

THE GOLDEN PERIL

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. THE AMBUSH

THE vultures knew a feast awaited them. They hung almost motionless in the gray, ominous sky. Their beady eyes stared greedily down into the deep canyon that lay beneath them. The canyon was gloomy as a grave. Its walls rose sheer and straight for an interminable distance. Boulders and runty trees lined its sides. A small stream droned a mournful dirge in the center. Except for the dirge of that stream there was no sound.

But death waited there!

Only the vultures from above could have seen the men-vultures below. They were huddled behind boulders. The half darkness of the canyon combined with the khaki they wore to make them almost invisible. Fully two-score men were there.

They were of almost every race and nationality. But they were alike in the greed that shone in their eyes—and in the modern instruments of murder they carried.

A faint sound came from the far end of the canyon. The dim figure of a man appeared in the distance, stood motionless for a moment, then vanished.

There was a sudden tenseness among the hidden men. Weapons were moved cautiously.

"Be quiet. Do not move until I give the command."

The order was given softly, but there was a chill note in the voice that brought instant obedience. The man who had spoken was not large, but there was a look of utter ruthlessness on his copper-tinted features and in his glacier-cold eyes. His shoulders were broad, his frame powerful. He wore the insignia of a general.

The aid at his side spoke in a whisper: "The trap has been set well, my general."

"Si.

Soon the jaws of that trap will close." The general's Spanish was guttural, as if he were speaking a language still partly unfamiliar to him. "But care must be taken. Those we await have keen eyes."

Even as he spoke, more figures came into view at the far end of the canyon. Their eyes searched the scene before them, then one raised an arm in signal. A donkey train moved around a bend. Scouts were out ahead. Other tall men moved beside the heavily loaded beasts of burden. Still others brought up the rear.

A faint fire kindled in the general's eyes, and his lips made sucking sounds.

"Soon that will be ours!" he breathed fiercely.

THE men escorting the donkey train were unusual in appearance. They were tall, with thick shoulders and powerful muscles. Almost copper-colored, they wore a short mantle over their shoulders, a network of leather which had projecting ends. They wore broad girdles, of a dark blue and leggings fashioned like football shin guards.

Those in the lead carried modern rifles. The others were armed only with spears and short clubs bearing vicious, razor-edged flakes of stone.

Slowly, they advanced. A few were chanting a weird song, utterly unaware of the terror and death that soon was to strike.

"Another sun and we shall reach Blanco Grande," said one.

"Then we will have fulfilled another task for Doc Savage," his companion replied. "It has been

long since we last saw the bronze man. I wish he would come again."

"He is busy, but he will visit us again some day. We shall see him if we are patient," rejoined the first speaker.

But he was wrong in at least part of his statement. None of those with the donkey train ever were to see Doc Savage again. At that moment, they were passing squarely between the khaki-clad men concealed on either side of the trail.

The general would bark only one word, but that word was to start a chain of circumstances that was to bring many deaths; that was to reach out to New York, where Doc Savage had his headquarters; that was to bring the bronze man's aids into the fray; that was to test to the utmost the skill of Doc Savage and his five friends, experienced as they were in battling evil and injustice.

"Fire!" roared the general.

Instantly, the quiet of the canyon was shattered by the murder-roar of guns. Khaki-clad men reared up from behind boulders with automatic rifles. A rain of lead poured from those rifles into the ranks of the guards with the donkey train.

The guards were brave. The leaders brought up their guns, tried to reply to the merciless hail of death. Then they went down, almost cut in two by lead.

The others hurled their spears and dived for the temporary safety of the rocks. The heavily laden donkeys snorted, burst into a panicky run. Khaki-clad figures leaped toward the trail and barred their path.

Shrill, pain-stricken cries came from the doomed guards. One grunted with satisfaction as his spear drove through the body of an attacker, only to die a moment later with a bullet through his brain.

Crimson stained the cold waters of the creek. It became literally a river of blood. The crashing roar of high-powered guns filled the canyon with thunderous echoes.

"Let none escape! Kill them all!" roared the general. The glacier-cold of his eyes had melted. The orbs were now red with a killing lust.

His men needed no urging. Relentlessly, their bullets were hunting down fleeing figures. The guards were dropping on all sides.

"We are lost!" moaned one of these. It was he who had first spoken on the trail.

"Doc Savage should know," his companion said throatily. There was a terrible wound in his chest. Red-flecked foam was on his lips. Already, his eyes were glazing. "Y-you should try to get word to him, Zum. I-I—" He became limp.

HIS companion eased behind the rocks on his stomach. His skin was almost the color of those boulders. Bullets whined over him suddenly. Zum rolled over and lay still. The death blast moved behind him, caught a guard who had risen to his knees to hurl a knife.

Cautiously, Zum wiggled on a short distance. Again he lay still. Then he moved ahead once more. Exultant cries of victory were coming from the sides of the canyon. Khaki-clad men were rising to their feet. The steady roar of guns had ceased. Now there was only an occasional shot from a revolver held close to some wounded guard's head.

Zum neared a turn in the canyon. He leaped to his feet. With the speed of a racing hare, he rounded that turn. An automatic rifle burst into life. Hot lead played a tattoo on rocks. Slugs ricocheted and howled. One nicked the running man's right shoulder just before he vanished from view.

"Get him! Don't let him escape!" the general shouted viciously.

Khaki-clad figures raced in pursuit. When they reached the bend in the canyon, Zum had disappeared. He was running with all his speed. His mighty lungs were drawing in great gulps of breath, his feet were pounding tirelessly.

"He escaped," reported the man who had fired the automatic rifle.

"Fool!" The general's face was livid. He swung a fist, knocked the man to the ground. "You know what happens to men who fail! You know what The Leader does!"

The man on the ground groveled. His face became a pasty color. His eyes rolled wildly. "The—the hand of death!" he half screamed. "Don't let it get me!"

The general's eyes were scornful. "You deserve to die. Too much is at stake to permit errors. But this time I shall let you live. I can stop that pig of a runner before he gets word to Doc Savage." Bodies of the slain guards were lying on all sides. Some were horribly mutilated by lead. Of all who had been alive only five minutes before, only Zum still lived. The vultures were swooping low. The general paid no attention to the bodies. Callously, he stepped on them, as he walked toward the still-trembling, frightened donkeys. His men, also, had leaped toward those donkeys. With anxious, feverish hands they were tearing loose the covering on the packs the donkeys carried.

"Gold!" one breathed softly.

"Much gold!" said a second.

"Retie those packs!" snapped the general. His lips were working with quick anger. "This is only a drop in the bucket compared with what we will have later."

UNWILLINGLY, the covers were restored. The khaki-clad men looked at the packs with greedy,

cunning eyes.

"This must be taken to Blanco Grande. You shall be its escort. Do not try to escape with it!" the general went on harshly.

One of the men shivered slightly. Escape! That would be impossible! Well he remembered the scarred, evil shape of the mountainous country over which they had been flown to reach this point of ambush. And they had dropped from those planes by parachute. There was no way of returning except to walk. They could have walked to this destination, but that would have meant loss of time. Other troops of gold-hungry men would meet them when they left the mountains.

The men had to do as they were ordered.

"This will be a blow to Doc Savage," the general's aide said craftily. "Are you not afraid?"

The general sneered. "Why be afraid of him?"

"But I have heard of many marvelous exploits of his," said the aide. "He is dangerous to evil-doers. He has done almost uncanny things."

For a moment, a faint flicker of worry passed over the general's hard face. Then it was gone. "Do not worry," he jeered. "The Leader knows how to handle him. Besides, Doc Savage will know nothing of this—until it is too late."

"And when will that be?" There was a cunning, shrewd look in the aide's eyes.

"When we have launched our plans. When the entire world is rocked. When power such as men seldom dreamed of—" The general broke off. One hand strayed to the heavy gun at one hip.

"It could not be that you desire too much information, that you are a spy, could it, mi amigo?" he queried softly.

The aide took a step back. "No—no!" he cried. "I am just naturally curious. That is all."

"Curious!" A peculiar expression flared in the general's glacier-cold eyes. The gun came to his hand, lifted. "We do not encourage curiosity in our ranks, mi amigo."

The other jumped back, turned to run.

Blam!

The general's gun spoke once. A section of the other's skull vanished. He was dead.

"I think you were not a spy, and that you were just curious," the general said. "However"—he whirled on the other khaki-clad men—"let that be a warning. You will take my orders. You will be paid in gold—as long as you obey those orders. You will be paid in bullets if you become curious. In bullets by me, or paid by The Leader in another way."

The khaki-clad men were silent. They had heard how "The Leader" paid. Hard-bitten, vicious as they were, they showed fear.

"Now take the gold in. I have a plane waiting for me near here. I fly back to Blanco Grande. The man who escaped must be stopped at all costs. No word goes to Doc Savage."

ZUM didn't know about the plane. He did know that no one could catch him on foot. Through winding canyons and deep gorges he ran at a steady, tireless pace. His feet ate up the miles.

Zum's heart was sad. Many of his friends had died in that murderous ambush. Hope of seeing those murderers brought to justice was one of the things that spurred him on. For he knew Doc Savage would act.

The gold that had been stolen had been on its way to Doc Savage. The men who had been guarding it were Mayans. All the world knew of Doc Savage and his men, and of their unceasing fight on evil. Until now, few had known where the money came from that financed that fight.

It really was a legacy left Doc by his father. It came from the Valley of the Vanished, where the bronze man had found pure-blooded Mayans, long lost from the outside world.

When Doc had left the Valley of the Vanished, he had arranged with King Chaac, chief of the Mayans, to listen in on a radio on every seventh day. When his funds ran low, Doc would send a call for gold. Mayans would take it to Blanco Grande, the capital of Hidalgo, where the president, Carlos Avispa, would see that it was sent on to Doc.

Dusk was falling as Zum came in sight of Blanco Grande. The mountains long since had been left behind. Zum's pace had slowed. He was weary. His face bore long lines of strain.

But steadily he went on, entered the narrow streets of the capital of Hidalgo. Zum had been there before with gold trains for Doc. He knew where the radio towers were. He knew that in some way it was possible to send messages from there that would reach Doc Savage. He turned that way.

Had he not been so weary, Zum might have noticed the unusual activity in the ordinarily sleepy Central American city. Many soldiers were about. They were fully armed and in small detachments, moving with evident purpose.

Zum did not notice. He had only one thought, only one driving motive: He alone was alive to let Doc Savage know what had occurred. He intended to fulfill that trust.

A LONE operator was on duty in the shack beneath the radio towers. He had difficulty in understanding what Zum was saying. The Mayan was breathing hard, his words came in gasps. His Spanish was not good.

"Señor Clark Savage!" Zum blurted at last.

The operator understood that. His eyes became wide. He had heard of Doc Savage.

"Gold stolen! Mayans killed!" Zum panted. "Send message!"

The operator stood as if paralyzed for a moment, his brain trying to digest what he had heard.

Blam!

A pistol shot came loudly. Zum fell to the floor, twitching. A short, heavy-set man with glacier-cold eyes and wearing a general's uniform stepped into the radio shack, gun in hand.

"Don't send that message!" he ordered crisply.

"But-but—" The operator's mouth dropped. "It-it's to Doc Savage, general. I—I've got to send it."

His voice ended almost in a scream at what he saw in the general's face. He made a dive for the radio key.

The gun came up. Once again it spoke. The operator died, the radio key untouched.

A faint grin cut the general's face. He patted the gun in his hand.

"Unless Doc Savage is a clairvoyant, I do not think he will ever receive that message," he said dryly. "And he couldn't hear those shots in New York."

Two men came in then at the general's barked command and gathered up the dead bodies and wiped up the blood. Some might wonder what had happened to the radio operator that he should disappear. But none would ever know just what had taken place. It would remain a mystery.

Chapter II. A PLEA FOR HELP

FEW sounds penetrated to Doc Savage's office on the eighty-sixth floor of one of Manhattan's skyscrapers. That office might have been in a world by itself, far aloft, with view unhindered by surrounding structures. But there was a curious, strained tension in that office.

"You've got to help, Mr. Savage. No one but you can do so. For you to refuse may mean unreckoned tragedy."

The speaker's voice was urgent, pleading. A tall man, he was dressed entirely in black except for a brilliant, white shirt. His eyes and hair were black, but his thin, mobile face, detracted from the somberness of his costume.

"Already there have been riots, some indication of what is afoot," he went on quickly. "I am sure the peace of the world is at stake, perhaps the fate of the world as well. You must act!"

His black eyes flashed entreatingly to the man seated behind the only desk in the room.

That man stirred slightly. He was a big man, but did not show it. He was so well put together that the impression was not of bigness, but of power. His face and hands were the color of golden bronze—a bronze that exactly matched the color of his hair.

But it was his eyes that held the attention of his visitor. They were like pools of flake gold.

They were penetrating, with an almost hypnotic influence.

"What definite information have you that such a plot exists, Baron Vardon?" Doc Savage asked. His voice was low, but it had a peculiar timbre, one that made it carry clearly and distinctly.

The black-clad man sat more erect in his chair. His fingers toyed with his black felt hat.

"As I explained, I am on the League of Nations staff. We receive much information that is not made known to the general public—information that comes to us from all our member States. Recently, we have heard much of a mysterious man known only as The Leader. Who or what he is, we do not know. But of his actions we know much."

Baron Vardon paused, frowned as if collecting his thoughts. "We know that a skeleton organization of well-trained fighting men is being organized in every country in the world. Already, there have been a few outbreaks. You remember the recent ones in China, Africa and South America. Those were merely tests of power. The big coup is still to come. It awaits some signal. What this signal is, we also do not know."

"And just what do you wish me to do?" the bronze man asked.

"We are convinced that the headquarters of this mysterious Leader is somewhere in Switzerland. As a League of Nations representative, I am empowered to ask you to go to Europe, find that man and block his plans."

"Seems like quite an undertaking to me," a third voice put in unexpectedly.

The speaker was sitting far back in one corner. A thin, not very tall man, he was pulling absently at an ear that was much too big. His complexion was sallow and unhealthy-looking. He appeared a physical weakling.

Only those who had tangled with Major Thomas J. Roberts, better known as "Long Tom," knew what an error that was. Nor did his appearance indicate that he really was one of the world's most famous electrical engineers.

Doc's fingers played a rapid tattoo on the top of the desk. His flake gold eyes surveyed Baron Vardon.

"A coup of such magnitude as you suggest would be difficult," the bronze man said.

"Practically impossible, I'd say," drawled Long Tom. Still tugging at his ear, he came to his feet slowly and sauntered from the room.

"I assure you this is not only possible, but so," Baron Vardon said earnestly. "And whoever The Leader is, he rules by fear. We have had reports he kills by a hand of death. Men who have seen victims of the hand of death say bloody fingers and palm appear on the neck. The features contort, horribly—"

Doc lifted one hand suddenly. A faint red light had appeared on a big panel at one side of the room.

"Anyone know you came to New York, Baron Vardon?" the bronze man asked quietly.

His black-clad visitor started, his eyes receded in his thin face. "N-no. But why?"

"Several men are trying to break into this office," Doc responded softly.

"But they can't get in, can they? I'm safe, am I not?" Baron Vardon's voice was hoarse, his features twisted with quick fear.

"No, they cannot get in unless I wish them to," said Doc. "But I believe we should see whom we are opposing. Just sit quietly. I am going to release the doors." The bronze man moved a foot on one spot on the floor.

Five men were in the hallway. One was working on the lock of a door which bore the sign: "Clark Savage, Jr." The others carried businesslike automatics. Their faces were hard and weather-beaten. "Speed it up! Get that door open!" one of them barked. The lock-picker snarled in reply.

Then an amazing thing happened!

The door opened of its own accord. On either side of it panels also slid open. A gap fully twenty feet wide was created in the office wall.

And inside, apparently rushing forward, appeared an entire company of armed men. They carried submachine guns. Their faces were horrible grimaces. They seemed to be leaping from behind shell-torn trees and out of huge shell-holes.

A yell of terror and horror came from the five attackers in the hall. One threw up his gun, fired, then turned to run. Three of his companions also started to take to their heels.

"Halt!" The leader roared the order. His own eyes were gazing wildly. He was making an apparent effort to keep his courage. Then his eyes became normal.

"Stop, you fools!" he bellowed. "It's a trick! There are no men there! See, they're not moving forward at all!"

The running gunmen stopped and looked back. Even as they looked, the scene changed.

The company of armed men faded. Gigantic seas took their place. Huge waves with white-topped spray appeared. The beat of surf came, low at first, then louder.

But no water splashed on the office floor.

The gunmen laughed, their nerves still jerking with their release from fear. Now they could all see it had been a trick. They did not know how they had been fooled; it was enough to know that they were not really facing a company of armed men. With cautious steps they moved into the room.

And now the waves began to disappear. The office itself came into view. At one side was seated a man dressed in black. Behind a desk sat Doc Savage.

"You wished to see me, gentlemen?" the bronze man asked.

Four pistols came up as one. Four bullets tore toward the bronze man. Doc Savage slumped. His head went down on his desk. Then those weapons were turned toward Baron Vardon. Again a hail of death poured out.

"Run! Run for your lives!"

The four gunmen turned with sudden fear. The cry had come from behind them, where their leader stood. The men took one look and then obeyed. They dived frantically backward.

For the door and the panels on either side were closing. Frantically, the gang chief threw his weight against one of those panels, tried to hold it back. The panel moved on.

Shrill screams of terror came from the four men inside. Desperately, they threw themselves through the opening. The shoe of one was caught. The heel was nipped off as neatly as if by a sharp knife.

"Let's get out of here, that was too close," their leader rasped. He was breathing heavily.

"Another moment and we'd have been trapped in there. And even if we did get Doc Savage, his men are still alive. They would have killed us."

DOC SAVAGE lifted his head, smiled at Baron Vardon. "Professional soldiers of fortune from their appearance. Would you not say so, Baron Vardon?"

The baron's face was a startling white in contrast to his black clothes. Nervously, he pulled a handkerchief from a pocket, wiped his brow.

"I-I guess so," he breathed. "But-but, I still can't understand why we're still alive."

"It is too bad they discovered the doors closing so soon," the bronze man went on, apparently unheeding the other's remark. "Another moment and they would have been caught, then they could have been questioned at leisure."

"But-but they had guns. They surely would have killed us, had they remained," exclaimed Baron Vardon.

"No," Doc Savage corrected. "I do not believe they would. You see, they merely thought they saw us. When I pressed my foot on a certain spot on this floor, I opened the doors, and bullet-proof mirrors dropped. You have seen the childish tricks with mirrors used at amusement parks, where a person would appear without a body. This was on the same order. In addition, the mirrors were of a type which permitted us to see through from this side, but prevented them from seeing us."

"And-and I—" Baron Vardon gulped. "I suppose they saw something that frightened them at first."

That was it."

"Yes. Merely some motion pictures projected against the mirrors, with a few added sound effects. Sometimes the sight of those pictures suffice to frighten away intruders. These fellows were of sterner stuff."

Baron Vardon swallowed hard, and an admiring grin appeared on his face.

"It was wonderful," he said. Then his expression changed, became serious. "But you see, this attack alone proves that we are up against something desperate. It would have to be if hired gunmen were sent all the way from Switzerland to kill you and, just because I am asking your aid. You must help us!"

"I think it might be interesting at that, Doc."

Baron Vardon glanced up swiftly. Long Tom had returned to the room. His thin, unhealthy-appearing face was blank of all expression, but one big ear wiggled slightly as he looked at the bronze man. Doc Savage's flake gold eyes looked long and hard at Baron Vardon. "We never refuse help where we may assist in any way to correct injustice, or to prevent evil," he said quietly. "We will undertake the task, Baron Vardon."

Emotion twisted the baron's mobile face. His features came alive. He leaped to his feet, raced forward and grabbed Doc's hand, shook it hard.

"I am delighted. I had hoped, of course, for your help. But to hear you give me your promise makes my trip really worth while. You will leave at once for Switzerland?"

"We will start our search for The Leader as soon as possible," the bronze man said.

"Good! Get in touch with me at my hotel if I may assist you in any way." The baron turned to leave, hesitated at the door, his face becoming solemn. "But be careful. I have heard much of this hand of death. I will not rest easily until I know you have succeeded."

The door closed behind Baron Vardon.

"He's O. K., Doc," Long Tom said. "I checked with Geneva. He's an accredited representative, and was sent here to contact you. Funny, I had him figured out as a phony."

The electrical wizard pulled one lobe of his oversized ear thoughtfully. "When you tapped that code in Mayan for me to check on him, I thought you believed him a fake, also," he added.

"I do not care to embarrass guests," the bronze man said. "Baron Vardon might have understood the code had it been in English."

Long Tom looked up sharply. "And by the way, Doc. Isn't it time to be hearing from Blanco Grande? Shouldn't another gold shipment be on its way?"

"I expect such a message at any time. Probably we—"

The bronze man broke off suddenly. A scream of dreadful agony, of pain and knowledge of death, penetrated the office walls. It was a thin cry, high-pitched. It came from the hallway.

LONG TOM moved fast. He appeared slow beside the bronze man. Almost before the electrical engineer had unlimbered his long legs, Doc Savage was out from behind his desk, had reached the door. He moved with the smooth, unbelievable speed of a man in the perfection of physical condition. The office door came open. Doc Savage leaped into the hallway, knelt beside a body that lay there. A low, trilling sound seemed to fill the air. It appeared to come from no one spot, yet from everywhere. It was a strange, eerie thing.

Long Tom hurtled over the bronze man. He understood what that trilling sound was. It came unconsciously from the lips of Doc Savage when he was either surprised or sounding a warning. The thin electrical wizard did not halt. Whatever had happened to that limp figure on the floor, he knew Doc could take care of it much better than he could.

He glanced once at the elevator indicator, saw no change was within six floors of them, then his thin legs darted like pistons as he raced toward the end of the hallway and started down the stairs. It was five minutes before Long Tom returned. His unhealthy-appearing face wore a look of chagrin. He was breathing heavily.

"No one in sight," he said, his tone filled with disappointment.

Doc was still kneeling beside the fallen figure. The bronze man had a physician's kit beside him.

"Adrenaline did not work. No restorative I had succeeded," the bronze man said.

Long Tom looked down. The fallen figure was that of a boy. He wore a messenger's outfit. His visored cap lay upside down on the floor. Inside it was a yellow envelope.

Then Long Tom's eyes opened and he whistled slightly. On the boy's neck, growing more clear with each passing instant, was the shape of a hand. It was a hand of blood-blood that came from the boy!

"The hand of death," Long Tom grated.

Doc Savage rose to his feet slowly. His flake gold eyes were sad. It was seldom that his astounding knowledge of medicine failed to save a life.

Carefully, he opened the envelope that had been in the messenger boy's cap. Again came that low, trilling sound.

"What is it?" Long Tom asked swiftly.

Silently, the bronze man handed him the message. It read:

GOLD HAS ARRIVED OKAY STOP WILL SHIP TO YOU TO-MORROW
CARLOS AVISPA

Chapter III. DEATH STRIKES

DOC SAVAGE stood motionless, his eyes riveted on the message in his hand. Abruptly he turned, strode into the office.

Long Tom, his mushroom complexion a blank, followed him. Doc's silence had indicated there was something peculiar about that message. What it was the bronze man had seen, Long Tom didn't know. And he knew that he wouldn't find out until Doc had proved himself right or wrong.

The bronze giant went quickly to the laboratory. First, he treated the message and the envelope with his own development of Flemming's solution. He put it on an automatic drier and then dipped it in a square container of dye.

Long Tom knew Doc was using the most modern method of developing fingerprints. Prints undetectable under ordinary methods stood out like bold landmarks with this new treatment.

Doc placed the paper under an ultra-violet lamp. The body of the papers fluoresced with a brilliant, blue-green luminosity. Only two fingerprints were on it. They stood out stark and black. "Those are mine," the bronze man clipped. "There is no other print on either the envelope or the message. And the boy did not have any gloves."

"Then—" Long Tom began.

"The message was switched." Doc said flatly. "Whatever did happen to that gold shipment, someone is trying to keep us from finding out."

Long Tom opened his mouth to speak. He stopped. A low whine and a swish of air told him that the private, high-speed elevator was soaring up from the basement garage.

No one but Doc and his aids were supposed to know the existence of that private lift. It could shoot upward, as if flung by a catapult, and dropped like a plummet. It took both experience and fortitude to ride in it at all.

No one else was supposed to know of it—but attacks on the bronze man and his aids came always from places least expected. Neither Doc nor Long Tom said a word.

They heard the automatic doors open. Then there was a crash of glass; a heavy body fell on the floor. Low, angry mutterings reached their ears; then there was silence. The only sound that came was a stealthy shuffling of footsteps.

LONG TOM reached quickly into a desk drawer and took out a weapon that looked like an oversized pistol. It was equipped with a large ammo drum. It was one of Doc's superfiring machine-pistols, twice as fast and deadlier than a machine gun.

Doc Savage did not move a muscle. His bronze face was expressionless.

Slowly, Long Tom approached the door to the corridor. Then he stopped; his jaw dropped, and a look of supreme disgust spread over his face.

He saw the immense back of the closest thing to a gorilla that could come in human form. Long, red-tufted arms dangled almost to the floor. The huge human swayed from side to side. A nubbin of a head was almost completely sunk in the huge shoulders. More red, simian hair came out from the head and neck.

A baffled, childlike muttering came from the huge man as he backed up. In front of him, one hand raised behind him, the other extended confidently with a vicious-looking sword, was an immaculately clad and dapper figure. With a handkerchief peeking from his breast pocket at just the proper angle, a spotless, pearl-gray hat on his head, the man danced forward with the agility of a fencer. In spite of his slender, foppish attire, he gave every indication that he was about to commit a highly pleasurable murder.

"I'll tear that danged sword cane to pieces," the hairy one complained, in a voice that would have better befitted an immature youth, "then I'll tear you apart, you animated writ of hocus-pocus!"

"Try it, you hairy vacuum!" Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks advised the apelike one.

"Destroy my choice presents, will you? I'll run this through your gullet and hang you up on the wall!"

"Cut it!" Long Tom's voice rapped out. "Things are happening."

The apelike one turned around. It was odd to see a face like his look so plaintive. It was probably one of the homeliest faces in existence. His little eyes were nearly invisible, so deeply were they sunk in their pits of gristle.

This was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, probably one of the greatest living chemists in the world. He was a Houdini of the test tubes. His friends knew him as "Monk." No other name would have been fitting.

"That danged shyster bought a statue of an ape and had my name engraved on it," he complained.

"Then he had the crust to make me a present of it. I smashed it right here. And I'm going to grind him into hamburger!"

Then Monk saw the body of the messenger boy. His expression changed. "Trouble," he exclaimed. "Do you suppose—"

The dapper figure, better known as "Ham," sheathed his sword cane with one quick motion. Together, they whirled and darted into the office.

Monk and Ham quarreled continually. No insult was quite enough for one to heap on the other. But either would have gladly given his life to save the other. And both would have died for Doc Savage. Almost running, the two raced to the room where Doc Savage stood waiting for them. Monk breathed an inaudible sigh of relief at the sight of the bronze man.

Ham was less demonstrative. One of the shrewdest legal lights that ever came from Harvard, he was trained to hide his feelings.

Doc Savage smiled slightly. He had seen the tableau in the hallway from where he had stood inside. An intricate system of mirrors enabled him to watch almost every part of his domain from any other point, while hidden microphones enabled him to listen to the conversation.

"I am afraid great danger may be threatening Hidalgo," he said softly.

A howl of rage and excitement burst from Monk. He fairly danced up and down.

"What are we waiting for? Let's go!" he bellowed plaintively.

"Still thinking of that good-looking princess down there?" Ham asked sarcastically.

Monk blushed.

"We all know that without Hidalgo we couldn't carry on the work we've sworn to do," Doc went on calmly. "And not only that, but we owe a debt to both the citizens of the republic and the Mayans to protect them from trouble."

"Well, then—" Monk blinked.

"I have accepted another task," Doc explained quietly.

For an instant there was silence. Yet that silence was indicative of the respect his aids held for their bronze chief. Their looks were not questioning. They waited merely for orders.

In crisp tones, Doc explained to Monk and Ham what had happened, what Baron Vardon had told them.

"I don't like that guy's looks," Long Tom gulped. "Even if he is from the League of Nations, he looked phony to me. And he went out of here just before this messenger boy came in."

Bristles seemed to rise on the back of Monk's neck. The chemist even preferred fighting to annoying Ham. And that was saying a lot.

"Let's go get him!" he howled. "Any guy that would kill a kid like that—" He waved his arms and started for the door. Doc's low voice stopped him.

"We must know more than we do now before we throw suspicion on anyone," he admonished. "But I think we had all better call on the baron. He may have seen someone in the hall as he left here and can give us a clue to the murderer."

Swiftly, the four went toward the corridor. As they opened the door elevators stopped at the far end of the hallway. A group of blue-clad policemen poured out.

"We heard a guy had been killed!" bellowed one in a captain's uniform. "What is it all about?"

Long Tom stepped forward, as if to explain. A bronze hand shot out, jerked him back.

"Look out! Duck for cover!" the bronze man cried.

His warning came just in time. For strange things were happening.

TO Doc's aids, the sudden arrival of an army of cops had not seemed suspicious. They had forgotten that no such force would be sent to investigate an ordinary murder. And they had forgotten, also, that the murder of the messenger boy had not been reported. No one knew of it except themselves—and the slayer.

The bronze man had not forgotten. His crisp order came just as the man in the captain's uniform made a grab for an object in a coat pocket. One hand went back, came forward with an overhand motion. What he threw looked like a teargas bomb.

Long Tom had already darted back inside the door. Monk and Ham instinctively grabbed handkerchiefs to place over their noses as they, too, jumped back.

But the keen, flake gold eyes of Doc Savage had seen something the others had missed.

Protruding from the body of the thing speeding through the air toward them were rows of tiny spikes. Those spikes made the object look something like a prickly pear.

Every one of those tiny spikes were a plunger. Should any one of the scores of spikes on the side of that bomb touch even the slightest projection, the plunger would set off a thermite compound that would tear a score of men to tiny bits!

And now that bomb was almost upon them, spinning and turning. The fake cops were racing backward down the hallway, evil grins of anticipation on their faces.

Doc Savage stood feet apart, one hand in the air. The thumb and middle finger were separated. It looked as if he were trying to talk the deaf and dumb language. Then those two fingers snapped onto the whistling bomb with a speed that defied detection.

The fingers closed between the tiny plungers!

But the body of the bomb was slippery; it had been greased just to prevent any such miraculous catching. Doc couldn't hold it steady. Already, it was slipping. If he reached with his other hand he would be sure to snap a spike, explode it in his fists.

So the bronze man did the only other thing he could do. He yelled a warning, hurled it from him, straight back where it had come from.

The phony cops had paused at the end of the hallway. They had stood rooted to watch the culmination of their evil work. But they didn't stand there after Doc let out that yell.

Scrambling, screaming, falling over each other in their frantic desire to get away, they poured down the stairs.

Then the thermite bomb landed. There was a blinding flash, a searing heat and a detonation that knocked Doc and his three aids flat on the ground.

Masonry had been torn from the floor and from the sides of the hallway. The entrance to the stairs was blocked. From far down those stairs yells could still be heard, as the fake cops raced for safety like they had never run before.

Doc picked himself up and looked at his aids. They were bruised a bit, but otherwise unhurt.

"The real police will now be here shortly. Stay here and explain to them," Doc instructed Long Tom. "Monk and Ham will come with me."

With swift strides, the bronze man led the way to his private, high-speed elevator.

THE HOTEL ROYALE, where Baron Vardon was stopping, was one of the more pretentious of Manhattan's hostelryes. It ran more to the ornate than suited the average visitor, but it was always filled. Monk and Ham automatically dropped back a few paces and separated as they strode through the lobby. That was a matter of habit, a practiced system. If trouble occurred, they were less vulnerable, more ready for effective action than if they were packed together.

Monk and Ham scrutinized faces closely, mentally catalogued types, ran experienced eyes up and down figures for suspicious bulges in their clothing.

Two men stood together at one side, hands thrust into their pockets. One spoke out of a corner of his mouth to the other. Both looked hard at Doc and his aids.

At the desk, a seedy, long-haired man argued violently with the hotel clerk. His shiny frock coat was green with age. Under an arm, he held a battered violin case. In a foreign accent that somehow sounded counterfeit, he loudly insisted that there must be some mail for him.

It seemed to Ham that the two shifty-eyed men in the corner glanced at him and at the violin case. But Ham couldn't be sure. It might be his imagination.

Doc had the baron's suite number. He didn't bother with the clerk, but went straight to the elevator.

"Twelve," he clipped. The lift rose.

Baron Vardon's suite was 1208. Doc Savage knocked softly on the door. There was no reply. He knocked again. The door yielded under the slight vibration.

Monk's bulgy muscles swelled under his coat. Ham swung his sword cane swiftly. Doc opened the door wide.

A dim table-lamp gave the only light. Curtains in the room had been drawn. But that table-lamp was sufficient.

Directly before them, on the floor, were a pair of expensively shod feet. Above the feet came well-creased trousers and a dinner jacket, then the face of Baron Vardon.

The diplomat was twisted in an unnatural position on his back. His lips were contorted into a grimace of horror.

But it was the neck that held the attention of the three who had walked into the room.

Upon that neck was the red outline of a hand. It seemed to be growing brighter every instant.

"The hand of death!" Ham gasped. "It has struck again!"

Chapter IV. INTO A TRAP

DOC stepped quickly past the body on the floor, leaped to a door at one side of the room. He flung it open and found only an empty bathroom. He looked at the room's one large window, pulled back the shades.

Outside was a narrow airshaft court, scarcely twenty feet square. Another door gave onto the bedroom of the suite. Apparently no one was there.

Monk waddled about the room like some huge anthropoid, sniffing on a trail. The hairy man's eyes lighted on a great wardrobe trunk in one corner of the room. It was a bigger trunk than he had ever seen before. He moved toward it.

And the trunk erupted!

From a horizontal slit near the top of the trunk, a long, thin muzzle was jabbed. It swept the entire room.

Br-r-r-r-r-r!

The machine gun roared in a staccato crescendo of death; .45 caliber slugs sliced through the room like a solid metal knife, just above waist height.

That terrific blast should have killed everyone in the room. It didn't. The killer within the trunk thought at first he was dreaming. That dream slowly turned into an awful nightmare.

Growling, long arms outstretched, Monk walked straight into the hail of lead like an avenging Juggernaut. Fingers that could bend a silver dollar double gripped the edges of the trunk. The muzzle of the gun swung squarely toward his stomach.

With a bellow of rage, Monk tore the top of the trunk open. A mean, ratty face was there. But there was a horror and disbelief on it, now. The killer forgot all about his Tommy gun. Here was a man who absorbed Tommy slugs as casually as he would take a shower!

The killer screamed, leaped from his little fortress. Red eyes darted back and forth. Doc and Ham were between him and the door. Monk took one step forward, a look on his face that would have made a tiger shrink.

The thug's voice ended in a gurgle. He ran blindly, crashed into a window. The sill struck him just above the knees. Before he could stop he had soared on out into space. A cry that was scarcely human came from his lips. That cry ended abruptly as he hit the bottom of the airshaft, twelve stories below.

There was a moment of silence. Then a low, grating voice broke in.

"I will shoot for the head, my friends," it said. "I know you wear union suits of chain metal that will defy machine-gun slugs. But the bones in your head are not that strong."

The three men whirled. There in the doorway crouched the musical-appearing fellow who had been shouting for his mail in the lobby downstairs.

There was no artistic expression on his face now. The wig of long hair was pushed askew on his forehead. A mirthless grin was on his face. A businesslike machine gun had emerged from the violin case.

That gun swung up, head high; a grimy finger tightened on the trigger.

And then Doc Savage moved. He moved like chain lightning. Like a bronze flash he dived across the room. His arms swept out.

The bronze man had been too far away to try and nail the gunner. He didn't try. His arms scooped up Ham and Monk, lifted each as if they were little children. In the same fraction of an instant he swung, head low, head away from the killer.

Br-r-r-r-r-r-r!

Slugs bounced off Doc's back as he covered the length of the room in two quick leaps. Crouched, holding his aids so their heads were out of the direct line of fire, he was safe for the moment from the deadly bullets.

But the room was small. It was an easy matter for the killer to maneuver into a better firing position.

And he did. But it didn't do him any good.

Without slackening his stride, his two aids held firmly, Doc Savage leaped through the window. On the concrete, far below them, lay the crushed body of the first killer.

THE homely face of Monk wore an expression of blissful unconcern as he felt himself catapulted into the airshaft. Ham, likewise looked as if he were thinking about some abstruse point of law that he might argue before the Supreme Court. Both of Doc's hands were occupied holding Monk and Ham. He doubled up like a contortionist in the air. His teeth closed on a tiny button on his vest. Then his head snapped erect. There was a swish, a sudden tugging, and their plunging drop was checked to a gentle fall.

Monk looked up above them critically. It was the first time he had seen this experiment. He had often thought of the possibilities of a special parachute built for an airshaft. There was no reason, he had figured, why one of the proper size and shape couldn't be just as effective in a short drop as the plunger in a pump. There was little space for the fugitive air to escape. But Monk had only thought about such a parachute. It had remained for Doc Savage to construct one.

They drifted gently to the bottom. The gangster up above could have shot them during the last few seconds of the fall. But when he first looked out the window, he was too amazed to move. By the time he poked his gun over the sill, there was nothing but an expanse of silk for a target.

Doc and his aids on arriving at the bottom dived through a doorway into the cellar of the hotel. "That parachute was good, but I don't think you gave it a real test, Doc," Monk argued as they reached the street.

"What do you mean?" Ham asked suspiciously.

"Why your head is so full of hot air, we could 'a' floated down, just hanging on to you," Monk chuckled gleefully.

Ham whirled, waved his sword cane angrily. "We shouldn't have taken you, anyway!" he yelled. "An ape like you should have been made to climb down!"

Monk chuckled. Things were back to normal. He became serious. "That seems to wash up Long Tom's theory that the baron was in on this," he grunted. "That is, unless he was double-crossed."

"We still must do what the baron asked," Doc Savage said quietly. "I gave my promise. You and Ham go to the hangar. Fuel the plane for a three thousand mile non-stop flight. I need several things from the office, and will bring Long Tom."

"We head for Switzerland?" Ham asked.

"We take the danger trail," the bronze man promised.

IF Doc could have seen the electrical wizard right then, he would have realized that danger had already arrived for Long Tom.

Behind the impersonal, mushroom-complexioned face of Long Tom, was hidden real sympathy for those in need. That sympathy had gotten him into trouble before. But he couldn't help being the soul of

generosity. He could never resist the plaintive pleading of beggars.

If some one had knocked on the door of the office laboratory, he might have been suspicious. But Long Tom was standing in the hallway just after the coroner's men had taken away the body of the dead messenger boy.

An aged and infirm step came down the stairs that led from the observation tower of the skyscraper. That was not unusual. It was one way that peddlers could get down through the building and canvass the offices.

The man was white-haired. His face was pinched and drawn, as if life had dealt harshly with him. He might have had a family to support, and selling pencils is not usually considered a quick way to riches.

The pencils were in a square box. Around them was a band blazoning a well-known make.

"Please, mister," the ancient said haltingly, "couldn't you use a few pencils?"

Long Tom hesitated, thrust his hand into a pocket. Then he remembered his wallet was in his coat pocket back in the office. He didn't have any change.

"Just a minute," he said, and opened the door.

It was only two steps to where his coat was hanging. Long Tom was a little surprised to see that the man had followed him in. But there was still that apologetic, suppliant look on his face. Long Tom reached out to take some of the pencils.

Pfffft!

A hissing sound came from a dozen little nozzles. Every pencil was a tiny hose from which came a jet of tear gas. Long Tom staggered back, blinded. Too late he realized he had been tricked. The bent old man straightened. Sharp orders tumbled from his lips. There was a rush of feet from outside. A dozen dark figures swarmed through the door.

Long Tom, blinded though he was, plunged forward. The men quickly understood that his unhealthy appearance was no catalogue of his fighting ability. Three men went down, moaned on the floor. But twelve against one are too many, particularly when that one cannot see. Long Tom's sight was slowly returning, but even that wasn't enough.

He flung two foes from him, staggered back. Four more gangsters bored in. The electrical wizard was driven back against a wall. Then a mighty fist sent him sagging to the floor. He landed on his back, hands outstretched. One slammed against the desk's baseboard. Groggy and helpless, he was bound hand and foot and gagged.

THE phone jangled sharply.

The white-haired man who was no longer old seized it. At first he imitated Long Tom's voice. It was a surprisingly good imitation. Then his voice dropped back to normal.

"O. K.," he rapped. "He's got away with a lot of things. I don't see how he got out of the hotel. But he can't get out of this trap. We'll fill him so full of lead they can use him for an anchor." The man clicked the receiver back on the hook and turned to the gangsters.

"The bronze man is in the elevator," he rasped. "Go to the stations appointed. Shoot for the head only!"

There came the sound of the high-speed elevator. Its meteoric ascension forced air whistling through the cracks of the door.

The elevator outside clicked to a stop. The automatic doors opened. Footsteps came toward the door. The white-haired leader glanced quickly at Long Tom, smiled in satisfaction.

Long Tom's expression showed he had recognized that tread.

The footsteps reached the door. Guns were pointing that way from all directions.

The door swung open. Long Tom held his breath. The white-haired man stopped smiling.

For the footsteps walked right into the center of the room. But no one was there!

Hair rose on the necks of the gangsters. Eyes seemed almost to pop from their heads. Some moistened dry lips. Others could only gape stupidly.

And the sounds went on!

The chair behind Doc's huge desk scraped back. There was a sighing, as if a huge bulk had dropped into the soft leather cushion. The seat of the chair sank.

Sweat was pouring now from a dozen faces. One gangster whipped a little paper from a pocket, sniffed the powdered contents up his nostrils. But the drug didn't seem to have any effect. He was still scared to death.

The white-haired man broke the spell with an effort. "Shoot, you idiots!" he screamed. "Shoot at that chair!"

The roaring of the guns sounded like a stepped-up Niagara. Acrid smoke filled the air. The chair behind the desk seemed to disintegrate. Lead literally tore it apart.

The silence that followed that burst of firing was like that in a courtroom following a verdict of death. Long Tom lay wide-eyed and motionless.

Then there was a low cough. It came from right above the shattered chair!

Then a memo pad on the big desk was riffled back.

"Long Tom," came Doc's voice from the chair, "when these persons have gone, I would like to talk to you about our plans."

THE gangsters stood frozen. If they had been frightened before, now they were actually oozing fear. Their features were chalk-white, their entire bodies shaking. Through the door to the library came the shrill voice of Monk. "You danged shyster!" he shouted. "As soon as we clean out this nest of gangsters, I'm going to take you apart, injunction by injunction!" "Ha!" Ham's voice came sarcastically. "You're not any tougher than those twelve babies out there." Two pairs of footsteps clattered into the room. But no one was visible. One of the coke-fiend gangsters let out a scream. "I've got 'em, I've got 'em!" he yelled. "Lemme go! I'm goin' straight to Bellevue!" He dropped his Tommy gun and dived toward the door. It was the signal for a stampede. Overtensed nerves could stand no more. Rat-faced figures fought each other to get to the hallway, the white-haired leader among them. In the space of seconds, the office was cleared. Then the elevator doors opened again. Doc Savage stepped out.

Chapter V. A WARNING

LONG TOM'S jaw sagged as Doc untied him. His eyes held a vacant look. His fingers played with a lobe of one oversized ear. "I've seen you pull a lot of stuff, Doc, but how was that done?" he asked weakly. "I caught your signal when you pressed the baseboard," the bronze man explained. "So I went to the room below, looked into the panoramic television in the ceiling, and saw the gang. The desk was wired to turn over a page of the memo pad. And the chair seat was wired to sag when I wanted it to. The rest—the sound effects—was done by micro-waves and ventriloquism." "Oh!" Long Tom's expression cleared. Then his face showed admiration. An electrical genius of no mean ability himself, those few words had been sufficient explanation. "That's something new. I've been working on it, but never got so far. In other words, the micro radio waves hit the diaphragm of the telephone in whatever room you aimed them at, and reverted into sound, and by ventriloquism you make it appear—" Doc nodded. "What happened?" he interrupted. Long Tom explained swiftly and somewhat shamefacedly. "Our opponent, whoever he is, not only has money and an exceedingly alert organization, but he must also have imagination and brains," the bronze man commented. "I believe Vardon was right. The stakes are high." "So much the more reason for us to get to Europe in a hurry," the electrical wizard said glumly. "I suppose we'll have to stick our necks out again for some rough gang to take a crack at. I—" The door burst open with the bang of a cannon. Ham bolted into the room. His usually immaculate attire was disheveled. He showed unusual excitement. He was waving a newspaper in one hand. "Look! Look!" His words were wheezing gasps. Long Tom craned his neck and moved forward. "Now, Ham, take it easy. Excitement is bad for your heart." Ham thrust the paper at Doc. "This extra just hit the streets. I grabbed it and came on up. Monk went on to get the plane ready. Read this!" Across the front of the newspaper were big headlines: BIG REVOLT IN HILDALGO! TROOPS STORM PALACE! Only a few lines of reading matter were under the headlines. Evidently but little information had been received when the extra had been put to press. "Hidalgo!" breathed Long Tom. "That must mean old Carlos Avispa is in danger. But what about the gold? Is that lost?"

THE bell of a telephone sounded. Doc lifted the receiver. "Mister Savage? I am speaking for the secretary of state." The voice was smooth, almost regretful. "Yes?" "I am afraid the news we have for you may already be in the papers, but we wished to verify it before calling you." "Thank you," said Doc. "And the message?" "There has been an uprising in Hidalgo. Knowing your interests there, the secretary of state asked me to give you what facts we have." "And those are?" "Few, very few, I am sorry to say. We do know there was a sudden uprising, seemingly by a majority of President Avispa's troops. What caused it, or why, I do not know. An attack is believed to have been launched on the palace. But all communication was severed after we had received but one short bulletin. Whether the government of Hidalgo has been overthrown or not, we do not know." "I see. I wish to thank you for calling." The bronze man spoke slowly. The speaker at the other end of the line coughed slightly. "I—we—er—we realize, Mister Savage,

that this may be a blow to you. President Avispa, we know, is a personal friend of yours. And we understand you have big interests there. But, ah-ah-

"Yes?" Doc's voice did not raise, but there was a sudden firmness in its tone.

"Ah-well, the secretary asked me to remind you not to get into any entanglements with Hidalgo. United States citizens must not participate in the quarrels of other countries." He paused, then added:

"I am sorry, sir."

Doc Savage hung up the receiver slowly.

"A FINE pickle!" raged Ham, after the bronze man had related the phone conversation. He paced to and fro rapidly. "Avispa and our gold in danger, and we must stand by-helpless!"

"There are many things to consider," Doc Savage reminded quietly. "The fact remains that much trouble has been, and will be, avoided with other countries if United States citizens minded their own business."

"Yes, it is justified, undoubtedly; but not in this case." Ham straightened, became Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks. He spoke in his best courtroom manner:

"But this situation is different, your hon-pardon, I mean Doc. If we went to Hidalgo it would not be to embroil our country in a private war. We would go merely as friends of the duly constituted authorities, to lend our advice and counsel--"

"And to do a little scrapping, if necessary," Long Tom interposed, with a sly grin.

"For all we know, President Avispa may be dead," Ham continued, with a stern glance at Long Tom.

"The country may be in the hands of rebels. Our friends, the Mayans, may be endangered. We owe them a debt we can never repay. Besides--" The lawyer hesitated. "Incidentally, Doc, we were not told definitely that we couldn't go, were we?"

The bronze man shook his head, said, "No. I was merely reminded not to interfere with anything that might drag the United States into trouble with Hidalgo. We would experience no trouble from the law if we went to Hidalgo, provided we left before our passports to Hidalgo are suspended."

"But-but," sputtered Long Tom. "You told Baron Vardon we would go to Switzerland, that we would leave at once! Even if our sympathies are with President Avispa in Hidalgo, we cannot go there until that job is taken care of."

"No," contradicted Doc softly. "I did not promise that we would go to Switzerland at once." Light flamed in his flake gold eyes. "What I did say was that we would undertake at once the task Baron Vardon suggested. We will do that. But now, we will go to Hidalgo. I believe the uprising there has a definite connection with the plot Baron Vardon mentioned."

Ham's face shone with delight. "The attorney for the plaintiff wins his case," he beamed. "Of course, I'm sorry we will be there just as advisers and can't get into the fighting, but--" He danced about, using his sword cane to spar with an imaginary enemy.

"Always thinking of fighting," Long Tom said disgustedly.

"Ham, you go on down to the plane, help Monk load," the bronze man put in. "You know the equipment we should have."

The dapper lawyer minced toward the door, still sparring with his cane. A broad smile was on his face.

"Long Tom, here are your instructions." Doc Savage spoke for some length. A look of bewilderment on the electrical genius's face gradually faded; his expression became eager and intent.

"That's good," he gulped at last. "We can't take any munitions except, of course, weapons to defend ourselves; but with this stuff--"

"It may come in handy," Doc agreed dryly.

Long Tom went to one of the big laboratory rooms that were included in the office suite. Doc turned to the radio room. The bronze man sat down before a large panel. He threw a switch and watched tubes slowly become warm.

"Renny and Johnny!" he said, his mouth close to a small microphone. His voice was unraised.

MORE than three thousand miles away, that voice came clearly from a small radio. Huge mountains reared on all sides. There was a tremendous cut through one of those mountains. Steam shovels were panting as they dug up tons of earth.

An enormous man, fully six feet four inches in height, was watching those steam shovels through half-closed eyes. As he watched, he opened and closed fists that were bony monstrosities. They appeared big enough to break doors. In fact, breaking doors with those fists was one of the favorite occupations of their owner.

His face was severe, the mouth thin and tightly compressed. Even though his eyes showed pleasure in the scene he was witnessing, his features had a puritanical look.

A small native, his clothes mud-covered, panted up.

"Señor Colonel Renwick," he wheezed. "The black box, it speak!"

The big man's look of indifference vanished. Long legs taking gigantic strides, he jumped over boulders, cleared a sixteen-foot stream with scarcely a break in his pace.

He halted before a big boxlike tent. A small radio was sitting outside that tent. Beside it was a

portable sending set. "Renny speaking," he said clearly.

As "Renny" spoke, another tall man came running into view. But where Renny was heavy, this man was thin. He looked almost half-starved. Glasses were perched on his nose. His features were studious and intellectual.

Known wherever geologists and archaeologists gathered as William Harper Littlejohn, one of the most famous in his field, he was called "Johnny" by his friends.

"And this is Johnny elucidating," he said into the microphone.

"There is trouble in Hidalgo," came Doc's clear tones.

Renny's big frame jerked erect. Forgotten in a moment was the engineering project he was directing. That project was one that would add to his fame, but additional renown meant nothing compared to a call to action.

"You two being in South America, are much closer to the scene than we are in New York," Doc's voice went on. "By leaving within an hour, you should be able to fly to Hidalgo before dawn. Keep in touch with me by radio, and help President Avispa in every way possible."

"Boy, this sounds like action!" Renny chortled exultantly. "It's great!"

"Positively stupendous," agreed Johnny.

In New York, Doc turned away from the radio.

"All set," called Long Tom. "Let's go. Too bad Johnny and Renny will beat us to the scene, but they may leave something for us to do."

Long Tom might not have felt so certain Johnny and Renny would arrive first, or that everything was all set, had he been able to see through the ceiling.

A SMALL, dwarflike man, an evil grin on his face, was rapidly coiling a strand of wire back into a small briefcase in the room above. The wire was almost invisible. The microphone at the end was no larger than a dime.

"A marvelous invention, this," he chuckled without sound. "So the great Doc Savage has decided to interfere in affairs in Hidalgo? That will prove very interesting to The Leader, I am sure." He took earphones from his head, placed them on top of the wire and the batteries the briefcase contained.

"And the great Doc Savage must be worried. He is calling in all his men to help."

The dwarf snorted with disgust. "Seems to me I read about the project Colonel Renwick is directing in South America. Littlejohn is making some archaeological surveys at the same place. It will be easy to discover just where."

Once more that evil grin crossed his wrinkled features. He moved noiselessly toward the door.

"Who can withstand The Leader? His organization is perfect. I do not believe that Colonel Renwick or William Harper Littlejohn will ever arrive in Hidalgo."

Chapter VI. DEATH CALLS

JOHNNY and Renny were troubled by no such doubts. Their movements were swift and assured.

They wasted no time on the tent. Growling, his puritanical face more stern than before, Renny threw clothes recklessly into a suitcase.

Johnny worked more deliberately, but almost as fast. He looked at some of his archaeological specimens with regret, but did not bother to pack them.

A youth wearing high leather puttees, military trousers and tropical hat, came toward them. His face wore a look of dismay.

"Colonel Renwick, what is the matter? Where are you going?"

Renny looked up impatiently, snapped the clasps on his suitcase. "Come on, Johnny, what are you killing time for!" he snapped.

"But-but you can't do this! You can't leave!" the youth exclaimed excitedly.

"Why says I can't?" roared Renny. "I am, ain't I? You're supposed to be an engineer, aren't you? You take charge. I'll be back-when you see me."

One huge fist reached out, yanked Johnny to his feet. "Come on!"

"You're a domineering, despotic, dyspeptic martinet," wailed Johnny. But he went along.

Two slender steel threads led down the mountainside. They vanished in the mists of clouds that hung far below the top of the mountain. They appeared tiny and fragile. Yet an open car was suspended from the upper thread.

This primitive elevator was used to bring material and men from the plains thousands of feet below to the summit. The lower thread acted as a brake, to keep the elevator from descending too fast.

Johnny and Renny leaped into the car. Renny reached over and released the brake. The effect was like that of a sudden, steep dive on a roller-coaster. Only this dive didn't stop in a second or two. It seemed to continue indefinitely.

The car rocketed downward. Johnny's mouth opened and closed as he tried to speak against the wind. He motioned for Renny to use the brake, to slow the speed of the car.

Renny grinned broadly. "Doc asked for speed, didn't he?" the big man shouted.

Johnny looked over the side. One hand was holding tight to the glasses on his nose. The other

gripped frantically at one side of the car. His face suddenly went a pale, pasty color. He gulped. Renny's face lost its grin. He reached for the brake, applied it hard. The speed of the car did not slacken. It increased.

Hunching his huge frame, Renny looked over the side. His face, too, went ashen.

The bottom steel thread had vanished. Somewhere, it had either broken or been cut. There was no way to stop the terrific speed of the car. It was hurtling downward at ever increasing speed. There still were thousands of feet to go.

When the car reached the bottom, there would be one tremendous crash. Only pieces would ever be found of car and occupants.

Renny groaned, but not from fear.

"When we don't get there, Doc sure will think we've disobeyed orders!" he shouted.

DOC was having troubles of his own just then.

Even Ham's features were streaked with perspiration as the last of a long series of boxes and provisions were stored aboard a huge amphibian.

The plane rested on a slide at the end of a long warehouse. The name "Hidalgo Trading Co." was painted on that warehouse. It was inconspicuous-appearing from the outside. Inside, it appeared more like a transportation exhibit at Grand Central Palace.

A submarine was there; both swift scout and heavier passenger planes and an autogyro were stored, ready for immediate use. And hovering close to the top of the warehouse was a speedy, modern dirigible.

"Too bad we can't use the dirigible," Monk groaned, with a look aloft. His simian countenance appeared pained. The dirigible would be easier riding than the amphibian, but the hairy chemist knew there was no chance of using it. Where they were going they would be buffeted by wind currents that would tear apart even the strongest airship.

"All loaded, Doc," panted Long Tom. His complexion was yellow-colored.

Doc nodded, swung through the door at the rear of the amphibian, made his way to the controls. A moment later and four motors burst into speech.

On the water, the plane was clumsy-appearing. Its nose reared up. It was huge, with the long wings that meant tremendous lift, but with wings so angled that they signified speed as well. Monk cast off the mooring ropes as Long Tom and Ham clambered aboard. The roar of the motors increased in pitch.

Far down the river, a launch was approaching. Spray curled, destroyer-fashion, from its bow. It was headed directly toward the Hidalgo Trading Co. warehouse.

Ham eased into the co-pilot's seat beside the bronze man. A carefully applied handkerchief restored his usual appearance of freshness. He glanced down the river.

"Visitors on the way, Doc," he said laconically. Doc Savage revved each motor in turn. The amphibian moved out slowly, drifting with the current.

"I expected them," the bronze man said quietly.

The launch was close now. A gun could be seen on its bow. It was an efficient-appearing gun, quite large enough to destroy an amphibian. A man appeared from the cabin, waved his hand frantically.

Monk's face appeared suddenly in the pilot's compartment. He wore a worried look.

"Step on it, Doc!" he howled hoarsely. "They'll be on us in a minute!" Behind him was Long Tom. The electrical wizard's features also showed strain.

The bronze man pushed forward on the wheel, drew back the throttle. The amphibian leaped like a race horse from a starting stall.

A yell of dismay came from the launch. It was close enough to make out the features of the men aboard. A police lieutenant held a megaphone, bawled a frantic order.

"Hold it, Doc Savage! You can't take off now!"

For answer, Doc smiled. Once more he pressed forward on the wheel, pulled back the throttle. The amphibian shot ahead, then rose into the air like a graceful bird, circled the police launch.

Down below there was much confusion. The police lieutenant yelled again through the megaphone.

"Stop!" he bellowed. "Where are you going?"

His voice carried to the plane, which wasn't so high up.

"To Hidalgo, of course, you mug!" bellowed Monk. A delighted grin creased his homely features.

"They can't stop us now!"

"No?" Ham turned a look of withering scorn on the hairy chemist. "You think they can't, you baboon! They couldn't, probably, if you had kept your mouth shut. Now—"

"What did I do?" Monk howled belligerently.

"Oh, nothing!" Sarcasm blistered from Ham's tongue. "Just nothing at all. Here we are up against a clever opponent who found out somehow that we were not headed to Europe, but to Hidalgo, and tipped off the state department to get us stopped. Then what do you do but bellow out the truth!"

"Well, what of it?" Monk looked hurt. "We're in the air, aren't we? They can't stop us."

Ham's shoulders lifted in a long sigh. "I don't suppose it ever occurred to that simian brain of yours that there is an air division of the Coast Guard, did it? If they really want to stop us,

they'll send a fast plane after us as soon as that copper reports. We couldn't get away then without a fight, and you know we couldn't fight."

Monk's big frame suddenly seemed to shrink. He did his best to hide his head. "I-I didn't think of that," he admitted sheepishly. "But if we don't get there, at least Renny and Johnny will."

RENNY and Johnny didn't think they would reach any place safely.

The car elevator was moving downward so rapidly that trees and rocks were only a blur on either side. The pulley on the steel cable overhead whined and shrilled like a banshee.

Johnny's eyes watered even behind his glasses. His hat whipped off. When he opened his mouth to yell, the wind tore the sound away so swiftly it could not be heard.

Renny stood fully erect in the car. His huge figure seemed unaffected by the tremendous pressure of the wind. His enormous arms were outstretched, so that the long fingers of his powerful fists grasped each side of the car.

He was looking over the side, his gaze placid and unworried.

"Always wanted to make a trip this fast sometime!" he shouted.

Johnny caught the words only faintly. "Inexplicable exhibitionism of juvenile philosophy!" he screeched.

The car sagged dangerously close to high knolls at times. Again, it was a hundred feet in the air. Always there was the danger it would overturn, would spill its occupants to instant death. And death could not be long delayed. The bottom of the mountain could not be far away.

Renny appeared to sigh deeply. He loosed the grip of one huge paw, reached down in the bottom of the car. He lifted up a small derrick hook. There was a rope attached to the hook.

The studious features of Johnny brightened as he saw Renny lean over a side of the car. The big engineer dropped the hook. His attitude was that of a man about to try for a trout.

The car dipped toward a knoll. Renny jerked on the rope. His face changed expression slightly as the car again rocketed high in the air.

"Missed!" he shouted.

Trees were bigger now, on each side. They grow bigger lower down on the mountains, where they can get more oxygen. And that meant the end of the elevator ride was very close.

Another knoll approached. Renny's features set hard. His thin mouth was more severe and grim than usual. It was compressed so tightly he seemed to have no lips at all.

Once more his enormous arms swung out, down, then up.

Johnny didn't need to hear his yell. He saw Renny's mouth open, saw the expression in his eyes.

Without hesitation, Johnny loosed his grip on the sides of the car, threw himself to the bottom.

A thin, piercing wail cut the air. It grew louder. It sounded as if thousands of saws were rasping against metal.

Renny's shirt split with the strain. Muscles knotted in big bunches. Perspiration poured from his face. A small, white streak of light came into view. It was a streak that cut across directly above the level of the car top. The derrick hook appeared to be holding that light in place.

Johnny's arms reached up, caught hold of the rope attached to the hook. He braced his feet against the side of the car, poured all his strength into holding that streak of light motionless.

A huge clasp was at the front of the car. It was used to hold the car in place at its terminal.

Now, Renny moved that clasp around, screwed it down slowly on the streak of light.

THE sound of buzz saws increased. Smoke curled up from about the clasp. The streak of light appeared to dance.

Then it became apparent what that streak of light was. It was the lower end of the two wires upon which the elevator depended—the wire that had been cut.

It was moving upward as fast as the car was traveling downward. Loose and uncontrolled, it would slice through a man's body easier than the keenest knife.

Johnny's eyes had a harried look behind his glasses. His arms were as rigid and immovable as steel. The slightest slip, the slightest slackening of pressure on the hook against the wire, would cause it to leap and whirl. Renny would be directly in its path.

The big engineer showed no indication of fear. His bony monstrosities of fists were slowly squeezing the clamp tighter against the wire.

The car pitched up on its nose. Instantly, Renny eased the pressure a trifle. As the car settled, he put that pressure back.

The car's speed was still that of a diving airplane, but even so it had slackened. Tightening of the clamp on the wire was acting as a brake.

Slowly, carefully, Renny increased that pressure. The car bucked like a rodeo bronco. The world gradually took on a more calm appearance.

Time seemed to stand still. Crimson showed in a long gash on one of Renny's arms where it had barely brushed the speeding wire. The car's pace slowed to that of a slow-moving auto.

"O. K., Johnny, get set!" Renny said quickly.

The car crashed. The two aids were hurled out. But they had landed with only minor bruises.

Near them lay another body. It was that of the watchman supposed to be on duty at all times at

the bottom of the elevator. He had been shot neatly through the brain.

"Seems like some one didn't want us to go where we're going," Renny observed without humor.

"A platitudinous observation, but justifiable," Johnny agreed dryly.

Fifteen minutes later, they lifted their plane from a South American field and headed northward. Neither spoke of the peril that was just past. Neither thought of the perils that might be ahead. It was just as well they did not know what was in store for them.

Chapter VII. A SPIDER STRIKES

WHITE, foamy clouds stretched for miles in either direction. They appeared solid, except where a shaft of sunlight drove through. Then it could be seen they were as filmy and intangible as a spider's web.

In the center of those white billows was a darker spot. It darted and circled rapidly, over and under, in and out of the white web, much as a spider does. But it emitted a deafening roar. It did not pounce noiselessly on helpless prey as does the spider.

Otherwise, the simile was quite correct. The plane that was seeking shelter in the clouds high over Florida not only resembled a spider with the clouds for its web, but its purpose was the same: It also was preparing to stalk prey.

Inside the plane there was little sound. Words of the men who sat there were quite audible.

"They should come soon," said one. His voice was thick, guttural. Heavy, protruding eyebrows masked small eyes in an aggressive face.

"Bah! They should not have been permitted to leave New York at all. The United States is too easy with Doc Savage," said a second.

Fingers of one hand twirled the ends of a tiny, waxed mustache. Shoulders shrugged expressively.

The third occupant of the cabin turned from the window. "What are the reports?" he asked.

His voice was flat, lifeless, without expression, but it brought an amazing change in his two companions.

"Just a moment, Leader," the heavysset man said excitedly. His aggressive face shone with eagerness.

"Permit me to get them, Leader," exclaimed his smaller companion. The ends of his mustache bobbed up and down rapidly.

"I have just come from the radio!" boomed the first.

"Me, I can answer the questions!" blurted the second.

"Quiet, Louie. Calmly, Henry." The man called The Leader did not raise his voice. It remained flat and lifeless. But a chill was there, suddenly. Louie and Henry stilled as swiftly as they had erupted.

THE LEADER swung his eyes slowly from one to the other. There was something malevolent about that look. It would have been hard to describe at first. Then the reason would have been clear.

The face was as lifeless as the voice. Only the eyes seemed alive. The nose, cheeks, lips and chin were not unhandsome, but they were devoid of all expression. Color was in the cheeks, the lips were pink. But that color appeared artificial.

It was almost as if rouge and lipstick had been used. The face might have belonged to a corpse.

It seemed impossible that it belonged to a living man. Yet power was reflected there, and a ruthless will.

"You first, Louie," that cold, dead voice said.

"We have just heard from Blanco Grande," the big man said hurriedly. "Everything, it is going according to plan. The soldiers have revolted. The country is in an uproar."

"And President Avispa?"

"I-uh-I regret to say he has not yet surrendered." The big man appeared frightened, suddenly.

Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. "It-it seems he was well loved by many of his people. Not all the troops revolted. The palace is still holding out, although it is only a matter of--"

The chill look in the other's eyes stopped him. Those eyes were as merciless now as his face.

"Do the men so soon forget the hand of death?" that cold, dead voice asked.

Louis's hands shook openly. He moistened his lips with a thick tongue. "No," he said hastily. "It is just a minor delay. They will be in command by the time we reach there."

"And your report, Henry?"

The small man twisted the ends of his mustache nervously. "All, it is well. The unit organizations in each country are progressing rapidly. From England, France, Germany, Russia and others, the reports come in. All wait the word from The Leader."

The hum of the plane's motors came but faintly. The ship twisted and turned through the sky.

"It is well," the dead-voiced man said at last. For just a moment a flash of hate lighted his eyes.

"We should have headed directly for Hidalgo, but the men I sent to New York failed. The world is within my grasp. I will win, but it is necessary to eliminate Doc Savage. Soon his plane will be coming by here. And then--"

Strange smiles lighted the faces of Louie and Henry. Their eyes dropped to a queer apparatus on

the floor of the cabin.

"WE are making good time, Doc," Long Tom said laconically.

"We can't make too good time to suit me," Ham said anxiously. "I'll be glad when we leave the United States far behind."

"A shyster that can talk like you shouldn't be worried," Monk grumbled. "You're supposed to be able to talk your way out of anything." The hairy chemist sighed. "I wish Habeas was along. It would be a pleasure to look at a face that doesn't have law written all over it."

At the start of the trip Doc had requested that the pets be left behind because of the danger that they would meet, much to the chagrin of both Ham and Monk.

"That hog?" Ham sniffed contemptuously. "Now if Chemistry were here—"

"We are nearing the outer coast of Florida," Doc cut in quietly. "Soon we will be beyond the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard."

"And if we are stopped?" Ham asked.

"I am sure we can explain to the state department," the bronze man said. "That would take time, however. I trust that will not be necessary."

Clouds were moving in on the plane. Long Tom moved to the radio compartment. He placed a pair of headphones over his ears and twisted a dial. A startled expression crossed his face.

With one move, the thin electrical wizard yanked the headphones from his ears, raced toward the front of the plane.

"Another ship is near by!" he shouted. "I heard the roar of her motors over the airphone!"

"I know. It is to our right, and above us," the bronze man said. He twisted the controls slightly, plunged the plane into a cloud bank to the left.

Long Tom's mouth dropped open. He knew Doc Savage had exceptional hearing, that the long, rigid training the bronze man had followed since childhood had made his ears super-keen, but even so Long Tom was surprised.

The airphone was tuned delicately. It was designed to pick up the slightest motor roar at the distance of several miles. Even so, the sound that had come to Long Tom's ears through the headset had been only moderately loud.

"The Coast Guard?" breathed Monk. A look of childish disappointment was on his homely face.

"There are numerous pleasure craft about here," Ham put in hopefully.

"The plane is drawing closer," Doc said quietly.

"In those clouds?" Monk asked incredulously. His look of disappointment changed to one of acute dismay.

"Some of the Coast Guard planes use airphones, also, you hairy ape!" Ham said bitterly. "They use them to help locate smugglers who use planes. You would pop off and talk too much!"

Doc looked thoughtful.

"WE are drawing close to them," Louis said jubilantly. His eyes under their big eyebrows were shining wickedly. Headphones were over his ears.

"This—this Doc Savage, he is a tough man to go up against," Henry said hesitantly.

"Bah!" Anger flared in the malevolent eyes of The Leader. "Who is he? Just an adventurer who has been lucky. He will not escape me!"

"I—I wish we could use the hand of death," Henry muttered, half to himself.

The pale, ghastly white features of The Leader spun toward him.

"That's child's play," he said in that cold, dead voice. "And it would not work at any distance.

The hand of death is only to impress and kill fools. Doc Savage, I'll admit, is no fool. But what we are going to do—" He broke off, turned toward the queer apparatus on the floor of the plane.

"The roar of the motors is much louder!" Louie yelled excitedly. "We must be almost up with them!"

The Leader glanced out a window. The clouds were thinning. The spot could not have been better chosen for an ambush. A swift drop, and then—

A signal was given the pilot. The plane turned up on one wing, dived downward. A second ship appeared below them. It was a big, four-motored amphibian.

"THEY'VE caught us," Ham said wearily.

Doc's flake gold eyes were looking upward. A plane was shooting down from above. On the sides of that plane were the insignia of the Coast Guard.

"I'm sorry," Monk said. For once his voice was quite humble.

"Can't you outrun them?" Long Tom broke in heatedly.

"We are carrying too heavy a load. The speed of our plane is not up to that of the one they are using," Doc said concisely.

The bronze man's eyes narrowed slightly.

The other plane had dropped until it was almost level with them. The helmeted head of the pilot could be seen through the side.

But no signal was being given them to land.

"Something queer about this," Ham breathed. A puzzled look passed over his features.

"Maybe," Monk began, "they're not goin'—"

He broke off. Doc had wrenched hard on the controls. The big amphibian went into a barrel roll, straightened out and dived.

Monk hit the top of the cabin, rolled and came up sputtering. Long Tom sprawled his length. Ham's features went white.

They all saw then what Doc had seen an instant before.

The plane bearing the Coast Guard insignia had turned toward them slightly, then its nose had gone up.

And as the nose went up, a long, dark shape hurtled from the bottom of that ship. It headed directly toward the amphibian.

"An aërial torpedo!" whispered Ham.

The fake Coast Guard plane pivoted, rose slightly, then leveled off. The aërial torpedo whizzed swiftly through the air.

Once more Doc whipped the big amphibian around. He looped, did tricks few pilots would ever have attempted with so large a ship. The plane should have been far removed from the course of the torpedo.

"It's following us!" howled Monk.

Long Tom's eyes were bulging. Ham was sitting upright, hands clenched.

Doc's eyes swept the scene. As he twisted and dodged, the torpedo went through the same motions.

Up above, the fake Coast Guard plane loafed easily.

"It's radio-controlled! We can't escape!" cried Long Tom. Doc was a master pilot. Under his hands the amphibian became as nimble as a pursuit ship. But in vain.

With every twist of the amphibian, the torpedo made a similar turn. A small screw behind it beat frantically. Short, stubby wings made it a flying engine—and a flying bomb.

And the aërial torpedo was fast. It was gaining. Slowly but surely, it was overtaking Doc's ship!

Chapter VIII. A TRAP CLOSES

A GRIM expression came over the face of the bronze man. The big plane was wide open. The throttle was pulled to the last notch. Her four giant motors seemed to be trying to tear their way from the wing sockets.

But escape that way was impossible.

Doc gave a faint signal. As Ham seized the controls, the bronze man slipped from the cabin. With Long Tom at his heels, he went into the tiny radio control room of the plane.

Monk slipped into the co-pilot seat. His features worked with futile rage.

"Daggonit," he howled, "if we could only get above that thing, I could drop down on top of it!"

"Try sticking your head out a window!" Ham blistered. "If it sees you, it'll probably get scared and run away."

The fact that Monk failed to reply to that one caused Ham to turn around. He could hardly see Monk for his mouth. It was open, wide. When the chemist did that, his head all but disappeared. Monk just pointed.

The dapper Ham stared. His eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped.

The aërial torpedo was no longer pursuing them!

As they watched, it appeared to hesitate. It wobbled and twisted. Then it spun, its nose going up as it turned.

The aërial torpedo headed back, directly toward the ship from which it had come!

ABOARD the other ship there was sudden confusion. The man called The Leader who had been watching with a frozen face, leaped to his feet, raced toward the radio room.

Henry was sputtering unintelligible words. His arms were waving wildly.

"It's turned around! It's coming for us! I can do nothing!"

The Leader's malevolent eyes became hard. "Get out," he said, in that cold, flat voice. "I can control this."

Louie's big form appeared behind him. The Leader worked keys rapidly. The aërial torpedo came on, twisting and dogging as the pilot of the fake Coast Guard plane went through maneuvers even as Doc had gone through them a few short seconds before.

Without change of expression, The Leader turned to Louie. He whispered a few words in the other's ear. The big man nodded, raced out of the radio room.

The Leader rose, motioned to Henry. "Take it. The torpedo is harmless now." Henry's eyes were fear-stricken, but he obeyed. The Leader's eyes narrowed slightly. He closed the door of the radio room behind him.

A moment later, and his air of calm had disappeared. The torpedo was gaining, it was coming closer with each passing instant. The frozen-faced man raced to the belly of the big ship.

Louie was already there, was pushing himself into a small opening. The Leader crammed himself in a similar one.

Louie looked up questioningly. The other nodded. With a heave of mighty muscles, the big man

jerked down on a lever.

The next instant they were falling. A tiny plane had dropped away from the belly of the big ship. Wings shot out from its side. A motor roared.

The Leader scarcely looked around as the aerial torpedo hit the plane he had just deserted. Safe with Louie in a small, swift pursuit plane, he showed no concern over the fact that he had tricked the man that he had left behind. That he had died.

But his eyes were terrible in their anger. He had come to grips with Doc Savage. He had lost—this time. But next—

DOC'S big four-motored plane was more than a mile away when the fake Coast Guard plane appeared to dissolve in air. He swung the big amphibian toward the speeding dot of the pursuit ship. It was useless. The tiny plane was merely a blur of motion. Even as he looked, it dived into a cloud bank and disappeared.

"That was unfortunate," the bronze man said. "But we can hardly be responsible for that."

Monk's breath came out in a slow sigh. His mouth closed like a big hinge. Eyes still staring, he surrendered his seat to Doc.

"Dang it," he complained, "I saw it, but I still don't believe it. Just what happened?"

"There are two types of aerial torpedoes," Doc said quietly. "One is radio-controlled at will. The other, like this one, was newer. The two planes, the sender and the object to be destroyed, complete a radio-wave circuit. The torpedo rides the beam. No matter what the direction the pursued ship takes, the torpedo will follow."

"But this one turned around!" Monk howled. "It destroyed the ship that fired it. How come?"

"The same principle as reversing a motor on an alternating current. We have stronger apparatus than they have. I merely reversed the beam."

"But two of them got away at that," Ham said regretfully.

"Yeah, and at the speed they were making, they'll get to Hidalgo long before we will," Long Tom put in dolefully.

"That may not be fatal," Ham said dryly. "Johnny and Renny are closer than we are. They should get there first. And they should be able to handle one pair, at least."

"If they get there," Monk said pessimistically.

As if in answer to his words, a light began to flash on and off on the switchboard at the radio controls. It showed that a message was coming in on the special micro-wave length used by Doc and his aids.

Long Tom sprang to the board, pressed a switch.

"Conditions deemed meritorious for incursion of landing terrain," the emotionless voice of Johnny droned through the loudspeaker. "Propugnaculum of legions of Avispa seem in prepotency."

Long Tom looked quickly at Doc, then spoke into the small microphone.

"All right, then," he clipped. "If Avispa's soldiers are in control of the landing field, go on down. We'll be seeing you."

RENNY looked over a side of the plane. The little joystick was almost invisible in one huge hand. But those enormous fists that could smash a solid oak panel were as sensitive as a mother's touch on the stick. The plane wheeled slowly as he picked up wind direction and prepared to land.

Below them was scattered fighting through the streets of Blanco Grande. That Central American city looked far different than when Doc's aids had first seen it.

The presidential palace had been rebuilt. Now it was one of the wonder spots. There was a great modern hospital that Doc had ordered built. That building and its highly trained staff had practically banished disease from all Hidalgo.

Gold from the Valley of the Vanished had made that possible, just as the same gold had financed Doc in his fight on evil-doers.

"Yeah, gold in proper hands can be of lots of good, but if the wrong guy had it—" Renny spoke almost to himself.

Soldiers in the uniform of the Republic of Hidalgo were putting dark, brown-clad men to rout all over the city. Bursts of smoke came from rifles, and brown-clad men fell in the streets. At the airport itself, a large contingent of soldiers stood on guard. They waved wildly to the approaching plane.

"Looks like they've got the beggars on the run," Renny said.

"We must get to Carlos Avispa before any untoward interposition by the criminals changes that tide," Johnny commented.

Renny moved forward the stick and the plane flattened into a glide, began to descend slowly. The soldiers were waving and shouting even more than before. It was as if they were hailing rescuers from the sky.

The big engineer frowned slightly as his eyes combed the crowd for sight of the distinguished figure of Avispa. If his soldiers had really been victorious, it was not unlikely that the white-haired president of Hidalgo would be at the flying field to greet them.

The motor roared as Renny gunned it, dropped one wing of the plane in a quick turn; then they

were swooping down, and the wheels touched the ground gently in a perfect three-point landing. Soldiers were rushing toward them from all parts of the field.

"Viva! Viva!"

came the cries.

"Viva, nothing!"

Renny growled. "I'll be durned glad to get my feet on the ground." He hoisted his big frame out of the cockpit. Johnny already had dropped from the ship.

"An extraordinary welcome—" Johnny began. Then he paused. The half-starved look on his face changed to one of incredulous wonder.

"Renny!" he yelled.

"Holy cow!" roared Renny.

Somewhere, a sharp voice had barked out an order. The soldiers stopped cheering. Bayoneted rifles swung up as they raced forward.

"Surrender!" came the harsh command.

JOHNNY and Renny already were several paces from their plane. The odds against them were overwhelming. With smiles wiped from their faces, Doc's two aids forgot all about the military strategy that says "do not fight a useless battle."

They went into action!

A strangled roar came from Renny as he leaped forward. His hamlike fists clubbed out like bludgeons. Two soldiers sank to the ground as if they had suddenly been mesmerized. Their uniforms were split, and beneath the colorful dress garb of the Hidalgo presidential guards, khaki uniform showed plainly.

Johnny dived to the plane, reached inside. He came out with his superfiring machine-pistol even as a soldier leaped for him. The starved-appearing geologist tripped his attacker, brought the pistol up. He was too busy even to use a big word.

The gun moaned in his hands. A wave of soldiers went down like wheat before a reaper.

The blast cleared the way so Renny could reach the plane and get his machine-pistol. He whirled, crouched low. His weapon, too, went into action with a bullfiddle moan. The phony guards went down like tenpins.

"We've got to get word to Doc!" Renny howled.

"Get word to him yourself!" came a bellow from Johnny. It had probably been years since he had used such simple words.

As their machine-pistols moaned and coughed, the uniformed men screamed, broke back.

Blam! Blam!

A rifle spoke sharply, twice. Lead pinged into the plane behind their backs. Johnny and Renny ducked, firing steadily. Only "mercy" bullets were in their weapons—bullets that brought quick unconsciousness, but not death; but their foes did not know that.

Then the tide of the battle turned. Behind the wave of retreating figures, a soldier set up a Lewis gun on a tripod. Sandbags were in front of him. A cruel leer was on his face.

The gun started with a deadly chatter, even before his own retreating confederates were past him. Three of them fell, filled with his machine-gun lead.

Doc's aids dropped, rolled. Dirt kicked up in front of them. They pressed themselves flat on the earth. There was a tiny rise in the ground between them and the machine-gunner. It made them more difficult targets.

But the machine-gunner chopped his gun down. The slugs tore off that little rise of ground, sent it flying away in a cloud of dust. Bullets tore through Renny's clothing. The deadly rain of lead came nearer—

A voice roared suddenly from a loudspeaker at the edge of the field.

"Do not kill them, fool! We must take them alive. Until Doc Savage is dead, they must live. By torturing them, we may bring the bronze man to terms."

The machine gun stopped chattering. Instantly, Johnny and Renny were on their feet. They turned, dashed toward their plane.

A veritable wave of men rushed around that plane toward them. A yellowish vapor was pouring from a large tank in the arms of the leading man.

Johnny coughed. Renny felt as if his muscles had suddenly gone powerless. The machine-pistol dropped from his hands. Figures wearing gas masks poured over him.

Arms flaying the air instinctively, his huge fists knocking down men right and left, the big engineer went on. His clawing hands caught a side of the plane. He felt as if his lungs were bursting. Arms caught him about the legs, tried to hold him back.

With the last ounce of his tremendous strength, Renny jerked himself forward, fell head down in the cockpit of the plane. His head collided with the radio switchboard. He tried to shout.

It was too late. He could not. He slumped down, unconscious.

Chapter IX. THE SKIES EXPLODE

FAR to the north, in Doc's big plane, the radio control board light flashed again. Once more,

Long Tom tuned in on the micro-wave. A voice came in steadily. It used none of Johnny's long words. It was a compact message, designed to pack the most meaning in the fewest words:

"Overpowered by enemy. Too many to tackle. Turn back. Use other plans."

Doc Savage's flake gold eyes opened slightly. His mouth tightened.

"They've been trapped!" Monk's voice was a moan.

"I don't see how—" Long Tom gulped.

"Evidently they mistook hostile forces for the loyal troops of President Avispa," the bronze man said crisply.

For a moment there was silence. Ham's brow was furrowed. He knew, as did the rest, that the very wording of the warning they had received indicated that Johnny and Renny had been overcome.

It was a warning designed to indicate that very thing.

Small, easily concealed dictographs were hidden just under the radio board on all the planes used by Doc's men. Pressure of a button was all that was necessary to broadcast one of several prepared messages. Renny had banged his head against the button that controlled the one he wanted to send.

"If no one saw Renny get that warning off, maybe we can surprise them," Ham exclaimed.

"More and more, we are having evidence that the man we are opposing is not only clever, but has sources of information that has enabled him to anticipate us," the bronze man said slowly.

Monk roared, thrust out his powerful arms. Monk always was a direct actionist. Trickery might be all right, but he preferred stronger methods.

"Let's go on and take 'em!" he howled. "We'll knock 'em clean to the Pacific!"

"One shot, if it struck this plane in the right place, and we'd be the ones who would be knocked clean to the Pacific," Long Tom commented dryly.

"Can't we let Monk get there somehow in any case?" Ham asked pleasantly. "They would think they had harmed us if they chopped him up, and that certainly would be fooling them."

"Why, you encyclopedia of reversed decisions!" Monk bellowed. "If I wasn't better than you, I'd take a parachute jump without the parachute!"

Ham pulled open a large window of the control cabin and smiled. "I think it's big enough," he said significantly.

"Turn east," Doc interrupted evenly. He turned the controls over to Ham. "Head for Havana. Give her all the speed she's got."

HAM obeyed unhesitatingly. Conversation quieted. Doc Savage had reached a decision. What it was, his aids did not know, nor did they ask. The bronze man seldom revealed what he had in his mind until it came time to put that plan into execution.

But they all knew that there must be a good reason, or Doc would not be turning off their course when Johnny and Renny were in danger.

For time and time again, they had all seen instances to show that Doc Savage's first concern was the safety of his men. The bronze giant would take terrific personal risks when his aids were in the clear. But when he was the only agent that could free them, he made sure they would be safe before he walked into almost certain death.

Vital supplies were aboard the big amphibian. Ham knew Doc would sacrifice those supplies willingly if it would aid Johnny and Renny. But if not, those supplies had to be saved.

Doc rose, went back into the cabin with Long Tom. The green foliage of Cuba appeared before them.

"Tilt the nose up," the bronze man instructed briefly.

The dapper lawyer obeyed. There was a faint jerk on the plane. An object hurtled downward. Then a huge, white mushroom appeared.

Long Tom had bailed out. He was landing in Cuba.

Doc watched Long Tom land, pick himself up and fold the chute. As the unhealthy-appearing electrical genius headed for a highway, the bronze man took the controls.

"Where to now?" Monk growled.

"Hidalgo," Doc answered briefly. "No stops until we get there."

Monk and Ham looked at each other questioningly. They would have liked to know what Long Tom was going to do, but they knew they would have to wait until Doc decided to tell them.

The bronze man looked straight ahead. Tiny flakes in his eyes looked like whirlwinds. His mouth was grim.

FAR ahead of the big four-motored ship, a smaller plane whipped along like a humming bird. It went so fast it was merely a blur in the sky.

The malevolent eyes of the man at the stick were inscrutable. His face was set and lifeless. It had no expression. Radio headphones were on his ears.

The little plane was high in the air. It had to be. The country below was rugged and wild. Just ahead was a mighty mountain peak. It was on one of the two great Central American ranges that wedge between them the Republic of Hidalgo.

The great area between the two giant ranges was traversed by half a dozen smaller but even more rugged groups of hills. The whole scene presented a perfect spot for guerrilla banditry.

It was almost impenetrable. The tiny ship topped the big peak and glided down into the valley. Nearly in the center of it was Blanco Grande.

The pilot, his malevolent eyes glowing, circled and spoke softly into the microphone slung before his mouth. Still swinging, he waited for his answer.

The view below him was one of beauty. Blanco Grande's crooked streets had been straightened. There were no squalid shacks, but only great parks. Crystal-clear water played from fountains. There was a great, white marble library that permitted the education of those Hidalgans who wished to partake of it. Gold had done that for Blanco Grande.

The vicious-eyed pilot saw, but was uninterested. He thought only of the gold that had made the beauty of Blanco Grande possible. The corners of his lifeless mouth lifted slightly. Gold! If the world only knew what he intended to do with that gold, armies from every civilized nation would be sped by warships under forced draft to block him. But the world did not know. When it did learn, it would be too late.

"Gold has been used in many ways, but never as I intend to use it," The Leader assured himself. The earphones crackled slightly. He listened, then turned to the big man in the tiny cockpit behind him. The slit that was his mouth straightened.

"The ones they call Renny and Johnny have been captured," he said in that flat, expressionless voice. "They are being held as hostages—or until I decree they must die."

Again the earphones crackled into life. The malevolent eyes of The Leader sparkled at what he heard.

"The bronze man went off his course to fly over Havana," he announced. "He circled and dropped the man known as Long Tom. Our men lost trace of Long Tom, but he is believed to have headed back for New York.

"Doc Savage is worried. He should be. I am almost glad we did not kill him in the clouds. I will be happy when he reach Hidalgo. For then—" A mirthless chuckle came from between his thin lips. Louie shivered faintly; perspiration dampened his fists. The big man did not hesitate to kill. He feared little. But he did fear the lifeless-faced ruler who piloted the plane. If The Leader said he was glad Doc Savage would reach Hidalgo, then it meant the brain behind those evil eyes had concocted some terrible scheme.

A GROUP of soldiers rushed out as the plane dropped to the landing field at Blanco Grande. Gone were the fake uniforms that had fooled Johnny and Renny. Now the soldiers of fortune were dressed in khaki.

At their head was a stocky, agate-eyed man in the uniform of a general. His shoulders were broad, his eyes set a little too close together. Copper-tinted features grave, he bowed low before the figure approaching from the plane.

When he raised his head, he endeavored to keep his features calm. But fear showed there. A silence fell.

Slowly, deliberately, The Leader raked him with his malevolent, repelling eyes. They started at the feet and moved slowly up to features that were turning ashen.

General Juan Glassell's mouth opened, then closed. He ran a tongue over dry lips.

"Glassell, you are a fool." The flat, lifeless tones of the other were not raised. They did not need to be. There was a chill in them like an icy blast.

The big man in the general's uniform tried to speak. The words would not come. His throat seemed glued.

"You were in command of the armed forces of Hidalgo," that dreadful voice went on. "You assured me you could seize control of this country within two hours. You failed."

The Leader took a step forward. His lifeless face jutted forward. Involuntarily, Glassell moved backward.

"I—I—" he half shrieked. "How did I know so many would remain loyal? How did I know we would have to kill so many?" He gulped rapidly. "But we are winning! We will soon be in control!"

The other looked at him for a long moment. "It must be that way, you must win before to-morrow. If not—"

"Not the hand of death, not that!" Glassell screamed.

"Blanco Grande must be in our hands. It is the only exit from the Valley of the Vanished. Unless we control that exit, we could be trapped." The Leader spoke as if to himself.

Some of Glassell's color returned. "It shall be done. We shall hold the city. There will be no attack on our rear when we push ahead. We can even start part of the advance to-night."

"You blundered also when you permitted this Doc Savage's men to send out word that they had been captured," the cold-voiced one went on.

General Glassell started with honest astonishment. "But—but that is impossible! I was here myself! They could not—"

The Leader held up a hand. "Enough. They did. But it is just as well. This bronze man will rush here to rescue them. That is what I want. Now here is what I want you to do—"

THE Hidalgo airport became the scene of great activity. Pursuit planes were rolled out, their

motors warmed. Big bombers trundled from their hangars. Pilots and observers swarmed about them. At the edge of the field, antiaircraft guns were moved into position.

"His plane should be here in ten minutes." General Glassell spoke excitedly. His close-set eyes were gleaming wickedly. "Every report has been the same. It is the four-motored craft you described. The markings are such they could not be counterfeited."

Beside him the frozen-faced one nodded slightly. "There is no question of that. His eyes narrowed, then he shrugged. "It has taken him longer to reach here than I estimated, but that means nothing."

The pursuit planes took off. The bombers roared in the air behind them. Up and up they soared. The pursuit ships were only faint dots in the sky, the bombers far in the distance, when a huge amphibian showed in the clear mountain air. At first, it was many miles away. Then it was quite close.

Relief showed suddenly in The Leader's evil eyes. "It is the right ship," he breathed. "At first I feared a trick, but now—"

On and on came the amphibian. It circled the field, high and suspiciously.

The Leader lifted the microphone in front of him. He spoke into it.

Instantly, it seemed as if all hell had arrived. There was the terrific roar and moan of diving motors. Pursuit ships that had been hidden high above, smashed down, motors wide open in desperate power dives. Machine guns rent the air like riveting hammers.

Doc's ship wheeled. It was clumsy by comparison with the hornetlike attackers. Its big bulk seemed to loom large, make a perfect target.

But machine-gun bullets bounced off it like rain.

"Armor-plated," The Leader sneered. "But wait!"

The big amphibian was dodging and twisting with amazing agility for so large a ship. Time and time again, it seemed to dart directly out from under a rain of steel that would have been fatal. But gradually the attackers were closing in. Squadron after squadron zoomed close. The bombers were coming down, their observers firing fiercely.

Then a second contingent of battle planes drew near. Doc's plane was locked in a perfect circle of enemy ships. It had no way to escape. The pursuit planes drew aside to let the latest arrivals close.

Strange-looking weapons protruded from the sides of these ships. Gradually they jockeyed close. Flame suddenly filled the air. Flame blasted with tons of pressure from the muzzles of those queer-looking weapons. That flame was white-hot. Even the watchers, far below, could see the armor plating on the big amphibian melting. The flame cut through the steel like an acetylene torch through a cheap boiler plate.

The lips on the frozen-faced one twitched. His grin was a horrible grimace.

Then that grin vanished. Stark dismay flamed in his malevolent eyes.

ONE instant the entire sky was filled with fighting ships. The next, and the sky was filled only with flames and flying pieces of things that had been ships and men.

The Leader had expected Doc's plane to be carrying explosives. He had counted on that to wipe out the bronze man and his aids. But he hadn't counted on the terrific destruction that occurred.

Doc's big ship vanished. It just wasn't there. But neither was the entire attacking fleet. The blast, when its concussion reached the earth, flattened hangars, hurled men to the ground.

Doc's plane was blown not to bits, but to fine powder. But with it every ship of that tremendous battle fleet was destroyed!

Hidalgo's entire fighting fleet had been destroyed. But—

The evil sparkle returned to the malevolent eyes of The Leader. Once more those lifeless lips twisted. He turned to General Glassell.

"The price was high," came that flat, cold voice. "But it was worth it. Doc Savage was more dangerous to us than any ordinary army would be. Now he is dead. He and his aids. And I am happy that I watched him die."

Chapter X. VIVA THE LEADER

DARKNESS fell on Blanco Grande. But the night was red. Streets resembled an old-fashioned torchlight parade. And there was a revelry of victory such as no political celebration would have dreamed about.

Khaki-clad figures staggered drunkenly, waved half-empty bottles in the air. They repeated one monotonous, victory chant:

"Doc Savage is dead! Viva The Leader! Doc Savage is dead! Viva The Leader!

Eyes stared wildly. Sometimes they glanced about nervously, only to start and continue their celebration. There could be no doubt about it. Doc Savage was dead!

That decision had not been reached at once even after the terrific explosion in the sky. Hundreds of men had been put to work. Carefully, they had picked up every piece of wreckage, every part of a human body they could find.

Enough pieces of the big amphibian had been found to identify it positively. There could be no

mistake. It had been Doc's plane.

Identification of bodies had been more difficult. They had been torn into thousands of pieces.

But one unanswerable clue had been found:

Among the shattered fragments that had been men, had been found a queer substance, several pieces of it, in fact. That substance had been tested. It was crimson-soaked underwear of the type only Doc and his men wore.

That had convinced even The Leader.

And as revelry reigned in the streets, the frozen-faced one and General Glassell sat comfortably in the traitor's well-furnished offices. As sound of the celebration penetrated those offices, Glassell smiled happily.

"With one stroke, you have insured victory," he complimented. "Even those who have stood with President Avispa will quail now. The bronze man was their only hope."

The frozen-faced one nodded slightly. His eyes darkened as the shrill echo of shots came to his ears.

"But those at the palace are stubborn. They still fight on." He shrugged, his lifeless face unchanging. "It does not matter. We can localize the fighting there. You have dispatched more troops toward the palace?"

"As you ordered. None can stand against the force I have dispatched. Every instrument of modern warfare is included in the equipment—everything but planes."

"The loss of those planes was regrettable, but need not concern us," the other said in cold, clipped tones. "More could be ordered, but we will not need them. Before they will have arrived, we will have conquered."

"And then?" There was a sly, shrewd look in Glassell's close-set eyes.

"Then I am ready." For the first time a note of hardness, a grim hint of implacable power and greed, broke through that flat voice. "Authority such as no man has ever had will be in my hands. Dictators, kings, emperors and czars of the past will be as nothing compared to me."

"But how—"

General Glassell's voice choked, his face paled. The other's repelling eyes had swept over him, once. That was enough.

"It is not well to ask too many questions," the frozen-faced one told him. "The secret of how that power is coming to me is known to me alone. No one else can guess, no one else will know—until it is too late."

From outside came that steady, monotonous shout:

"Doc Savage is dead! Viva The Leader! Doc Savage is dead. Viva The Leader!"

THE cries filtered dimly through a subterranean passage. They reverberated hollowly against walls of stone. The walls were damp, cold and clammy. But the two men leaning against them felt just as damp and just as clammy.

Sweat—the cold sweat of horror—oozed from the pores of Renny and Johnny.

"If Doc is gone, it doesn't matter much what happens to us," Renny said.

Johnny was slow in replying. His grief was heavy.

"Doc had to get it sometime, I suppose," he said in a low voice. Under stress of emotion he had returned to simple words. "But if he'd only had a chance to fight—"

The guards had told the two men all about it. They had told it with great glee. Their description had been complete. They had even revealed the fact that look-outs had been watching Doc and his men all the time, and that Long Tom had landed in Havana.

Renny shuddered. That chant of death came again through the cell window. "And Monk and Ham went with him. There were six of us. Now there are only three. Long Tom's the only one left, outside of us."

"And we are incapacitated by lack of locomotion," Johnny said crisply. His eyes narrowed behind their glasses. His half-starved features set.

Renny looked at him quickly. The big engineer's puritanical face became severe. His thin mouth compressed tightly.

"I see what you mean!" he snapped. "Doc wouldn't want us to quit, just because he is gone. He'd want us to carry on, to do what we were supposed to do."

His huge frame swung toward the door. His monstrosities of fists battered furiously. He was accustomed to smashing through doors with those fists. This one was different. Skin came from his knuckles. The door did not move. It was of iron.

Johnny gestured faintly toward one side of the dungeon. Renny looked that way and his eyes opened slightly, his features became even more thin and disapproving.

Mortar appeared chipped and flaky around one huge stone in one side of the cell. Some previous occupant had undoubtedly spent hours working away at that mortar, buoyed by undying hope.

Softly, despite his bulk, Johnny eased to the stone. His powerful fingers brushed the mortar away. Then those fingers jammed in hard, caught a firm grip.

Muscles rose in huge ridges on his back, perspiration broke from his face. The big stone creaked. Fine dust flew out. Renny moved over, caught Johnny about the waist, added his ponderous weight.

There was a dull, crunching sound. The huge stone came out. In the corridor outside the cell a guard laughed jeeringly. "Birds do not fly from this cage, señors," he called bitingly. With disappointed eyes, Doc's two aids looked into the hole left by the huge stone. Behind that hole was another stone, equally as big. The cell was a veritable fortress. Escape was impossible. "Maybe Avispa can win out without our help," Renny said. But his voice showed that he had no such hope.

NOR did President Avispa hold any such hope, either. Despair was written on a face that once had known only smiles. Harsh lines of worry had wiped out his look of kindness. Shoulders that once had been powerful, now were bowed with sorrow and disappointment. His head was cupped in strong, well-formed hands. His eyes had a look of grief and resignation. Words dinned into his ears, words shouted by a drunken, boisterous mob of khaki-clad men that encircled the palace.

"Doc Savage is dead! Viva The Leader! Doc Savage is dead. Viva The Leader!"

A scattered volley of rifle shots sounded, near at hand. The monotonous chant broke off, but only for a moment. Soon it was resumed.

A small man slipped into the room. His face was bloody, his clothes torn. Avispa's head came up. For a moment hope lighted his eyes; then that hope died as he saw the look on the other's features.

"It is so?" he asked needlessly.

"There is no doubt about it, my president," the little man said. "I myself saw the pieces of the plane and the—the other things that show the bronze man is dead."

For a moment President Avispa did not speak. He was thinking—thinking back into the past, as the old sometimes do. Clark Savage, Sr., had been his friend. Clark Savage Jr. had been his friend. Now both were gone. He had respected the elder Savage, but he had had an affection for Doc such as he had had for no other living man.

But Doc was gone. And enemies were pressing ever harder.

"What else did you learn?"

The man hesitated. It was as if he did not care to be the bearer of evil tidings.

"The two known as Renny and Johnny are captives," he mumbled at last. "They are held in the dungeon, where none can get at them. From words I heard dropped by liquor-loosened tongues, they are to be executed."

A sudden shout went up from outside the palace. A machine gun wrote rapidly. And the words it wrote were death. Rifles cracked.

"An attack!" the little man breathed.

Avispa grew old again. He slumped in his chair. "They are few. My men are loyal, but why should we fight a useless battle? Why shouldn't I surrender and at least save their lives?"

"No! No, my president!" The little man fairly spouted words. "That cannot be! I did not want to tell! But now I must!"

"There is worse to come?" Avispa asked incredulously.

The small man gulped, and nodded. "They are boasting in the streets of what they are to do," he said brokenly. "Those of us who are captured alive are to be tortured in ways that make the blood run cold. Never surrender. If you are not killed in the final fighting, then—"

Slowly, with hands that shook, President Avispa reached into a drawer, brought out a pistol. "I understand, mi amigo. One bullet I shall save for myself."

A second, then a third machine gun joined the riotous chorus of death beyond the palace walls. A pitiful line of defenders hunted cover, praying only that the end would be a merciful one.

THE men manning those machine guns outside the palace were angry. They alone had been kept on duty. While others drank and celebrated, they were forced to work.

"Let's get it over with!" a hardboiled sergeant snarled fiercely. "The quicker we wipe out that bunch of rats in there, the quicker we can have some fun ourselves!"

"They at least are a stubborn bunch of rats!" a corporal grated.

Sullen murmurs swept the ranks of the attackers. The monotonous chorus of the revelers brought only fierce swearing.

A tall figure came swaying down the street. He was dressed as a captain. Or he had been in a captain's uniform. Now that uniform was ripped and torn. A civilian's hat was pulled down tightly over his head. He held a bottle high in one hand.

"Doc Savage is dead! Viva The—"

"Viva

hell!" bellowed the sergeant. He made a swipe for the bottle in the other's hand.

The big man toppled, but held onto the bottle. "Naughty, naughty," he said thickly. "Shish is mine. Why don't you get your own?"

"Yeah, why don't I?" the sergeant rasped bitterly. "By the time I get free, there won't be any left!"

The big man nodded his head sagely. "You shonow, I spect you're right. Shere isn't very much more."

Machine guns quieted. Eager, angry ears were cocked toward the speaker.

"You mean the supply is about gone?" the sergeant asked, with dangerous calm.

"Yes, shir. It's about gone." The big man swayed again, lifted the bottle to his lips, then wiped his mouth with a tattered sleeve. He coughed, the bottle almost fell from his hands.

The sergeant grabbed it, took a deep swallow. The anger faded from his face. "If we only didn't have to push on and take this place to-night--"

He hesitated a moment, and fear showed thinly on his features. "But it's no go. I only wish--"

The big man regained his balance with an effort, stared owlshly at the bottle in the sergeant's hand. He pawed for it awkwardly.

"Shay, that's mine."

"Scram!" snarled the sergeant. "I'm keeping this, and it's little enough as it is!"

"O. K." The big man turned, staggered off. "If you're goin' tuh be so-so unsociable about it. I got a bunch hidden I was goin' to give yuh, but not now."

The sergeant's mouth dropped open. He looked quickly at the corporal. The corporal nodded feverishly. Together they slipped off, behind the swaying figure. They did not see the men from the machine guns take in after them.

And soon they discovered they had lost the big man. He seemed to have vanished in thin air. For a moment the men swore, then they hurried back to their posts. A vacant spot had been left in the lines for a moment. But no one would know about that.

EVEN as they were warming up the machine guns a moment later, a tall figure eased into the palace grounds. A moment later and that figure had reached the palace itself.

President Avispa heard a faint tap on his window. He whirled, grabbing up the gun from the desk. Peering in at him was a disheveled figure wearing what had been a captain's uniform. A civilian's hat was jammed tight over the head.

But Avispa did not notice the uniform or hat. He saw only a pair of eyes. Those eyes were of flake gold.

As he stared, momentarily paralyzed, the big figure eased quickly into the room.

"I came as swiftly as I could," said Doc Savage quietly.

Avispa found it hard to speak at all. Outside, he could still hear that monotonous chant:

"Doc Savage is dead! Viva The Leader!"

But Doc Savage was not dead.

Chapter XI. SEEING DOUBLE

PRESIDENT AVISPA seemed to grow younger with each passing second. Age dropped from him like a cloak. His features were lined, his hair white; but now his shoulders were erect, his head up.

"My-my friend," he said simply.

Doc wiped dark grease paint from his face. Bronze hair that closely matched the color of his skin showed as he pulled the hat from his head.

"You are safe. I thought you were dead." Avispa had difficulty in standing still. He seemed to want to hop up and down with joy. Then he sobered. "But I can't understand. You have had many narrow escapes. But this--" He gestured expressively. "Positive evidence was found that you were dead."

"Evidence that I hoped would be found," the bronze man said dryly.

"Then you really weren't in the plane?"

Doc smiled slightly. "Of course not, although I wanted The Leader and his men to think so. Long Tom dropped off the plane at Havana. In the disguise of a peasant, he purchased some supplies, then chartered a small, swift plane and followed us. We met over the Valley of the Vanished."

President Avispa nodded eagerly.

"I had supplies we could not afford to lose," the bronze man continued. "Those were the ones Long Tom purchased in Havana. Those supplies were dropped by parachute. Monk, Ham and Long Tom went with them, and I took over the small plane. Using radio control, I directed the big amphibian here."

"But when the attack came?"

"My plane was hidden in the clouds, even above the pursuit ships that were waiting for me. In the amphibian was thermite, in great quantity. Naturally, when the explosion came it was devastating, as you saw."

"But the bodies," protested Avispa. "How did you do that?"

"They were artificially created," the bronze man responded quietly. "I knew The Leader would demand more than an exploded plane to make sure I was dead."

Doc then told the white-haired president of the ruse he had used to get inside the palace grounds. Although he had pretended to drink, the bronze man hadn't touched a drop.

"Now the enemy thinks you are dead." The white-haired president grinned broadly. "What a surprise is in store for them when they discover their error, when they find that you have arrived and saved Hidalgo!"

"Hidalgo is far from saved," the bronze man cautioned. "The enemy we oppose is resourceful, he is

dangerous."

Avispa sighed, sank back in his chair. He knew that Doc was right, that the battle had still to be won; but now that the bronze man had arrived, he felt his first ray of hope. And he was glad to shift his burden to another's shoulders.

"First, you will want to know what has happened. I will tell you," he began.

"The revolt is led by General Glassell. He was in charge of my army. He turned traitor. Why, I do not know. I do know that in the weeks just preceding the revolt, he enlisted many strangers in the army. They were of a type I did not think we would need, evil-faced, villainous-appearing. But he said they were fighters."

"They were renegade soldiers of fortune, men who came here solely to take part in this revolt," Doc said quietly.

Avispa nodded. "So I discovered. When the attack came, many of my men were loyal. But they were caught unprepared. A majority were killed. Only a few reached me here at the palace. They have done their best. They have repelled attack after attack. But it is only a question of time. They cannot hold out much longer."

"And Johnny and Renny?"

A shadow of pain flickered over the other's face. "They are prisoners. They are to be executed," he said.

DOC SAVAGE'S expression did not change. Only the gold flecks in his eyes appeared to move.

"Where are they held?" he clipped.

"In the dungeon," Avispa said apologetically. "I should have destroyed that dungeon. I did not. I kept it as a curiosity. It was built years ago by another ruler. In it are all the medieval instruments of torture ever devised. And it is impenetrable."

A shudder shook the white-haired president's frame.

"Johnny and Renny are there. They are fifty feet underground in a fortress that has walls twenty feet thick. The only entrance is a narrow passageway in stone. It is heavily guarded."

Guns sounded with renewed vigor outside the palace walls. A scream of pain came from an unlucky defender. Doc Savage's face hardened. His life had been dedicated to fighting injustice and evil-doers. The screaming of dying men and the snarl of guns outside symbolized the worst type of injustice.

Directed by a man with an insatiable lust for power, revolt had been brought about in a peaceful country. Hundreds of innocent lives had been lost. And the trail of blood was not yet ended.

"The situation is bad," Avispa said doubtfully.

"Johnny and Renny are in peril," Doc said quietly. "They are prisoners because they obeyed my orders. My first task is to save them, if possible."

Avispa agreed slowly. Age seemed creeping back over him.

"Where does Glassell live, or have his offices?"

"They are combined." The white-haired president gave brief directions.

"Perhaps if you could talk to him, you could persuade him to see the evil he has brought," he concluded wearily. "He did not appear bad to me. I thought once—" he gestured resignedly.

"I will be back," Doc interrupted swiftly. "Do not give up."

As swiftly as he had entered, the bronze man was gone. He melted into the shadow of the palace wall.

A machine-gunner thought he saw a dark shape move against that wall. He turned his gun that way, squeezed the trigger.

Br-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!

Lead tore fragments of stone and dust from the wall. The dark shape had vanished.

The machine-gunner swore half-heartedly. He was beginning to be accustomed to ghosts. The captain who was going to lead the way to a liquor supply must have been one. Nothing else could have disappeared so fast.

A breath of air fanned the gunner's cheek suddenly. He spun, twisting his gun with him. Then he laughed nervously.

A tall figure appeared to have materialized beside him, coming out of the very ground. The figure was swaying. One hand passed a bottle to the gunner.

"Brought this to you," the big figure gulped.

The gunner grabbed it gratefully. It wasn't until much later that he recalled that his benefactor must have come from the palace wall. By that time the bottle in his hand was half empty. He no longer cared.

GUARDS almost encircled the home of General Glassell. They, too, were thirsty. But liquor would not have tempted them, even if they could have had it.

The Leader was in the office with Glassell. The very thought of that was enough to bring chills to otherwise hardened spines. They had heard of The Leader. They had heard more of the hand of death. So they walked their posts alertly, quick to challenge any who came too close.

But walking in a military manner does not mean looking up at the sky. Thus the guards did not see

the dim shadow that glided noiselessly through the foliage of trees, high over their heads. Leaves rattle and tree limbs bend easily under heavy weight. But so carefully did the shadow among them move that there was not a sound. Yet it moved fast. Only seconds elapsed until it had passed the line of guards, reached the security of darkness on the other side. Then a big figure dropped to the ground as lightly as a cat. It drifted across the yard, blending with shadows behind stunted trees and bushes.

Before a window, the figure halted. The shades were drawn, but there was light behind those shades. Voices came clearly.

"I personally do not take pleasure in watching torture, but if that is your wish, Glassell, you have my permission," came cold, flat tones.

Breath was drawn in gustily. Lips smacked, as if Glassell were anticipating a pleasurable experience. "It has been long since I have enjoyed such a sight," the general said. His Spanish had become blurred. It was guttural and harsh.

"This Renny is a big fellow, is he not?" the cold, lifeless voice asked.

"Big enough to stand plenty before he dies," Glassell gloated. "In that I shall take extreme delight. The other"—his tone expressed supreme disgust—"this Johnny, as he is called, is a half-starved appearing fellow. He probably will not last long, although we have ways of keeping life existing, even when the poor pigs want to die."

The huge figure outside the window stiffened.

There was sound of a chair being drawn back. "First I shall eat," Glassell said. "Then I shall go. When I return, two more of Doc Savage's aids will be dead."

A shadow appeared to drift up one side of the house. It moved lightly, fingers finding the slightest projection. Then a window swung up. The shadow disappeared inside.

Glassell ate heartily. His close-set eyes were half shut. Already he was planning the exquisite torture he would use. There was the rack now; but that was not so good, it had been used too often. Perhaps it would be better to start by filling the bodies of his victims with sharp toothpick-sized pieces of wood imbedded not too deeply in their bodies. By burning those pieces of wood, every nerve would suffer agony, but the torture would not kill. After that—

Still smiling, he rose from the table and left the house. Guards snapped to attention as the general walked from the building and headed toward the dungeon.

THE soldiers who guarded the dungeon torture chamber were brutal. It took men of instinctive brutality to serve in those posts. Right now they were filled with a sense of well-being. There were two captives below who should furnish lots of amusement.

A bottle had been passed around earlier. Now several were smoking cigarettes. But they were alert. They could afford to take no chances on those prisoners escaping.

A sentinel whistled softly. The men leaped up, stepped on their cigarettes. Ugly, loutish figures drew to attention.

The swaggering form of General Glassell came into view. The general walked jauntily. His air bespoke a man well pleased with himself.

"The soul of Doc Savage is no doubt lonesome," he purred. "We will send it company."

He laughed harshly at his own joke as he passed the first guard.

"Step lively!" he rapped. "I wish to see the dogs immediately. The day's work is incomplete."

Four of the guards stepped forward. Here was a leader to their liking. He was ruthless, vain and brutal.

Moving at a rapid pace, the guards led the way down through long stone corridors. Deeper and deeper they went into the ground. The air was dampish and foul.

As they reached a heavy door, three of the guards stood back. They lifted bayoneted rifles.

"These are desperate men," said the turnkey. He twisted a huge key in the lock. The door swung open.

Johnny and Renny stared out calmly. They looked at the big figure of the general.

"A one-way trip?" Renny asked pleasantly.

"And not a joyful one," the turnkey sneered.

"Bring them out!" the general rapped.

The turnkey laughed. Johnny and Renny moved out slowly. The guards backed up, the points of their bayonets touching the stomachs of Doc's aids.

Safe behind them, the turnkey smashed Renny hard in the neck, spat at him. He kicked Johnny in the shins.

"Travel," he rasped. "If you're nice, we'll shoot you after using the thumbscrews. Otherwise, we may show you some of our other playthings."

"Guard them carefully!" the general barked. "Take them up above. We'll see about the torture then."

"A pleasant executioner," Johnny commented.

"I believe I prefer dying to his company anyway," Renny agreed.

"Silence, dogs!" The turnkey kicked out viciously. Renny bit his lip, his huge hands working as if they already felt a throat in their grip.

The general stood to one side, smiling slightly as the procession passed him.

THERE was a sudden commotion above them. The sound was that of running feet. The guards halted, startled.

"Get going! What are you waiting for?" barked the general. His lips lifted in a savage snarl. The guards quickened their pace. Sharp points of the bayonets boosted Johnny and Renny along. "Holy cow," Renny exploded, "we can't even walk; we've got to run to the closest exit—and the kind of exit that probably will be our last one!"

The sound of running feet was nearer now. Two more guards tore around the end of the corridor, rushed toward those with Renny and Johnny.

They looked as if they had been seeing ghosts. Their faces were pale. They swallowed hard as they tried to speak.

Then another figure came around the bend in the corridor. Breaths came in sharply. Then there was silence. A deep, ghastly silence.

That second figure also was General Glassell! There were two General Glassells!

One stood near the prisoners. The other stood almost before them. The two looked exactly alike. They were dressed exactly alike.

It was almost as if one of them was standing before a mirror. Or as if the soldiers were seeing double.

"Arrest that man! He's an impostor!" howled the second General Glassell.

Chapter XII. THE TORTURE ROOM

THE soldiers stood rooted. Eyes were bulging, hands were fingering guns nervously. The wrong word would have filled that corridor with a deadly hail of lead. Nerves keyed, the men were ready to shoot at anything or anybody.

The two General Glassells were glowering at each other. The face of each grew red. Their mannerisms were the same, the very lift of their lips was identical.

"You heard me! Arrest that man!" The roar came not from one man, but from two.

Guns came up in the hands of the soldiers. And about half covered the second General Glassell.

The others covered the one who had arrived first.

Johnny and Renny stood fast. They were barely breathing, but their eyes were sparkling. They alone of all those in the corridor knew what had happened, knew that one of the two men wearing a general's uniform was really Doc Savage!

But even they did not know which one!

The bronze man had often fooled them by his skillful use of make-up. This time, he had excelled himself. So closely did the two men resemble each other, that none could tell which was real and which was counterfeit.

More guards and soldiers poured into the corridor. And that broke the spell. For in the lead was a captain of the guards, carrying a submachine gun.

The captain's wits were quick. He took in the situation with one quick glance.

"Both of you up, with your hands!" he bellowed.

"But I'm General Glassell!" shouted the second general to appear.

"Obey my orders! Arrest that man!" countered the first.

"You'll both be corpses if you don't do as I say!" snapped the captain. "One of you is lying. I'll find out which. Up with your paws!"

Slowly, two pairs of hands went up. The guards moved closer, encircling both of the men dressed as generals. Bayonet points went out, jabbed a trifle harder than was necessary. It is seldom that buck privates get a chance at generals.

"I cannot understand this," the first General Glassell snarled. His Spanish was guttural and harsh. "I come here to take these prisoners to the torture room. Then this fake general appears. I do not understand why you do not arrest him. He must be a spy."

"Spy!" The second general fairly shouted the words. "Spy! Me, the general in command of all Hidalgo's troops? This man looks like me outwardly; he talks like I do. But he is not me. I can prove it!"

A sharp gasp came from Johnny. Renny's huge figure shifted uneasily.

"Then prove it!" bellowed the captain.

The second General Glassell pawed at his tunic, he tore his shirt open.

"You have all fought with me!" he screamed. "Look!"

With one quick motion, he bared his chest. A long, vivid scar ran from the center of that chest almost to the waistline.

"See if the impostor has such a scar!" Glassell shrilled.

"That will not be necessary," came the calm tones of Doc Savage. "I congratulate you. You have won, General Glassell."

RENNY moaned in disappointment. Johnny shook his head sadly.

The real General Glassell was jumping up and down in anger. He surged close to the man who looked

like him, took one incredulous look into the other's eyes. Then anger faded; fear and something like awe crept into his face.

"Doc Savage!" he breathed. "But-but you are dead!"

The guards stepped back when they heard Glassell's words. One who had imbibed too heavily turned a pale, sickly color.

"A spirit!" he moaned.

With a visible effort, General Glassell regained control. The red rim of rage crept into his eyes.

"Not a spirit yet!" he blasted. "This bronze man is hard to kill. But he is in my hands now. And this time he will die. I myself shall watch him die. Shall see him die by inches."

All attention was centered on Doc Savage. For just a moment no eyes were on Renny. The big engineer went into action.

The bellow of rage he gave would have done credit to a bull-ape—or to Monk. His huge arms swept out, knocked over two guards as if they had been tenpins.

Then his huge monstrosities of fists knotted. He really went to town! Arms working like pistons, Renny slugged with the grim efficiency of a battering ram.

Fists that could break the panels of a stout door, snapped jaw bones just as easily. Howls of pain and rage resounded through the corridor.

Johnny, also, had started to go into action. He had been stopped almost before he started. One guard was standing behind him. That guard brought the butt of his gun down on the geologist's head with deadly force.

General Glassell paid no attention to Renny. He didn't even turn his head when Johnny went down. He held a .45 automatic in one fist, and the muzzle of that automatic was aimed directly at Doc Savage's head.

"Call your man off, or I'll order my captain to sweep this hall with his submachine gun!" he rapped.

The threat was no idle one. The guard captain had stepped back as the fight had started. An amused grin was on his hard features. He held the submachine gun ready for instant action.

Doc could have fought. He undoubtedly could have disarmed Glassell. With Glassell's gun, he could have killed many. But the odds were too heavy against them.

Alone, Doc would have taken the chance. He could not take a chance now without sealing the fate of Johnny, and Renny. And thought of his men always came first.

"Hold it, Renny," he said calmly.

The huge engineer's arms dropped to his sides instantly. A surprised look crossed his puritanical features, but he asked no questions. If Doc said stop, then stop it was.

A moment more, and he was pinned in by bayonets. Further struggle was useless.

"To the torture room," Glassell said. And his voice had hoarsened, had become thick and gloating.

The general was well pleased with himself. He had just recovered from a shock that had badly disturbed him. For, finishing his dinner, Glassell had left his room, to meet what, at first, he had thought was a ghost. That had been the last thing he had remembered. A bronze fist had rendered him unconscious.

But lady luck had been with Glassell. A guard had, by chance, heard the thud of the general's body falling to the floor. Investigating, he had almost fallen across the unconscious man. A few minutes had been necessary to revive him. Doc Savage hadn't pulled his punch. Cold water had brought the general to.

There was a gleam in Glassell's eyes as he marched with the prisoners toward the torture room.

There was a smile on his face—a smile that spoke death for the bronze man and his aids.

JOHNNY swayed dizzily as he was led into the torture room. His head still ached from the terrific blow he had received. But he forgot that blow, forgot the pain, as he saw the implements for inflicting pain which were stored in the dimly lighted, stone-walled room.

As an archaeologist, Johnny had often studied instruments of torture. He knew the history of most of them, had seen many extensive collections.

But he had never seen a more complete collection than had been assembled here. Every fiendish device perfected during the Spanish Inquisition was there, as well as many used by pirates and savages.

The rack appeared almost gentle compared to the other instruments designed to inflict pain for hours without killing. There was an ironlike cage in the shape of a man.

A victim would be placed there, and the door closed. The inside of that door was of solid iron spikes. Whenever the victim grew tired and slumped, those spikes drove into his body and forced him erect.

Hours of mental and physical torture would pass before the poor wretch would finally fall forward, impale himself on those spikes and be unable to rise again. He would die a slow, horrible death.

Then there was the platform to which a victim would be trussed by his thumbs, with a noose slack about his neck. Blocks of wood were placed under the feet and the arms pulled up high over the head.

Then those blocks of wood were removed, one at a time, until the victim hung by his thumbs, pulling himself up, until he could stand no more and dropped down to strangle.

Iron pinchers were there. Spots were on those pinchers and the spots were not from rust. Toenails and finger nails were extracted with those gentle instruments, while other devices cut away the eyelids.

But all these were given only a passing glance by Renny. His attention centered on a huge machine in the middle of the room. His eyes grew wide, and he gave a strangled cry as he saw that machine. For Doc Savage was being led toward it!

The bronze man appeared perfectly calm. Rusty handcuffs had been placed on his wrists, with those wrists behind him. Guards were all about him. And at his side was General Glassell.

"I will explain this little pet of mine to you," Glassell jeered. "I am sure you will enjoy it. You see, we attach cords to each of your arms and legs. We pull you into the air, spread-eagled.

"You are hoisted high, at first. Under you, you see, is this sharp sword. It will be aimed directly at your belly. You will be lowered slowly, oh so slowly. When that sword pricks your stomach, you will draw yourself up. You are a strong man. That is what will make this amusing.

"For long minutes, perhaps, you will hold yourself up; then you will sink down. The sword will cut you; it may drive just a little way into your belly. You will lift again, and again you will drop, until finally that sword will start cutting into you, half an inch at a time until at last—" "Shall we start now?" Doc asked politely.

Renny half sobbed. Doc had been in many tough places. But none, the big engineer thought, had ever been as tough as this. And he was helpless. Johnny was helpless. They had to stand by and watch—

Blam!

There was a sudden explosion, it came near the door to the torture chamber.

Tense nerves jumped. Guards spun. Their guns roared even before they could look. Then blank looks of astonishment crossed their faces.

No one was there!

"Fools! Must we wait all night?"

Half abashed, but still wondering, the guards turned back to the scene in the center of the room. Their eyes grew wider still.

The general was swinging a gun in his hand. With his other arm, he was supporting his prisoner. A mark on the jaw showed where that gun had collided hard.

THE guard captain leaped forward. Two other men joined him. Quickly they took the rusty handcuffs from the unconscious man's wrists. As swiftly, they attached strong cords to ankles and arms. The limp figure was swung up in the air, to hang spread-eagled, directly above the sharp-pointed sword beneath.

Johnny kept back a cry with difficulty. He had hoped until the last that the bronze man would find some way to escape. Now it could not be done. Knocked unconscious by that blow to the jaw with the butt of the heavy .45, he would recover to find slow, certain death awaiting him.

An evil, coarse chuckle came from the general. Features contorted into a hideous grimace, he whirled on Renny and Johnny, studied them for a moment. The corners of his mouth lifted higher.

"Are all the guards here?" he snapped at the captain.

"Si,

none wished to miss the treat," the man agreed.

"Give me two brave men who are not afraid to kill," the general ordered. "I have thought of an added delight. The bronze man is more worried about his aids than he is about himself. If he should revive and find them missing, his mental torment will equal the pain the sword will inflict"

"Si, si,

it is so," the captain smirked.

"Then give me two men. I will take these two out and place them where they will be safe. Do not lower that poor pig up there, even if he regains consciousness, until I return."

"Si,

my general."

Johnny and Renny were bound swiftly. Then they were marched from the room. The general followed them, an almost insane look on his features.

The heavy door of the torture room swung closed. Instantly the general seized the heavy lock, threw it in place and locked it.

"What—" began one of the guards.

STRONG fingers flicked out. They caught the man just at the base of the brain, pressed hidden nerves there. The man collapsed like a bag of flour.

The second guard brought his gun up. It seemed to him later that strength must have deserted him. The gun was taken from him so fast he did not know what had happened. A hand smacked down over his mouth, he was propelled toward the entrance to the dungeon at a fast pace.

A moment more and they had reached the night air. The guard was flung back up against a wall. He

hit so hard he was stunned.

"Turn around," a quiet voice ordered Johnny and Renny. The bonds were torn from their wrists. "Now get back down there, save that general of yours before he is impaled on his own pet device," rasped the terrible figure that stood over the guard. The guard turned, ran as if demons were pursuing him.

"How did you do it?" gasped Johnny, using small words in his surprise.

"A nitro capsule. I had it in my mouth, shot it across the room. The handcuffs were already loose. When the explosion came, I merely knocked out Glassell and put the handcuffs on him."

"Holy cow," exclaimed Renny.

Doc did not seem to hear. He was already running through the darkness. His aids took after him. As they ran, they heard renewed firing at the palace, firing so fierce that it could only mean disaster.

Chapter XIII. THE LEADER STRIKES

THE small band of palace defenders was hard-pressed. Not many soldiers remained. Some had deserted in fear of the hand of death. Enemy bullets had accounted for many more. The attackers were staging a bitter assault. But it seemed concentrated at the front gates. With a stone wall and concealed firing pits to aid them, the defenders fought desperately on. Even though only comparatively few remained, they held back the khaki-clad legions.

Near one side of the palace, a sentry paced restlessly. He strained his eyes, trying to peer into the darkness. Upon his shoulders rested the task of protecting President Avispa. And he preferred the sounds of the battle in front to the ominous stillness of the shadows inside the palace grounds. That sentry wasn't afraid of guns. But he had heard of the hand of death. And a death that could creep out of the darkness and leave him with a horrible red stain on his neck made sweat course down his backbone.

A weird, high-pitched scream pierced the night. It came even above the crack of rifles and the typewriter-like chatter of machine guns. The sentry gripped his gun tightly, found it wet and slippery with his own perspiration.

Victims of the hand of death were supposed to scream like that.

The sentry pivoted, retraced his steps along his post. And behind him, two furtive figures crept from the shadows. They drifted noiselessly toward the side of the palace.

"Wait for a moment. I will take care of the guard," came a low, flat voice.

One of the two furtive figures halted. The other slipped ahead, blended with the blackness of the palace wall.

The sentry whirled, started back toward where that lurking assassin waited. He saw a dim movement, and opened his mouth to yell. That yell never came.

A vagrant moonbeam flickered faintly on cold steel. A long knife plunged up to the hilt in the sentry's heart.

The sentry was already dead, he could not scream. But with his last flash of consciousness, he saw something that froze his brain, made him grateful for the merciful plunge of the knife.

A hand darted out for his throat. It was a strange-appearing hand, a dreadful monstrosity. That hand closed on soft flesh and squeezed hard. But the sentry was saved that horror. Life had already departed.

The killer moved into the open briefly. His companion sped to his side. That companion was breathing heavily, his own eyes were filled with fear. Teeth chattered, despite the warmth of the night.

"Stop it, fool!" hissed a cold, flat voice.

With quick steps the killer reached a window, pushed it open. A moment more and he was inside. His companion followed him. Light showed under the bottom of a door leading to an adjoining room. The killer crept forward. His hand was light as he turned the knob of the door, swung it open slowly.

Before them, but with his back turned, sat President Avispa. The white-haired president of Hidalgo was studying maps.

A sudden draft of air swept the back of his neck. Avispa did not look up. One of his hands moved toward a drawer at his side. Then that hand halted.

"Hands still, Avispa!" snapped a cold, quiet voice. "Turn around!"

Defiantly, the white-haired president's head snapped up, he whirled in his chair. Then the defiance went out of him as if he were a punctured balloon.

He knew death had called for him.

THE lifeless, expressionless face of The Leader was before President Avispa. Malevolent eyes swept scornfully over the white-haired man. A gun was steady in one fist.

But it was on the frozen-faced one's companion that Avispa's attention centered.

The other was removing a hat. He unwrapped a long muffler from about his neck. Casually he slipped from a light topcoat. As he stood revealed in the light, he also was white-haired, his features were lined.

"A double!" Avispa whispered.

The frozen-faced one nodded. "Exactly." His cold, flat voice was clipped. "Doc Savage is not the only one who knows something of the art of make-up."

"W-what do you want?" Avispa's tones were choked.

"Your abdication—in return for your life."

There was silence for a moment.

"If you will abdicate and name General Glassell your successor, you will be spared," those cold, flat tones went on.

"And if I don't?"

The malevolent eyes of the frozen-faced one sparkled. "If you don't, you will die! My companion here will take your place. He is made up to look just like you. His act will be sufficiently good to fool your guards."

"But will it fool Doc Savage?" Avsipa asked quietly.

The lifeless face of The Leader split. Teeth showed as the red flare of rage lighted his eyes.

The hand that held the gun came up, the fingers showing white on the butt.

"Doc Savage! Doc Savage is dead!" he half shrieked. He jumped up and down, screaming curses of hate.

Avispa took a chance. His hand shot to the desk drawer, closed over the gun that was there.

Blam!

Two shots sounded as one. Avispa's weapon dropped from his fist. There was a red stain across his knuckles.

The make-up double leaped forward, he smashed the aged president squarely in the face with a fist. Avispa was slammed back into his chair. Crimson streamed from his nose.

"I could have killed you then." The Leader's voice had become low and merciless. "I am going to kill you, but that way would be too easy."

He moved forward, his lifeless face jugged out, his malevolent eyes staring. One hand still held his gun. The other hand came from a pocket. It was a peculiar-looking hand. It appeared like a club-foot at the end of an arm. Queer fingers opened and closed.

Avispa opened his mouth, but no sound came. His vocal cords appeared paralyzed.

"Think, as you are en route to hell, of what will happen to your people," the frozen-faced one gloated. "They are to become the accursed of the earth. Nothing can save them! Your double, here, will rule for a time. Then Glassell. And now—"

Those clutching fingers shot out. They gripped President Avispa firmly by the throat.

A thin, high-pitched scream—a dreadful scream—broke from the aged man's lips. The bloody imprint of a hand appeared on his neck.

DOC SAVAGE was easing over the palace wall when he heard that scream. Close behind him were Renny and Johnny. Both aids knew their only chance to get by the guards was to follow him.

"Holy cow, what was that?" exclaimed the big engineer.

The bronze man did not answer. It had seemed he was moving fast before. But his speed then was nothing as compared with the speed he now showed.

Before his aids could hit the ground, he had dropped over the wall, was racing across the grounds toward the palace. He could see the faint light through the shade at Avispa's office windows.

A peculiar trill sounded. At Doc's feet was stretched the body of the sentry. He stopped only for a second. That second was enough to show the sentry was dead.

The bronze man then vaulted through the open window, dived into Avispa's office.

The white-haired president was slumped back in his chair. The prints on his throat were rapidly growing more red, His heart had stopped, he had quit breathing.

Renny and Johnny pounded into the room.

"Well, I'll be superamalgamated!" boomed Johnny.

Doc Savage crouched over the body of Carlos Avispa. His hands darted to the secret pouch that was always strapped next to his skin. He took out a tiny hypodermic syringe and a small vial. In an instant, he jabbed the hypodermic into the reddening flesh and shot home the plunger.

"If the stain continues to deepen for more than a few seconds, there is no hope," the bronze man clipped.

Even as he spoke, he was drawing another syringe from the pouch. This one was as long as a darning needle. Renny gasped as Doc jerked loose Avispa's shirt. The bronze man placed the needle directly over the white-haired president's heart. Then he drove that needle in, deep through the flesh.

Silence gripped the room. But that silence was broken. A voice from somewhere outside ripped through the night, rasping metallically from a powerful amplifier.

"It grieves me to confess that I have been deceived," the voice cried. "I had thought Juan Glassell was our enemy. He is not. And I had thought Doc Savage and his aids were our friends. That, also, was a mistake."

Incredulous gasps came from Renny and Johnny. Even through an amplifier, an intimate would have sworn the voice was that of Carlos Avispa.

Doc Savage did not look up. He was still working over the stricken body of the white-haired president.

And slowly at first, the red hand of death was fading.

"Extraordinary phenomenon," Johnny muttered. The geologist felt Avispa's wrist. A pulsebeat came faintly.

"The adrenaline injection in the heart I understood," Renny said. "But the other?"

Doc did not appear to hear. Avispa's eyes opened. He stared about wildly for an instant, incredible horror still mirrored in the pupils of his eyes.

"—and so," the amplifier blared outside, "as president of Hidalgo, I call upon you to surrender."

RENNY'S mouth dropped open. He leaped toward the door that connected with other parts of the palace. That door was locked.

An expression, almost of glee, crossed the big engineer's face. He squared off before the door, drew back one huge fist. With an explosion like that of a minor bomb, his fist struck. Two-inch oaken panels split.

The white-haired president stirred.

"Those words! That man—" he gasped.

Doc nodded. He bent over, lifted the white-haired president in his arms.

As Renny reached through and unlocked the door, Doc pushed past him, darted into the hallway.

At the front of the palace, the impostor was smiling, but there was a worried look in his eyes.

He had spoken well and persuasively. But still a sullen murmur came from the defenders.

"What I say is true," he repeated into the amplifier. "Doc Savage is really the man behind this revolt. He wants all the gold from the Valley of the Vanished. He intends to defraud Hidalgo. I was tricked. General Glassell argued with me, but I did not believe him. Now, I know the truth. We must surrender. I will let Glassell become—"

He broke off.

A bronze man, carrying the white-haired figure of President Avispa appeared at his side. Avispa was weak, clung to Doc's shoulder as he was set on his feet.

The impostor's face paled. He glanced desperately toward a dim and darkened corner of the parade ground. He couldn't see the half-concealed figure there. But he needed instructions.

Sounds of firing outside the palace walls had stopped. It was as if the attackers expected an immediate surrender.

The crowd of palace soldiers stood in stunned silence. What they saw they could not comprehend.

The impostor was an actor. He thought he could bluff it out. He screamed into the amplifier:

"Doc Savage is here with an impostor! Kill them before they do us harm!"

A roar came from the crowd. Figures crowded close to the stand.

The bronze man did not attempt to speak. He leaped to the side of the fake Avispa, seized him by his hair. The wig came off.

The impostor then stood revealed as a black-haired, villainous fake. The mob went wild.

THE impostor wasted no time. He leaped from the platform with a scream. Palace guardsmen raced toward him.

Doc Savage stepped before the amplifier. "Do not kill him," he said quietly. "His master is the one we want. Save this man until we can find out what he knows."

Renny and Johnny leaped into the raging throng, tried to fight their way to its center, where the impostor had gone down under a struggling mass.

Doc might as well have shouted down a well. Even over the amplifier, his voice was drowned on the howls of mob rage.

And Renny and Johnny stood no chance at all. They could not even penetrate the outer fringes of the struggling mass. The guardsmen had caught a traitor. They knew how to deal with traitors.

The impostor was literally torn to pieces.

From a darkened corner, at the far edge of the palace grounds, a frozen-faced man with malevolent eyes stared in amazement. A plan that couldn't go wrong, had gone wrong! A man that should be dead, was not dead!

Silent as a wraith, The Leader vanished from the grounds. Grim orders were issued.

"Wipe the palace from the face of the earth! Kill every man inside!"

Guns went into action. And for the first time, artillery was brought up. That artillery would soon blast the palace into dust.

Chapter XIV. A VOICE FROM THE SKY

THERE was a small chemical laboratory in the presidential palace. Carlos Avispa paced nervously up and down. Doc worked quietly at a small vat with several chemicals. Renny and Johnny stared dolefully out a window.

A red glare showed dully against heavy, overhanging clouds. Part of Blanco Grande was in flames. The reprisal of The Leader had not been long in coming.

"He's a killer," Renny muttered. "We gotta get that guy, somehow."

"I thought, at first, Glassell was the arch-fiend," Avispa said. "But this is beyond his planning. Even for all the gold in the Valley of the Vanished."

"The Mayan gold is only the start of this," Doc's voice said quietly. "And Glassell is merely a cog."

"Holy cow," Renny boomed, "what more than gold would he want?"

"This man is a person of unlimited ambition," Doc said cryptically, "Also one of ability."

The shrill of the telephone in the laboratory interrupted him. Avispa answered. His haggard face grew even grayer as he listened to an excited voice on the other end of the wire. His lips grew into a tight line. When he hung up, he turned to Doc.

"It was a spy I have in their camp. I am afraid you must go, Doc Savage. I know your sworn pledge to the Mayans. Five thousand troops have left for the Valley of the Vanished."

He paused, seemed about to speak again, then changed his mind. Doc looked at him for a moment.

"That is not all the message you received," he said gently. "Tell me the rest of it."

Avispa hesitated.

"Another large group of troops has been left behind. Even now, they are bringing up artillery to shell the palace. When we are wiped out, Blanco Grande is to be burned."

"Astounding retributory determination," Johnny grumbled. "We should do something."

"I can do nothing but urge you to leave," Avispa said sadly. "My place is here. I must die with Blanco Grande, but you should do your best for the Mayans."

Doc walked to one corner of the room. Concealed in a wall, was a small but powerful radio transmitter. The bronze man flicked on the switch. He twirled the dials, waiting briefly for the tubes to heat.

"Monk speaking," a voice bawled. It was startlingly clear as it boomed from a tiny loud-speaker.

"A large enemy force is on the way to the Valley of the Vanished," Doc's voice clipped. "I will endeavor to be there with Renny and Johnny before they arrive. But in the meantime, there is much to be done." He issued instructions in concise, swift sentences.

"I gotcha, Doc," Monk's voice said. The radio clicked off.

The bronze man sped back to the chemical vat. He poured a peculiar-colored liquid into several bottles. His flake gold eyes gleamed.

"Wait," he instructed briefly. Then he was gone.

THE rumble of heavy artillery, being towed through the streets, sounded ominously as the bronze man left the palace grounds.

Khaki-clad rebels were jubilant. When that artillery was fired at point-blank range, the battle would be over. Blanco Grande would be theirs.

A small, smartly clad captain strutted down the street. He had served in wars all over the world. He had fought under a dozen flags. But none that afforded him as much pleasure as now. Here was an opportunity for just the sort of wild looting and killing that he liked.

Strolling easily, he went past a dark alleyway. Steel-strong fingers reached out, caught him back of the neck. He floated into the alleyway.

The captain was no coward. But he felt fear then. He tried to struggle. He could not seem to move a muscle. A low voice came to his ears, a vibrant, compelling voice.

"Where is the gold?"

"W-what gold?" he stammered.

A finger pressed on nerves at the back of his head.

"The gold is under guard in the bank building. It was taken from the Mayans," the captain said in a dull, colorless voice.

Pressure on that nerve had done something to the captain. He found that he could not think clearly enough to lie. He had to tell the truth.

A hand flicked across the back of his head. The captain dropped to the ground, unconscious. A shadowy, dimly seen figure eased through the night. It headed toward the bank where the stolen gold was hidden.

The bank was brightly lighted. There was a reason for that. The rebel soldiers did not trust each other. They wanted to see anyone who went in or out. The structure itself was a severe, stout affair of stone.

There were five men on guard. They were villainous-looking criminals and well-armed. A voice came from around a corner. It was a feminine voice. It screamed in pain.

"Help! Help! Let me go! Please!"

The five khaki-clad men grinned evilly. They strolled down to the corner, peered around. There was nothing there. Grumbling, puzzled, and faintly worried, they hurried back to their posts.

Inside, a bronze figure was active.

Pile after pile of gold was there. That gold had cost the lives of many brave Mayans.

The bottles of chemicals came from the bronze man's pockets.

The guards were talking uneasily. The rumor had spread. Word had come that Doc Savage was not dead. And the mysterious call for help when there had been no one about, weighed on over-tensed nerves.

"I've heard that the bronze guy was an excellent ventriloquist; maybe he played a trick on us," one muttered.

Fear-shadowed eyes glanced into the bank. A voice howled hoarsely. Something was there. Guns ready, the men darted to the door. That door was unlocked. It had been locked ten minutes before.

Frantically they rushed in, darted toward the back of the building. Then they halted, abashed. A dummy hung there. There was no sign of any living creature.

Tiptoeing, lips tight, the five guards crept out. Something happened—something puzzling. But, without words, they decided what they would do: They would say nothing. To admit some one had entered the gold storeroom would be inviting the hand of death.

At the outskirts of Blanco Grande, the tall figure of Doc Savage moved swiftly to a small field. His plane was concealed there. The motor of that plane roared.

Outside the palace, artillerymen were swinging their guns into lines. Shells were piled by the guns. In the distance sounded the drone of a plane's motor.

The artillerymen glanced up curiously, then pushed shells home. In a moment the palace of Hidalgo would be no more.

"This is Doc Savage speaking," came a clear, vibrant voice. The voice came from the sky.

"SOLDIERS of General Glassell, listen!" The clipped tones of the bronze man won instant attention. Artillerymen halted their work, necks craning upward. Everywhere in the capital city, noise ceased. It was as if all were listening to that voice.

The plane loafed easily in the sky. A radio loud-speaker amplified the voice of Doc Savage thousands of times. Each word he said came clearly.

"You were promised gold for your fighting," Doc's voice went on. "For that gold, you must murder innocent people. But how do you know, even after you have committed your crimes, that you will receive the gold that is promised you?"

Jeering laughter rose from the khaki-clad men below.

"You have seen the gold, I know." It seemed almost as though Doc had heard those jeers, and was answering them. "When the Mayans were slaughtered and the gold they escorted brought here, that gold was exhibited. But were you given any of it?"

The jeers died suddenly. That was so. The men had seen the gold, but none had been paid with the precious metal. With closer attention, they listened to the next words from the sky.

"Early to-night, more than half your force was dispatched to the Valley of the Vanished. It is there that the real gold is. There is more of it there than could be carried by all of you. There is enough there to make every man a king. But again, how do you know you will receive your share?"

The khaki-clad men were silent. Hard faces bore wondering expressions.

"There is one way in which you might answer that question." Doc's voice seemed to rise slightly. His plane pivoted directly over the heart of the city.

"If those who led you are playing fairly with you, then what you think is gold now stored under guard, is really gold. But suppose it is not? Suppose the gold has been taken by your leaders, and only worthless metal remains?"

"Then, in that case, you have been tricked. You have nothing. The men storming the Valley of the Vanished may get gold, but how do you know if you will get anything?"

"I say to you then—investigate. Find out if that is really gold that is stored in the bank. If it is not, then go after those who are really on the way to a fortune. Do not be fooled!"

A moment of silence followed those last words. Then there was a yell from a thousand throats.

Gold, not glory, was what these men fought for.

Artillery was forgotten. Machine guns were forgotten. Hundreds of yelling men smashed through the streets toward the bank.

THE five men guarding the bank did not know whether to join the rush or to fight. They lifted their guns, hesitantly.

That was a mistake.

They were cut down almost before they could move. Angered killers swarmed into the building.

The sacks of gold were at the rear. In an instant, those sacks had been ripped open.

Howls of disappointment and futile anger came from those who were close enough to see.

When the golden loot had first been brought back by the raiders, it had been shown to the soldiers. It had gleamed dully, as only gold can gleam.

What the khaki-clad men saw now did not gleam. There was no sign of gold. Only bars and ingots of lead lay before them.

The word passed swiftly. The leaden bars were hurled furiously aside. Men rushed from the building. In disordered streams, they poured down the street.

It was just as well they did not investigate too closely. One leaden bar struck a marble wall with such force that the bar broke in two pieces.

Had the ends of those pieces been examined carefully they would have revealed much. The outer side of the bars appeared to be lead. For as much as a quarter of an inch from the surface, they

also appeared lead.

But the centers were pure gold.

The chemical Doc had mixed, a combination chiefly of graphite had done its work well. It had worked into the porous, precious metal, had seemingly worked alchemy in reverse, changing gold into lead.

Actually, it had done nothing of the sort. But the angered, charging troops did not know that. They did not even recall Doc's actual words, did not know that he had not lied to them, but had merely tricked them. They believed the gold that was to have been paid them had been stolen, that their only hope of getting gold was to join the rush on the Valley of the Vanished. Frantically, they streamed from Blanco Grande, following those who had left hours before. High above them, Doc looked on, a peculiar expression in his flake gold eyes. He had saved President Avispa. He had saved Blanco Grande from destruction. But at what a cost! Now, hundreds more of gold-hungry attackers were streaming toward the Mayans he was sworn to protect.

HALF an hour later, Doc was in the air again. This time, he pointed the nose of his plane toward the Valley of the Vanished. With him were Renny and Johnny.

They did not see the plane that left close after them. That plane carried General Glassell and a frozen-faced one whose eyes could only glare with rage.

But the evil brain behind that frozen face was working. A preliminary skirmish had been lost. But the main fight was still to come. And The Leader was confident.

For he knew the cards were stacked against Doc Savage.

Chapter XV. SHOT DOWN

THE sun was high when Doc eased the motor of his plane and headed downward.

Below lay a scene such as few have ever viewed. It was a big valley, shaped roughly like an egg. Most of the ground was sloping, far too steep upon which to land a plane. But there was one small, smooth lake.

In the center of the valley towered a pyramid. The sides were absolutely smooth, except for the center where steps had been carved. At the top, on a flat place, stood a temple, with a flat stone roof, supported by square pillars.

The entire pyramid glowed with a yellow, metallic aurora. It had been constructed of quartz literally filled with pure gold.

Doc had arrived at the Valley of the Vanished.

As the bronze man sat his plane down on the small lake, scores of figures raced toward him. The air was filled with strange cries of welcome.

In the lead was a tall, solid man, with snowy-white hair. His skin was golden-colored, he wore a broad girdle of red, with the ends forming an apron in front and back.

Close behind him was a young woman, nearly as tall as he, whose beauty caused a gasp from Renny and Johnny, even though they had seen her before.

"Greetings, King Chaac and Princess Monja," Doc said in perfect Mayan.

The lumbering figure of Monk and the tall, perfectly attired Ham, with Long Tom at his heels were approaching at a more dignified pace.

"Boy, I'm glad you got here!" Monk bellowed.

Renny's ordinarily tight-lipped face had relaxed in a huge grin. Johnny appeared just as pleased as Mayans rushed to the sides of the plane and hoisted them out, carrying them through the water on their shoulders.

King Chaac seemed almost speechless. He grasped Doc's hands and held them tightly in his own. His daughter had eyes only for the bronze man. She was looking at him in a way that showed clearly that she loved him, even though she knew that love was hopeless.

"It has been long, too long since you were here," Princess Monja said. Her voice was low and trembled slightly with emotion.

"Son of my old friend, I am happy," King Chaac said.

Others crowded about, chatting happily. Renny and Johnny were seized by old friends who talked as if they could never stop. Monk and Ham eased their way closer, moving slowly through the throng.

Long Tom stood back, his eyes thoughtful.

No sign of the danger in which they all stood was marring the welcome to Doc. Young men and women, dressed in clothing that showed expert weaving and dyeing, some with fine wire-gold interwoven, were bubbling joyously.

A dozen were trying to talk to Doc at once. The bronze man was answering all as swiftly as he could. His features were as emotionless as usual.

But Long Tom wondered just what memories this reception brought back to the bronze man. King Chaac was still erect, but his hair was whiter, his shoulders more bowed than when last he and Doc had met.

And Long Tom knew that Doc must be thinking of that first meeting, must be recalling the sad events that had led up to it, even though he did not show that fact.

For the gold in the Valley of the Vanished, the gold that had provided Doc Savage with funds to fight wrong-doers and now was being sought by the worst criminal of them all, had been a legacy to the bronze man from his father.

Clark Savage, Sr., had discovered this lost valley with its strange inhabitants, many years before. He had secured possession of the land inclosing the valley, and had made arrangements with King Chaac for Doc to have the gold when the bronze man came and proved himself worthy. Then Clark Savage, Sr., had been murdered.

LONG TOM'S eyes darkened with pain as he thought of that, even though it was long in the past. Enemies had killed the elder Savage, had tried to prevent Doc from ever reaching or claiming his legacy.

Those enemies had been defeated. Doc had won out, but the loss of his father had been a severe blow.

And now the Valley of the Vanished was threatened again. It was threatened by modern, well-armed foes. Even Long Tom, with all his marvelous faith in the ability of the bronze man, did not see how the present peril could be defeated.

The happy, chatting Mayans were faced with extermination by relentless, merciless foes. Still talking to King Chase, with Princess Monja clinging to one arm, the bronze man was led toward the Mayan village.

"I am glad you have come in our time of danger," Chaac said with simple dignity.

"Our enemies are many. Our task will be a difficult one," said Doc Savage.

"But with you here, I know we shall be safe," the Mayan king responded.

"The preparations you asked us to make are completed," Long Tom said, drawing nearer.

"Those bums are in for a surprise when they jump us," Monk put in.

"What I cannot understand is who could be behind this," said Ham. "You mentioned a General Glassell—"

"He is only a tool," Doc Savage said.

"And a renegade Mayan," King Chaac said, bitterly.

"I thought so," the bronze man agreed gravely. "His skin and features showed me he was of your race."

"He is a product of what you call civilization," Chaac continued, and his face was hard. "Also, he is the son of Morning Breeze."

Renny's puritanical face lighted. "Morning Breeze! The one who tried to kill us when we were here before?"

King Chaac nodded. "That is correct. And Glassell, as he calls himself, really is Son of the Moon, the child of Morning Breeze. After Morning Breeze was killed, Son of the Moon apparently reformed. He became very popular with our younger people."

"He is no good," Princess Monja said unexpectedly. Her beautiful face twisted scornfully. "He tried to make love to me!"

"Son of the Moon convinced a majority of my people that we were missing much that civilization could give us," King Chaac explained. "He persuaded me he should be sent to Blanco Grande. He said he would study, would bring back to us things that would help us."

"He didn't," Monja said angrily. "Instead—"

"Instead," Chaac continued, "he became a too apt pupil of civilization. We heard disgraceful stories about him. But President Avispa liked him, made him head of his army. Now he has betrayed that trust."

"And now he intends to kill his own people," Princess Monja said.

"Not if we can help it," growled Monk. The hairy chemist's gaze never left the face of the girl.

"Hero saves life of girl's father, wins her hand," whispered Ham maliciously.

Monk blushed.

THE council of war was held in King Chaac's quarters. Doc sat at the head of the table with the Mayan ruler. The others ranged themselves on either side.

"We have made a thorough study of the terrain," said Ham. His words were crisp, concise.

"Now we have Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks speaking," Monk put in slyly.

"With Major Thomas J. Roberts and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, I reconnoitered the situation," Ham went on smoothly. "It is bad."

"The entrance to this valley is a narrow one," objected Renny.

"True. It could be held against a large number of men—provided we had sufficient modern weapons," Ham replied. "But while we have only our mercy pistols and a few other things, the foe is in possession of high-powered artillery."

"Did not your diligent preparations provide for such a contingency?" asked Johnny.

Ham grinned. "We followed out Doc's orders. That is the only reason we may hope for success."

"I think the invaders are in for a surprise," Long Tom agreed. He smiled with quiet pride.

King Chaac turned to Doc Savage. "What are your instructions for my people?" he asked simply. The bronze man's flake gold eyes swept swiftly over his aids. "We do not wish to cause loss of

life among your people," he said. "However, you have scouts out now, I presume?"

Chaac nodded. "They are watching all possible routes of approach."

"Then there is little more they can do," the bronze man said. "But we should not underestimate the foe who opposes us. He is clever. Above all, counsel your young men to take no unnecessary chances."

"They are filled with anger at the brutal murder of their Friends," said Chaac. "When the invaders appear, they will want vengeance. They may be difficult to control."

"But they must be controlled," Doc Savage said quietly. "Against the modern weapons of the soldiers of fortune who are marching here, they would stand no chance."

"They have motorized battalions," Renny put in. "They have artillery, machine guns and rifles. When they attack—"

He broke off. A tall Mayan had suddenly raced into the room. Perspiration was pouring from his body. He spoke excitedly.

"They come! They come! An advance guard is even now entering the canyon only one removed from this!"

KING CHAAC started to speak. Doc Savage already was on his feet. The others leaped up.

"You remain here. I will see what is to be done," the bronze man clipped.

Without waiting for a reply, he vanished from the room. Johnny was close behind him. Monk and Ham exchanged one quick glance, then poured from the room, followed by Long Tom and Renny.

Doc was racing down the street of the village with long, quick strides. He did not appear to be moving fast, but a Mayan runner who attempted to keep up with him, found himself quickly outdistanced.

"He's going for the plane!" Long Tom shouted. "We've got to stay here, but at least we can look!"

He turned the opposite way and sped toward a narrow, dangerous trail that led upward, toward the head of the canyon—the direction from which the invaders must come.

Princess Monja appeared from a near-by building. Without a word, she joined the group of running men.

"You go back!" Monk roared.

The girl shook her head. A strange look was on her face. "If Doc Savage goes into danger, I want to see," she argued.

Ham chuckled as Monk's jaw dropped. "Thought she was worried about you, you hairy ape, did you?" the dapper lawyer gibed.

Behind them, a plane's motor came to life with a sullen roar. As Renny glanced over one shoulder, he saw the plane move swiftly across the small lake, then take to the air.

The climb was steep, but Doc's aids were all in good condition. They mounted swiftly.

Princess Monja alone lagged slightly. Renny caught hold of one of her arms in a huge fist. Monk glowered, and grabbed her on the other side.

The plane was now far above them, moving over the end of the canyon.

"Lucky Doc destroyed most of their air fleet, or we'd be worse off than we are," Renny commented.

"A few eggs from the air could sure make it tough."

Br-r-r-r-r-r!

The wicked snap of a machine gun came faintly to their ears.

Just as the group reached the top of the mountain, where they could look down into the adjoining valley, a puff of smoke appeared in the sky near Doc's plane.

"They've even brought anti-aircraft guns along with them," Long Tom marveled.

It was impossible to see the men who were firing on Doc. They had taken shelter among trees and rocks several miles away. But the sound of shooting came clearly.

More and more puffs of smoke appeared near Doc's plane. The bronze man was swinging the ship around in lazy circles.

Princess Monja's dainty fingers gripped hard into Monk's arm.

"They won't—they can't—he'll be safe, won't he?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure," Monk comforted. "Doc can take care of himself. He won't take any unnecessary chances. Why—"

A moan came from Johnny. The lean archaeologist looked sick suddenly. An exclamation of dismay came from Monk and Long Tom. Ham's hands clenched tightly, while Renny was banging one huge fist into an open palm as pain showed on his tight-lipped face.

Smoke was billowing from Doc's plane. Even as they watched, the plane faltered in mid-air.

Slowly, its nose dropped; then it was falling over and over. Going down, down—

Chapter XVI. A NET CLOSES

"HE—he's lost!" sobbed Princess Monja.

"Don't be silly. Doc will be all right," said Monk, but his simian features were worried.

"Ah-ah, Doc has extricated himself from much more precarious situations than this," Johnny said hollowly. His glasses were bobbing up and down.

The plane was almost out of sight now, sinking behind a projecting corner of the canyon. Smoke

had increased until huge billows were rolling from the stricken craft.

"Doc's got something up his sleeve. Don't you worry!" boomed Renny. But the huge engineer's mouth was compressed tightly, his features even more severe than usual.

"I-I'm glad we got the stuff rigged up in time," Long Tom said, desperately trying to change the subject.

His yellow complexion even more unhealthy-appearing than before, the electrical wizard glanced down the rim of the canyon where long, pipelike weapons had been rigged. Those weapons pointed downward, so that they covered the approach to the Valley of the Vanished.

A faint crash came to their ears. A cloud of dust rose far down in the canyon. Doc's plane had struck.

"Let's get back to the village," Monja pleaded brokenly. Tears were streaming from her face. Had Monja not been present, Doc's aids probably would have delayed their departure. As it was, they followed the weeping princess.

Thus, they did not see the creeping, stealthily moving figures who were wiggling their way to where the pipelike weapons hung over the canyon's rim.

The safety of those in the Valley of the Vanished depended upon those weapons. They were supposed to be guarded at all times. Only chance left them vulnerable. The slinking figures were taking advantage of that chance.

DOC'S plane crashed almost at the spot where the advance guard of the soldiers of fortune had made their stand.

Khaki-clad figures, bayoneted guns ready, rushed forward as the ship came down. At the last moment the plane seemed to right itself, but still it struck with resounding force.

Smoke clouds rolled out on all sides. The soldiers plunged into the smoke and vanished from view. Others followed them. Some were shouting hoarsely as they charged.

Those shouts died suddenly. The smoke spread out in a thin cloud. Even those who had hung back were enveloped in it.

A huge captain, face scarred from some ancient encounter with a sabre, halted abruptly, a heavy automatic in one hand.

"Halt!" he roared. "Wait!"

The sound of his voice appeared to dwindle on the second word. A faint whiff of the smoke had reached his nostrils. A surprised expression crossed his battle-hardened features.

Slowly, he crumpled. His arms fell limply to his sides. His head landed on one of those arms. His eyes closed as in sleep. Around him, others were dropping. Those who had first darted toward the plane already were down.

Scarcely ten seconds after the plane had crashed not a soldier in the advance guard was on his feet. The entire company was sprawled motionless, weapons still in hand.

Slowly, the smoke cloud lifted. Fresh currents of air swept through the canyon, rolling the mist away.

A soldier stirred, sat up to stare about stupidly. One by one others awakened. Their faces were dull and stupid. They pressed their hands to their heads as if unaware of what had happened.

The scarred-faced captain recovered more swiftly. Intelligence dawned in his eyes. He leaped up, snarling viciously as he raced to the side of the plane. Shock-absorbers on that plane had taken up most of the force of the crash landing. The ship was virtually undamaged.

And it was empty!

"Where did he go?" the captain roared angrily.

The soldiers glanced about with dull eyes. One, a huge fellow in khaki, moved over to the machine guns that had been trained on the plane, started to dismantle them.

"They-they ain't nobody here," a sergeant gasped. There was a note of awe in his voice. "Would a ghost 'a' been flying that plane?"

"Ghost, hell!" The captain's jaws worked furiously. "This is one of that Doc Savage's tricks!"

His eyes widened suddenly, and he whipped a hand to one pocket. A relieved expression showed on his hard features as his fingers felt papers there.

"Form your men and call the roll!" he shouted.

The sergeant wet his lips uncertainly, "But-but, captain," he objected, "there had to be someone in that plane. There ain't now. Where did he go? And what happened to us?"

"Form the company!" the captain roared, his face livid with anger. "Doc Savage must have been flying that plane! I've always heard he was tricky. And that couldn't have been smoke that rolled from the ship; it was gas. A kind of gas that just put us to sleep."

The sergeant looked dazed for a moment, then snapped out commands. The huge fellow who had been dismounting the guns rose with a sigh and ambled toward the forming ranks. He stumbled as he neared the captain, threw out one hand to catch himself.

"Excuse me, captain," he mumbled.

The captain snarled, one fist dropped to the .45 at his hip, but the big soldier was already walking away. The sound of paper being crumpled came faintly.

THERE was uneasy murmuring in the ranks of the soldiers. Facing bullets was one thing; facing an enemy who dropped from the sky, overpowered an entire company and vanished, was something else. It smacked too much of the supernatural.

Corporals cursed bitterly as they swung their men into formation and checked off names. Two or three stepped out of ranks to confer with the first sergeant.

"All present and accounted for, sir," the first sergeant reported. "And, if the captain please—" he hesitated.

"Well?" snapped the scarred-faced man.

"The men are upset by what has occurred," the sergeant said hesitantly. "They are willing to take orders, but they want to remind you they are all in this just as much as you are. They are afraid we may run into a trap in canyons such as these, and respectfully ask your plans."

The scar flamed like a red gash on the captain's face. For a moment, he seemed too inflamed to speak, and the first words that rolled from his lips singed even the hardened hides of the men who faced him.

"We attack in just two hours!" he bellowed. His hands opened and closed on the butt of his .45.

"We want to know what we're runnin' into. Gold ain't no good to us if we're dead!" a voice shouted from the rear rank. It was the big soldier who had dismounted the machine guns who spoke. Others yelled in assent.

"And if our company can be gassed, why couldn't all our army get it the same way?" the big soldier went on.

"I'll answer that question." There was a decisive ring in the captain's voice. His face had hardened, but he spoke with assurance. "First, I want to see the man who dares question me. Who is he? Bring him here."

Men in the ranks shifted uncertainly, then the big soldier was pushed to the front. He shuffled forward between two other khaki-clad veterans until he stood within a few feet of the captain.

"We knew of this gas. Preparations have been made to render it useless!" the captain snapped. He darted a quick glance at the big soldier, then again faced the company. "Doc Savage is clever, but The Leader is clever, also. He has known in advance every move this Doc Savage has made, and checkmated it. A plan has been devised to kill every Mayan without risk to ourselves. Why, right here in my pocket is—"

The captain's hand touched his pocket. A blank look crossed his features. For a moment, he was quite pale, standing as if stricken. His head turned slowly, his eyes bored into the face of the big soldier before him.

Slowly, his hand went to his hip, pulled out his .45. The muzzle of the .45 came up, pointed squarely at the head of the big soldier.

Flake gold eyes stared back calmly at the captain. The gold-flecked eyes of Doc Savage.

"Damn you!" shouted the captain, and pulled the trigger.

AN entire company of men was watching the scene. None could have told exactly what happened next. It came too fast.

A harmless click came from the .45 in the scarred-faced man's hand. In the same instant, the two men beside Doc Savage turned somersaults in the air. Powerful hands had snapped out, grabbed and hurled them as if they were weightless.

The body of one struck the captain. They crashed to the ground together.

In the same flash, the bronze man started running. As the company of soldiers stood stupefied, they saw the big soldier fairly fade across the ground, start up the side of the canyon.

The captain staggered to his feet.

"Fire! Get him!" he bellowed. "That's Doc Savage! A thousand in gold extra to the man who kills him!"

Rifles came up. Bolts clicked. Hammers fell.

But no shots came!

A squad rushed to one of the half-dismantled machine guns, assembled it swiftly, inserted a belt of bullets and swung the muzzle to cover Doc Savage's fast-disappearing figure. The gun would not work.

"The firing pin's been knocked off my rifle!" one of the soldiers yelled. Others took up the cry. Not a workable gun was left in the company. Doc Savage had worked swiftly in the few minutes the men had been unconscious.

Now he was traveling swiftly back toward the Valley of the Vanished.

As he ran, sure-footed as a mountain goat up the steep canyon side and over rocks, the bronze man examined the papers he had taken from the scarred-faced captain.

The papers were covered with orders. They were concise, detailed military orders. A map showed every canyon, every possible adit and exit to the Mayan kingdom.

And they revealed that even now huge forces of armed men were marching to bottle up both the upper and lower entrance to the huge canyon where the Mayans lived. The attack was to be launched simultaneously from each end.

The orders read:

When the signal for the attack comes, move forward fearlessly. The canyon should be taken without loss of a life.

A faint, trilling sound filled the air, the sound of Doc Savage. The final notations on the orders read:

We understand what Doc Savage intends to do. He will be rendered harmless.

The bronze man redoubled his speed, stripping off the khaki coat he wore. The original owner of that coat was trussed and gagged firmly. His bound form would be found when the advance guard started ahead.

Doc Savage was following no trail. Sometimes it seemed as if he literally were running on a thread, so narrow was the ledge of rock he traversed.

He mounted sharply, sped along the crest of the canyon. Two huge boulders loomed before him. There was a narrow passageway between.

The bronze man was moving almost soundlessly, despite his speed. As he neared the boulders, he traveled even faster. Like a high jumper, he leaped at one of the huge rocks.

With fingers that gripped like steel, he hurled himself upward, reached the summit.

On either side of the passageway, now below him, waited an armed man.

ONE of the soldiers thought he sensed the shadow of an eagle. He glanced up, tried to cry out. He had no chance. Doc Savage flashed downward. One arm whipped out. The man went down without a sound. His companion turned, squeezed the trigger of his gun.

There was a streak of bronze as Doc's fingers went forward, lightning fast. One finger caught between the trigger and the trigger guard, preventing the ambusher from firing.

The bronze man's right hand flicked hard against the other's neck, struck the paralyzing nerves there.

Scarcely slowing, never hesitating to look back, Doc raced on. Behind him were two prone figures. Ahead were other boulders, but they were farther apart.

A shot rang out, close at hand. At the same instant, Doc Savage was whipped into the air.

One moment there had been firm footing beneath him. The next, and the ground seemed to rise swiftly.

A group of men rushed forward from all sides. At four corners, several men had hold of ropes.

They were holding up a huge fishing net, of the type used by deep-sea fishers, and woven to withstand tremendous pressure. A thin layer of dirt had concealed that net.

Doc was being held up in the air, as the onrushing men seized the edges of the net, pulling it up, pinning him in the center.

The bronze man had nothing firm to get a grip on. The net beneath his feet gave him no leverage. But his giant muscles erupted. Men yelled with sudden fear.

Enmeshed as he was in the huge net, Doc went into action. His fists cracked on jaws. His skilled fingers brought quick oblivion to those who came within his reach.

Without the net, he would have stood a chance of victory. But that net was a handicap. Too big a handicap, combined with the number of attackers that now launched themselves upon him.

Pistol butts rose and fell, showering blows unmercifully on Doc's closely combed bronze hair. The avalanche of attackers swarmed over him, pulling the net tight, wrapping ropes about it.

Doc Savage resembled a mummy in a hempen cocoon as a broad-shouldered, powerful man strolled on the scene. The fellow wore the uniform of a general.

"Well done, men," smirked General Glassell. "The famous Doc Savage who escapes even torture rooms, is now harmless. Before we are through with him, he may regret he ever made that escape."

Chapter XVII. A KNIFE FALLS

DOC'S flake gold eyes moved briefly over Glassell, the son of Morning Breeze. They remained longer on the man who followed the renegade Mayan.

The newcomer was dressed in the uniform of a field marshal. But his appearance would not have been called commanding. Rather, it was fearsome. It affected even the hardboiled soldiers of fortune. They cleared a path for him, with awe and unbidden terror showing on their features. The face of the field marshal showed nothing at all. It was lifeless. The nose, cheeks, lips and chin were devoid of all expression, as are those of a corpse. Only the eyes seemed alive. They were malevolent beyond description.

The Leader stood before Doc Savage!

The bronze man's gaze was steady. He appeared not to show the effects of the beating that had brought crimson through his light bronze hair. His attitude was that of a disinterested spectator surveying a freak.

The Leader's features did not move. They remained leaden and set. But hate sparkled deeper in his malevolent eyes.

"I am pleased to meet the so famous Doc Savage," he said in a flat, lifeless voice. "One of us had to go. Naturally, it had to be you."

General Glassell shifted uneasily. "We shall kill him now?" he asked anxiously.

The cold, lifeless face turned toward him. The burly Mayan took a step backward involuntarily.

"I—I only thought—" he began.

A faint flicker of scorn came to The Leader's malevolent eyes. "Certainly we kill him, but in my own way—and in my own time." He whirled toward the soldiers. "Get blankets and more ropes." The Leader's eyes blazed as he turned back to the bronze man. "Have you no curiosity?" he flared. "Why should I be curious?" Doc Savage's voice was even and unruffled. "You probably arrived here soon after I went to visit your advance guard. You saw what I did there and laid a trap for me. The trap was well set."

The frozen-faced one bowed. "Thank you," he sneered.

Then his voice returned to its usual cold, lifeless tone. "We did just that. The first two men you encountered were mere decoys. They served their purpose. But I didn't mean that. I meant, weren't you curious as to what my plans are, what I mean to do?"

"No." The bronze man's face did not change. "I am not curious. I know."

Lifeless lips drew back to show gleaming teeth. Eyes became thin slits. "And you shall die with that knowledge. You will not pass it on."

The Leader spun swiftly to the soldiers with the blankets and ropes. "Do as you were instructed!" The soldiers moved forward. Even with Doc Savage trussed so that movement was impossible, they were cautious. A grin spread over Glassell's features. He seemed to anticipate some special amusement.

"You once caused the downfall of my father," he jeered. "I hope the gods permit him to watch his son aid in revenging that downfall."

Doc made no reply. Soldiers were wrapping blankets about his already trussed figure. More ropes went about the blankets. Only his head was left free.

Then a rope cradle was fashioned. His helpless form was tossed into the cradle. A strong hempen strand was placed over an outjutting rock, and fastened to the cleverly fashioned support.

"Now!" rasped The Leader.

Three soldiers lifted Doc's bound form. With sure-footed steps, they walked to the edge of the cliff. A corporal barked a sharp order.

Without hesitation, the three soldiers threw Doc over the side. A sheer thousand-foot fall lay below!

THE rope snapped taut. Doc's body jerked viciously, struck the side of the canyon wall and bounded out again. Above him, the single rope that kept him from falling to destruction was stretched tight as a violin string.

The frozen-faced one peered over the edge. A sharp knife was in his hand.

"Anticipation is always half the enjoyment," he advised in that cold, lifeless voice. "You cannot see me. I can see you. Sooner or later, death will strike. Hang there, helpless. Meditate on the rocks that wait for your body far below. When you least expect it, this knife will do its work. You will die."

A battle-hardened corporal shivered slightly. It was ghastly, he reflected, to hang there, never knowing when you were to fall, with a horrifying, mangling death below you—one that would leave your body a smashed, pulpy mass.

And Doc Savage had been a great man. But, of course, The Leader was greater.

General Glassell was trying to express somewhat the same sentiments.

"You have genius," he said flatteringly. "No one but you could have defeated the bronze man. He even escaped me."

The Leader's lifeless face did not change, but his eyes showed pleasure. "I am a genius," he agreed.

"And is not now a good time to tell me what is to happen, now that the bronze man is through and victory within our grasp?" Glassell asked cunningly.

The frozen-faced one glanced at a wrist watch. "Ten minutes before we attack," he said coldly.

"Where are the reports from your Mayan spies that you promised we would have?"

General Glassell squirmed as if suddenly stricken with a chill. "They will come, they will come in time," he said hastily. "None could fail you." He drew a deep breath. "But is it not time that I knew the plan?"

The Leader hesitated. Then his eyes glowed fanatically.

"Perhaps I should tell you a little," he conceded. "You called me a genius. And that is correct. For none but a genius could have devised this plan. For it is simple. Simple and yet so complex that none but me could have thought or carried it out."

The wild light had left his eyes for a moment. Now they blazed with the lust for power that makes and wrecks kingdoms.

"Gold is the answer! Gold and gold alone!"

"But—but, I know," stammered Glassell. "But you are a wealthy man. You have far more of a fortune than you could ever use, or ever spend. I don't understand."

THE LEADER gazed at him scornfully. "Of course you don't. And certainly I have money—much money. But money isn't always gold. And it is gold I want. Gold to bring me power, power to rule the world.

"I have men in every nation of the world. They are trained men, trained agitators." The lifeless-faced man spoke as if to himself. "They have stirred up disorder. They can stir up much more. My money and their skill have done that.

"Some of them are leaders in their own fashion. They can cause revolts that might upset one or two nations where the people are none too well pleased with their present governments. But what is that?"

Glassell's eyes were large, his mouth half open.

"Nothing!" The frozen-faced one's lips came together tightly. "Money alone will not buy enough men to rule the world. Even gold as a purchasing power will not do that. You must strike in another way. And that can be done with gold."

"But I do not see!" Glassell objected blankly.

"Of course, you do not see. No one has, except me. That is where genius comes in. That is where a simple plan that suddenly becomes complex, baffles the average mind. But not mine."

"Doc Savage said he knew," Glassell put in suddenly.

For a moment, faint admiration appeared in the malevolent eyes of The Leader.

"Perhaps he does," he admitted. "But he is an extraordinary man. The knowledge, however, will do him no good. I will seize the gold in the Valley of the Vanished. I will use it as no one else has thought of using it."

He paused dramatically. "And I—I shall become the dictator of the world!"

Glassell's breath was coming fast. His features bore a strange look.

"And me. I'll run Hidalgo!" he breathed.

The words seemed to snap The Leader back to reality. His eyes swung about swiftly.

"Yes, you shall rule Hidalgo," he agreed, but there was a faint, underlying sarcasm in his words.

"I shall rule you."

The Leader tested the edge of his knife on the ball of a thumb. A thin, crimson line showed. He nodded, walked toward the rope that alone held Doc Savage's helpless body suspended.

The knife blade pulled across the rope gently. A thread snapped up. General Glassell looked on, hypnotized. Conversation between the soldiers stopped. They stood frozen.

Again the knife caressed the taut rope. Another fragment of hemp unwound like a steel spring.

Glassell moistened lips that suddenly had become dry and parched. His eyes were burning feverishly. His own hand made unconscious, sweeping moves, as if it were he who wielded the knife.

The frozen-faced one lifted the knife high, tensed for a swift, sweeping blow that would cut entirely through the rope. Then he halted, his head came up quickly.

In the almost absolute silence, came the faint sound of running feet.

"The spies," Glassell said, his voice coarse and choking.

A TRAVESTY of a smile, a mere lifting of the corners of the mouth, unexpectedly marked The Leader's face.

"Savage has been where he could hear all we have said so far. He should live until he can hear this. Death will then be even more unbearable," his flat tones came.

Two men rounded a turn in the mountain wall, came racing toward the group of soldiers.

Glassell chuckled. "I told you they'd get here in time," he reminded.

The newcomers were not dressed in the khaki of Glassell's troops. They were dressed as Mayans dressed, their finger nails painted a brilliant red. Once that had been a sign of fighting men. Now it meant only those who were outcasts.

"We come, Son of the Moon," they said in Mayan.

Shifty-eyed, they stood in front of the renegade who once had won the respect of King Chaac in the Valley of the Vanished. These two, also, had been trusted. Friends of Glassell's father, they had appeared to reform. But when Glassell called, they had answered. They had turned traitors.

"You did your work?" Glassell asked harshly.

"Speak Spanish, French, English or anything else, but not that gibberish," the frozen-faced one ordered.

Glassell's eyes narrowed slightly, but he interpreted without hesitation.

"They say the task you sent them on has been completed," he reported.

"The fangs of Doc Savage's men have been drawn?"

"Si,

completely. They found the big chambers of gas, with special projectors aiming in our direction, just as you had said they would. Using masks you provided, they succeeded in freeing that gas."

"And it must have been a good gas," the frozen-faced one said reflectively, "judging from how it tumbled over the advance guard when Savage used it from his plane. I am glad our radio experts heard his orders. That gas, released at the proper time, might have left our entire army helpless."

"But not now." Glassell was jubilant. "They think they are armed to receive us. They are not. They are without a weapon. They have nothing to fight with."

"Right." The Leader turned, looked over the edge of the canyon, down to where Doc Savage hung swaying on the end of the rope. The bronze man was trussed so thoroughly only his head was in view. He glanced up, his flake gold eyes emotionless as they saw the lifeless face of The Leader.

The knife made a quick circuit in the air. Sunlight glanced off its shiny surface as it cut cleanly through the rope.

Below—a thousand feet below—sharp-pointed rocks seemed to leap upward to receive Doc's body as his cocoon-bound figure hurtled downward.

Somewhere in the distance a bugle sounded.

Chapter XVIII. THE ATTACK

"I DON'T like it." Monk was frankly worried. Perspiration showed on his apelike features. He paced back and forth restlessly.

"Doc will win out somehow." Ham tried to speak with assurance, but he somehow failed.

Long Tom held a pair of field glasses to his eyes and peered down the canyon. "If we only hadn't gone down with Princess Monja, we might have been able to see something that would have given us a clue as to what happened," he worried.

"Female perversity predominates even antediluvian craniums," Johnny contributed, with a bitter look at Monk.

"You didn't have to go down with us just because I was taking Monja!" Monk flared. Red crept over his face.

"Quit speaking of girls." Renny's puritanical features became even more severe. "You said, I believe, that you have something rigged up that Doc suggested might halt the army that is to attack us. Perhaps we had better inspect that apparatus and see that it is in working order."

"Gladly." Ham brightened. He swung his sword cane back and forth. "Anything to be doing something, and anything to keep from having to look at the lovesick face of this ape."

Monk growled something unintelligible, but even he seemed glad of something to do.

With Long Tom leading the way, the five moved along the lip of the canyon to where the pipes extended over the edge.

Johnny and Renny examined them with frank interest.

"It was a tough job, but one that should work," Long Tom said, with pardonable pride.

"Unless attacks are launched from both ends of the canyon at the same time," objected Renny.

"We've got others just like this at the far end," Monk rumbled. "A couple of Chaac's men are down there to operate them."

"And the motivating principle behind these cylindrical protuberances?" asked Johnny.

"Compressed air and a gas Doc invented," Long Tom explained. "We will use masks so we won't be affected, then press this button"—he stepped forward to illustrate—"and gas, much heavier than air—" His mouth dropped. His ordinarily yellow, unhealthy appearing features became ghastly. "It-it—" he choked.

Monk and Ham rushed forward, investigated swiftly.

The hairy chemist's mouth worked wordlessly. Ham straightened, spoke in strangled tones.

"Some one has tampered with them! The gas has been released!"

"And that kicks us into eternity," Monk rumbled thickly. "It took us hours to fix that gas. Doc might do it quicker. But he isn't here. And without it we're lost. The Valley of the Vanished is doomed!"

Renny spoke the thought of all of them.

"Perhaps it would be well if Doc hurried back," he said simply.

DOC was hurrying—downward.

When the rope was cut, his body fell as if it had been shot from a gun. Glassell yelled out gleefully. The malevolent eyes of The Leader were half shut, as if savoring a delectable joke. Those eyes opened wide with startling quickness. Glassell's yell shut off in mid-breath. The unbelievable had happened!

The blankets, cocoon-tied ropes and huge fishnet that bound the bronze man suddenly opened and fell away. Doc Savage appeared, free of any bonds.

In the same instant, his long arms and unbelievably strong fingers shot out. They caught a narrow crevice in the seemingly sheer face of the cliff.

His fall was halted.

A foot more, or a foot less, and the effort would have been in vain. He made his catch at the one place where the cliff bulged sufficiently that he could reach it.

Only years of training of eyes and muscles could have achieved the bronze man's purpose. The hours he spent daily in going through the most rigorous exercises, training every muscle, every faculty, had their reward.

For the space of a heartbeat, he hung motionless; then he was in action.

With the grace and ease of a human fly, but with a speed that no other human fly ever possessed, Doc moved across the face of that flat mass of rocks.

The unexpectedness of it all had caught Glassell and his frozen-faced companion flatfooted. For long moments they were as if drugged, eyes unbelieving.

The Leader was the first to recover. He whipped a heavy .45 from his pocket, fired hastily. That haste was his undoing. His bullets went wild. Even as Glassell drew his gun free, and before his

companion could fire again, Doc reached shelter.

It wasn't much of a shelter. It was merely a wrinkle in the cliff. That wrinkle, like a glass-smooth wave, was above him. Lead struck it and whined away harmlessly. The bronze man moved along easily beneath it.

Glassell was raging. The frozen-faced one's thin mouth was set; he was firing clip after clip of bullets. Soldiers had raced forward, were adding their rifle fire to the din.

Doc Savage went on, swiftly.

The corporal who had heard much of Doc Savage surmised what had happened. In a way, he was almost glad. He held a reluctant admiration for the bronze man.

But he had no intention of reminding the others of what they must have forgotten.

Doc Savage had been tied, and tied tightly. But the bronze man had been tied before. Slipping his bonds had been simple enough. And in the kit he always carried around his body were razor-sharp knives. It had not been difficult to obtain one of those knives and cut through net, ropes and blankets.

The bronze man, had he desired, could have climbed back up the rope to the top of the cliff. But that would have meant facing bullets without a chance for defense.

Now he had rounded a corner of the canyon, reached a place where he could climb to the top and run.

With sure-footed speed, he tore toward the lip of the gorge where his aids awaited him.

Once more a bugle sounded. And as the shrill blast of the trumpet still echoed, artillery went into action.

The invaders launched screaming shells toward the Valley of the Vanished.

As Doc reached the place where his aids waited, the first of those shells tore overhead. At the other end of the canyon came the rumble of attacking forces there.

"WE can't hold out long." Renny's voice was as calm and conversational as if Doc had just returned from a pleasure jaunt.

"They freed that gas we had," Monk grumbled.

None of Doc's aids showed surprise at the bronze man's reappearance. They always pretended that they never worried when he was on dangerous errands.

"I know." The bronze man wasn't even breathing fast. He made no reference to his experiences.

"The mercy guns?" he asked.

"We got them as soon as we found the gas had been destroyed," said Long Tom.

Doc Savage nodded slightly. The roar of heavy artillery increased.

So far, the shells were overshooting. The gunners may deliberately have been intending to frighten, rather than kill.

"Two of you go to the other end of the canyon," Doc said swiftly. "The other three remain here.

Use mercy bullets in your guns and delay the invaders as long as possible."

He turned, raced on down the canyon side toward the Mayan village.

Renny and Johnny picked up weapons and followed, headed toward the lower end of the gorge.

"So long, if we don't see you again." Renny said dryly.

The others nodded. Their plight was desperate, and they knew it, but their spirits were far from low. Doc Savage was back again.

Far down the canyon in front of them the first of a skirmish line could be seen advancing. It was moving slowly, the khaki-clad men taking care to stay behind rocks. The invaders were taking no chances.

The artillery fire had settled down now to a steady, thunderous roar.

A modern army, with all that civilization had developed in the way of death dealing, was moving relentlessly on the last remnant of an ancient race.

Only one man stood between that army and victory. And even his aids wore frowns as they wondered what one man, even Doc Savage, could do to stop a well-armed, well-disciplined mass of troops.

PRINCESS MONJA'S features lighted as she sighted the bronze man. Face still stained with tears, she rushed to him, threw her arms around his neck.

"I'm so glad, so happy you are back," she half sobbed.

An unaccustomed color mounted on Doc's face. There was no time in his busy life for love. He long ago had renounced any thought of marriage. And his unflinching attraction for women had often proved a source of embarrassment. He felt far more at ease in a desperate fight than he did when some beautiful girl showed affection for him.

Monja's arms were locked tightly around Doc's head, her well-molded form was close to his.

Gently, he released her grip.

"You must never worry or be concerned ever about my fate," he told her gravely.

The deafening explosion of a big shell drowned out all lesser sounds. Princess Monja shuddered.

"I-I was afraid," she said. "I am not afraid now."

"But still there remains much to be done," Doc said softly. "Please tell your father I wish to see him."

The girl hurried to obey. Doc made haste to the building where Long Tom had taken temporary quarters. One room was filled with chemical supplies and strange equipment. Swiftly, he went to work.

Only the fact that the canyon walls were so high saved the Mayan village from destruction. The gunners were forced to elevate the muzzles of their weapons to such an angle that accurate fire was impossible.

But the troops with those guns were advancing.

King Chaac's face was worried as he entered the room where Doc worked. "Are—are we lost, Clark Savage?" he asked anxiously.

"The assault will be centered on the buildings here," the bronze man observed, ignoring the question. "Glassell, since he formerly lived here, knows of the gold caverns beneath us. I believe he expects you to run there for shelter, since you would be safe from shells if you were underground."

"An excellent idea," the aged king said. "I'll give instructions—"

"Such caverns also could prove to be a gigantic trap," Doc went on. "Openings could be blasted into them, and we would be caught. Therefore, take your people and seek shelter in the undergrowth and small caves along the walls of the gorge. There you will be safe."

"And you?" King Chaac asked.

"I shall be busy," the bronze man replied grimly.

"WE can't hold out much longer," Monk panted. The hairy chemist was perspiring feverishly. Much as he loved a fight, this one was becoming just a little too warm.

Ham and Long Tom were twenty paces on either side of him. Each had sought shelter behind large rocks, was making himself as small as possible.

And they needed all the protection they could get. Snipers were raining lead about them. Several times, bullets had smacked into various parts of their anatomy. Only the bulletproof armor they wore saved them.

Even so, Doc's aids knew they could not hold out much longer. Their rapid-fire pistols, loaded with bullets that brought unconsciousness but not death, sounded occasionally with bullfiddle roars. But they had no chance.

Had the situation not been so serious, they might have marveled at the scene beneath them. Small baby tanks were creeping forward with machine guns spitting. Those tanks could never scale the cliff and descend on the Mayan village, but they could come close enough so that the men safe inside could drive defenders from the top of the canyon wall.

A stream of lead, fully a hundred feet in length, burst from one of the tanks, played up and down the side of the gorge, but fell short of the men crouched on the top.

Small trench mortars were throwing up bombs. Some of these exploded too close for comfort.

Heavy artillery, machine guns, flame-throwers, tanks and infantry—all were being used in one strong, desperate assault.

"Doc's running the Mayans to shelter," Long Tom observed. He pulled restlessly on the lobe of one oversized ear.

"And we'd better be getting out of here," Ham put in grimly. The lawyer's usually dapper appearance was far from that now. He was hot and tired, his clothes dirty. The barrel of his gun was almost white-hot.

"I hope Doc's got some trick figured out," Monk worried as they retreated cautiously. "If he hasn't, we're really goners this time."

PRINCESS MONJA hoped that the bronze man had some way of halting the invaders, too. But she did more than that.

A look of determination was on her beautiful features. When others of the Mayans slipped toward the sides of the canyon in obedience to Doc's order, she did not go with them. She hid in one of the buildings near Doc until the streets were clear.

Then she slipped out, began a cautious approach to the head of the canyon, circling to dodge Monk, Ham and Long Tom as they moved slowly back. At the rim of the gorge, she halted at a point where she could see all that was going on beneath her.

A strange glint entered her eyes as she made out a bulgy, heavy-set figure in the uniform of a general. One hand felt softly the hilt of a peculiar stone dagger.

Son of the Moon was a traitor. It was he who had brought this trouble on his people. She, as princess and heiress to the throne of her people, should kill Son of the Moon, and with his death remove the one who had forgotten those of his own blood. Thus reasoned Princess Monja.

Carefully, taking shelter where she could, she crept slowly down the side of the gorge, toward the point where that bulky, heavy-set figure was.

At the bottom of the canyon, she halted briefly. No one was looking in her direction. General Glassell was only a hundred yards away. Earphones were on his head. He appeared to be talking into a black box. His back was toward the girl.

Whipping the stone dagger from her dress, Monja crept onward.

And it was then, with terrifying suddenness, that strong arms seized her from behind! Monja kicked, scratched and fought with the fury of a trapped wildcat. Her mouth was open; she screamed frantically. Words were being whispered into her ear. Too late, she realized their significance. Monk, growling and muttering, pulled the still struggling girl back toward the side of the gorge. Catching sight of her as she had started down the canyon wall, he had grasped the mad mission she was on, had set out in pursuit. But he had reached her too late. Monja's scream had been heard. An entire platoon of khaki-clad figures descended upon them. Monk fought. He fought as he had never fought before, mouthing defiance as his apelike arms bowled soldiers right and left. But he could not protect his rear. A heavy weight crashed upon him, bore him to the ground. Still struggling, he was bound, a revolver butt smashed down on the back of his skull. Dazed, but with belligerence undiminished, he was jerked to where General Glassell stood waiting. Princess Monja was held firmly between two of the invaders. "This is a surprise," Glassell said, with mock politeness. "I'm glad to see you, Lieutenant Colonel Mayfair, and you, princess." His eyes gleamed with a strange emotion as they looked upon the scornful features of the Mayan girl. He whipped around to the soldiers. "Execute Colonel Mayfair at once!" he snapped. "As for the girl"—he paused, smirked slyly—"I had intended to get her anyhow. I am just as well pleased that she could not wait, but came to me. I will keep her."

Chapter XIX. A TRAIL OF GOLD

GLASSELL turned back to the radio he had been using. Monja, bound tightly, was propped against a rock near by. The soldiers led Monk away. The girl's eyes were soft as she watched the hairy chemist go to his doom. Monk glanced at her once. What he saw in her face made his heart beat swiftly. "I'm sorry, Monja," he rumbled. "You are a brave man, Monk," she said softly. "I shall always remember you." Glassell was speaking excitedly. "I've captured the one they call Monk and King Chac's daughter!" he reported. "It is well." The cold, colorless tones of The Leader sounded in the earphones. "Save both of them in case Doc Savage offers unexpected resistance and it becomes necessary to bargain with him." "I've ordered Monk shot!" Glassell half howled. "Countermand that order at once!" The other's voice did not rise, but there was something in it that made Glassell's hands shake as he tore the earphones from his head and raced in the direction the soldiers had taken Monk. Then he paused. A cunning look crossed his heavy features. The hand of death was terrible, but still—Sharp orders sounded clearly. "Ready! Aim—" Glassell motioned to a near-by soldier. "I have changed my mind," he said. "Tell Sergeant Audib he must not execute Colonel Mayfair." "Fire!" A volley of rifle shots crashed out. The soldier gaped stupidly. "But, señor general—" "Fool! Idiot!" Glassell swore with seemingly genuine rage. He jerked out his .45, shot once. The soldier crumpled, a look of surprise still on his face. "I am sorry," Glassell reported over the radio a moment later. "I gave a soldier orders to run and halt the execution. He did not move swiftly enough. Monk already had been executed. I shot the soldier myself." At the opposite end of the canyon, the frozen-faced one listened without change of expression. Only his malevolent eyes turned a shade darker. "Proceed with your advance," he instructed, in that flat, cold voice. "Do not move too swiftly. Doc Savage may have something up his sleeve, although I doubt it. We shall start moving here in five minutes and pinch the Mayans between us. We should have achieved our entire aim inside half an hour." The Leader switched off his radio. For a moment, he stood silent. When he spoke, it was to himself. "And I am afraid, General Glassell, that you have blundered once too often. Your usefulness, also, will have expired within the next half an hour."

SOLDIERS mounted to the canyon rim overlooking the Valley of the Vanished. Other khaki-clad figures appeared from the opposite end of the gorge. The men moved forward, cautiously. Below them, they could see only the collection of queer-shaped buildings—and the huge, gold-built pyramid. Eyes became feverish; a tenseness filled those advancing soldiers of fortune. Captains shouted orders harshly, delaying with difficulty the advance of troops that were muttering rebelliously. "That's the gold we're after. What are we waiting for?" a gigantic, red-eyed invader snarled.

"There is no one in view. It might be a trap," a companion counseled.

"Trap, hell!" The big soldier spat contemptuously. "That bunch down there is licked, and they know it!"

The Mayans hidden at the sides of the canyon also felt that hope was gone. Peering through trees, they saw Doc's aids retreat to the building where the bronze man had been at work. Then they saw nothing more.

Glum features faced Doc. "Monk is gone," Ham said, softly. Sorrow showed on the lawyer's face. Pain flashed for an instant in the bronze man's flake gold eyes. "You are sure?"

Long Tom nodded slowly. "We saw him overcome and later executed. We were too far away to help him."

"He tried to save Princess Monja," Ham explained haltingly. "The big ape, I-I—"

"We understand," Renny said. His thin lips were tight. All felt a stunning loss, but all knew that Ham probably was the most affected, despite the continual bickering between the two that had marked their careers.

"Time is short," Doc Savage said. He stared straight ahead for a moment, then spoke crisply. "We have only a faint chance. The forces against us are overpowering. But we can try. The fate of the Mayans, the fate of the world, depends on us. Here is what must be done."

He spoke on, in short, clipped sentences. The others nodded. No need to tell them that their plight was desperate. They all knew they were faced with almost certain death. But it was not in their code to surrender.

Once Johnny opened his mouth to protest. Then his lips came together, the words unspoken. Doc Savage was taking the most dangerous, the most desperate chance of all in the one plan that offered the slightest hope of winning out. But that was the bronze man's way. Johnny knew protests would be useless.

One by one, the men turned to their allotted tasks.

Doc wheeled a small machine to the doorway. In appearance it was not unlike a miniature cannon, except that the barrel was solid steel, with no opening for a shell. Wires led from it to a small dynamo. At one side was a row of buttons and across the top, running parallel to the barrel, were two heavily insulated wires, strung like a radio aerial.

Soldiers were moving over the edge of the canyon wall. Doc spun the point of his strange weapon in that direction. The dynamo hummed, its pitch gradually increasing.

The bronze man pressed one of the buttons beside the barrel.

Blam!

Rock and dirt exploded with a tremendous blast directly in the face of the onrushing force.

Again Doc pressed a button.

"HE'S pulled one out of his hat."

The speaker was clad in khaki. He was pressed close to the ground, where he could get a clear view of what was happening. Small, deep-set eyes peered from beneath layers of gristle. One long, crooked arm was tossed carelessly over the small form beside him.

"Yes, Monk, but I expected that," said Princess Monja.

The hairy chemist twisted his head, looked admiringly at his companion.

Explosions were blasting at the entire edge of the cliff where the attacking force had halted.

The blasts came with the force of high-powered shells. The attackers were milling in confusion.

"Atomic blasts." Monk explained.

"At-at what?" asked Monja.

Monk blushed slightly. "Long Tom is the electrical guy; he could explain better than I can," he confessed. "But Doc's got an electrical dingbat rigged up that shoots bolts of juice, and when that juice hits the rocks it releases the atomic energy inside, causing an internal explosion, creating the illusion of artillery shells hitting."

"O-oh, yes. I-I understand perfectly." A dazed look was on Monja's face.

Monk grinned happily. He didn't understand perfectly either, but he was glad just to be alive, and to be with Monja.

He really should be dead, he conceded. In fact, he'd been left for dead by the firing squad. But the commander of that firing squad evidently hadn't heard of the bulletproof armor. None of the soldiers had fired at his head. All had shot at his body.

The tremendous striking power of the bullets had knocked Monk out, but they hadn't killed him.

He'd recovered, just as the advance had started. Borrowing the uniform of an unconscious soldier, he'd found Monja, freed her and started back to rejoin Doc.

Slowly, the hairy chemist's grin faded. Additional hordes of khaki-clad troops were pouring up the canyon.

The gold-maddened reserves from Blanco Grande had arrived!

In the same instant, officers of the invaders saw through Doc's trick. The explosions were continuing. Rocks and dirt were being thrown high in the air, but casualties were few. Shouted orders came distinctly.

Troops dived through the dust clouds, started charging down the slope toward the Mayan village.

From the opposite end of the gorge, the first of the attackers there came into view. Streams of khaki-clad troops were swarming toward the golden pyramid from all directions. Literally thousands of men were staging a last, furious charge. Below them, Doc Savage stood alone!

AS the charge started, Doc Savage abandoned the atomic gun. It had served its purpose. It had delayed the attack until the bronze man's aids had completed their tasks and disappeared. But Monk did not know that. A groan burst from his lips. Nothing could withstand the resistless force of that charging mass of gold-maddened, inflamed band of soldiers of fortune, an army composed of little better than bandits, whose sole aim was to kill and loot.

And then a strange thing occurred—a thing that not even Monk could understand. Doc left the doorway of the building where he had been crouched. He raced into the open. He raced directly for the golden pyramid.

Order almost disappeared in the ranks of the invaders. They became little more than an unruly, senseless mob. Attempts of their officers to control them were unheeded.

All had heard of the extra reward offered to the man who killed Doc Savage. They raised guns, fired, and ran downward.

Doc apparently paid no attention to the bullets that sang about him. As Monk watched, the bronze man reached the front of the pyramid, started up.

Narrow paths, chiseled in the side of the gorge, offered the only route for one group of the advancing soldiers, but they were tumbling down that with little regard either for their own safety or the safety of their companions.

Some were pushed off, to fall to horrible deaths. The others did not even pause. Behind them came even more, as those who had left Blanco Grande last joined in that frantic rush.

All eyes were on the bronze man. The steps up the front of the pyramid were steep, but he was mounting them with apparent ease. His rapidly moving figure made a difficult target, but even so it seemed impossible that he could reach the top in safety.

But reach the top he did. A sigh of relief came from Monk, a sigh that was half a groan. For Doc had swung open the huge door at the top of the pyramid—the door that led to the enormous gold caverns beneath the ground.

"He's safe for a minute, but he'll be trapped! They'll get him sure!" the hairy chemist wailed. But he found he was talking to himself. Monja had slipped from under his arm, was on her feet and running down another narrow trail.

"If Clark Savage dies, I want to be with him," she sobbed.

For a moment, a lugubrious expression was on Monk's homely face. It seemed he hadn't been making the progress with the pretty Mayan that he had thought.

But Monk's hesitation was only momentary. Then he, too, was on his feet, plunging after the girl. He also could die with Doc.

From the far end of the canyon, a fresh regiment of khaki-clad veterans streamed into view. The valley seemed filled with shouting, murderous invaders.

Then Doc reappeared. And at sight of him, Monk's breath came in with sudden comprehension.

The bronze man was running down the face of the pyramid now. He was carrying a huge load in his big arms. And as he ran, he dropped objects from that load.

The sun flashed briefly on the burden he carried. It was a dull, golden gleam. The objects that were being dropped were golden ingots, goblets and golden vessels.

The bronze man was leaving a golden trail leading straight to the enormous storehouse underground—the storehouse where thousands upon thousands of similar ingots and immense stores of beautiful golden images and vessels lay hidden.

Chapter XX. WHEN PLANS MISFIRE

THE tumult that followed was almost indescribable. No such desperate, hideous stampede had ever been seen before.

The sight of those golden objects, the clear intimation that they led to a storehouse where an almost inexhaustible supply was hidden, released passions that long had been hidden. The thin veneer that civilization had stamped on the murderous troops intent on a bloody errand was stripped away. They became savages. Only one thought filled them; only one desire impelled them.

Each wanted to be the first to get the gold. Each wanted to seize all the gleaming metal that he could carry, to paw over it, to revel in wealth, to steal and loot and kill.

Officers tried desperately to stem the tide. Automatics cracked as those officers shot the men in the leading ranks, striving to restore sanity.

They might just as well have tried to reason with a hurricane, and they stood as little chance of stopping the rush.

More guns roared. But those guns were in the hands of the gold-maddened soldiers. The officers dropped. Some were trampled to death, others were shot down, still others were run through by bayonets. None lived.

The race up the front of the pyramid resembled the rushing onslaught of warrior ants, who climb over the bodies of their fellows to surmount any obstacle, and who leave nothing behind them. So it was with the khaki-clad invaders. Those who slipped, those who paused for an instant to draw a breath, were knocked to the steps, were ground under hobnailed boots. Screams of pain and torture filled the air, mingling with other yells from those who did not even know they were making a sound, but knew only they intended to go on, and that nothing could stop them.

The bronze man had disappeared. Even had he been in plain view, it is doubtful that he would have been noticed. Every eye was focused on that yawning opening near the top of the pyramid, the opening that led to the gold vaults.

THE LEADER had been thrust aside by the first rush of his troops. And he had realized at once what had happened.

The anger that filled him against Doc Savage made his malevolent eyes gleam like red balls of fire. His expressionless face was even more lifeless and frozen.

He alone made no attempt to try and halt the soldiers. That, he saw, was useless. The very reason that had impelled him to enlist such men as his warriors was now working against him.

He had wanted only those to whom killing is just another job, who were outside the law and ready for any desperate venture. Now those qualities had broken out in a way that would be impossible to control.

Doc Savage had outwitted him.

But the frozen-faced one had no intention of giving up. He still had one desperate play he could make. His eyes narrowed with cunning thought. Cautiously, he started toward the pyramid.

Thunderous noise of fighting men came from under the ground now. The stream of struggling bandits climbing up the pyramid had dwindled. In a few minutes all would be in the deep, hidden caverns. There was huge chamber after huge chamber in that underground vault. Every chamber was filled with gold. Pile upon pile of it was there for the taking. But the frozen features of The Leader betrayed no interest, now, in that fact.

The soldiers, he knew, could still be taken care of. They could be taken care of in a way that was hideous beyond all human reason.

But The Leader was scarcely reasonable. And now he was hunting and stalking. He wanted to find Doc Savage. If he could find him—

AT one side of the village was a peculiar-appearing structure. Once it had housed the sacrificial well. At the bottom of that well had hissed vicious snakes. It had been used by the Mayans for executions.

The snakes were no longer there. It had been long since the sacrificial well had been used. But if the snakes were gone, the well did hold other queer creatures.

As the din and tumult quieted, those strange creatures appeared, pulling themselves awkwardly over the edge of the well.

There were four of them. They were huge, and far from human in appearance, although each did appear to have two legs and two other appendages that might have been arms.

But where the heads should have been, were bucket-shaped objects, something like divers' helmets. Shoulders and torsos were hidden in bulky jackets that joined the helmets at the top, and overall-shaped trousers below.

Each of the four was carrying a large cylinder. A bellowslike arrangement was at one end of each cylinder, while a hose was attached to the other end.

The cylinders were heavy. The four, big as each was, grunted inaudibly as they hoisted their burdens and started slowly toward the pyramid.

And as they moved forward, another figure came into view. Doc Savage glided from a near-by building, took up a position in front of the strange-appearing figures.

He did not appear surprised, nor did the four seem to notice him.

But another did. The frozen features of The Leader peered cautiously around a corner, two hundred yards away. A gun came up in his hand, then dropped. The distance was too great.

The Leader was not superstitious. He saw nothing awesome in the four creatures that trailed Doc Savage. He did see deadly peril there to his plans.

He did not know, but he felt with fierce certainty that he knew what was in the cylinders those four carried, and felt he knew why they were dressed as they were.

Men about to use an overpowering gas would be dressed that way. Men who planned an attack on a large force where their only hope lay in rendering their opponents helpless, would be dressed that way.

If such a gas were loosed in the gold caverns, the soldiers there would be helpless. Even if the gas did not kill, it would leave the bandits easy prey, so that they might be disarmed and bound. Under the direction of the Mayans, terrible when aroused, an army could be marched, powerless, back to Blanco Grande to face the summary justice of military rule.

The Leader darted forward with fierce strides.

GENERAL GLASSELL, also, was stalking prey. Unlike the commander, the Mayan renegade had not been in the front ranks of the attackers. He had arrived behind the fierce rush of the maddened men. But bringing up the rear, he had seen something that at first made him believe in ghosts. Speeding along ahead of him had been a beautiful girl, closely pursued by an apelike form, whose long, dangling arms almost touched the ground. Glassell's .45 had appeared in his hand; he had slipped along rapidly behind them. The Mayan, also, saw that all was lost. There had been one instant of fierce regret, then he had reverted to type. With the fatalism of his race, he had accepted defeat. But all his fierce hatred had centered on Monk.

As the roar of underground fighting increased in volume, Doc led his four aids to the base of the pyramid. He held a mercy pistol in one hand. The scramble of running feet came to his keen ears. He whirled. A strange trilling filled the air, a trilling low, yet penetrating. It was heard by his four aids, even inside the huge helmets they wore.

From one side of the pyramid had appeared Princess Monja, with Monk close behind her. And in the rear, pistol raised, was General Glassell.

At another corner, almost behind Doc, came the frozen, expressionless features of The Leader. His gun was aimed directly at the bronze man's head.

THERE was an instant of perfect silence among those at the base of the golden pyramid. The fate of the world hung on that one breathless moment. Victory for either side could be decided in the space of a heartbeat.

The Leader saw that victory in his hands. A single pressure on the trigger, and lead would drill the bronze-haired head of Doc Savage.

Monk saw the danger to Doc. He let out a hoarse bellow of rage and leaped forward with the clumsy, gangling, yet tremendous speed of the bull-ape he resembled. Four men in queer costumes also leaped to shield the bronze man.

But even quicker than his aids, even faster than the finger squeeze of The Leader, was Doc Savage.

A gun cracked. Lead whistled through the space Doc's head had occupied a moment before. But the bronze man was no longer there.

With a coördination of muscles that would have appeared unbelievable unless it had been seen, Doc had jumped to one side. In that same flash, he had turned in mid-air. He landed facing the horrible features and malevolent eyes of the frozen-faced one.

It was then that the man who had wanted to rule the world knew he had lost. It was then he knew that the golden trail he had followed could have but one ending.

With a shrill scream, he vanished behind the side of the pyramid. He ran frantically along the wall toward a small niche.

General Glassell saw that move. He understood what it meant. Some deep, hidden remnant of manliness came to the surface. With frantic steps, he charged desperately to intercept the man he had so long obeyed.

They came face to face, directly before the niche.

Insane rage gleamed from the frozen-faced one's eyes. Glassell was yelling, was shouting frantic words. What those words were, The Leader never knew.

He squeezed the trigger of his gun, again and again.

The renegade Mayan went to the ground, his head almost shot from his body. The Leader clawed frantically at a small spot on the side of the pyramid.

Doc Savage shot around a corner. Lead tugged the side of his coat as the frozen-faced one fired at him.

Mouth drawn back in a terrible grimace, eyes almost popping from his head, The Leader's clawing hand found what it sought. It was a small key.

Doc Savage's keen eyes saw that key. His lips tightened. He fired his mercy pistol at the other's hand.

That mercy bullet struck even as the key was pushed home.

THERE was a tremendous, earth-shaking roar. The ground trembled and rocked beneath their feet. Even Doc was shaken off balance, while his aids were thrown to the earth bodily by the force of that explosion. The pyramid rocked and teetered, seemed almost about to collapse entirely.

While ears still rang, while bodies still were stunned by the force of that overpowering blast, other sounds rose from the depths of the earth. The sounds were such that none who heard them ever could forget.

They made tame by comparison the worst nightmare ever experienced. They were animal cries of unendurable pain and torment. They were wrung from hundreds of throats—the throats of gold-maddened bandits, trapped and dying.

The simple pressure of a hidden key had exploded tons of dynamite planted by spies at either

entrance to the gold cavern. That explosion had been planned to trap and kill Mayans who had been expected to seek refuge there from the artillery bombardment. Instead, it had trapped and killed those who had sought to destroy the Mayans. And they had been killed by their own commander. Hidden caches of deadly gas, designed to wipe out any Mayan who might survive the explosion, had been released with the blast. That poison was now killing the last of the bandit horde.

Doc Savage ran forward, firing once more with his mercy pistol.

The Leader had fallen. He made no attempt to rise. One fist made feeble swipes at his throat. As the bronze man reached his side, the other fell back. On his throat was the crimson-soaked hand of death.

Chapter XXI. FRIENDS PART

DOC SAVAGE reached quickly for the kit inside his coat. His hand came out. It held only a broken hypodermic. The Leader's last shot at the bronze man had sealed his own doom. It had broken the only vial of antidote Doc had had for the hand of death.

The bronze man's aids gathered swiftly. The metal helmets came off, to reveal Renny, Johnny, Long Tom and Ham. Monk stood close to Princess Monja.

A peculiar-shaped glove was on one hand of the frozen-faced one. It was literally covered with hundreds of tiny needles.

"The hand of death," Monk said solemnly.

"Be careful when you touch it," Doc cautioned. "The point of each of those needles has been covered with a very swift-action poison. It was only by analyzing some of the blood of the slain messenger boy that I was able to develop an antidote. Now that antidote has been destroyed."

Ham nodded. Mayans were streaming down from the hills. The noise underground had ceased. There was only the silence of the tomb—a tomb that enfolded all those who had come to murder and loot. Renny glanced at the body on the ground curiously. "But who is he, Doc?"

"Yeah, I never saw that mug before," Long Tom muttered.

Doc Savage smiled slightly. He reached down, his hands worked about the fallen one's face.

A gasp of astonishment came from the lanky chemist as Doc Savage rose. In his hands, he held a cleverly fashioned mask. That mask had fitted closely over the real features of The Leader. The man who lay dead was Baron Vardon.

"BUT he's the one who wanted us to go to Switzerland. We saw him dead in the hotel room in New York!" Monk exploded.

"He is the one who wanted us to go to Switzerland, but we did not see him dead," Doc corrected quietly.

"You mean—"

"I mean he tried to decoy us abroad, so he might have a clear field here," the bronze man went on. "He realized he might fail, so he pretended to be a victim of the hand of death. When we first entered the hotel room, his acting was realistic.

"Before we left, I knew he was not dead, but there was no time to do anything, or any reason to then. I didn't want to make him a prisoner then. It would have meant letting the rest of his men know that fact and disperse before I could trap them all. But, unfortunately, I failed."

"The pulse on his throat?" Johnny asked. "Is that how you knew he wasn't dead?"

"Exactly. The pulsebeat there showed he was alive."

"But his purpose?" Ham asked. "From Long Tom's investigation, Baron Vardon was an exceedingly wealthy man in his own right. Why did he want the gold here?"

"Baron Vardon was wealthy," Doc agreed, "but he wanted power. Through his League of Nations connections, he learned of the Valley of the Vanished. And he saw a way to use the gold.

"Gold is almost a forbidden metal on a majority of the world's leading money markets, yet those money markets are based on it. And the peace and prosperity of the world depends on the money markets.

"Should the financial centers of the world suddenly be disrupted, the entire financial structure of the world would be toppled; and nations, even the strongest, would fall."

"Then he—"

"He intended to throw the billions of dollars' worth of gold of the Valley of the Vanished on the world market in one big sweep. Financial security of nations would have been overthrown. His agitators would have stirred up trouble where stirring was necessary. Gold would have made him dictator of the world."

"A golden peril!" Ham breathed.

THE MAYANS did not want to see Doc and his men go. But the bronze man's errand was over. Hidalgo and the Valley of the Vanished had been saved.

The plane Long Tom had purchased in Havana, virtually undamaged, was flown from the near-by canyon to the small lake in the Valley of the Vanished. Equipment was placed aboard.

No attempt had been made to open the underground tombs where murderers and thieves lay buried.

The Mayans would wait for months, until all poison gas was gone, before they did that. Princess Monja stood silent and forlorn at the edge of the lake as the six men started for the plane.

Monk paused beside her. His homely face worked with emotion. It seemed he had words to say, but he could not say them.

The Mayan princess had eyes only for Doc. Face lengthening, Monk walked on.

The plane's motor roared. The ship began to move slowly across the water. Cries of farewell, mingled with sadness, filled the air. It might be long before they saw Doc Savage again.

Monk's eyes were glued to Monja. Under the full sweep of the Central American sun, her skin was golden, her face beautiful.

Ham's face screwed up mischievously; then he sobered. The look on Monk's face showed only too well where his heart was.

"Skip it," the dapper lawyer advised affectionately. "She's beautiful, and she's a princess. But you have no more chance there than she has of winning Doc. Women are dangerous, too."

"Yeah," Monk sighed deeply. "A golden peril."

THE END