim. He was senseless,

but his muscles felt like truck tires, anyway.

His face was the color of good smoking tobacco. Doc opened his shirt and noted that his chest and the rest of him was the same color.

John Doe had been sitting in a chair, fully dressed, waiting in the dark. There was a long-nosed automatic on the floor at his feet, so probably he had been holding that in his hands.

Doc searched John Doe. Then he searched the penthouse. There was no baggage.

There were twenty-five cartridges for the automatic in John Doe's pockets, but absolutely nothing else. Not a thing to show who he was.

John Doe woke up after a while.

"I am Señor Steel," he said.

HE was not what Doc Savage had expected. In appearance, at least. He did not look like the kind of man that the newspapers had painted.

True, however, the newspapers had never printed Señor Steel's picture. It was said there were no photographs of him in existence. It was reported that there were X-ray machines planted to throw beams across every door in the palace of the dictator of Blanca Grande. The X-rays would ruinously fog any films that photographers might try to carry in or out of the palace. As a matter of fact, Doc Savage used the same gag in his New York headquarters. The two men didn't want their pictures taken for similar reasons.

Both Doc Savage and Señor Steel had enemies who would gladly hand their pictures to hired killers.

The similarity stopped there, as far as Doc Savage knew. For the last year or two, many stories had spread concerning Señor Steel, dictator-president of the South American republic of Blanca Grande. He did not stand well with the American government—for one thing, he had followed the example of others in appropriating the property of United States oil companies. And there were other stories, not wholesome.

Señor Steel looked young. Except that there was grimness around his mouth and eyes.

"You are Doc Savage," he said quietly.

"Yes."

"I will not waste time," Señor Steel stated bluntly. "Here are the facts: I am president of Blanca Grande. I do not have a good reputation."

Doc nodded, said nothing.

"My reputation is bad," said Señor Steel, "because lies have been spread about me. Political lies."

He waited for that to soak in, then went on. "Stories have been told of my imprisoning and shooting numbers of political enemies. People, prominent and good people of Blanca Grande, have vanished, and I was given the credit both at home and abroad. The truth is that I had nothing to do with those people disappearing."

Doc Savage looked interested.

Señor Steel said, “One of my political enemies is responsible. This enemy is a professional soldier of fortune. He helped me with the revolution by which I gained the presidency of Blanca Grande. I found out that this soldier of fortune was a bloodthirsty rascal who expected to loot the treasury. I ran him out of the country. Since then, he has schemed against me.”

“The soldier of fortune’s name—”

“Tex Haven.”

Doc said, “You claim that Tex Haven is a crook?”

“Exactly. He is aided by his daughter. Also by another rascal named Jep Dee. And by a villainous group of men headed by a man known as Horst.”

“Horst is working for Tex Haven?” Doc asked.

“He was.”

“What do you mean—was?”

“They have fallen out. Quarreled. Now they are fighting over the loot.”

Doc inquired, “What loot?”

“The Tex Haven gang has stolen a lot of money from Blanca Grande,” Señor Steel explained grimly. “They have seized prominent people and are holding them somewhere for ransom. That is the loot.”

“I see,” Doc said.

“I want you,” Señor Steel told Doc Savage, “to help me wipe out the Havens, Jep Dee and Horst.”

“My services are never for hire,” Doc Savage explained.

“I know that. My government will donate a million dollars to any charity you wish to name.”

Doc Savage considered what had been said. It sounded truthful. It was all reasonable, too, since the more violent kind of modern politicians had been known to do such things. And Señor Steel’s voice certainly had a ring of truth.

“Care to go with me?” Doc Savage asked.

“Of course.”

THIRTY minutes later, Doc Savage cautiously approached the spot where Rhoda Haven was guarding Monk and Johnny during the absence of Henry Peace, who, as far as the girl knew, was still on his trip to fetch Jep Dee. Neither Doc nor Señor Steel showed themselves, at the bronze man’s suggestion.

Monk was doing some loud talking, probably in hopes of attracting help. It was sure he was not getting enough information to pay him for the breath he was wasting.

“Let us loose!” Monk yelled.

“Not so much noise!” Rhoda Haven ordered grimly.

“Who is this Henry Peace?” Monk persisted in a loud voice. “I don’t know who he is. Doc Savage don’t know. Who is he, anyway?”

Rhoda Haven came over and poured a palmful of sand in Monk’s large mouth. This discouraged his noise.

Doc Savage touched Señor Steel's hard-muscled arm, and they withdrew in the night until they were out of earshot.

"I don't understand," Señor Steel said. "Those prisoners are two of your men, Monk and Johnny."

Doc explained, "They are being Rhoda Haven's prisoners deliberately in hopes of learning something of importance."

Señor Steel thought that over. He chuckled suddenly.

"The real identity of this Henry Peace is a mystery?" he asked.

"Somewhat," Doc said.

Which was the truth—somewhat.

The bronze man now explained quietly that they would go and get Jep Dee, adding that they would then return to this spot and seize Rhoda Haven, after which he hoped they would be fortunate enough to clear up the entire affair.

They went to the tourist cabin where Jep Dee lay.

"Do not speak," Doc warned Señor Steel. "Jep Dee must not hear your voice. He might recognize it."

Jep Dee was stronger. He was sitting up in a chair, and replacing the bandage across his eyes, a painful operation because of his nailless fingertips.

Doc Savage said, "I'm the man who got you out of the hospital. We were none too soon. Horst's men arrived soon afterward."

Jep Dee was satisfied.

"I can't see," he said. "I took the bandage off my eyes, and I can't see."

"It is night," Doc reminded him.

"I know. I found a match and struck it. I could just see a faint glow. Damn! Did my eyes hurt!"

Señor Steel went to an open window, looked out, shrugged to indicate there was no one in sight. He remained at the window, leaning out frequently, on sentinel duty.

"Who's that?" Jep Dee demanded.

"Fellow helping us."

"Oh."

Doc Savage said, "Horst and his men have seized Tex Haven and carried him away on a boat. Do you have any idea where they would take him?"

"To the island, probably," Jep Dee said grimly. "To that hell-hole."

"Where is the island?"

Jep Dee's expression showed plainly that he was not going to answer that. But he thought it over for a moment.

"You say you're working with Rhoda Haven?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'll tell *her* where the island is."

"You—"

"I'll tell Rhoda," Jep Dee said emphatically. "Nobody else."

“All right,” Doc told him. “We’ll join Rhoda Haven.”

Señor Steel arose from the sill of the open window, where he had been sitting. They left the tourist camp and headed for the spot where Rhoda Haven was guarding Monk and Johnny.

Doc Savage had reached a decision. He was going to get the whole group together, disclose the fact that Henry Peace was really himself, Doc Savage. He had an idea that was the best way. Jep Dee, he believed, would then reveal the location of the island to which Tex Haven and Ham had been taken. Jep Dee might give that information freely. If he didn’t, there was such a thing as truth serum.

But they met Monk Mayfair running wildly along the beach.

“Horst himself!” Monk yelled. “He grabbed Rhoda Haven and Johnny! I got away!”

Chapter 15

SHARK WITH FRECKLES

It was impossible. Horst could not have known the whereabouts of Rhoda Haven, Johnny and Monk. Or maybe he had. Maybe—

Doc Savage made, for a brief moment, his low, exotic trilling sound, and this time it was an unconscious reaction to mental shock. Shock because of the impact of a suspicion that he had been duped, had overlooked an important possibility. He did not do that often. He had lived through many dangers in the past because he made it a practice to overlook no possibilities, to prepare against every eventuality.

Monk was explaining how it had happened—an unexpected rush out of the darkness, a furious fight in the night. And he, Monk, had escaped only because he had previously succeeded in loosening his bonds.

“And it was just after Habeas Corpus and Chemistry came around,” Monk finished. “Two pets must have trailed us.”

The pig and the chimp had come up in the darkness. Chemistry chattered uneasily a time or two, and Habeas emitted one forlorn grunt.

They left Jep Dee for the moment, and moved quickly, the three of them, back to the spot where Rhoda Haven and Johnny had been seized. There was no trace of them; only a trail that led to a road some distance away, and in the sand that had blown over the road, tracks of a car.

Monk looked at Señor Steel. “Who’s this?”

Señor Steel told who he was. He also repeated the story about the Havens and Horst and Jep Dee all stealing loot and kidnaping in Blanca Grande, then falling out among themselves.

“We’ve still got this Jep Dee!” Monk snarled. “Where’s he?”

Doc Savage warned, “Make Jep Dee think we are working with him, so he will tell us the location of the island.”

They went back to Jep Dee.

“Did Horst really get Rhoda, too?” Jep Dee asked grimly.

“Yes.”

Jep Dee wasted no more words.

“The quickest way to that island,” he said, “is by plane.”

“We have a plane,” Doc told him.

Jep Dee growled, “That piece of shark skin had a map showing the location of the island, also the spot on the island where the cache is situated.”

Monk snapped, “There was nothin’ on that shark skin! Just freckles!”

“Who is this squeaky-voiced guy?” Jep Dee demanded.

“Another man helping us,” Doc said.

Jep Dee, satisfied, went back to the subject of the bit of shark skin. “You say there was no map on it?”

“You were in the water after you drew the map?” Doc asked.

“Yes,” Jep Dee admitted. “I swam for hours, escaping from that island.”

“Then the map must have washed off the shark skin, except for spots which resembled freckles,” Doc suggested.

“Why—sure! Sure, that’s what happened! The water washed the berry-juice ink I used off the shark skin. I’ve been blind as a bat since I was picked up, so of course I didn’t know the drawing had soaked off.”

THIRTY minutes later, Doc Savage’s fast little plane—the craft which he, as Henry Peace, had stolen from Monk, Ham and Johnny on the way south—sent a roaring sound over the golf course where the bronze man had landed when he came to Key West. The little craft picked up its tail, angled past a sand trap, took the air. Doc handled the controls. He cut the exhaust into the efficient mufflers, and the plane became a dark ghost that hissed.

Jep Dee resumed talking, went on describing, as best a blind man could, the location of the island.

Monk listened intently, poked a pencil point speculatively at a chart that showed the myriads of islands composing the Florida Keys.

Señor Steel remained silent in one of the cabin seats. He had not spoken at any time, had given Jep Dee no chance to identify the Señor Steel voice.

The sky in the east was faintly promising sun. But on the plane there was still nothing but moonlight, and below it, silver moonbeams that crested the beach surf with lactescence. The sea was a dark infinity, the islands darker spots like moss.

“We haven’t long until daylight,” Doc said gravely.

“But the island isn’t far,” Jep Dee said.

The plane rocketed on, in a direction generally northward. It was climbing; Doc Savage intended to have plenty of altitude, and then coast down silently when they came near the island.

Already below them were the keys, some of the strangest islands in the world. First, the water was shallow, so shallow that it was possible to step out of a boat in some places and wade, if one felt so inclined, as much as fifty miles; and in only a few places would the sea be more than neck-deep. The islands themselves were low. Hurricanes swept over some of them at times. Few of them had white beaches; shores of naked, mud-colored coral were more frequent. From the high night-flying plane, of course, it was impossible to tell just how grim and unpleasant the islands were.

Monk gave flying directions in a low voice.

Finally, “How much farther?” Doc Savage asked.

“If this is an island I’ve got my pencil on, about fifteen miles,” Monk said. “If it’s a fly speck on the map—I don’t know.”

Doc Savage used night glasses—binoculars with lenses of extremely wide field, so that they gathered much light—on the sea below. Shortly, he saw a boat.

“We’ll drop down a little,” he said, “with the motors muffled.”

The plane sank in the sky. The engines were expertly silenced, the propeller of a special design to eliminate much of its natural roar. Doc examined the boat.

“Two-masted schooner,” he said, “running faster than any conventional schooner could run.”

“Recognize it?” Monk asked.

Doc Savage said, “That is the boat on which Ham and Tex Haven were taken.”

Jep Dee stirred impatiently, demanded, “Who is Ham?”

“Another man who is helping us,” Doc explained.

A bit later, Monk leveled a hairy beam of an arm.

“There she be,” he said.

It was not a mile long. It was not half a mile wide. It somewhat resembled a green doughnut out of which someone had taken a bite.

Doc Savage said, “We might as well land in the lagoon.”

The lagoon, of course, was the water in the center, the hole in the green doughnut.

Jep Dee said, “Come in from the north. They’re on the south side.”

“The lagoon safe?”

“Nothing is safe down there,” Jep Dee said grimly. “But they won’t be watching the lagoon. It’s mostly shoal, not more than a foot or two of water. Do you have to come in through the entrance?”

“No.”

“That’s good,” Jep Dee said. “They’ve got one of those electric-eyes set across the entrance. That’s what caught me. Can’t even a rowboat come into that lagoon without breaking the electric-eye beam and giving an alarm.”

Monk said, “They must have the place all fixed up.”

“Fixed up is right!” Jep Dee swore for a little while. “Wait until you see the cache!”

Doc Savage cut the plane motor, set the ship gliding at as slow a speed as possible, to keep down wind noise from its flying wires. He nosed it in to the island from the north.

Spray sheeted from under the floats when they touched; then the plane settled. The lagoon was glass-smooth; there seemed to be no wind whatever.

“Break out the paddles,” Doc directed.

They were regular canoe paddles, capable of driving the small plane after a fashion. But before they paddled far, they discovered that it was simpler to drop off in the water, hardly more than knee-deep, and shove the plane.

They pushed the plane to the mangroves, found a small indentation, backed the craft into that and tied it there, poised with its nose toward the open lagoon, where it could be unlashed quickly for flight.

Jep Dee muttered, “What about me? I don’t want to give the idea that I’m a coward, but I don’t like the idea of being left alone in this plane. I can’t fly it, even if I wasn’t

blind.”

“We will leave you in the mangroves,” Doc told him.

They left him concealed among high mangrove roots, with an emergency kit of blankets and food from the plane. Before they left him, he asked a question.

“What’s the matter with this other guy with us?” Jep Dee demanded peevishly. “Why ain’t he said nothin?”

Monk said, “He got smacked in the neck with a fist, and it hurts him to talk.”

Jep Dee seemed satisfied.

Doc Savage led Monk and Señor Steel into the mangroves.

“The schooner will be here soon,” the bronze man explained. “When they take the prisoners off, we might as well follow them. Be a simple way to find the cache.”

Señor Steel spoke quickly. “I can think of a better way.”

Doc studied the man in the moonlight. “Better way?”

“The cache,” said Señor Steel, “is located on the very southern tip of the island, where there is high ground and some palm trees. It will save us time to make directly for it.”

Doc Savage said, “You seem to know a great deal about the island.”

“One of my agents reached it, and got away, without finding out the exact location. He stowed away on Horst’s schooner-speedboat.”

“Agent?”

“You seem to have met him,” Señor Steel said.

Doc made his voice puzzled. “I have met one of your agents?” he asked.

“Henry Peace,” said Señor Steel.

“Henry Peace is one of your agents?”

“Exactly.”

Chapter 16

MUD

AT first, there was mangrove swamp around them, the earth being boggy and in some places covered with water. It was tidal flat that flooded at high tide, and the tide was out now; so that the mangroves, for a foot or so above the mud, were slimy and slick. They heard, occasionally, small sharks make splashing sounds in the pools, and crawfish sometimes fled with furious skittering noises in the shallow water.

Once Monk slipped off a mangrove stem, landed on his head in mud which was semiliquid and about three feet deep. He had to have Doc's help to extract himself.

"Brothers," he said, "some day I'm gonna give up this hero business and settle down to a peaceful life of finding out what's in test tubes."

They reached the path shortly after that. It was on higher ground, where there were palms, palmettos and a few trees of the tropical evergreen variety.

"Boy, here's easier going!" Monk gasped gratefully.

He would have started along the path, but Doc gripped his arm, stopped him.

"Let me examine your machine pistol," the bronze man requested.

"It's in working order," Monk said.

"We are going into action," Doc reminded him. "Let's be sure."

Monk drew his machine pistol and passed it to the bronze man. They stood close to the high palmettos and shrubbery that lined the path. The shadows were like blobs of oil smoke that were standing still.

Faint clicking noises indicated Doc Savage was unclipping the ammunition drum from Monk's pistol and scrutinizing it.

"All right," he said. "You have plenty of spare ammo drums?"

Monk's pockets were full of mud.

"The drums are probably muddy as blazes," he said, and felt of his pockets.

He gave a great, dismayed start.

"Gleeps!" he exploded. "I haven't got a single spare ammo drum!"

Doc Savage said, "You probably lost them when you fell into the mud."

Monk made mutterings of disgust, took his machine pistol when Doc Savage handed it back to him.

The bronze man now spoke quietly.

"You and Señor Steel will remain here," he directed. "You need a breathing spell, after going through those mangroves. Too, we should scout this path. It would be poor strategy for all of us to do that—if there should be a trap, we would all fall into it."

"That is true," Señor Steel said in a rather strange tone.

"Wait here," Doc repeated.

The bronze man vanished in the shadows.

HE went quietly. He followed the path about twenty yards, turned off, headed back toward where they had left the plane.

Monk, who'd had so much painful trouble with the mangroves, would have been amazed at the speed of the bronze man's movements across the swamp. Probably he would not have been surprised—he knew all about the bronze giant's almost uncanny muscular agility.

Jep Dee crouched where he had been left.

"Easy does it," Doc told him quietly. "I decided to move you."

"Why?" Jep Dee asked.

"Rigging up a little surprise party," the bronze man explained cryptically.

He moved Jep Dee a considerable distance from where he had been located, and left him on higher ground, lying in a trench in the sand which was quickly scooped out by hand.

"Be back in a minute," Doc said.

He went to his plane. Still intact in the baggage compartment were equipment cases—a standard outfit of gadgets which the bronze man and his aids always took with them when setting out on an adventure. Gas masks and the little anæsthetic gas grenades were a part of the equipment.

Doc Savage distributed gas grenades about the plane, placing them so that the ship could hardly be approached without the gas being released.

On the handles of the cabin door, on the controls themselves, the bronze man smeared a sticky liquid which was hardly noticeable. The liquid was an anæsthetic, too, that penetrated the pores of the hands; and while anyone handling the plane controls might not get enough of the stuff to cause unconsciousness, it was sure to deaden their arms, make them feel very ill, and create a good deal of worry.

He smeared more of the sticky liquid on the surrounding brush, on the plane guy lines.

Then he went back to Jep Dee.

Giving Jep Dee a gas mask, Doc Savage explained about throwing the anæsthetic gas grenades. He put a supply close to Jep Dee's hand.

"If anybody comes, how'll I tell whether they are enemies?" Jep Dee asked. "I can't see."

"They will say, '*The sand is green,*'" Doc Savage explained. "That will be the password. Unless they give it, cut loose with the grenades. But put on the gas mask first."

Having given Jep Dee a gas mask he showed him how it worked.

Then he made a round of Jep Dee's hiding place and distributed more of the sticky liquid on the mangroves, where anyone trying to creep close to the spot would be fairly sure to get into it.

When the bronze man approached Monk and Señor Steel, he could tell that they were getting impatient. He did not show himself, did not let them know he was near.

"About time Doc was gettin' back," Monk said uneasily.

Doc Savage now began his examination of the path. He went very slowly, searched with the utmost care, for he distrusted almost everything upon this island.

The death trap that he found was ingenious.

It functioned if one did not carry some kind of a projector that turned strong ultraviolet light upon the receiving cell of an electric-eye. There was an electric-eye beam across the path; if the beam was interrupted, a machine gun began firing at once, swinging a little as it fired, to rake the path thoroughly.

Doc got acquainted with the whole grisly trap.

He put his hand over the electric-eye, from a safe spot.

The machine gun cut loose deafeningly, and its lead mowed down mangroves. It fired perhaps two hundred shots. Then it stopped, empty.

Doc Savage went out in the path and lay down where he might have fallen if shot. He carried a fountain pen with red ink, and he spread the ink on his face and clothing in realistic splotches.

MONK MAYFAIR heard the machine gun roar, jumped to his feet.

“Doc!” he gasped. “Something has happened—”

He did not finish, because Señor Steel hit him. Señor Steel used his fist, and he set himself carefully, because he could see that Monk had an iron jaw. The blow sounded like an axman’s first hard cut at a tree.

Monk jerked very stiff and rigid and fell, as the tree would fall, backward.

Señor Steel did not have a gun. He’d had a gun at the hotel penthouse in Key West, but he’d been able to find no trace of it after he regained consciousness there, with Doc Savage in the same room.

So Señor Steel took Monk’s machine pistol. He fumbled with the thing until he found how it operated.

He fired a short burst at Monk’s chest.

Then Señor Steel wheeled and ran—not toward Doc Savage, but in the opposite direction, along the path—until he came to a sandy beach.

Far out to sea, barely distinguishable in the moonlight, was the approaching schooner. Señor Steel ignored it.

He pulled a tangle of vines aside and disclosed a buried, wooden box with only the hinged lid showing. There were several lanterns in this—strange, square lanterns with lenses that seemed to be made of black glass. When Señor Steel switched the lantern on, it still gave no light.

It was an ultraviolet lantern that would keep the electric-eye death traps from functioning.

Señor Steel carried the lantern back along the path until he found Doc Savage’s prone form.

He laughed once, then. A rather terribly gleeful laugh. And he fired a burst from the machine pistol at Doc Savage’s chest.

Señor Steel then picked up Doc Savage and the bronze giant was limp. He carried the big form into the jungle, to a creek in the mangroves that had a mud bottom.

He threw Doc Savage into the creek. Then he stepped upon the bronze giant's body, and jumped around until he had trampled Doc's form some two feet in the mud.

"Good place for them both," he told himself.

He went back and got Monk. Monk seemed to be breathing, it dawned on Señor Steel when he had carried the apish chemist to the mudhole, so he shot him again.

After he had dumped Monk in the mud, he stood on him until the homely chemist was deep in the mire. Then he got out and wiped his shoes on weeds.

"We question the prisoners to see if Doc Savage left any record of what he learned," he remarked to himself. "Then we bump them, and this thing is settled!"

He walked away.

Doc Savage came out of the adjacent darkness, waded swiftly into the mud, groped for Monk, and dragged the unfortunate chemist out on dry ground.

Monk had regained consciousness under the mud. He was not very pleased with the situation.

Chapter 17

HORROR CACHE

DOC SAVAGE had two things to do at once. First, he had to keep track of Señor Steel, to be sure the man did not evade him. And secondly, he must keep Monk from making a noise that would betray the fact that they were both alive.

Keeping Monk quiet was the big problem. Monk wanted to make a noise, a lot of noise. He had mud to get out of his mouth, and a lot of words, all sulphur-coated, that he wanted to release. Doc Savage held the homely chemist's mouth and nose, shook him, pounded on him, and otherwise conveyed the need for silence.

After Monk got the situation straightened out, he was quiet. He cleaned out his mouth and nose, wiped his eyes, and scraped off his face as best he could.

"Somebody is gonna pay for this!" he snarled. "Somebody is sure gonna!"

"Let us hope so," Doc whispered grimly. "Do not make too much noise."

The bronze man did not follow Señor Steel immediately. Instead, he ran back to the cache—the hinged box in the ground under the vines—from which Señor Steel had taken an ultraviolet lantern. There were other lanterns, and Doc Savage got one of them.

He had previously followed Señor Steel to the spot, interrupting his operation of playing dead to do so.

The bronze man carried one of the lanterns, hurried along the path.

"Quiet," he warned.

Monk could walk now. He had been thinking, and the more he thought, the madder he became.

"That Señor Steel slugged me!" he gritted. "He's a crook."

"A large one," Doc admitted.

"He the head of this thing, by any chance?" Monk demanded.

"My guess is that he is."

They crept along in silence—there was still no sign of Señor Steel ahead—while Monk did some more thinking.

Doc Savage breathed: "Here are the ammunition drums you thought you lost. Also a spare machine pistol."

"Huh?"

"I slipped them out of your pockets the first time you fell in the mud. Later, when I examined your gun, I substituted blank cartridges."

Monk muttered, "I don't get this!"

"It was to prevent Señor Steel killing you with your own weapon," Doc Savage explained. "He shot you a number of times while you were unconscious. He didn't

know he was shooting blanks. Then he threw you in the mud and tramped you under. He thinks we are both dead.”

“Both? He do that to you, too?”

“Yes.”

“Hm-m-m.”

“His idea that we are dead,” Doc Savage said grimly, “is going to make it much simpler for us to fight him. He won’t be expecting much.”

Monk rubbed his hard knuckles together fiercely.

“When I get hold of that guy,” he said, “he’s gonna think there’s a blasted violent spook around!”

SEÑOR STEEL was taking his time. The path—there were a number of the electric-eye death traps along it—forked in the approximate center of the island, and one arm led over to the deep water along the south side of the island. Here was an anchorage, protected by a hook of reefs offshore, where a craft could lie with safety in anything short of a full gale.

It was into this anchorage that the schooner came, two searchlights sticking out like long white whiskers from her bow to pick up the channel range-markers. She rounded the stake that marked deep water, and the anchor rattled down. A dinghy was put overside.

Ham Brooks and Tex Haven were dumped into the dinghy, and the craft was rowed ashore.

Señor Steel’s appearance on the shore got sudden gasps. They were not happy gasps, either. The men became uneasy. It was evident that they feared Señor Steel. They stood about with uneasiness in their manner. When Señor Steel did not say anything, they grew more worried.

“We’ve been doing the best we could, your highness,” a man mumbled nervously.

Señor Steel said, “You’ve done excellently.”

His voice was cold, but it was evidently warmer than the men had expected. They brightened perceptibly.

“What do you wish done with the prisoners?”

“Hold them here a minute,” Señor Steel directed. “Horst should be showing up in the plane.”

“Horst has Rhoda Haven and the Doc Savage assistant named Johnny,” a man told him.

“I know that, you fool!”

The men withdrew to a respectable—and safe—distance. In all their minds were the things they knew about this Señor Steel. The diabolic cleverness of the man, his cold and almost insane rages when things went wrong. The fact that he was so unpredictable. He might, and on occasion did, do anything.

They were afraid to work for this Señor Steel, and they were afraid not to work for him. That summarized it.

The plane came shortly. It was a fast and modern job, with every appliance for safety and speed. The cabin fittings were the utmost in luxury—leather from Morocco, rare tapestry from Gobelins, a painting by an old master that had cost a hundred thousand dollars, in one end of the cabin. Señor Steel had wanted solid gold fittings. But gold was too heavy, so the handles and window cranks and such were only gold-plated.

It was the personal plane of Señor Steel, president-dictator of Blanca Grande, which was a very unfortunate South American republic.

It landed and unloaded Johnny and Rhoda Haven. Also Horst.

Horst was as scared of Señor Steel as the others.

“This Doc Savage,” he said, “is a devil. I haven’t been able to do anything with him.”

Señor Steel showed his white teeth. “I have. He is dead.”

He told about tramping the bodies of Doc Savage and Monk deep into the soft swamp mud. They were dead, he said. He sounded very pleased.

“The only thing left,” he added, “is to question the prisoners and make sure Doc Savage left no written record of what he learned.”

“What about Henry Peace?”

“Well, what about him?”

“He’s a mystery to everybody,” said Horst.

“Some soldier-of-fortune tramp. Forget him.”

MONK MAYFAIR gripped Doc Savage’s arm, said, “We could jump them now,” in a low whisper.

“Not now,” Doc breathed.

The palmettos were thick around them, for shrubbery grew with luxuriance close to the beach. The sand was soft, and had muffled their footsteps.

Monk whispered, “I know we’re outnumbered, but—”

“Let them lead us to this thing they call the cache,” Doc said.

“Oh!” Monk understood, even if he was itching for a fight and didn’t want to wait.

The march along the island path started. At this end, too, there was a cache of the ultraviolet lanterns that prevented the path death traps from working. They took no chances on one lantern protecting the whole group. They carried four.

They walked to the fork where the two paths joined, continued along the one that led to higher ground—higher ground being such only in comparison with the rest of the island. The greatest altitude was probably no more than twenty feet, and there were plenty of evidences that high hurricane water had swept over during the past.

They came to a hut.

It was not a hut that would attract anyone’s interest. It might arouse a little pity, perhaps. It was very squalid. The old man who occupied the hut sat outside.

The old man had a beard, rather a remarkable beard, one that a family of nest-hunting mice could have envied. He also had wrinkles, such wrinkles that it was hard to

tell which one was his mouth.

“Hell’s fire!” he said. “Ain’t I ever gonna get to go to bed tonight?”

He said that before he saw Señor Steel. Then he saw Señor Steel and got down on his knees and began protesting that he hadn’t known his highness was along.

They went into the shack, lifted a trapdoor. There was sand. They scraped away the sand, and there was a wooden lid. They lifted the lid, and there was a box full of gimcracks—rifle, revolver, knife, a good suit, a purse containing some money—such as an old man who was afraid of thieves might hide under his house. They took these out and opened the bottom of the box. This disclosed what seemed to be an ordinary abandoned well. Into the well they put a rope ladder which the old man of the hut produced.

They climbed down into the well, which was walled with brick, and pushed on certain of the brick, and finally stepped through a trapdoor into the cache.

It was lighted with electric bulbs, and it did not smell pleasant. It smelled, in fact, nauseating.

“They must be burning one of them now,” Señor Steel said.

“Yes,” a man told him. “Old Goncz, who hid all his gold somewhere before we got him. I think that tonight he’ll tell where it is.”

It was about this time that Doc Savage walked out of the darkness outside the shack and took the old man with the beard by the throat.

DOC SAVAGE had moved quickly, and the old man was taken by surprise.

Doc was also a master of certain methods of inflicting pressure on the spinal nerve centers so as to induce instantaneous paralysis. After he had pressed awhile, the old man became helpless, and could not cry out. Eventually, if certain readjustments were made, osteopathic fashion, on the nerve centers, he would be none the worse. But until then he could not move nor talk.

“You oughta let me biff him one!” Monk said.

“You’ll get plenty of chances to biff people, I’m afraid,” Doc advised grimly.

The elaborately secret entrance to the underground cache had been left open. Descending the ladder, they could not help grimacing. Even the swamp mud had a rather pleasant aroma by comparison.

Monk suddenly gripped Doc’s arm, breathed anxiously, “Could this smell be gas?”

“It’s burned flesh,” the bronze man explained.

The corridor, concrete-walled, was narrow for perhaps ten feet. Then there were steps, twenty or so. After that the passage widened.

It seemed to be a long subterranean corridor, off which opened various steel doors. The electric lights were brilliant, and some of the doors stood open.

When feet stirred ahead, Doc Savage quickly drew Monk through one of the doors that was dark.

Men approached, and Señor Steel’s voice sounded. He spoke in a cold, clipped fashion, describing the exact location of Doc Savage’s plane, and particularly the spot

where Jep Dee had been left.

“Get Jep Dee,” Señor Steel ordered. “Shoot him on the spot. The plane is not so important. We will fly it out to sea somewhere and sink it.”

Six men strode past in the party that was going after Jep Dee.

Doc Savage produced a handful of glass bottles which he had taken from the equipment case on his plane. He gave these to Monk.

“Gas?” the homely chemist whispered.

“You have to be careful with this stuff,” Doc warned. “It works through the pores of the skin, and it’s pretty bad. If you have to throw it, get away from the stuff. Don’t let it touch you, or you won’t feel much like fighting.”

Monk said, “There won’t nothin’ make me feel like not fightin’, the mood I’m in!”

THEY listened, finally thrust their heads into the lighted corridor. There was no one in sight. But voices came from what seemed to be a larger room fifty feet or so distant.

The door of that room was not open. But there was a barred aperture in the steel panel.

Doc Savage went forward silently, took a chance, and looked through the opening. It seemed to be safe enough. No one inside was interested in the door.

It was a large room of naked concrete, like a great basement. On the far side was a circular door of steel—a vault door. Every eye was on this.

Señor Steel was working on the combination of the vault. He got that door open. Inside that was another door, locked by key; and centrally located in that, a round lid.

Yanking the lid open quickly, Señor Steel popped a large bottle through. They could hear the bottle break. Señor Steel closed the lid instantly.

Monk, close to Doc Savage’s ear, breathed, “A gas chamber on the vault.”

Monk’s chemistry knowledge had told him that. There was a chamber between doors of the vault, an air-tight one, probably filled with some form of deadly gas; and the bottle of chemical which Señor Steel had broken in the chamber would neutralize the gas, render it harmless, so that the vault could be entered.

After a while, Señor Steel opened the other vault doors, three of them.

“Give me the stuff I sent up recently,” he ordered.

The “stuff” was jewels. Several hundred thousand dollars’ worth, judging from the scintillating cascade that poured from Señor Steel’s hand when he dipped into the small casket which was handed him.

He walked into the vault with the jewels, and they had a brief glimpse of an array, seemingly hundreds, of yellow metal bars in neat stacks.

“Looks like the inside of a mint!” Monk breathed.

Señor Steel came out and locked the vault, operated levers which probably charged the chamber again with gas.

“Get old man Goncez off the slab,” Señor Steel snapped. “We’ll put one of Doc Savage’s men on. This overdressed one with the big mouth.”

He meant Ham.

Chapter 18

WHEN DEAD MEN FIGHT

THE slab was of iron, and there were iron bands to hold ankles, and others to hold arms. It stood on four legs in the center of the large concrete room. Steam pipes made a mattress on the iron slab, and these led to a gas boiler which stood to the left. The boiler burned gas of the ordinary steel-bottled kitchen variety; and it was making heat now with a low moaning sound.

Old Goncez was perhaps seventy. It was doubtful if he would live. He looked as if he had been scalped, but probably that had been done with red-hot irons. There was a place in the boiler for heating irons.

Goncez could not move when they tossed him aside. He was not tied, and no one told him not to move; he was just past doing anything.

Rhoda Haven was in the room, and Ham, Johnny, Tex Haven.

They seized Ham.

Rhoda Haven made a gasping sound of horror and jumped forward. They grabbed her, and there was a short struggle. Then Rhoda Haven began talking. Not exactly screaming, but almost.

“We’ll give up!” she cried. “We’ll stop. We won’t bother you—”

Old Tex Haven said savagely, “Like hell we’ll stop!”

The girl paid no attention to her father.

“We won’t bother you again!” she went on crying at Señor Steel. “Let us go and we won’t come near this cache again, or ever try to make trouble for you. You know us—you know we keep promises.”

Señor Steel said coldly, “I don’t know anybody well enough to take their word.”

The girl said: “You used a million dollars of our money. We financed and managed the revolution that put you in power. We’ll forget that. Won’t that satisfy you?”

Tex Haven said, snarling: “Won’t nothin’ satisfy the skunk. We was goin’ to run Blanca Grande with an honest government and develop the country, and we’d have made millions and not harmed anybody, and made work for plenty of people. But Señor Steel wasn’t satisfied with that. He had to run us out and start grabbing everything in Blanca Grande. Look at the country now. Half the population starving. More misery in Blanca Grande right today than in any ten other countries.”

Señor Steel laughed.

Then he jerked his head at the strong room where he had put the jewels.

“But look at the profit,” he said. “Over eighteen millions.”

“Heard it was fifty,” Tex snapped.

“Exaggerated.”

Old Tex Haven showed his teeth in an unpleasant way. They had taken his corncob pipe away from him, and that had not helped his mood.

He said: “The skunk that was your father must have crossed with a fox. You’re slick. You had eighteen million dollars you had looted from Blanca Grande, and you had to keep it somewhere. You couldn’t keep it in European banks.”

“No,” Señor Steel agreed cheerfully, “I couldn’t keep it in European banks. They’ve made it against the law to take money out of most of those European countries. Anyway, their currencies aren’t stable.”

Tex said: “And you couldn’t use American banks because the United States government figures you should pay for some of the American oil companies your government confiscated.”

Señor Steel laughed.

Tex continued: “It was slick of you to pick an island inside United States waters, like this one. You knew no foreign government would be seizing it for an air base or something.”

Señor Steel shrugged. This was praise. He was pleased.

Tex Haven said: “You brought a lot of your political prisoners here, you polecat. Old Goncz, here, is an example. I hear you’ve got almost forty more in the dungeons. Well, that’s going to be your undoing. You can’t torture people on that scale and get away with it. Matter of fact, you’ve slipped. Jep Dee found this island. Others will find it.”

This wasn’t praise. Señor Steel did not care for it. He pointed at Ham.

“Go ahead and torture that fellow,” he ordered.

Tex Haven finished, “If I’ve got to watch a torture, how about giving me back my pipe?”

Someone came over and slapped him several times, great long-armed slaps that made loud noises.

RHODA HAVEN put her chin up and made her mouth tight. She had been shaken for a moment, when she tried to plead their way free, but now she had hold of herself, would take her medicine. Like old Tex Haven, she was made of human oak and human steel, and she had picked her career of soldier-of-fortuning, had liked it, knowing always what the wages might sometime be, and now she would accept the end.

Tex Haven shook with rage, but could do nothing. He wanted his pipe.

Johnny and Ham were calm, if not happy. They had been in tight spots before, not that practice made them any the less susceptible to fright—but previous danger had taught them that the thing to do in a case such as this was keep the mind so busy trying to figure a way out, that it would have no time to dwell on what seemed certain to happen. Death, in this case. Señor Steel would order them killed eventually, of course. Now, he was just worried about written records that Doc Savage might have left.

Monk was scared. He wasn’t even in danger—yet. But he was more worried than anybody. His arms were trembling, and he had to keep his teeth clamped to prevent their chattering.

Monk was terrified for Ham. They were about to put Ham on that steam-torture horror.

The homely chemist's skin seemed to get as tight as a drumhead.

"We gotta go in there!" he gritted.

"Yes," Doc agreed, "we better."

The bronze man reached up and unscrewed one of the light bulbs that illuminated the corridor. He had his pocketknife ready the instant the bulb came out, and he plunged the blade into the socket.

A small devil of blue-green fire popped and hissed as the blade short-circuited the socket, and molten metal fell like jewels. Fuses blew.

There was darkness, blacker than it seemed any darkness could be.

Doc Savage and Monk Mayfair went into the concrete torture vault.

And screaming started somewhere else in the cache—weird screams by many voices, as if there were fear of darkness.

THE bronze man did not start fighting. Monk had sense enough not to cut loose with his fists, either, which was a remarkable piece of self-control for Monk, wanting to fight as he did.

The men in the vault would not know an enemy was attacking. Not for a moment or two. They would think the lights had failed.

While they were thinking the lights had only gone bad, Doc Savage cut Johnny and Ham loose. He bumped into people, of course. They swore at him, cursed each other. There began to be some noise in the place.

"Stop this racket!" Señor Steel yelled. "One of you fools light a flashlight. Where's the idiot responsible for keeping these lights operating?"

His tone promised something unpleasant for the idiot who tended the lights.

The grisly wailing from elsewhere in the cache was louder.

Doc Savage found Rhoda Haven. She was close to her father. They were trying to free each other.

The bronze man said, low-voiced, "It's Doc Savage. I'm cutting you loose. Make for the door."

He had told Ham and Johnny the same thing, and no one else had heard. He did not intend to be heard this time. But Horst was close. He caught the words.

"Doc Savage!" Horst screeched. "Doc Savage is in here!"

Señor Steel spoke rippingly.

"Shut up!" he rapped. "Doc Savage is dead!"

For a dead man, Doc Savage began to do a good deal of damage. He found Horst, struck him, knocked him against a wall. He hit another man.

Two more men got Doc's ankles, and he went down, but did not stay down. He broke someone's arm before he got up, and the arm owner started screaming steadily in a high, yip-yipping voice, like a dog.

His shrieks were a flutelike accompaniment for the wails somewhere else in the cache.

Doc got to the door.

“Out?” he asked.

Ham, Johnny and the Havens, he learned, were in the corridor. Only Monk was still in the big room.

“Monk!” Doc rapped loudly. “Get out of there! I want to use gas!”

Monk didn’t hear. Or he didn’t want to hear. From the sounds—knuckles crushing flesh, a bone popping now and then, and screams—he was having the fight he’d wanted for hours.

“Lock the door!” Monk howled. “Don’t let any of ’em get away from me!”

There were at least a dozen men in the room. Monk, the optimist, didn’t want any of *them* to get away.

“The big dope!” Ham gasped anxiously.

Ham thought as much of Monk as Monk thought of him, but the only time he’d ever admitted it was once during an operation, when he was under anæsthetic; and he’d claimed he was not responsible at the time.

Doc heaved bottles of gas into the room—the stuff that worked through the skin pores. Masks would not protect against it. It was not fatal, but it would be very uncomfortable.

The gas went to work in the room almost at once, and there was screaming, so much screaming that it sounded like a great chorus singing the climax of an opera.

Monk’s yelling was the loudest of all.

There was a stout fastener on the outside of the door. Doc secured that.

And more men came running and attacked them in the corridor.

THE new attack was not entirely a surprise. They had realized there must be other men in the cache. There had to be a generator room at some spot to supply the electric current. And the prisoners—they were somewhere.

It was very dark, but one of the new attackers had a flashlight. Doc Savage threw his pocketknife, the blades closed. He was fairly close to the flashlight, threw the knife very hard. He missed the light, but hit the hand that held it. The man dropped the light.

Doc plunged in, and there was a short and furious fight over the light on the corridor floor. The bronze man got it and used it to blind their assailants.

None of the newcomers seemed to have guns. But they did have wrenches, and one of them a wood chisel that could split a skull. They were obviously the men who maintained the cache.

They retreated, took flight soon. They were outnumbered.

Doc Savage, flinging after fugitives, began passing barred, cell-like doors.

The wailing from elsewhere that they had heard—it came from these cells. There was not as much of it as had seemed; only four or five voices. Voices of the prisoners.

Of people who had been confined and tortured and threatened until everything was gone from their bodies but fear.

On past the cells, the flight went. It ended in the generator room, where flight was no longer possible. Cornered, the men turned and fought.

The last fight did not last long—Ham and Johnny and Tex Haven did most of it with their fists, while Doc Savage blinded men with the flashlight.

They went back past the wailing cell occupants to the big concrete torture room.

Only one man was yelling in there now. It was Monk. The apish chemist was tougher than any of the others, for the pore-penetrating gas had made all but Monk unconscious. Monk was standing in the middle of the room and roaring.

They let him out. He'd been right when he predicted the gas would not take the fight out of *him*. He wanted to fight more than ever.

"Who turned that gas loose on me?" he bellowed. "I was lickin' all them guys, and somebody ruined it!"

He bounced up and down and squalled.

"Who did it?" he screeched.

"Henry Peace," gaunt Johnny said dryly.

They let time enough elapse for the gas to become ineffective in the torture room—the vapor lost its potency after the elapse of ten minutes or so—before they went in to count their victims and make sure all were there.

"We better tie up Horst and Señor Steel first," Ham said grimly.

But Horst and Señor Steel were not in the concrete torture room.

THERE remained, too, the group of Horst-Steel men who had been sent after Jep Dee.

Tex Haven, Monk, Ham and Johnny went after those. It was almost an hour before they returned.

They brought Jep Dee along.

"What's this all about?" Jep Dee demanded.

"We'd've been back sooner," Ham explained, "only we had to tie them up. We found the party that went after Jep Dee. They got gassed when they tried to get into the plane."

By that time, Doc Savage had given the prisoners in the cells a brief, general examination. He had released about twenty of them. The others were pretty bad, in no mental condition to be released now.

There were at least four cases of stark insanity among the prisoners. Complete mental collapse brought on by the unspeakable tortures to which they had been subjected. Those would need treatment.

"No sign of Señor Steel or Horst?" Doc asked.

"No trace," Monk grated.

Doc Savage suggested arrangements for the cache prisoners requiring medical treatment. They would be taken to Key West hospitals, where Doc himself would

attend to their care, for greatest of this strange bronze man's skills was his ability as a surgeon and physician.

His quick-formed opinion—he did not express it at the moment—was that most of the Horst-Steel political prisoners could be led to recovery.

Doc Savage went to Rhoda Haven and her father.

“Have you any demands to make,” the bronze man asked, “regarding the hoard of gold and jewels in the vault, which we incidentally haven't opened yet?”

The Havens must have talked that over. Their answer was prompt.

“No comment,” old Tex Haven said dryly.

“What do you mean by that?” Doc asked.

Tex Haven had found his corn cob pipe somewhere, and he had stuffed it, was filling the surrounding air with fumes so vile that Monk insisted he preferred poison-gas.

“When I went to you in the first place,” Tex said slowly, “I figured that you might come out on top, wind up in possession of Señor Steel's stolen wealth. To tell the truth, I didn't really mind that. I don't mind it now. It's yours.”

“Mine?”

“I know enough about you,” Tex said, “to be sure that you will put that money back where it belongs—to benefit the people of Blanca Grande, from whom it was taken.”

Doc Savage considered that.

“Would you take over the managing of a commission to use this money to build factories and develop other means of permanently employing and benefiting Blanca Grande?” he asked.

“Me?” Tex was surprised.

“Yes.”

Tex grinned. “I'll do it, of course. On condition that you put one of your men down there to watch me and my daughter. I don't want any suspicion of dishonesty.”

Johnny, glancing at pretty Rhoda Haven, put in, “Monk would like that watching job.”

Monk manifestly would like it, his expression indicated.

Monk's smug expression apparently irritated Rhoda Haven.

“I wish,” she said, “that we could find a young man named Henry Peace.”

“That big loud-mouth!” Monk said disgustedly.

Rhoda Haven's eyes snapped.

“I intend,” she said angrily, “to marry Henry Peace. He proposed several times, you know.”

Tex Haven snorted, said, “He proposed every time he saw you.”

Doc Savage swallowed several times and turned red. A bit later, he got Ham and Johnny aside.

“Don't you ever let her find out who Henry Peace was,” he warned grimly. “Monk still doesn't know, and see that he never does. You hear?”

The bronze man sounded so deathly serious that Johnny and Ham doubled over laughing. It was the first time they had ever laughed *at* Doc Savage.

THE next day, they opened the treasure vault. Monk did the opening, fully equipped with gas mask and a gas-proof rubber suit—it was an ordinary diver’s suit which they had flown up from Key West during the morning—for safety’s sake.

Monk came rushing out of the vault.

“During that fight,” he yelled, “two of them tried to get into the vault through that gas chamber. They didn’t make it. They’re both dead in there. I stumbled over the bodies.”

Monk was a bloodthirsty soul at times. He acted as if this was one time he was glad to stumble over two bodies.

“Who are they?” Ham demanded.

“Horst and Señor Steel,” Monk said. “Who’d you think?”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Freckled Shark* by Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson)]