

THE RUSTLING DEATH

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. A RUSTLING NOISE

NO one realized that Doc Savage stumbled upon the rustling death quite by accident. Had that fact been known, some terror might have been avoided. Or at least delayed.

The occurrence in the hotel lobby was really a coincidence. But the small man with the wise face apparently did not think so. He had bushy hair, bushy eyebrows, a long pointed nose that twitched, and small eyes. He stood, as if frozen, in the center of the lobby of one of Washington's most fashionable hotels. An expression of fear was stamped on his pinched features.

The newcomer at whom the pinch-faced man stared did not look like a fearsome creature. He was a tall, handsome man, dressed immaculately. He signed the register: "Theodore Marley Brooks, New York." Then he took the elevator to his rooms with the announced intention of dressing for dinner. A windy sigh escaped the lips of the pinch-faced man. He darted quickly to the desk. Before the clerk had a chance to turn the removable signature card around, he seized it with skinny hands and twisted the card so that he could read it. A ghastly, croaking sound crawled from his lips.

The clerk was solicitous in a superior sort of manner.

"Are you ill, Mr. Strang?"

Strang croaked again. He strove to recover his poise.

He darted toward a bank of phone booths. The clerk was still smiling in a superior fashion as the little man raced, rabbitlike over the floor. Fox Strang was the sort of guest who had to be treated with just so much respect. He paid his bills. There was no question that he had money. But the management wished that he'd stay at another hotel.

Fox Strang had never been convicted of a crime. He had been accused of murder, arson, grand larceny and several other infractions of the law. But he was smart. No one had ever caught him red-handed. That was how he got the name of Fox.

He was perspiring as he wedged himself into a booth separated somewhat from the rest. He got a number in New York City.

"Hello, Krag?" he barked. "Ham Brooks just blew in. That means Doc Savage is probably wise."

The voice that came back over the wires was stilted in tone, practically without inflection.

"Doc Savage will be disposed of at this end. You merely follow instructions."

He hung up, leaving Fox Strang staring at the mouth piece of his phone. Fox shuddered.

"I wish I'd stuck to picking pockets," he mumbled.

Then he made a couple of phone calls. When he had finished, he stepped out into the lobby. He bought a paper at the newsstand, sank into one of the biggest easy-chairs in the lobby, apparently to read. But first, he punched a hole in the middle of the newspaper with one finger so that he could see what was going on in the lobby without anyone noticing that he was watching.

Fox twitched and fidgeted for quite a while. The man he had called Ham Brooks apparently took his time at a leisurely dinner. When he finally emerged from the dining room and strode to the street, Fox got up and followed him.

THEODORE MARLEY BROOKS was the subject of two strange coincidences that night. Ham Brooks, as he was called by his friends, had come to Washington on perfectly legitimate business. One of the best legal brains ever to have been graduated from Harvard University, he intended to plead a case before the United States supreme court the following day.

Ham had two further claims to fame aside from his legal ability. For one thing, he was recognized as one of the best-dressed men in the nation.

But he was also one of the five aids of Doc Savage. It was this distinction that really set Ham apart from most other men.

The dapper lawyer was not thinking of any particular distinction or prowess as he strolled through the beautiful night in Washington. Ham was quite at peace with the world. It was quite natural that Ham should have wandered toward the outskirts of Washington to enjoy the moonlit night. And having reached the fringe of the city where there were few dwellings, it was quite natural for him to notice the four lighted windows of the only structure that seemed inhabited for more than a mile. There is something about a solitary lighted dwelling at night; it draws one.

There was nothing about the shack that particularly attracted the dapper lawyer's scrutiny. It just happened that the moon, rising in the distance over a ridge of tall trees, offered an impressive picture from that spot. Ham paused, leaned on his shiny cane as he gazed at it. It was at that moment that a young man came along.

At first, Ham thought the oddly pale countenance of the man was merely the reflection of the white moonlight. Then he noticed the stark expression of the eyes. Ham moved toward the young man, intending to ask him if he were ill. But before he could open his mouth, the pale man was gone. He headed straight for the shack. Then he slowed. Stealth was evident in his sudden crouch. In another half a dozen seconds the man blended into the shadows cast by shrubbery in front of the building. Ham turned to follow. The soft, slurring tones of a Virginian came from behind him, made him pause.

"Maybe Mr. Jan is workin' late tonight. Guess Ah'll jes' check up on it, though."

Ham turned his head. A Washington policeman swung down the street, twirling his nightstick. Ham moved into the shadows. There seemed no point in identifying himself in something that might be a quite ordinary and innocent situation. He shrugged, as the patrolman strode toward the shack. The lawyer then turned to go on his way.

But in that moment, the terror that was to sweep the land made its first appearance!

Ham froze where he was. At first, an eerie rustling noise seemed to come from all directions at once. There was an ominous, threatening note to it, as if some giant virago of vengeance had stepped from history's pages with an enraged swirl of skirts that were silk and crinoline.

Then a scream of pure terror welled up from the flat-roofed shack!

The lights of the shack flickered strangely, then went out. Ham leaped to swift motion; he began to race toward the shack. He whipped up the shiny black cane he carried, pressed a hidden button. The black case dropped away, fell to the ground. It left a long, slender blade of spring steel that was tipped with a sticky substance. This was a sleep-inducing drug, instantaneous in its action. Ham's sword cane was a celebrated weapon that had won a lot of scraps. The dapper lawyer had complete confidence in his ability to come out on top, even against great odds. It could have been expected that he would plunge right into whatever enemy might be lurking in the darkness. That made his sudden hesitation quite peculiar. The rustling sound grew louder, a weird, omnipresent thing. Ham shuddered. An expression of amazed uncertainty spread over his features. He gave the impression of a man awakening from a nightmare, still certain that it is real and terrible. And, in fact, a queer overpowering feeling of apprehension was gripping Ham. His flesh was suddenly damp with perspiration-dripping with the sweat of a terror that he could neither understand nor admit to himself was really there!

The rustle of silk and crinoline ceased. In its place there came a hum that was not a hum. It was a sound that the ear did not record; something sensed and felt rather than heard. Ham Brooks staggered. His brain grew fuzzy. Meaningless words jumbled from his lips. His eyes stared with a lack of comprehension that seemed to indicate approaching idiocy.

He slowed to a grotesque, exaggerated pace, somewhat like a slow-motion movie.

Time lost all meaning for Ham Brooks. He sank slowly and wearily to the ground. How long he lay there, his eyes half seeing, he had no idea.

RATIONAL thought crept back into Ham's brain slowly. He again had the sensation of emerging from a dream. This time, he was aware of the reality of the world into which he was waking. It was a dark world, illumined only by the paleness of the moon.

He staggered to his feet, glanced at his wrist watch. Less than fifteen minutes had actually gone by. He shook his head, picked up his sword cane and moved toward the shack, which was now in darkness. He stumbled over some large, soft object. From one pocket he took a spring-actuated flashlight that was an invention of Doc Savage. He washed the ground with its bright beam.

At his feet lay the body of the Washington policeman! Ham leaned over, felt the pulse. The man was quite dead. The lawyer rolled the cop over and moved the light up and down. There seemed to be no mark upon his body, no indication of what had caused death. Ham straightened. Then he heard the soft moaning sound from the open door of the flat-roofed shack. Cautiously, he moved toward it. The second body was inside the door. This man was not dead. He lay on his back, half-seeing eyes staring at the ceiling. Moans of anguish came from his lips.

This man was about the same size as the pale young fellow who had crouched outside. But his ruddy face was round and chubby, rather than pale and pointed. Ham leaned over and shook the fellow's shoulders. The eyes flickered, seemed to come more into focus. The voice rose to a thin scream.

"P-please d-d-don't kill me!"

Then he opened his eyes wide and sat up. He could see Ham in the reflection of the lawyer's

flashlight. "Wh-who're you?" he demanded. "Where's Jan?"

The voice was brisk, businesslike. Ham parried with two questions of his own.

"Who are you and what's all this about?" he snapped. "There's one dead man here already."

The young man with the round, chubby face paled slightly. He looked past Ham and saw the dim outline of the policeman's body.

"Gosh!" he said. "I'm Tester Lyons. I worked here for Jan Vanderlee."

Ham wanted to know what the nature of the work might have been. Tester Lyons shuddered. He staggered to his feet, found a light switch. Then he gasped. The interior of the shack looked as if a hurricane had gone through it, followed by a tornado, a typhoon and an earthquake.

What little there was left of benches and equipment had been smashed to bits so small as to defy repair or even, in many cases, identification. There was a huge hole in one wall where some heavy apparatus had apparently been taken out. Tester Lyons stared at the wreckage and then at Ham.

"J-Jan must have taken it away," he stammered.

Ham stamped his foot.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Quit stalling!"

Tester Lyons drew a deep breath.

"Jan Vanderlee was working on something he said would revolutionize warfare and some branches of peace-time industry," he explained. "Jan is an inventor. I'm an electrical engineer. I've been working for Jan a month, and I don't know what it is he has invented—except that it is terrible."

Ham considered that for a moment.

"What did Jan look like?" he inquired.

Tester Lyons described the youngish man with the pale, pointed face who had passed Ham out in the street.

"I saw him come in the shack," Tester said in his brisk voice. "Then that is all I remember except a sort of rustling noise. I think Jan must have been afraid I was getting wise to whatever it was he's discovered."

"Were you?" Ham asked.

Tester Lyons' eyes grew thoughtful. He shook his head.

"No! I wish I had been. It must be worth millions."

Ham did not reply to Lyons. Instead, he twisted a fancy pin on his tie, switched on the hidden transmitter of a compact two-way short-wave set. Then he began to give a detailed account of what had happened to him and what he had found. Ham was using a throat microphone, similar to those used by some air-line pilots, which is hidden underneath the collar. It picks up sound by vibration from the outside of the throat.

Chapter II. PLANS FOR DOC

A FIVE-PLACE cabin job was taking off from a private flying field in another part of Washington. The pilot, a scarred and thoroughly tough-looking individual, occupied one of the five seats. The one beside him was filled with baggage. Behind him sat Fox Strang. The other two seats were taken up by a skinny giant who was so tall that he had to sit sideways, his knees occupying the space that normally would have accommodated another passenger.

The tall man had an Adam's apple so prominent that it made one think of an ostrich who had swallowed a baseball. When he spoke, it was with the general effect that he was starting a speech of great importance.

"The boss will expect us to move with expedition," he rumbled. His voice started down somewhere near his shoes.

Fox Strang bobbed his head up and down in agreement. "That's right, Ward. I'm waiting for a call from him now."

He adjusted a radio headset to his ears. Then he grunted. Signals began to come in.

"The boss," he said. Then he devoted his attention to the radio set.

"Ward Hiller and I are taking off from Washington," he reported. "We were getting ready to move the stuff when Ham Brooks showed up at the shack. We tried to get him, but a dumb cop stumbled in the way. We got him instead. The stuff is being taken care of. What'll we do?"

Words poured over the air. Fox Strang nodded his head. Finally he took off his headphones.

"We go to the spot in New York," he said. "The trap is set for Savage. If we get him now, we won't have anything more to worry about."

Ward Hiller grinned tightly. His eyes glowed briefly with some private enjoyment.

"Smart guy, the boss," he said.

Fox Strang shot a covert glance at his long, skinny companion. Apparently he thought Ward Hiller knew more than he had confided.

"Just who is the boss?" Fox asked. "I know his real name ain't Krag. That's probably just a phony."

Hiller shrugged.

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Who knows?"

Fox tried again.

"Wonder what nationality he is. He talks good English. But it sounds kind of foreignlike."

Ward Hiller merely smiled again. He looked out of the window at the lights of Baltimore spread out below them.

"Must be up about five thousand feet," he observed.

TESTER LYONS' mouth dropped open as Ham began to talk. As far as Tester could see, Ham was talking to himself. Then he began to realize that Ham was using a throat microphone. From the tiny receiver that was inserted in Ham's right ear came a shrill, metallic voice. "Yes, you danged shyster. A phone call came in on the automatic recorder from a guy named Tester Lyons saying something phony was going on in a shack out there."

Ham interrupted the voice. He turned to Tester Lyons.

"Did you phone Doc Savage?" he asked.

A variety of emotions seemed to pass over Lyons' face.

"What if I did?" he demanded. "What business is it of yours?"

"I am one of Doc's men," Ham explained quietly. "I am in communication with his office at the moment."

Tester Lyons' eyes went wide.

"Gosh!" he blurted. "Gee, I'm glad you're here. Maybe we can bust this thing open now and find out what it's all about."

Ham nodded, then held up his hand for silence. He switched the short-wave set back on again.

"Where is Doc?" he asked.

The shrill voice informed him that Doc Savage would return to the office within an hour and that, in the meantime, the speaker was looking forward to an extremely pleasant time.

"You should see her, you law book in doll's clothing," the voice said. "She's a dream. Brown eyes that would melt an iceberg and a shape that an artist would rave about. Isn't it just too bad, shyster, that I've got the inside track all to myself?"

Ham Brooks snorted in impatience.

"Listen, you missing link, we've got to find this Jan Vanderlee. Never mind about beautiful women."

The voice from New York laughed.

"You worry about the missing Jan Vanderlee. I'm busy. I'll call you when Doc gets back."

There was a click as the New York transmitter cut off. Ham stood glowering at the big hole in the wall of the shack. His concentration was so great that he did not hear footsteps that crept softly up behind him. Tester Lyons, beside him, was staring vacantly in the same direction in which Ham was looking.

The lights winked out and there were twin thuds as bludgeons of some sort smashed into flesh.

IN New York, the owner of the high-pitched voice moved back from the radio transmitter.

Most people called him Monk. His face was friendly in a simian sort of way. The eyes were sunk in deep pits of gristle. Long arms hung to his knees. The visible portions of his anatomy were covered with a stiff, reddish bristle. When he opened his mouth in a grin at having irritated Ham, Monk's entire head almost disappeared.

It was still a fact, however, that Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair was one of the outstanding industrial chemists of the age. He was also a valuable aid of Doc Savage and the bane of Ham's existence.

He sighed audibly and turned toward an outer reception room. He'd left a brunette there. Monk was very susceptible to good-looking women. So, for that matter, was Ham. A good part of their vehement quarrels had started over women.

Monk opened the door leading to the reception room. The hairy chemist had been more than usually smitten by this brunette vision, the kind of a girl that made a man think of a cottage with vines and a garden. She had given her name as Nada Morrell. She wanted to see Doc, personally.

Monk opened the door and put on his friendliest smile. He looked at the girl. He also looked into the business end of a pearl-handled automatic. The gun was in Nada Morrell's slim white hand. And the hand was perfectly steady.

The chemist's mouth dropped open. He stared.

"I heard every word you said," Nada Morrell said in clipped tones that did not remind him of a cottage with vines and a garden. "You must have bumped into the lever of an interoffice communicator. What do they want Jan Vanderlee for?"

Monk gulped.

"It looks like he killed a guy," he said.

"Anyone he killed deserved it," she snapped. "Now, don't come near me."

She backed toward the door. Monk moved toward her instinctively, put out one gnarled hand. The gun blasted! The lead tore past Monk's ribs.

"The next one," she informed him, "will not miss!"

Monk gasped. He staggered back against a table, moving it. The girl backed slowly through the door. The chemist made no move to stop her. The door swung closed and she was gone.

Monk went into action then. When he had stumbled against the table, a lever had been pressed

which released a thin chemical sheen on the floor outside the door. That sheen would impregnate the girl's shoes with a chemical that could be easily followed with the aid of infrared glasses; which would make the stuff fluorescent. Also, Monk had her fingerprints. He quickly developed a set of prints from a specially treated magazine cover she had been reading while waiting for Doc. Monk put the developed prints under a television-transmission unit which would reproduce them in a private office in Washington. Ham, he figured, could then take them to the F.B.I. and learn immediately whether the girl had a record.

The hairy chemist had not seized the girl before she left for two reasons. In the first place, he was afraid she might have been injured. Doc's aids did not make war on women. Monk, himself, was quite safe. He was wearing at the time a bulletproof garment that covered his entire body like a suit of long winter underwear.

The other reason was that, believing she had gotten free without identification or leaving a trail that could be followed, the girl might lead them to some clue that would really help them. But when Monk looked out in the hall, he decided that she had taken off her shoes to fool him. Monk returned to the laboratory. He walked to a narrow panel that bore six names. There was a switch under each of them. He pulled the switch under the inscription, "Doc." Then he sat down in a chair to wait.

DOC SAVAGE at the moment was in a large building in uptown Manhattan. There was quite a crowd in the room. Even in the dimness, necks were craned to give their owners a better look at the bronze man. Doc Savage towered in a crowd. It was by comparison with other men that the giant size of Doc Savage became apparent. Away from other men or familiar objects, Doc's development was so symmetrical that the effect of size was lost. His hair was a bronze hue just slightly darker than his skin.

He moved through the crowd with the supple grace of perfectly coordinated muscles. The bronze man was a striking figure; one upon whom strong men looked with awe. His eyes were probably his most compelling feature. They were flake-gold pools, constantly stirred as if by tiny whirlwinds of thought. They had a hypnotic, dynamic quality that caused great discomfort to persons of uneasy conscience.

Doc Savage had dedicated his life to an unusual career. He and his five aids directed their energies toward helping the oppressed and to punishing evil and evildoers. Doc paused in the center of the crowd, now. There was a crackling, spitting noise in one corner of the room. Gigantic sparks ripped the air between two large balls. The device he was watching was an artificial-lightning machine, similar to the one that had been on display at the World's Fair for two years. It had been claimed that this one was utilizing a hitherto unheard-of voltage with interesting results. Another man wedged in beside Doc Savage. He was an extremely unhealthy-appearing fellow. He was of slight build and looked as if any well-developed lad of sixteen could have given him a battle. That appearance had fooled a lot of people about Thomas Long Tom Roberts. It seldom fooled the same person twice. Long Tom was the electrical wizard of Doc's group and an able scrapper in his own right.

"I don't see anything so unusual about this generator," Long Tom told Doc. "It is little, if any, more powerful than the one at the Fair."

Doc Savage nodded. He was silent for a moment. Suddenly he turned, started out of the room toward a bank of phone booths.

"Monk is calling," he said. His voice was well modulated and carried just as far as he desired it should. Long Tom heard him. But no one else in the room did.

Monk's signal indicating that there was information of importance at headquarters, was received only by Doc. The bronze man and each of his five aids, when in New York, wore a compact metal ring that was thermally reactive to a certain wavelength stimulation. The wave length in each ring was different. The ring Doc wore had become heated, informing the bronze man that Monk was calling him. The hairy chemist told Doc what had transpired. He told him about Ham's communication from Washington and of the queer death of the Washington policeman.

"It looks like something pretty big to me, Doc," Monk said.

Doc Savage agreed with him.

"Long Tom and I will return to the office immediately," he said. "Contact Ham at once. Tell him to pick up the televisor-transmitted fingerprints and get them to the F.B.I."

Doc hung up the receiver and rejoined Long Tom. Together, they walked to a long, sleek sedan parked at the curb of a side street. Doc toiled it carefully over to the West Side elevated highway and down toward midtown Manhattan.

They were just cutting off a few blocks below Forty-second Street when the two-way short-wave set of the sedan began to crackle. Monk's high-pitched voice came from the speaker.

"I can't raise Ham," he shrilled. "He said he'd keep his receiver open, Doc. I think something's happened to him."

"We will be in the office immediately," Doc Savage told Monk.

DOC SAVAGE'S offices occupied the entire eighty-sixth floor of one of New York's most imposing

skyscrapers in the midtown area. Ordinarily, Doc, when driving, entered the building by a private ramp that led to his own garages beneath the ground.

This time, he parked a block away from the building.

"It would not surprise me if we were expected," Doc said.

They entered the big building through a little-used entrance. It gave onto a long corridor that ended in the main lobby. The building was practically deserted at this hour of the night. Doc paused a moment inside the door through which they had come. He said several words to Long Tom. It was highly doubtful that anyone overhearing them could have gleaned much information. Doc was speaking in ancient Mayan, a language understood by scarcely a dozen people of the so-called civilized world. Long Tom nodded as they walked along the corridor. Suddenly he stopped. An omnipresent rustling noise filled the great office building. Then there was the hum that was not a hum; the high drone that the ear could not record, but was sensed rather than heard. The unseen virago shook her silks and crinoline with greater vigor.

Slowly, Long Tom sank to the floor. Doc's greater physique apparently resisted more strongly. But presently, the bronze man sank wearily to the shiny marble floor beside the electrical wizard. Doc's eyes were glazed. Meaningless words came from his lips. Then he was still.

Chapter III. BEHIND THE INVENTOR

IN a sumptuously appointed office not far away, two men looked into the luminescent scanner of a television set. Across the screen stretched the forms of Long Tom and Doc Savage. The tableau brought pleasurable reactions from the two watchers.

Fox Strang gave vent to a dry chuckle that was both brittle and harsh. He rubbed his hands together with obvious glee.

"Didn't think we could do it," he gloated. "The boss really is smart."

Sprawled in a big leather chair, his feet stretched before him, Ward Hiller cleared his throat. His amazing Adam's apple bobbed up and down as if it were on a string.

"Certainly," he rumbled. Hiller could make a single word sound revealing and important.

Fox Strang nodded. He leaned forward and spoke into a microphone with his dry, crackling voice.

"Bring in the equipment, Flathead," he snapped.

"O. K., boss," a thick voice replied. "I'm on my way."

Fox swung around to Ward Hiller and snapped off the radio and televisor. He revealed one of his business secrets.

"Always pick 'em dumb enough so that they don't get ideas," he suggested. "Dumb guys follow orders best and don't ask any questions. Like Flathead."

FLATHEAD SIMPSON indeed did not have any ideas of consequence. All he knew about the portable short-wave receiver he carried in his pocket was that he pressed a button and it worked. He had no concern whatever with what might have been inside of it. Flathead shuffled through the lobby of the building that housed Doc Savage's office. He was a tall, stoop-shouldered man whose head looked as though his mother had kept a flatiron on it during most of his formative years.

Flathead Simpson carried a mop and a big pail with a wringer attached. He looked like a janitor. But as he shuffled through the lobby and toward the arch that led to a long passageway, he hid the mop and pail in an open elevator that was shut off for the night.

When Simpson looked into the corridor, he could see the still forms of Long Tom and Doc Savage. They seemed to be lying between two decorative pillars in the center of the passageway. Then he began to blink. There was a faint rumbling of machinery, and the scene changed slightly.

Flathead shook his head. He couldn't understand it. Had he been a bit brighter, he would have realized that a complex arrangement of mirrors somewhat in the amusement-park mirror-maze manner was being lifted by automatic machinery.

In a moment or two, the bodies of the two men were not between the decorative pillars. They were at least a hundred feet away. Flathead grunted. All of this funny business was no concern of his. He opened an access door on one side of the passage and wheeled out a baggage truck that had been concealed there. He loaded the two "decorative pillars" onto it and wheeled them out of the building to a waiting truck. He picked up a similar set from each of two other entrances to the building. If Flathead had been a little brighter, he might have reported the odd change in the set-up in the long passageway. Had he reported it immediately, things might have turned out somewhat differently. But he didn't. He was well away from the building before Fox Strang snapped the television set on to have another look at the victims.

"THE boss had the camera installed in a lighting fixture," Strang said. "It'll be interesting to have a look when Savage's body is found."

Ward Hiller cleared his throat.

"Extremely."

The greenish luminescence of the iconoscope flickered weirdly. The prone forms of Doc and Long Tom were plainly visible. Fox Strang chuckled dryly. The chuckle turned to a thin scream of disbelief. Ward Hiller sat erect in his chair and stared with fascinated eyes at the iconoscope

receiver.

"It . . . it ain't possible!" Fox croaked. "It c-can't--"

THE form of Doc Savage stirred slowly, then sat up on the floor of the corridor. Doc put one hand to his forehead. He shook Long Tom. The electrical genius moved slightly. Disjointed words came from his lips. Then he opened his eyes and saw Doc Savage beside him. He sat up.

"What happened, Doc? I feel as if I'd been living in a nightmare."

Doc sprang to his feet and helped Long Tom to his own.

"Did you notice those two decorative pillars that were in the corridor?"

Long Tom nodded.

"I thought it was funny that they'd just been installed."

"Our mirror direction scrambler made someone think we were between those posts," Doc told him. Comprehension dawned on Long Tom's face.

"And if we had been--"

Doc Savage nodded. The two men disappeared around the corner, out of the line of vision of Fox Strang's television radio.

GREAT beads of sweat stood out on Fox Strang's forehead. His long nose quivered. Slowly, he reached for the phone with one skinny hand.

"The boss is going to be sore as hell," he muttered.

The boss was. When Fox put the phone down again, he was pale and shaking. He licked his lips with a tongue that was dry and hot.

"Nobody can talk to me that way," he muttered. "Not even Krag. Not--"

He looked at Ward Hiller and shuddered again.

"He wants you to call on Doc Savage," Fox told him.

It was the tall, skinny man's turn to sweat.

"Wh-what for?"

Strang smiled. He was feeling better.

"Savage will be less dangerous if we know what he's doing. Krag says for you to go to him and ask for help. Tell him you've heard some terrible things and that you are afraid this thing is going to sweep the country."

Ward Hiller got to his feet. His head almost scraped the ceiling of the room.

"We ought to get rid of Savage," he rumbled. "If we don't, he's liable to give us a lot of trouble."

That was probably one of the most accurate predictions that Hiller had ever made.

He ducked his head going out the door, crouched in an elevator that took him to the street.

There, he hailed a cab and gave the address of Doc Savage's office.

MONK was yelling at the top of his voice when Doc and Long Tom came into the reception room. The chemist jumped up and down. He made big, hairy balls out of his fists, brandished them like clubs. His homely face was creased with lines of rage.

"They can't do that!" he yelled. "I'll bust 'em in two. I'll smash every one of 'em. I'll--"

He stopped with his mouth open when he saw Doc Savage. Quickly, he picked up a late special-edition paper.

"This just came up the tube, Doc. Look at it."

Late-edition papers were always delivered immediately to the office. The type on this one was a font the editor dusted off only for major catastrophes.

WEIRD RUSTLING DEATH SWEEPS

WASHINGTON; DOC SAVAGE AID

KIDNAPED BY MURDER GANG

Below that there was a bank in somewhat smaller type:

Inventor's Assistant Warns of

More Horror to Come

The story quoted Tester Lyons. It described the rustling death as Ham had seen it and as he and Ham had discussed it. He said that he and the lawyer had been standing in the shack that had been Jan Vanderlee's laboratory when thugs had sneaked up behind them and bludgeoned them into unconsciousness.

When Tester Lyons had recovered consciousness, a policeman was standing over him. Ham had disappeared. And there was still no trace of Jan Vanderlee. At first, police had been somewhat skeptical about the rustling-death business. But Tester Lyons' story had finally been believed. Monk looked anxiously at Doc. His face bore an expression of mournful panic.

"We've got to find Ham," he said. "Can't we get going?"

Monk and Ham existed in a perpetual quarrel that apparently approached murder or at least mayhem on many occasions. But actually, either of the two men would gladly have given his life for the

other.

Tiny whirlwinds stirred Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes. He moved silently across the room to a fingerprint rack where Monk had left a copy of Nada Morrell's prints. Doc answered Monk as he studied the whorls and ridges.

"As long as we are alive, it is likely that they will hold Ham as hostage," Doc said. "He would be of no value to them dead."

Monk subsided grudgingly.

At that moment a red light began flashing on and off beside an oblong screen on one wall of the room. Presently the black silhouette of an automatic pistol showed on the screen.

"A visitor," Long Tom observed.

The device was a television relay which called attention to and photographed any metal object larger than a coat button that a visitor to the office had on his or her person.

Monk and Long Tom faded back to the two side walls of the room as the handle of the outer door turned. Doc Savage stood in the center of the floor. The man who came in was the incredibly tall and skinny Ward Hiller. He looked at Doc and his two aids and cleared his throat noisily.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he boomed. "I flew here from Washington, hoping I'd be able to find you."

The last remark was addressed to Doc Savage. Hiller cleared his throat again. He leaned slightly forward.

"Something terrible is going on in Washington," he confided. "It's got me so scared I've been carrying a gun."

It occurred to Monk that Hiller must have known about Doc's mechanical stool pigeon. Doc motioned the tall man to a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Hiller," he said pleasantly. "We are already interested in what is going on in Washington."

Ward Hiller's jaw dropped open.

"Y-you know me?" he asked in surprise.

Doc Savage acknowledged that he did. The number of movements, scientific and political developments and personalities that Doc kept tabs on was a constant source of amazement even to his own aids.

"You were campaign manager for the senatorial race of J. Wyndham Weatherton," Doc recalled.

Ward Hiller beamed at the recollection. J. Wyndham Weatherton had won the senatorship of a Midwestern state, partly due to the astute management of Ward Hiller. Hiller had a finger in a great many political pies both in state and national politics. Some of them were legitimate pies. Others were not so savory. Hiller cleared his throat.

"A great man, Senator Weatherton," he said.

"Yes," Doc agreed. "Weatherton's latest venture has been the financing of a young inventor named Jan Vanderlee, who has disappeared, apparently after murdering a Washington policeman."

Ward Hiller's jaw dropped open even farther than it had the last time.

"You do learn things, don't you?"

"We are now interested in learning what you can tell us of Weatherton's interest in Vanderlee, and what Vanderlee's invention was supposed to be."

Ward Hiller half rose from his chair. He acted like a man who had suddenly discovered that he was uncomfortable. He made fishlike motions with his mouth, seemed to have difficulty in locating his voice.

"G-g-gosh!" he rumbled finally. "I honestly don't know anything about it. Weatherton and I haven't been too friendly since his election."

Doc gave no indication of either belief or disbelief. As a matter of fact, he had heard conflicting reports about the alleged differences between Hiller and Weatherton. Hiller made another contribution then. It was somewhat of an understatement.

"If he's g-got anything to do with this rustling-death business, something ought to be done about it."

WHILE Ward Hiller was delivering that piece of wisdom, the red light above the mechanical stool pigeon began to blink again. This time, all it showed was a flat cigarette case that could hardly be classed as a lethal weapon. The door opened and a barrel of a man stood there, with an expression of surprise in his face.

The newcomer opened his mouth with the apparent intention of speaking. He sneezed instead.

"Kershweeze!"

It was a good one. Papers blew off the top of a desk. Doc Savage put the visitor at ease.

"Come in, Mr. Cortlandt," he said quietly.

Representative King Cortlandt smiled his thanks. He put out his hand. "Pleased to— Kershweeze!"

Monk ducked. He knew of the pictures of the beet-faced barrel of a man. King Cortlandt was filling out an unexpired term of a congressman who died suddenly. He represented a Southwestern state. Cortlandt was not a particularly important legislator, having taken no very decisive stands on any vital subjects. He had only one really outstanding characteristic. His colleagues referred to

him as the King of Sneeze.

In the spring, it was rose fever. Hay fever came in the summer and asthma in the fall. In the winter, any old cold would keep King Cortlandt sneezing. He held a handkerchief over his nose, now, as he talked to Doc Savage.

"I came to—Ker—"

He jammed one finger against his upper lip and held it there.

"I've got some information on this rustling death that I thought you ought to have," he finally told Doc Savage. "It has to do with a mysterious person known as Krag. I understand that he is a foreign agent and that he has been in contact with Jan Vanderlee."

Ward Hiller suddenly stood erect.

"G-gosh," he said in his subway-express voice. "That invention was supposed to have something to do with national defense. We ought to investigate this thing."

Doc's voice was quiet.

"We are starting our investigation at this moment. We will leave here immediately."

Doc barked orders to Monk and Long Tom in Mayan. He directed that certain portable equipment be taken. Then he turned and walked out of the office between King Cortlandt and Ward Hiller.

After a few moments' wait at the elevator, they were joined by Monk and Long Tom. Monk's last act was to set an automatic device that would administer a harmless, sleep-inducing gas to any marauders who might try to force entrance to the office during their absence.

DOC was in the lead as they stepped out into the street. He turned to the left and was fifty or so feet from the entrance when the Tommy-guns cut loose. Lead splattered against the granite walls of the building.

"Drop flat and roll," Doc rapped out. His two aids and the other two men dropped. They rolled.

Doc Savage moved in a weaving crouch. His hands made motions as if he were bouncing a ball. Then he spoke again.

"Run!" he yelled. "Follow me."

Doc stood erect and raced along the sidewalk. The brrrrr! of submachine guns rose to a crescendo.

Dim figures slouched from dark corners all along the block. There were probably a dozen armed gunmen, all shooting at once.

Chapter IV. TRUFFLE HUNTER

CURSES ripped from the brutal lips of the mobsters to punctuate the blasts of gunfire. They were curses of bewilderment. It was beyond their understanding that the five figures kept on running. A dry, brittle voice added profanity and advice to the scene.

"Get Savage and his two men. They're the ones we want."

Fox Strang crouched beside his men. He ripped a Tommy-gun from one of them, aimed it. Doc, Monk and Long Tom were several feet ahead of the other two men. Doc had instructed Monk and Long Tom to separate from them. That would draw fire away from probably innocent targets, if his own defense did not work. But the defense was working. Doc clipped further orders in Mayan. He dropped to one side and headed directly for the gangsters!

Doc's right hand looped up. Small round globules of glass shot from his fingers. The mobsters in the foreground put down their guns. They sighed, stretched out on the pavement and began to snore. Fox Strang yelled in frustration. He beat a hasty retreat, racing around the nearest corner. Fox knew when he was licked. The anaesthetic-gas bombs with which Doc had put some of the gunmen to sleep were familiar to Fox. But he was still mystified at the terrible aim exhibited by his gunners. Fox had not noticed the motions of Doc's hands that were somewhat like a basketball player dribbling the ball down the court. Doc had used a new diffusion gas that he had recently developed. It filled the air with fine refracting particles of moisture that acted much like the prisms in a periscope. The whole scene shifted in such a fashion that the gunners were firing far from the real direction of their target.

A gentle breeze began to dissipate the gas. But by that time, the mobsters who were conscious had fled. Monk and Long Tom strode over beside Doc. They had in their hands queer oversized weapons that looked somewhat like automatic pistols, fitted with intricate ammunition drums. These were Doc's superfiring machine pistols, the rate of fire of which was so rapid that, in operation, they sounded like gigantic bull fiddles.

A wail of police sirens came from the distance. The sound of the shooting had attracted police attention. Doc did not wish to be delayed at that moment.

"We will leave," he said. "Long Tom, you will get the car."

Doc's reason for leaving the building by way of the street entrance had been to retrieve the car he and Long Tom had parked a block away. Otherwise, he could have reached his next destination without appearing on the street on foot. He turned now to King Cortlandt and Ward Hiller.

"You are welcome to accompany us," he said simply.

Ward Hiller said he would go along. But King Cortlandt had business to attend to in New York. He hailed a cab and departed. Long Tom drew up in Doc's sedan. The bronze man, Monk and Ward Hiller got in. Then Long Tom drove to the Hudson River water front, under the express highway.

THE sign on the big, barnlike structure said "Hidalgo Trading Co." It was a nondescript sort of place. The appearance of the gaunt dock warehouse gave no hint that it was a veritable fortress containing one of the most amazing collections of transportation units ever gathered under one roof. Photoelectric cells actuated automatic doors as Long Tom drove in from the street. A second set of doors responded to a short-wave impulse on a combination of wave lengths. It was sort of a radio safe, as difficult to unscramble as the combination of a bank vault.

Ward Hiller gasped when they were finally inside.

"I heard you had some kind of place like this," he rumbled, "but I didn't really believe it." One half of the great building was given over to aircraft. They ranged from tiny single-seater speed planes that were mostly engine to a huge four-motor transport. A small dirigible was moored at one end of the building. A water lock near the planes held a trim Diesel yacht and a queer-looking submarine with a superstructure that looked like glorified sled runners. The runners were for use under ice.

Ward Hiller made the trip through the Hidalgo warehouse with his mouth open. Doc and his two aids went directly to the big transport plane. Doc took the controls. A powerful electric motor lowered pontoons from the belly of the ship for a take-off from the river. Great sliding doors opened in the river side of the warehouse at a touch of a button on the plane's instrument panel. Powerful motors roared into life and the plane was out on the water. In the air, Doc set a course for Washington and cut in the robot control.

THERE was little conversation on the trip. Flying at better than two hundred and fifty miles an hour, the big transport was soon over the lights of the nation's capital. The first streaks of dawn were just beginning to show in the east.

Doc Savage occupied himself during the trip by scrutinizing the newspaper report of the rustling death and Ham's kidnaping. The radio was turned on to an all-night station that was devoting considerable time to news bulletins.

When they were well over the city, Doc switched the ship to manual control and pointed her nose toward the ground. He did not head for the airport. The newspaper description of the terrain surrounding the shack indicated that the ship could land there. The transport was equipped with special landing flaps that permitted her to come down in an amazingly small space.

Doc dropped magnesium flares both to give him a clear view of the terrain and to warn back any persons who were on the ground. Then he brought the transport down to a gentle landing.

There were half a dozen policemen, three newspaper reporters and Tester Lyons at the shack that had been a laboratory. The chubby-faced assistant of Jan Vanderlee apparently was enjoying himself. The newspaper reporters were making quite a hero of him.

"The cops don't think the kidnapers got far with your aid," he told Doc Savage as the bronzed man came up. "The police checked on the time element and think they were here within half a dozen seconds after we were knocked out."

One of the policemen wore the insignia of a lieutenant.

"We've searched the whole area for miles," he said. "Can't find a trace of anything suspicious." The reporters drifted off to phone their papers on the arrival of Doc. One of them, more nosy than the rest, moved toward the transport. He had heard a lot about Doc Savage's planes, but this was the first time he had seen one.

Monk, Long Tom and Ward Hiller were listening to the conversation between Doc and the police lieutenant. No one was paying any attention to the reporter. Suddenly, there was a scream from the direction of the transport plane. It was a scream of real terror.

Cops whirled around, whipped up their guns. The lieutenant gasped. The apparition that raced across the field was enough to wring a gasp from most anyone. The nosy reporter was plunging toward Doc and his aids. Astride his neck, riding him like the old man of the sea rode Sinbad the Sailor, was what looked startlingly like a somewhat smaller edition of Monk. And at the luckless scribe's heels, nipping them ferociously, raced one of the most peculiar-looking pigs it had ever been the privilege of any of these cops to see. One of them aimed his service revolver at the pig. Monk let out a yell. He bumped into the cop who was apparently about to shoot the plunging porker.

"Habeas! Stop it!" Monk yelled. Then he picked up the pig by its ears. Habeas Corpus was Monk's pet pig. The ungainly shote, which was long-legged and long-nosed, was often of use to Monk. But his principal purpose in normal times was to annoy Ham.

The reporter had come to a halt. He moaned through the furry black fingers that were gripped around his mouth.

"You wouldn't have to have somebody help you get rid of the thing if you hadn't been so nosy," Monk reminded him. Then, to the unwanted passenger: "Get down, Chemistry. He's had enough."

The animal unwound himself from the reporter and leaped to the ground. He barked and chattered happily. He walked over to Monk with a rolling, sailorlike gait and took a playful bite out of Habeas' rump. The reporter took a deep breath.

"Th-that- What is it, anyway?" he blurted.

"You're right," Monk said and left the reporter to figure that out. But a what-is-it is exactly what Chemistry had come to be called. Some experts had leaned to the theory that he was a stunted gorilla. Others were more of the baboon belief. There wasn't any agreement, however, so Ham had registered him as a what-is-it. Chemistry was Ham's pet. Monk had put the two animals in a rear compartment of the plane before they had left the big warehouse.

The hairy chemist hauled the pets away from the shack. He began to sing in a shrill, off key voice. No one noticed that the words of the song sounded like gibberish. If Monk had used the same strange words in a conversational tone, it would have been apparent that he was giving Doc information in some foreign tongue.

Monk took a small vial from one pocket. He broke it and smeared the contents over the long snout of Habeas Corpus. He released the pig then and stood back, watching him. Habeas grunted amiably and began to walk in a circle. Suddenly the saillike ears went up. Habeas' grunt quickened. He wheeled around and headed directly toward the flat-roofed shack. At the edge of the building, Habeas skidded to a stop and began to dig.

Monk began to yell. He raced to the transport plane, clambered into it. A few seconds later, he reappeared, carrying two collapsible shovels. He tore across the ground to the spot where Habeas was digging. Long Tom joined Monk and took one of the shovels. The two men dug beside the porker. Tester Lyons, Ward Hiller and the cops looked on with baffled expressions.

Suddenly the ground erupted beneath them. Turf and bushes flew into the air. What appeared to be a cleverly arranged trapdoor, somewhat like the winged cellar doors set flush in city sidewalks, opened. Three figures hurtled out of a yawning pit.

The move was so sudden that it caught the police by surprise. Three automatics barked as the three men plunged from their hiding place in the ground. Slugs smashed into the bodies of Long Tom and Monk. The bulletproof undergarments they wore saved their lives. Both men drew out their superfirers.

The moan of giant bull fiddles seemed to fill the air. The superfirers were loaded with mercy bullets, which were light shells filled with a chemical that brought instant unconsciousness but did no permanent harm. Doc's men did not take lives when it could possibly be avoided. The mercy slugs also would permit the later questioning of their enemies.

But the cops were excited. As the three men-ordinary gangsters from their appearance-hurled lead at Monk and Long Tom, the cops went into action. The sharp bark of Police Positives rose above the moan of the superfirers. The gunmen slumped to the ground. There was, in that moment, the intense lull that frequently follows a moment of exceptional stress. But for one thing, a pin could have been heard, had it dropped.

That one thing was the sophisticated voice of Ham.

"Take this blamed pig away from me, you hairy baboon. I was better off before he rescued me."

Several amazed faces looked into the hole from which the gunmen had plunged. The pitlike cave had apparently been a storage place for chemicals of some sort. Narrow steps went down some ten feet into the ground. The walls of the place were of concrete. Shelves were lined with bottles and vials. Stretched out on the concrete floor was Ham. Habeas Corpus sat beside the lawyer.

DOC SAVAGE moved through the crowd. He descended the narrow steps to untie the lawyer. As he did, Doc asked questions in a voice so low that no one except Ham heard it: Monk knew that Doc wanted to hear Ham's story before any remarks were made in public. So he created a diversion by explaining the remarkable behavior of Habeas Corpus.

This was one of the few times in which Monk's constant attempts to play practical jokes on Ham had turned out to be a lifesaver. Monk had smeared all of Ham's clothing with a chemical that the human nose could not detect. The pig's nose, also, was insensitive to it unless smeared with a complementary chemical. But when it was treated that way, Habeas could not only smell the other chemical but was irresistibly attracted by it.

Doc emerged from the pit with Ham. He let the lawyer tell his own story to the police. It was as Tester Lyons had already told them. The gunmen had done some talking in the dungeonlike affair in which Ham had been held. Apparently, they had intended to take Ham somewhere else as soon as surveillance was relaxed around the shack. They usually got their orders from Fox Strang.

The only hint of their real purpose had come in guarded mention of someone called Krag. They had never seen him, Ham said. Krag was, Ham assured the police, an agent of some foreign power.

Chapter V. WARD HILLER LAUGHS

THE next step, Doc Savage decided, was to contact Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton. Whether the senator was involved or not, there were some questions that he would have to answer. Weatherton was the friend and backer of Jan Vanderlee, the inventor of the thing the newspapers were calling the rustling death.

The telephone still operated in the flat-roofed shack. Doc used it to phone the senator's Washington residence. While he was phoning, Ham favored Monk with a withering glance.

"I presume you got along all right with the brunette blitzkrieg," he said sarcastically. "Always thinking about women when there's work to be done."

Monk tried to appear nonchalant, but his face got very red.

"Here comes Doc," he said. "Maybe he got the senator."

"So," Ham snapped, "she turned you down, did she?"

Long Tom couldn't resist a word there.

"Yeah," he said, "she turned him down with a gun."

Doc Savage came up swiftly.

"The plane," he clipped. "The senator has gone to the airport. We may be able to intercept him."

Doc's three aids followed the bronze man to the plane. Ward Hiller went along.

THE quickest way for them to get to the airport was to take off from the field and fly there. The trip took only a few minutes. At the administration building of the airport, information concerning Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton was instantly available. The dispatcher had recognized the tall, stately legislator. He had just taken off in a private plane and headed west. He had said he was going to his Midwestern estate.

There was nothing particularly damning about a sudden decision to leave Washington. But the dispatcher wanted to be as much help as he could to Doc Savage. So he described the slightly built man whom the senator had met at the airport and who had flown with him westward.

The description left no possible doubt that Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton's companion was Fox Strang!

Monk, Ham and Long Tom gasped. Doc Savage said nothing. An eerie, tuneless yet musical trilling sound filled the air. It seemed to come from no particular direction. Doc's aids paid no attention to it. They knew that it was a small, unconscious thing that Doc did when he encountered a particularly knotty problem, or when he was baffled by some unexpected turn of events.

Ward Hiller cleared his throat. His expression was one that seemed to indicate that things were even worse than he had suspected.

"I hate to think that my campaign management helped to elect him," the tall politician groaned.

"We will follow him," Doc Savage said. "Weatherton must be the key to this thing."

The bronze man turned toward the big plane. Ward Hiller hesitated.

"I would like to go with you," he said. "But I have urgent business that keeps me in Washington today."

Doc Savage nodded.

"Thank you for the time you have given us," he said.

The tall politician shook hands and turned away toward the administration building. As he turned the corner, a sly smile spread over his face.

"When I said good-bye, I really meant it," he grunted to himself.

Doc Savage was the first to reënter the big plane. A small blue light was blinking on the main instrument panel. Long Tom, coming in behind the bronze man, saw it.

"Renny and Johnny," he suggested. "They must have tried to get us in New York."

The New York headquarters was equipped with an automatic message-recording device that worked on a secret short-wave band. When they left the office, Doc adjusted it to relay any incoming messages to the plane. He took a spool-wound ribbon of steel from a container, now. The recorder utilized a magnetized steel ribbon to store messages, instead of the more conventional wax recording.

The ribbon yielded its message to a photoelectric-cell pick-up device. It was, as Long Tom had suggested, a report from Colonel John Renny Renwick, one of the world's leading civil engineers, and William Harper Littlejohn, better known as Johnny. The latter was an archaeologist and geologist whose name was known wherever men of those sciences met. Renny and Johnny rounded out Doc's band of five adventurers.

The voice that came from the magnetized-steel tape was that of Renny. It had about it the quality of an enraged bear in a deep cave. It was a hollow roar.

"I think we've stumbled onto something pretty big, Doc," Renny's voice boomed. "If you can get in touch with us, I think you'd be interested. We're going out, now, but we'll leave our set on automatic record."

That was all there was to the message. There was no hint of what their discovery might be. Renny had been engaged in a routine engineering inspection trip in the Southwest. Johnny had gone along in the hope of finding interesting geological specimens. Doc Savage sent out a message directing his two aids to fly at once to the home town of Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton in the Midwest. Renny and Johnny were using a two-motor cabin job of Doc's on their trip.

That message having been dispatched, Doc swung the big plane into the take-off runway. He got an "all clear" from the dispatcher and the big ship roared down the runway and lifted into the air. As soon as she was off the ground, Doc Savage turned the controls over to Monk.

Chapter VI. BOLT OF DEATH

JOHNNY stood beside Renny while the engineer transformed Doc's message from a magnetic impulse on the tape into words. Johnny was extremely tall, and thinner than, it seemed, any man could be. No tailor could fit clothing to his bony frame. As a result, all of his garments appeared ill-fitting. "Accelerated action would be received with jocundity," Johnny observed in clipped, scholarly

accents.

Johnny had only one bad habit that annoyed his companions. He never used a short word where a long one would suffice.

Renny's big voice boomed with annoyance.

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can."

The skill with which Renny manipulated the steel tape was surprising when one considered the size of his hands. Each bony fist was a quart of bone and gristle. The engineer was a huge man with a long face which habitually bore an expression of utter gloom. The happier Renny was, the gloomier he looked.

The message informing them to fly immediately to the home town of Senator Weatherton came from the transforming device. The two men listened to the transcription of Doc's voice. Then Renny tried to contact Doc's ship on short wave. He had no success.

"Doc's message ostentatiously indicated an essentiality of acceleration," Johnny suggested.

Renny climbed to the pilot's chair, kicked the starter of the two-motor ship.

"You're right," he mumbled. "We better get there as fast as we can."

The ship raced along a wide stretch of smooth desertlike sand and rose gracefully above the mesquite and sagebrush. Renny set a northeast course and cut in the robot pilot. They had more than a thousand miles to go.

It had been mid-afternoon by the time they had returned to the ship from their tramping. Dusk was beginning to fall as they neared the Midwest city that was Senator Weatherton's home. The city was a small one, not on the schedule of any of the major air lines. The airport was not of much importance and was not well equipped for night landing.

Johnny was the first to see the other plane.

"Apparently we are under surveillance," he observed.

It was immediately obvious that Doc's message to them had been intercepted.

The other ship was pacing them about a quarter of a mile to the right. It was a slightly larger ship than Doc's fast two-motor job. Neither of Doc's aids noticed anything peculiar about the other plane. The only unusual occurrences that were noted took place right in the plane Doc's men were flying.

It happened first to Johnny. The archaeologist tried a long jawbreaker of a word and his tongue got all tangled up. That in itself was unusual. Johnny's diction was normally extremely precise. But it was even more odd that neither Johnny nor Renny noticed the slip. Each of them was suddenly overcome by a feeling of extreme apprehension. There was a sensation of terrible, unreasonable fear. The last clear thing either of them remembered about the end of that flight was Johnny's observation that they were being followed. Instinctively, they buckled their safety belts. That was an ordinary precaution anticipating possible action.

Both of the men were staring vacantly ahead, before they were over the little airport. Neither of them had heard of the brain-numbing effects that came with the rustling death. They had no reason to know that the horror had moved westward from Washington and was riding at the moment in that plane a quarter of a mile to the right.

THE pilot at the controls of the other ship was the same scarred and tough-looking fellow who had flown Fox Strang and Ward Hiller from Washington to New York. He was the only visible occupant of the plane.

In the center of the cabin, a wall of duralumin, or some other light alloy, cut the plane entirely in two. Behind that partition, machinery hummed and crackled. Occasionally, a voice came from the hidden compartment. The tones were muffled by the confinement and distorted by the sounds of the machinery. It did carry, however, a gleeful chortle of triumph.

"It is beyond my wildest dreams," the voice blurted. "We've got what scientists dream of but have never been able to develop. A death ray that works!"

Strain showed on the pilot's face.

"Get it over with," he called back. "That thing is beginning to get on my nerves."

The voice from behind the partition laughed raucously.

"Watch! Their plane will dissolve. It will come apart as if a mighty hand had torn it."

The voice died away in a mad-sounding chuckle. The sound of the voice was replaced by the rustle of silk and crinoline. The rustling noise rose to a crescendo of ear-piercing intensity. With it was the effect of sound that the ear could not detect, bombarding the consciousness with brain-numbing force.

The pilot clawed at his throat with one gnarled hand. He gave the impression that he was stifling a scream with great difficulty. He peered out the window and watched Doc's two-motor plane in the dimming light of dusk.

The right wing of Doc's plane crumpled first. It fell away from the metal fuselage. The ship careened, twisting over and over. The rustling noise knifed into the cold air. Then two things happened almost simultaneously. Two black figures shot from Doc's plane as if catapulted. In the next instant, the entire metal fuselage of the ship disintegrated. There was a mighty crackling sound. The metal seemed to dissolve as if a giant blowtorch had breathed the heat of destruction

upon it.

The pilot craned his neck. He peered into the gloom of dusk unbelievably. He watched the parachutes mushroom out above the two black dots that had been catapulted from Doc's ship. "We got the plane, but we missed the two guys we were after," he called to the rear compartment. "That must be that new seat-parachute gadget I've heard about."

He was correct about that. Doc Savage had developed an idea that was once suggested for American commercial planes. As long as the safety belt was in place, his aids were safe from any plane disaster in his ships. Unless a switch were thrown to disconnect the device, the chairs on which the plane occupants sat were automatically ejected with parachute attached as soon as the ship dropped below three thousand feet.

Johnny and Renny were dazed, scarcely conscious. But they were drifting safely toward the little airport below them.

The pilot of the plane carrying the death ray contemplated the descent.

"They'll be taken care of, anyway," he said. "They won't be on the loose very long."

The chuckling voice from behind the center partition of the plane interrupted him.

"It doesn't matter. What we've got here is so powerful that nothing can stop us. I don't care what happens to those two birds."

THE two "birds" in question didn't seem to be caring much, either. Johnny and Renny landed sitting down. It was quite a bump. Neither of them was quite conscious. Renny had the more powerful physique of the two. He stumbled to his feet and lurched toward the writhing form of Johnny. The archaeologist sat up and rubbed his head. Slowly, rationality began to filter into the minds of Doc's two aids. Renny recovered first.

"Holy cow, Johnny. What happened? I don't remember a thing after we sighted that other plane." Johnny shuddered. He was so shaken that he used little words.

"I only remember a sensation of terror," he admitted. "I haven't any idea what happened to us." Big-fisted Renny shook his head. He'd encountered something he would rather not think about. He gathered his 'chute and repacked it. Johnny did likewise. Together, they walked toward the tiny caretaker's office on the field. There wasn't even a light in the place. At first, the whole place seemed deserted. Beside the caretaker's office a man cleared his throat. Renny jumped.

"Beg pardon, sir," an apologetic voice offered. "If you two are Mr. Savage's men, I've been sent for you."

The man stepped from the shadow of the building. He was a gray-haired, hesitant sort of fellow, clad in a chauffeur's livery. Doc's two aids saw the limousine then. It had been hidden by the caretaker's office. The chauffeur coughed more apologies.

"Senator Weatherton sent me, sir," he mumbled. "I shall be pleased if you will permit me to drive you to the estate."

Johnny and Renny were still a bit foggy from their encounter with the rustling death. Had they not been, perhaps they would have been more suspicious of the apologetic-appearing servant. As it was, they both climbed into the back of the limousine.

The fact that there were no handles on the inside of the doors escaped their notice.

A faintly smelling gas filled the back compartment of the limousine. Johnny and Renny leaned toward each other. In a moment, they were both snoring gently.

The apologetic chauffeur looked in through the glass partition. There was nothing apologetic about his grin.

THROUGHOUT the United States, there were hundreds of men in all sorts of jobs, trades and professions who owed their present status in life to Doc Savage. They were aware of the fact, but none of them knew why. They realized only that memory for them was a comparatively recent thing. These men were all graduates of Doc's upstate "hospital." Criminals who were captured by the bronze man and his aids were sent to the college, as Doc referred to the institution. There, a delicate brain operation was performed which robbed them not only of criminal tendencies but also of all memory of criminal past and associations.

One of the graduates of Doc's college lived in a town that was only a dozen miles or so from Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton's estate. This graduate was a dealer in tractors, wagons and farm equipment. He was also an amateur short-wave fan. His name was Dan Walters. Doc contacted him by radio and made certain arrangements. Doc did not want his huge transport recognized in this section, if he could help it.

It was dark when the bronze man nosed the ship earthward. Dan Walters had lighted a large field that belonged to him with four acetylene flares. So far, none of his neighbors had been sufficiently curious to ask him what he was doing and why.

The big transport plane came into the field with only a minor amount of bumping. The field was plowed and planted. Dan Walters rushed over the field, a flashlight in his hand. He was a thin, gray sort of man with a perpetually nervous manner. He shook hands with Doc Savage and looked over the bronze man's shoulder at Monk, Ham and Long Tom. Then the three adventurers went to Walters' home.

Chapter VII. KRAG'S WARNING

THE morning sun was high when Monk, Ham and Long Tom entered the Weatherton estate. As they rounded a corner of the big house, Ham saw the girl. Instinctively, he reached up to straighten his necktie. She was really something worth looking at—a demure brunette with large, melting brown eyes. Ham bowed low.

"You are Miss—"

"Nada Morrell," she told him with a friendly smile. "I am Senator Weatherton's niece."

A bellowing roar interrupted anything Ham might have been going to say.

"This is the same girl," Monk yelled. "It's the babe who pulled the gun on me in Doc's office. I've got a score to settle with this young lady."

Nada Morrell's nose went up.

"My uncle will deal with you," she snapped.

They decided to get that angle straightened up right away. The senator, they learned, was in his second-floor study. They went into the house.

WEATHERTON was standing, his feet wide apart and his back to a large window. He was a tall man with a clipped gray mustache and leonine gray hair. He was deep in conversation with Doc Savage. Monk gasped.

"Doc! You here?"

The bronze man smiled slightly.

"It seems that your preceding me to the estate was not needed," he said. "Senator Weatherton was quite willing to see me and has been entirely co-operative."

Weatherton coughed. He spoke with the full, rounded tones of a man who has spent many hours speaking in public.

"Mr. Savage had no way to expect that. However, I do not blame him for being highly suspicious." Weatherton's glance rested lightly on his niece. There was a soft, somewhat sorrowful note to his voice.

"I am afraid that we cannot ignore the possibility that Jan Vanderlee may really be involved in this thing," he said. "After all, he never did tell us exactly what he was inventing."

Nada Morrell shook her head stubbornly.

"I don't believe it," she insisted. "I don't believe he would have lied to the woman he intends to marry. He told me he was afraid of someone named Krag who had threatened him."

"Who in heck is this guy Krag?" Monk wanted to know.

Ham chimed in then.

"Krag is either Vanderlee himself or some other person who threatened him," he suggested. "But what I can't figure out is what Krag is going to do. He seems to have some terrible weapon that Vanderlee was developing. But he hasn't used it to get away with anything. If he is a foreign agent, you'd think he'd just take the thing and disappear."

Doc's quiet voice cut in.

"I believe we shall find out before long what Krag's intentions are. He apparently has been delaying any definite moves for some reason."

Monk snorted.

"My guess is that Krag is Vanderlee and that something scared him out of the laboratory before he was quite ready."

Nada Morrell turned toward the hairy chemist. Words poured out in a torrent. She first apologized for drawing a gun on Monk. She said that she had gone to Doc to ask help against the force that Vanderlee had said was threatening him.

"That might have been an alibi," Monk interrupted. "He might have been building up an out so he would not get blamed for what was going to happen."

Nada stamped her foot.

"That's what I was afraid you would say," she complained. "That was why I ran away. Then I hired Fox Strang. If there were criminals working against Jan, I thought I'd fight fire with fire."

Ham wanted to know how a girl in her position would know Fox Strang. Senator Weatherton coughed apologetically at that question.

"Strang is well-known to a great many politicians," he admitted. "He's known as an investigator. Some of the work he has done has been legitimate."

While they were still talking, Doc walked to a phone on the senator's desk. He called Washington, got the chief operator on the wire. Her voice changed when Doc identified himself.

"I want to talk to Ward Hiller if he is in Washington," Doc said. "Please give me a report at this number within ten minutes."

When the bronze man put down the phone he spoke again to Weatherton.

"We believe that Hiller is involved in this thing, senator. And I am of the opinion that he can be made to talk."

Weatherton waggled his head in agreement.

The phone bell jangled. It was the chief operator of the Washington exchange.

"Mr. Hiller flew out to the Middle West yesterday," she informed Doc. "I am unable to learn

anything more than that."

Doc thanked her. He put down the phone again and repeated the message he had just received.

"If he flew out yesterday he has had plenty of time to get to any part of the country that he desired to reach."

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes were stirring gently. He made one more call. That was to Dan Walters, the radio fan. He told Dan that he wanted to locate Ward Hiller. The tall politician's description was one easily remembered.

Radio "hams" are a queer fraternity and a very useful one. Queer bits of information have been turned up by them. They have maintained communications in flood-ridden areas; have intercepted furtive messages that were valuable to the government. They are a gabby lot. Most of their leisure time is spent gassing over the air.

Dan Walters was back on the phone in less time than anyone had believed possible. A "ham" acquaintance had just come off duty from a commercial airport in a city fifty miles away. Before he sat down to lunch, he'd listened in. The operator had seen Ward Hiller less than fifteen minutes before. Hiller had been in the process of chartering a local plane to take him to Senator Weatherton's home town. He should, Walters told Doc, be in the air by then.

Doc Savage moved swiftly. "We should meet Hiller at the airport, if possible," he said.

Senator Weatherton agreed.

"My car is ready. It will hold us all."

Nada Morrell stayed behind. The rest of them piled into Senator Weatherton's limousine. Though they had no way of knowing it, it was the same limousine that had carried Renny and Johnny from the airport the night before. The handles had been replaced on the inside of the doors. And the chauffeur was not the same. The man who drove them now was a skinny, watery-eyed fellow whom Weatherton said he'd had in his employ for many years.

THE airport was only a ten-minute drive from the estate. The little caretaker's shack was open, now. The caretaker, a little rabbit of a man, met them. He was quite impressed with a visit from the senator. He was more impressed when he recognized Doc Savage. He was also bursting with information. "Funniest thing," he said. "There is part of a wrecked plane over at the edge of the field. It looks like it had been burned in a blast furnace."

Doc Savage was immediately interested. While he had said nothing, the bronze man had been worried about the nonappearance of Renny and Johnny. Doc followed the caretaker over to the edge of the field. The skeletons of the fuselage and one wing of a plane were crumpled there. The light duralumin skin had been entirely burned away. The skeleton framework was scarred, pitted and twisted.

"Something hotter than a gasoline fire did that," Monk said.

Doc made no comment. He recognized the framework as that of his own plane. He examined closely the alloy-steel seat frames. Two of the seats were missing.

"Renny and Johnny were apparently catapulted out by the automatic safety device," Doc said.

Monk's mouth dropped open.

"Golly, Doc, I didn't realize it was our plane."

Monk could hardly have been blamed. The bit of charred wreckage on the ground was not easily identifiable. Monk started to say something else. But a droning sound from the southeast grew into a recognizable roar. A plane was approaching them from the direction of the city in which Ward Hiller had been negotiating for a flight to Weatherton's home town.

"Here he comes," Monk shrilled gleefully. He took out his superfirer, inspecting the mechanism closely. "I hope he's brought some of his pals along."

But Monk was not destined to get into a fight with Ward Hiller. Doc and his aids flattened against the caretaker's shack as the plane banked into a wide circle to make an upwind landing. Like a great silver bird, the chartered ship began the long glide toward earth.

It was still a thousand feet up when the rustling drifted through the air. The sound rose to a crackling crescendo. With it came the indescribable beating of sound that was felt rather than detected by the ear.

There was a crackling roar as the gliding plane broke in two, then burst into flames. The caretaker screamed in terror. He clapped his hands over his eyes and raced into his shack. Doc's aids and the senator were silent as the appalling disaster took place before them. As the two blazing, rapidly disintegrating sections of the stricken plane drifted toward the ground, two figures tumbled free, plummeting down beneath it.

Doc moved swiftly toward the falling bodies. He examined them as soon as they struck. One of them apparently had been the pilot of the chartered plane. The other was undoubtedly Ward Hiller. The features were badly burned. But it was highly unlikely that there were two persons in that section of the country with such an unusual build.

A COMPLETE silence followed this newest visitation of the rustling death. It was broken presently by the ring of a telephone in the caretaker's shack. The little rabbit of a man tumbled out of the door.

"It's for you, Mr. Savage. Long distance."

Doc's eyes stirred strangely. His weird, trilling noise welled into the air. A phone call for him at the airport so well timed was a bit too much of a coincidence to be overlooked. Doc started for the shack.

Doc Savage's hand slipped into an equipment vest he always wore when possible. Three compact pieces of apparatus came from the vest. One was a flat induction coil that looked something like a small heating pad. A tiny earphone and mouthpiece combination plugged into that. The two were in turn plugged into a small battery. The device was an induction pick-up circuit which enabled the bronze man to cut in on the phone line without being closer than fifty feet from it.

"This is Doc Savage," he said.

A blinding flash ripped from the metal box of the phone. The smell of ozone was strong in the air. Had Doc Savage been standing at the phone when he answered, he would no longer be alive. A raucous laugh blurted from the receiver of the phone. The terrific force seemed to have killing power to leap from the instrument without destroying the working parts of the phone.

The raucous laugh was followed by a scratching voice. The rest of the men at the airport were crowded into the small room with Doc, now. The voice could be heard all the way across the room. It was muffled, obviously disguised. But the sneer that was in it was beyond disguising.

"I am Krag," he chuckled. "I have been delayed in the final perfection of the rustling death. But it is now ready."

There was a pause. Then another sneering chuckle.

"Senator Weatherton, if you are present, step to the phone. Doc Savage should be dead by now. I did not realize that he was alive until he phoned Washington to locate Ward Hiller. I believe now that I have killed him. But step up, senator; you need have no fear-yet."

Sweat dripped from Weatherton's chin. He looked nervously at Doc. The bronze man nodded. He was certain that, for the time being at least, Krag desired Weatherton to remain alive.

The legislator stepped gingerly to the phone and identified himself.

"You will receive the first of my instructions shortly, senator," the muffled voice said. "You will be wise if you obey them. And you may tell the world, for Krag, that the rustling death awaits anyone who fails to do my bidding."

There was a click as the connection was broken from the other end. Doc got the operator quickly; he asked to have the call traced. It was possible to do that because it had gone through regular service. Doc got the answer almost immediately.

The call had come from a pay station in a medium-sized city, midway between the town where Doc was now calling and Washington. The city was on a main air line and was only two hours by plane from the nation's capital. And, of course, by private plane only a similar length of time from Weatherton's estate.

It told them absolutely nothing.

Chapter VIII. INSTRUCTIONS

THERE was little conversation on the return trip to Senator Weatherton's estate. The senator's face was particularly gloomy.

"I wonder what traitorous piece of work this fiend will demand that I do?" he asked.

Doc Savage's expression did not change.

"You assume that Krag really is a foreign agent?"

Weatherton shrugged.

"I fear so. What do you think?"

Doc Savage did not answer. Until Doc had indisputable proof of suspicions, he seldom voiced opinions. He had found that the expression of such opinions frequently prejudiced the clear thinking of others.

The big limousine drew up to the Weatherton mansion about that time. They all got out and went to the senator's study. Nada Morrell met them there. Her face was anxious with worry.

"There has been a phone call for you from Washington," she told her uncle. "You're to call the chief operator."

Weatherton looked questioningly at Doc.

"You may as well take the call," Doc said. "I doubt that you will be in any danger as long as you are potentially useful to this fellow."

Weatherton nodded. He went to the phone and contacted the chief operator in Washington. The call was immediately completed. Doc, by arrangement, was listening in on an extension. The voice that came over the wire was not the muffled sneer of Krag, but the voice of King Cortlandt, the representative who had accused Weatherton of being involved in the rustling death.

Cortlandt's voice was nasally apologetic. He sneezed a couple of times before he managed to get his message across.

"I'm sorry I accused you of complicity in this thing, Wyndham," he said. "I just got a message from this man who calls himself Krag. It's a list of what he calls 'must' legislation."

J. Wyndham Weatherton stammered.

"Wh-what has it to do with me?"

King Cortlandt sneezed again.

"Some of the bills on his list are pieces of legislation you've been fighting against," he explained. "When I saw that, I knew I owed you an apology."

While Weatherton was at the phone, a uniformed telegraph messenger appeared at the study door. He handed in a telegram which Nada took. At a nod from her uncle, she ripped it open. It was a long message, signed by Krag. It contained a list of pending bills which the sender termed "must" legislation. Nada handed it to Weatherton.

The tall, dignified senator choked when he looked at it.

"This is an outrage," he bellowed into the phone. "I . . . I won't do it."

Cortlandt on the other end apparently stifled a sneeze.

"I agree with you," he said. "If you will stand pat, so will I."

Then Cortlandt gasped.

"Did you hear that?" he demanded.

A sneering chuckle sounded over the wire, an eerie voice that apparently had been eavesdropping.

"Do not try to trace me," the muffled, disguised tones challenged. "I am cut into the line in such a fashion that I cannot be traced. But I wish to take this opportunity to warn both of you. I was quite sure this phone call would be made, so I prepared."

King Cortlandt's voice came on the wire then. It was hushed, expectant.

"Who are you?" he husked.

"I am Krag," the voice declared. "And I have prepared a demonstration for you fools. Your office looks out upon the airport, does it not, Cortlandt?"

"Yes."

Cortlandt's voice was a mere whisper of terror. Krag's brittle laugh came then.

"Look out the window, fool. Watch the new army bomber that is starting out on its first official flight. Watch what Krag does to that with the rustling death. Then ask yourselves if opposition to my plans is worth the price!"

The voice was suddenly gone.

Over the wire, the rising roar of a mighty four-motored bomber could be heard.

IN Washington, King Cortlandt rushed to the window of his office. He saw the great bird of war taxi slowly across the field; saw her roar down the runway. The tail lifted first. Then the huge plane was in the air, a graceful fortress of steel alloy equipped to bring death to the nation's enemies.

The plane was less than a thousand feet in the air when the rustling death struck it! Screams of terror welled up from the crowd that had assembled to watch this first official take-off. The giant ship disintegrated before their eyes. It fell in flaming pieces, a smoldering coffin of a thing that only seconds before had been the pride of the United States army.

King Cortlandt tottered back to this phone.

"It . . . it was awful," he moaned. "The man is a fiend."

In halting tones he described what he had seen to Weatherton.

"Y-you'd better come to Washington," Cortlandt suggested. "W-we ought to talk this thing over."

"I shall take a plane from the nearest airport," the senator agreed.

DOC SAVAGE was silent as he went over Krag's "must" list. The bills mentioned in the long telegram appeared to be an extremely unimportant collection of suggested legislation. There were bills for bridges over creeks to be included in the rivers-and-harbors omnibus for the session. There were post offices to be built in out of the way places. There was a power dam to be built in a Southwestern state that could not mean an expenditure of more than a few thousand dollars. There was no single item in the list, nor was there any group of related items, that amounted to enough to create a furor even in committee. Senator Weatherton shook his head.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "I have opposed some of these bills as unnecessary expenditures. But none of them seemed to be of great importance to me, one way or another. It must be that this preliminary list is unimportant, merely designed to get Congressman Cortlandt and myself accustomed to taking orders. What do you think?"

Doc Savage was silent for a moment. His gold-flaked eyes stirred with suppressed emotion.

"I agree with you that this is a mere beginning," he said quietly. "But there may be more than is apparent in even this innocuous list of bills."

Weatherton straightened. His clipped gray mustache quivered.

"I'll not do it," he said with finality. "To yield would merely be the first step toward servitude."

Doc nodded.

"That may be," he admonished. "But Krag has the power to trap someone else if you fail him. It is better, for the present at least, that you give every indication of co-operation."

Weatherton sighed.

"You are probably right. I will fly to Washington immediately and consult with Congressman Cortlandt."

Doc turned to Nada Morrell.

"Call the limousine," he instructed. "My own plane is only twenty miles away. It will take the senator to the nearest air-line terminal."

MONK and Ham were getting a bit restless. They went out of the Weatherton home and wandered into the yard behind the house. Monk suddenly realized that someone was watching them with more than idle curiosity. The staring eyes were directed toward them from behind a corner of the stables.

"Wise guy by stables," Monk grunted to Ham in Mayan. He started for the stables without apparently looking at them.

The man by the stables tried to absent himself in a hurry. But he underestimated the speed with which the hairy chemist could move. He landed flat on his stomach with Monk sitting on him. Ham inspected the tableau with impartiality.

"You might let him up, now," he suggested. "We will cook him later."

Monk stood up. He picked up the eavesdropper by the neck.

"So you won't talk, eh?" he piped. "I'll fix that right now."

Monk clenched his fist. The man's neck happened to be inside the fist. His eyes protruded like grapes. Monk had no way of knowing that the gaunt and gray fellow was the chauffeur who had abducted Renny and Johnny the night before. On the other hand, the "chauffeur" had no way of being certain that they didn't know.

"We're wise to you," Ham chirped. "If you don't talk, he'll bust you in two."

The pressure of Monk's fist increased. The man's face began to get purple. He waved his hands in the air. Apparently he had decided that conversation was preferable to strangulation.

"Put him down," Ham said. "He's ready to talk."

"Yeah, he's ready," another voice cut in. "But he ain't goin' to."

Ham whirled. Fox Strang and half a dozen mobbies crouched in the door of the stable. All of them had automatics.

"Let them have it," Strang barked. "Aim for their heads. They got protection everyplace else."

Fox Strang knew of the bulletproof undergarments. Half a dozen automatics roared. The unfortunate crook in Monk's grasp slumped. He died a victim of his own confederate's shooting. Monk and Ham simply turned their backs and ducked their heads.

The mobbies held the triggers of their automatics back and the magazines emptied themselves. That was a fine system for one fusillade of lead. But they soon ran out of bullets.

There was one prolonged roar. When that was over, Monk whirled around and let loose with his superfirer. The bull-fiddle moan whoomed into the air. Mobbies fell to the ground. Fox Strang went for his own automatic. He got it. But he didn't get a chance to use it. Before he had it in firing position, he found that he was dangling in the air just as the phony chauffeur had been, a few moments before.

Fox Strang dropped his gun. He was not a man to entertain certain death. And that, he was certain, was what he was looking at in Monk's little eyes. There was nothing amiable in Monk's face as he spoke.

"You can take us to Renny and Johnny," he said, "or I will squeeze your neck as if it were a banana."

He gave a partial demonstration. When Fox could speak again, he started giving minute directions.

"Swell," Monk grunted. "You go first. And my hand doesn't leave your neck until we get there."

"Maybe not then," Ham observed. "I'd still like to see that banana stunt."

Chapter IX. CONFESSION OF GUILT

SENATOR WEATHERTON picked up a brief case and went to the limousine with Doc and Long Tom. Nada Morrell remained at the estate. The limousine whisked them the twenty miles to Dan Walters' establishment where they got into Doc's big transport plane.

The fifty miles from there to the nearest commercial air-line terminal was spanned in little more than a quarter of an hour. As they glided down to a landing, Doc gave Senator Weatherton some parting advice.

"You will be wise if you start at once on this list of so-called 'must' legislation. If there are any bills of hidden importance, they will probably be found buried under innocuous measures. So, I would start from the top of the list. Proceed as slowly as you can without giving any indication of stalling."

The tall senator nodded in agreement.

"How much shall I tell King Cortlandt?"

"You can be frank with him. If something does not turn up to give us further information on Krag, it will be necessary to act on all of the bills, anyway."

Weatherton shook his head.

"I hate to give in to this fiend, but--"

An expression of fear glowed briefly in his eyes. Weatherton was thinking of the new army bomber that had disintegrated above the airport in Washington.

Doc Savage had been bringing the big ship to the ground while he talked. As he braked it to a

stop, Long Tom pointed out of the window. He had an air-line timetable in one hand.

"Two ships in," he said. "One just came in from the East. The other is bound for Washington. She takes off in three minutes."

Weatherton bustled in preparation to leave. He had scattered several papers from a brief case onto the floor. Long Tom helped him pick them up. Neither of them noticed the excited figure that raced past the idling westbound plane to Doc's ship. The man was young, medium-sized and chubby-faced. It was Tester Lyons. He began to yell as he ran.

"I heard you were at the senator's place, Mr. Savage," he shouted. "I've got some information for you. I--"

Senator Weatherton stepped out of Doc's plane, then. Tester Lyons shut up as if he'd been slapped. His face assumed a sullen expression. Weatherton opened his mouth to speak. But he shut it again. Lyons' attitude did not encourage conversation and the senator now had about a minute and a half to make his plane for Washington. He raced across the airport.

Tester Lyons turned, watched him. There was a thoughtful expression in his eyes.

"I don't trust him," he clipped in his businesslike tones. "After all, he was Vanderlee's financial backer."

Doc Savage did not comment on that fact.

"What evidence have you discovered?" he inquired.

Lyons was instantly all business. He flipped open a brief case and handed Doc a sheaf of papers. The bronze man's flake-gold eyes stirred with restless life as he glanced at them. A weird trilling sound mounted into the air. The papers were all letters addressed to Jan Vanderlee. And each of them was signed "Krag."

"I found them on a shelf in that underground chamber," Lyons blurted. "I didn't show them to the cops. Thought you'd want to see them. You do as you want."

The former assistant to Jan Vanderlee looked proud. Obviously, he believed he'd done something pretty smart. Long Tom looked over Doc's shoulder as the bronze man read the letters. Some of the phrases brought exclamations of anger from the electrical wizard.

Your experiments will be invaluable to my country . . . no price is too high to ask. . . . The understanding reached in our last conversation has met with the approval of my leader . . . Within a few days, now, we will be in a position to act--

The last statement was contained in a letter dated May 1st. It was now the 10th. Doc glanced from the letters to Tester Lyons' chubby face.

"These are very interesting," the bronze man said quietly. "I believe they will be of great assistance to us."

Lyons beamed his happiness.

"L-let me be of some help," he begged. "There ought to be something I can do."

Tester seemed overwhelmed by the chance that he might be allowed to travel with Doc Savage. Doc nodded.

"We will take you with us," he agreed. "But right now, I wish to check up on some aspects of these letters."

Lyons' face fell.

"D-don't you think they are genuine?" he asked.

Doc did not answer. He strode to the airport administration building and disappeared into a phone booth. He called the Federal Bureau of Investigation and asked for an agent whom he knew to be in charge of subversive activities and espionage. When Doc identified himself, the agent was more than glad to give him what information he could.

The agent in charge was well acquainted with the name of Krag.

"We have a great deal of data which indicates that Krag is an active saboteur and espionage agent," he told Doc. "But, unfortunately, we have not been able to prove either his nationality or identity."

He said that they had managed to seize specimens of Krag's handwriting. Doc described the signatures on the letters Tester Lyons had given him in the terms of an expert graphologist. The F.B.I. agent checked them with signatures on file and agreed that they probably were the same. Doc thanked his informant, pronged the phone receiver and returned to his plane. Tester Lyons' chubby face was creased with a frown of anxiety.

"W-were they O. K.?" he asked.

Doc nodded.

"Apparently, the letters are genuine," he said. "It is certain that they will be of great help."

Tester Lyons sighed.

"To think that I worked for that guy. And him a traitor."

"We will return to Senator Weatherton's estate," he said. "Monk and Ham may have some progress to report."

MONK and Ham were shoving Fox Strang ahead of them. The trail led through a boggy, heavily wooded section. Then the narrow path began to rise. Monk kept asking the pinch faced gang leader questions. Each time he would ask one, his hairy fist would tighten experimentally around Strang's neck. The

effect was one of extreme persuasion.

"Who is this guy Krag?" Monk demanded.

Strang tried to shake his head without success.

"Honest, I don't know," he whined. "I'd begun to think it was Ward Hiller until . . . until—" His voice died away.

"Until what?" Ham snapped.

"Until we got orders to bump him."

After some persuasive demonstrations of the discomforts of strangulation, Fox told that the orders had come through a small portable short-wave set that was in the hide-out he was taking them to. He said that he merely transmitted the orders to the operator of the rustling death, whose face he had never seen. Monk began to think he was really getting somewhere.

"What is the rustling death?" he wanted to know.

Fox Strang began to shake all over. He gave every indication of being much more afraid of the rustling death than he was at the thought of strangulation.

"It . . . it's awful," he whined. "None of us know what it is. There're two machines that we know of. One is in Washington. The other's been out here. It came out in a plane. Then we transferred it to a truck to get the plane that Hiller flew here in. The boss was afraid Hiller wouldn't stand up under a grilling."

That was all Strang really knew. The rustling death was generated in a huge cabinet that took four men to move, he told them. What it was or how it worked, he had no idea. No one who ever saw it work, he informed them, ever thought of trying to put anything over on the man they knew as Krag. One piece of information was interesting to Doc's two aids. Fox said that since Krag first used the rustling death, he had developed it far beyond its original power. The master mind was still experimenting, however.

At this point in the conversation, Fox Strang emerged from the woods at the foot of a big moundlike hill. One side of the hill showed signs of having been excavated. It was shaped somewhat like a round loaf of French bread.

"Indian burial mound," Ham said.

Fox nodded in agreement.

"Hollow inside," he said. "You'll see in a minute."

Excavators searching for valuable relics had dug holes into the big burial mound. Apparently, there was a big hand-hewn cave in the center. An oblong door, shored up like a mine entrance, was half concealed by a big boulder. Fox Strang headed for that.

Monk still had Strang's neck in his grip when they stepped into the dark, tunnelloike entrance. Ham was right behind Monk. The dapper lawyer had his sword cane unsheathed. He had renewed the sticky chemical on the blade with fresh anaesthetic.

There was a metallic snap when they were a dozen or so feet down the corridor. That was followed by a thumping sound. A dim light flashed on. Monk began to howl. Smooth, shiny steel plates had dropped across the corridor, like fire doors in a ship's passageway. Monk, Ham and Fox Strang were in a steel cubicle about six feet square.

"Choking me will do no good," Fox Strang squeaked. "The others will not release you even if you do kill me."

Monk grunted in frustration. Ham sniffed.

"Gas!" he said. "We won't last long against that."

Whitish vapor began to drift up from a tiny hole in the floor. Monk's nostrils dilated. The stuff was sticky sweet. The hairy chemist staggered and sank groggily to the floor. Ham slumped down beside him.

Chapter X. VANDERLEE APPEARS

MONK recovered consciousness before Ham did. He shook his head and opened his eyes. Dim light in what appeared to be a subterranean chamber showed him that he had been stripped to his shorts. A thorough job of searching had been done.

Reduced to shorts, it was undeniable that Monk did look an amiable gorilla. Someone behind Monk commented on the fact.

"An ineffable anthropological manifestation of conversing fauna," a cultured voice observed.

"Johnny!" Monk yelled.

"You're right," another voice boomed in the murky semidarkness. "The manlike animal can talk."

Monk yelled and tried to leap to his feet. He discovered he was tightly bound. He rolled over on his side. Renny and Johnny were there. They also were reduced to shorts and were tied tightly. On the other side of Monk, Ham stirred. He mumbled groggily and opened his eyes. He saw Monk and shut them again.

"It must be a nightmare," he said. "If it isn't, I won't open my eyes ever again."

"We've found Renny and Johnny," Monk yelled joyously, ignoring Ham. "Now, we have to get out of here."

"An efficient search for weapons seems to have rendered us helpless," Johnny informed him.

"Maybe Monk is brighter than he looks," Ham suggested. "He seems to have it all figured out."

Monk grimaced. He doubled up and tried to scratch his foot. Tied as he was, it was a difficult task.

"Doc figured you'd need a guardian," he said. "So he sent me along."

Monk reached the shoe and scratched it vigorously. The entire sole came off. The other shoe yielded a similar false sole. The chemist rolled on his back, got his fingers on flat tubes of chemicals that were pressed into the false soles. There was a smell of burning rope. In another moment, Monk was free.

He untied Renny, Ham and Johnny.

"What happened to you two?" he asked.

Renny described their flight back from the Southwest. He told of the terrible disintegrating effect of the rustling death.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed. "The thing made us punch-drunk first. We didn't know what was going on. If it hadn't been for Doc's automatic catapult seats, we'd have been goners."

"We were then lured into a limousine where gas was administered," Johnny said. He described the phony chauffeur of the machine. Monk gulped.

"That's the guy we captured, Ham. His own pals killed him."

Johnny rubbed his hands together.

"We had best endeavor to locate a means of exit," he suggested.

Monk grunted and agreed with him. He picked up the two false shoe soles and tucked them carefully under one arm. One end of the cavernlike prison gave onto a narrow corridor. Monk started down that. The others were behind him. The corridor made a right-angle turn into another large subterranean chamber.

As they turned into that, Monk collided with a medium-sized man who was trying to go in the opposite direction. Monk asked no questions of identity or purpose. He started slugging right away. The other man slugged back as well as he could. Monk shoved him out into the room. There was a dim light in that chamber also. Ham looked over Monk's shoulder at the hairy chemist's captive. Ham began to yell!

"It's Jan Vanderlee!" he shouted.

Monk held the pale young man with the pointed face at arm's length.

"O. K.," he said, "if this is Vanderlee, he'll lead us out of here or I'll make hamburger out of him."

Jan Vanderlee looked wildly about him.

"I . . . I don't know the way out," he insisted. "I was trying to get out myself."

Monk snorted.

"Just waiting for a streetcar, I suppose."

Jan Vanderlee looked behind him. He might have feared other enemies, or he might have expected reinforcements. It was difficult to be certain. But Monk was not one to waste a great deal of time in useless indecision. He smacked Vanderlee with the flat of one hand.

"You're not going around killing any more people with your danged inventions," he shrilled.

"You're going right along with us. So quit stalling."

Vanderlee's eyes went wild with panic.

"My invention was not deadly. I cannot understand it. The whole thing baffles me. I . . . I don't want to—"

Vanderlee gave a superhuman leap. Monk still had hold of the young man's coat collar. But the inventor was out of it. He started racing in the opposite direction from which they had come. Monk let out a yell of rage and tore after the fleeing man. But for sudden interference, Monk would have caught him.

THE interference was the arrival at that instant of Fox Strang and his mobsters. They crowded into a narrow doorway.

"Shoot to kill," Fox rapped. "We don't need these birds any more."

Monk dropped to the floor. He began to roll rapidly backward. He yelled to Doc's other aids.

"Run for it, fellows! It's our only chance."

Renny, Ham and Johnny took Monk's advice. They knew he would not have instantly decided upon flight unless he had some reason. Monk never ran from a fight because it was dangerous.

Monk rolled toward the two false shoe soles he had dropped on the floor. The hairy chemist realized that in searching Doc's aids, Strang's men had removed the bullet proof undergarments which were their only protection against flying lead.

Monk's hands gripped the false soles as he rolled. He rubbed them violently together. There was an instant explosion. Red flame and pitchy-black smoke billowed up into the underground chamber. The smoke had an acrid, tear-gas effect. Monk leaped to his feet as smoke ruined any aim the gangsters might take. He plunged into the corridor and found Renny, Ham and Johnny crouching just around the corner.

Fox Strang's voice yelled orders.

"Go through the smoke after them!"

Monk nudged Ham.

"Take a deep breath. Go right back through the smoke past them. Keep well over to the right. We'll go out the door on the other side of the chamber."

His three companions whispered their agreement. Doc's aids crept through the black smoke. The mobsters were plunging in the direction they thought the four men had taken. They passed each other in the center of the chamber.

There was no one in the doorway on the far side of the room. The four men plunged down a dim corridor. It twisted on a downward course. Suddenly, they found themselves in a brightly lighted chamber that was on the edge of the old burial mound. This seemed to be sort of a wardroom for the mobsters. There were chairs and tables. On one of the tables was a pile of clothing. Monk yelled with delight. The clothing was theirs. Apparently, the mob had been going through it for hidden weapons or chemicals. Ham's sword cane was even on top of the pile of stuff.

They pulled on the clothing swiftly. Their superfiring machine pistols were on a wall rack. The surfaces of the weapons were scratched, as if the gangsters had been trying to take them apart to see what kind of mechanism they had.

Monk growled.

"Let's go back and take them," he said. "Armed, we can lick the bunch of them."

No one objected. The four men retraced their steps. They encountered one guard stationed along the corridor. There was a bull-fiddle roar as Monk poured mercy bullets into him. In all probability that one roaring shot told the rest of the gang that Doc's men had escaped and that they had found their weapons.

The four men toured every passageway they could find in the old burial mound. They didn't find a single mobster. Nor did they find Jan Vanderlee.

"He's in on it," Monk insisted. "He's the guy who's controlling the rustling death."

Ham, for once, felt inclined to agree with his apelike friend.

"Let's go back to the estate and find Doc," he suggested. "He'll want to talk to Renny and Johnny."

DOC SAVAGE was not at the Weatherton estate. The bronze man had just landed his four-motored transport at the small air field nearby. It had been arranged that Senator Weatherton's limousine would pick him up. But, apparently, the chauffeur had been delayed.

The caretaker had left for the day. The only other person at the airport was Nada Morrell. The senator's niece was tinkering with a light speed plane she had taken from a hangar that was half concealed by trees.

"It's my plane," she explained as Doc walked across the small airport. "I'm just checking the motor to see that it is in order if I should want to go up."

Tester Lyons stood beside Doc, watching Nada Morrell. His chubby face registered decided approval.

"Maybe I can help her," he said.

Doc walked back to his ship. Long Tom was adjusting some of the instruments on the panel. Doc looked at the chronometer there.

"Weatherton should have reached Washington by now," he observed.

Long Tom stood up. He saw Tester Lyons and Nada Morrell strolling over toward the ship. Tester seemed to be making good time; Nada's smile was extremely friendly.

"Monk and Ham better get busy," Long Tom commented.

Doc Savage picked a small portable radio from the floor. It slightly resembled the type of portable used by picnickers. He flicked a switch and twisted the two dials.

"Did you put the eavesdropper in the senator's brief case?" he asked Long Tom.

The electrical genius nodded. When he had helped Weatherton pick up the scattered papers from the floor of the plane, he had dropped a small, compact microphone with self-contained transmission power into the briefcase. The thing was ingeniously contrived to conserve power. It only functioned when an impulse was sent out from the receiving unit. There was nothing but a cough of static at first. Then the round full tones of Weatherton's voice rumbled out.

"Is Congressman Cortlandt in?"

A feminine voice, apparently a receptionist, answered.

"He is expecting you, senator. Go right in."

There was a faint sound of leather heels striking against hardwood flooring. A door slammed. Then King Cortlandt's voice came through the loud-speaker.

"Ah, I'm so happy to see you, Wyndham. I . . . kershzweeze . . . we've got a terrific problem on our hands, senator."

There was a sound of Weatherton clearing his throat.

"I certainly agree that we have," he said. "It is obvious that we will have to go along with this fiend for the time being. On these bills, I mean."

King Cortlandt's voice was a reluctant sigh.

"Yes, I presume—"

"There are some things I must pick up at my office," Weatherton interrupted. "I will be right back. If you don't mind, I'll leave this brief case here for the moment."

King Cortlandt apparently didn't mind. There was a sound of a door slamming again and apparently Cortlandt was again alone in his office. A peculiar laugh came through the pick-up microphone. It rose to a guffaw of triumph. The voice was still King Cortlandt's. But it was coarse and sneeringly hard.

"The fool," he jeered. "He's falling in line more easily than I thought he would." The grating, jeering laugh rolled through the loudspeaker again. Then it faded as Cortlandt apparently walked away from the brief case which Senator Weatherton had left in his office. Long Tom gasped.

"Whew!

Do you suppose Cortlandt is really Krag?"

Tester Lyons and Nada Morrell were both open-mouthed, speechless. Doc Savage did not answer. He stepped quickly from the plane and looked toward the road. Senator Weatherton's limousine had arrived.

Monk, Ham, Renny and Johnny piled out of the back seat. The chauffeur stepped gingerly from the driver's seat. He was closely followed by Habeas and Chemistry; Ham and Monk had picked up their pets at the estate.

"Gosh, Doc!" Monk blurted. "Johnny's got some information that sounds important."

"We will discuss it on our way," Doc Savage said. "We must get to Washington immediately."

Monk quieted down. Ham wanted to know who were to go.

"All of us," Doc said. "That is, if Miss Morrell and Lyons desire to accompany us."

Tester Lyons wanted to go along. Nada Morrell demurred. She said she was still hoping to find some trace of Jan Vanderlee. If any word came, she insisted, it would come through the phone on the estate. Monk tried to argue the girl into going along with them, but it was no use.

Doc took the controls and lifted the big ship from the runway of the tiny field.

"What did Renny and Johnny learn?" he asked.

The tall archaeologist began to talk. He realized from Doc's attitude that something crucial had come up, so he spared Doc any of the details of their encounter with the rustling death or their capture. Those things the bronze man could learn about later. Johnny also cut things down by using short words for a change.

"Renny was inspecting the engineering aspect of a small unimportant power project," Johnny said.

"I dug around in the rock substrata and discovered a natural tunnel partly obscured by an ancient slide of shale. We took soundings from there on down a valley and found that it fans out for miles."

Renny was getting excited as Johnny talked.

"Holy cow, Doc! That thing is supposed to be a cheap power job. Actually it will furnish perfect irrigation to a hundred miles of country that has been considered worthless. Why, the thing is worth more millions than any one guy would even think about."

"What is the exact location of this site?" Doc asked quietly.

Monk couldn't hold himself any longer. He'd been biting his tongue in an effort to keep quiet. But now he exploded.

"That's the whole point. The dam is the one this guy Krag mentioned in his list of 'must' legislation for Weatherton and Cortlandt to put through Congress!"

Monk sat back, expecting Doc to show some surprise. But Doc seemed to find nothing unexpected in the information.

"It is quite apparent that the rest of the legislation was merely included for window dressing," Doc said. "The other items served to draw attention away from this one."

"Holy cow, Doc!" Renny boomed. "There's a government surveying party due down there in the morning. They're quite likely to discover what Johnny found."

Doc Savage sat suddenly more erect. He looked out of the plane's window, quickly scanning the landmarks.

"You are undoubtedly correct," the bronze man said. "And if they do find it before that bill is passed and signed, they will probably be visited by the rustling death!"

Doc shifted the plane's course, stepped the four motors up to maximum speed. He pointed the ship's nose for the commercial air-line terminal where he had seen Senator Weatherton off for Washington.

"Renny, Johnny and Long Tom had best charter a plane here and fly at once to the power-project site," Doc said. "Warn the surveying party to stay away from it for the present. I will have authorizations for their delay telegraphed from Washington."

On the long glide to the airport, Doc told those who had not been present of the monologue of King Cortlandt that had been picked up by the transmitter.

"Criminy!" Monk said. "I bet he's working the Washington end, with Jan Vanderlee on the Midwest part of it."

He told Doc about their encounter with Jan Vanderlee, Fox Strang and the gunmen. Doc was busy landing the big ship. Renny, Johnny and Long Tom got out. Then Doc took off immediately and headed for Washington.

THE normal air-line time from that terminal to Washington was slightly more than two hours. Doc's transport could do it in a few minutes over an hour and a half. The bronze man set the robot control as soon as the ship reached ten thousand feet. Then he turned to the receiver that was tuned to the wave length of the transmitter in Senator Weatherton's brief case. He flicked it on.

At first, there was only the confusion of sound that is always present in the midst of any legislative body. There were fragments of whispered confidences, coughing and the clearing of throats. Feet shuffled uncertainly. Then a chair scraped back, there was a crackling of papers and the clear voice of Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton came over the microphone.

"Gentlemen, I have a measure to introduce which should become part of the rivers-and-harbors appropriation. It is, perhaps, a minor item from a part of the nation that is usually neglected. My utter belief in the justice of the measure is attested to by the fact that this small improvement is not even within the borders of my own State. There is a small power project needed to give the benefits of civilization to a really deserving group of—"

Monk began to rumble epithets that no senator would like to have applied to him. Ham frowned at the hairy chemist.

"You dope—Doc told him to go through with the bills."

Monk looked somewhat abashed. He still didn't like the set-up, however. He glanced at Doc. The bronze man seemed entirely unperturbed, even satisfied. Monk sighed. Ham assumed a somewhat superior attitude.

"With what we know about that project, neither King Cortlandt nor anybody else can get away with anything in that valley," he reminded. "After all, the hill must be passed by the House and then signed by the President before it can become law. We have plenty of time to upset any plans Cortlandt may have."

Monk grunted in annoyance.

"The world would still be better off without lawyers," he grumbled.

Monk got up and ambled back to the compartment where Habeas Corpus and Chemistry were kept. He wanted to see if the animals were both comfortable. Both of them were asleep, so Monk returned to his seat. Doc, meanwhile, had made a radio-telephone contact with the main Washington switchboard. He called Congressman King Cortlandt at his private office near the airport and received no response. He tried him then at the regular House Office Building. King Cortlandt was there and delighted to hear from Doc Savage—so he said. Doc told him quite truthfully that he was flying into Washington and expected to see him.

"That will be . . . kershweeze . . . that'll be fine," King Cortlandt told him. "I've just seen Senator Weatherton and I would very much like to talk things over with you."

Tester Lyons had been quiet up to that point.

"The old hypocrite," he said, now. "He ought to be boiled in oil."

Monk snorted.

"You're too gentle."

"Hold your hats, boys; we're coming in," Ham interrupted. Doc nosed the plane down toward Washington Airport. He radioed for clearance and was signaled into an open runway. The bronze man taxied the plane to a hangar, sprang out and gave orders to a head mechanic to refuel and lubricate the ship. Then he turned toward the main gate, followed by his two aids and Tester Lyons. Monk and Ham left their pets in the rear compartment of the plane.

THE office building that housed the private offices of Congressman King Cortlandt was a new and modern structure. It had a veritable armed guard of night attendants. The offices were easily accessible, however, because all of the night force had seen pictures of Doc Savage. They were considerably impressed.

"Congressman Cortlandt is expecting me," Doc told the captain quite accurately. Cortlandt was expecting Doc—in the House Office Building, several blocks away.

The night elevator operator let them off at the fourth floor, on which King Cortlandt's suite was located. Doc Savage used a skeleton key to get into the door. There were certain records that the bronze man thought he might find in the filing cabinets of the office. He wished to inspect them before calling on the supposedly crooked legislator.

Monk, Ham and Tester Lyons followed the bronze man into the outer office. There were no files of any importance kept in that room. So Doc went on into the bigger office. There was a slight spark as Doc opened the door. Instantly, an ominous rustling sound lifted into the room.

Monk leaped back to the door of the outer office. The same power that had caused the spark and the weird rustling sound had apparently locked it. The rustling noise grew louder. Every man in the room began to undergo the strange sensation of "hearing" a sound that wasn't a sound at all. The queer pulsations beat against their minds with brain-numbing force.

Tester Lyons began to scream.

"We're trapped!" he yelled. "We will never get out of this. It's the rustling death! It . . . it's—"

Then Tester Lyons began to babble meaningless words. He sank to the floor, a wide-eyed vacant expression on his face. His head weaved from side to side and he grinned foolishly. Monk and Ham

floundered around the room, bumping into each other. Monk clawed at his throat. Doc Savage was stretched prone on the floor. Beads of perspiration stood out on the bronze man's forehead. The flake-gold eyes were open. But they were still and dull. Doc's face was contorted with lines of intense concentration. The mighty brain of the bronze man was battling to resist the numbing force of the rustling death. Doc rolled. One hand came out of his pocket. The fingers clutched a peculiar two-bladed key. The blades were similar to the prongs of a light plug that would fit a baseboard socket.

Doc's corded muscles were knotted with tremendous effort as he rolled toward one wall. His hand moved like something in a slow-motion movie. Finally, the pluglike key touched a wall socket. The prongs sank into it.

There was a sudden, blinding flash! The lights went out. The rustle of silk and crinoline ceased. So did the terrifying impulse of the soundless hum. There was silence in the big office for several moments.

DOC SAVAGE was the first of the four men to revive. He sat erect, looked around him. The gold-flaked eyes stirred once more, as if driven by tiny whirlwinds.

Doc had deduced that the motive power for the rustling death might originate in the lighting circuit. He had short-circuited that and blown out a fuse. Whatever principle the hideous death machine might use, its power source had been cut off. The bronze man got to his feet. As he did so, the others began to regain their senses.

Doc Savage was going systematically through the big desk in one corner of the office. Tester helped in the search. He tried a metal filing cabinet near the desk. When he pulled the top drawer out, there was a blinding flash. Red flame and smoke gushed out into the room. It mushroomed out so quickly that there was no possibility of extinguishing the flames.

The fire spread rapidly over the office. Doc backed toward the door.

"Cortlandt apparently prepared this to destroy any evidence if the rustling death failed to function," the bronze man said. "I believe we can conclude that there is nothing here that would be of interest."

Doc, his two aids and Tester Lyons retreated to the hallway. Fire sirens wailed in the street outside. The smoke, billowing from a window, had evidently been spotted. A confusion of firemen, building-service employees and curious citizens filled the corridors. In that confusion, Doc Savage and his group escaped.

In the street, Doc gave Monk and Ham certain specific instructions. He told Tester Lyons that he could meet them at the plane later. In the meantime he could do as he pleased.

"I am going to see Senator Weatherton again," Doc said.

Then he was gone.

DOC waited several minutes in Weatherton's business quarters in the Senate Office Building. A secretary ushered him into the senator's private office. Presently, the tall, gray-haired legislator came in the door. His eyes lighted somewhat at the sight of Doc Savage. But then his shoulders drooped again.

"I don't like this, Mr. Savage," he said in a tired voice. "Perhaps these bills are all harmless. But taking orders from a master crook who may be a foreign agent is not a pleasant prospect." Doc nodded sympathetically.

"I hope the situation will not continue much longer," Doc said. "I am in search of certain evidence that may be sufficient to bring this thing to a close."

Weatherton mopped his forehead.

Then two things happened which materially changed the course of Doc Savage's battle against the rustling death. The first thing was the arrival of Monk and Ham. Weatherton's secretary announced them. While Monk was crowding through the door, the phone rang. The senator answered it, and his face went pale. He held the receiver out to Doc.

"It's for you," he said in a low voice. "I think it is . . . Krag!"

Doc Savage's gold-flaked eyes stirred with life. The weird, trilling sound of bafflement welled up into the air. The bronze man took the phone quickly. He did not fear another lightning attempt upon his life right then. Doc had reason to believe that Krag wanted to talk to him.

"This is Doc Savage," he said into the mouthpiece.

Over the wire came a muffled laugh. It carried a defiant, sneering note.

"I have just followed your two men, Doc Savage," the sneering voice gloated. "They succeeded in the mission on which you sent them. And now the information will be worthless. Things which become obstacles to me must be destroyed. This is Krag, Doc Savage. And you may rest assured that the rustling death is just beginning!"

There was a click as the man hung up. Doc whirled to Monk and Ham.

"Quick!" he snapped. "What did you learn?"

"We telephoned every power official in two States and the record clerks of three counties in the Southwest," Ham said. "We found that the power project Johnny told us about and the tremendous leases to exploit the valley it will control are all owned by dummy corporations of King Cortlandt."

Doc nodded. He was obviously not surprised.

"I hope we can reach him quickly," the bronze man said. "I am afraid things are taking an unexpected turn."

Doc picked up the phone. He called Congressman Cortlandt's phone in the House Office Building. There was no answer. The bronze man put the phone down quickly. He sprang to his feet and started to the door.

"Come on," he said. "It is barely possible that we may be able to prevent another death."

Chapter XII. DEATH CHANGES HANDS

ABOUT the time that the mysterious Krag was warning Doc Savage that the rustling death was just getting under way, a trim speed plane started a long glide for the runway of Washington Airport. The pilot was Nada Morrell.

The girl's pretty face was tense with emotion. She had a radio telephone connected with the main Washington switchboard.

"I tell you Jan Vanderlee must be somewhere in the capital," she said. "He must be near a phone because he called me long distance an hour and a half ago."

The chief operator came on the wire then.

"We have checked the long-distance call to you, Miss Morrell," she said. "It was made from a pay station in a drugstore."

Nada Morrell thanked her. She shut off the radio phone and devoted her entire attention to landing her trim two-seater ship.

"Jan must be in trouble," she said to herself. "His voice sounded as if he were frightened."

The wheels of the plane hit the concrete in an almost perfect landing. Nada taxied the ship to a row of private hangars. A mechanic trotted across the field. She climbed out, turned the ship over to him.

"It is Senator Weatherton's," she told him. "Take care of it."

The girl hurried from the field. Near the administration building, a newsboy was hawking late-edition papers. It was now late evening and dark. The newsboy yelled something about a fire and the rustling death. Hastily, Nada Morrell bought a paper and glanced quickly at the front page.

There was a bulletin about the mystery fire in the private offices of King Cortlandt. Somewhere, the reporter had gotten a hint of the presence of the rustling death. He made the most of the hint.

Nada Morrell shuddered. She thought of the rustling death. And she thought of the fear in Jan Vanderlee's voice. Jan had not instructed her to come to Washington.

Nada had no definite plan in mind to locate her fiancé. She turned to a phone booth in the administration building. The most natural place for her to call was her uncle's office. She got Senator Weatherton's secretary on the wire just after he had left the office with Doc Savage. The secretary informed her that the senator had gone to the House Office Building to see King Cortlandt. Nada hung up and started the several blocks to the same destination.

And there, she had her first actual encounter with the rustling death!

AN excited crowd milled in front of the House Office Building. Nada Morrell felt her hair stiffen, as if the air were filled with highly charged static electricity. Her pulse hammered as if some unseen, unknown force were pounding at her eardrums without making an audible sound. The girl's hand went instinctively to her throat. She had an inexplicable impulse to scream and stifled it with great difficulty.

The lights in the House Office Building were all extinguished when Nada came up. Then someone turned them on or found whatever it was that had cut them out. Women screamed as the lights came on again. One middle-aged blonde staggered out of the building and down the steps. Her eyes were vacant, staring. The whole scene had about it an atmosphere of unreality.

Nada Morrell faltered at the steps. She had a premonition of disaster. Then she brightened. Four figures were shouldering their way through the crowd. The bronze hair of Doc Savage loomed above the crowd. Almost as tall as Doc, the dignified gray hair of her uncle showed. Monk and Ham followed.

The senator's niece waited for them on the steps. She felt a strange reluctance to go into the building alone. Doc Savage nodded slightly as he passed her. The bronze man leaped up the steps. Nada Morrell kept as close to him as she could. When Doc opened the door and went inside, Nada was beside him. A groan escaped her lips as she went into the long corridor.

Down near the other end of the corridor, a face showed briefly. The features were pale, the face wide at the forehead, tapered to a pointed chin. It was visible only for an instant. Then it was gone. Nada Morrell gasped.

"Jan!"

The girl ran down the corridor. Monk and Ham tore after her. Doc Savage turned directly into the offices occupied by King Cortlandt. They were halfway down the long corridor. The outer office was a shambles. Filing cabinets were overturned. Papers were strewn all over the richly carpeted floor. An attractive brunette secretary was sprawled on the floor. She was dead. J. Wyndham Weatherton gulped.

"Good heavens!"

Without comment, Doc walked on into the inner office of King Cortlandt.

The body of King Cortlandt lay on the floor. It was twisted grotesquely, as if the man, even in death, were trying to escape from his fate. Doc Savage leaned over the body. Once more, the eerie, tuneless expression of amazement rose into the air.

"Wh-what is it?" Senator Weatherton stammered.

Doc straightened from his inspection of the body. "There is not a single mark on the body," he said. "But the flesh is as pulpy as if it had been beaten. It was obviously subjected to some terrific force as yet unexplained."

A loud-speaker on King Cortlandt's desk began to crackle with static. Then the words gushed out of it.

"You have seen different manifestations of the rustling death, Doc Savage. Look the body of King Cortlandt over carefully. Remember the airplane in which your aids were riding. Then warn the world, Doc Savage, that Krag cannot be stopped!"

Doc lunged to the desk and whipped up the loudspeaker. He found that it was radio-controlled; that there was no way of tracing it. While he was looking at that, Monk, Ham and Nada Morrell came into the office.

"H-he disappeared into the crowd," Monk said. "We didn't see him again."

Senator Weatherton's brow wrinkled.

"Did you get a good look at his face?" Ham nodded.

"The features were the same as those of the man I saw the night of the laboratory attack. And it was definitely Jan Vanderlee that I saw then."

Nada Morrell hung her head. Her pretty lips were pouting.

"I'm afraid I have to admit that he is right," she said. "I saw his face, too."

Nada began to cry. Between sobs, she told of the phone call she had received at the estate.

"Jan just said he was in Washington," she moaned. "He didn't exactly ask me to come. But I thought I could find him and cheer him up. So I flew East."

The girl sat down in an overstuffed chair. She pillowed her head on one arm and cried quietly.

Doc Savage was silent for a few moments. He inspected the room carefully.

Monk was following Doc.

"It looks like this King Cortlandt wasn't guilty after all," he commented.

Doc Savage shook his head.

"On the contrary," he said quietly. "King Cortlandt was our most important enemy."

Monk brightened.

"Then, it's all over."

"No!" Doc snapped. "Krag is set to give us a reign of terror that is ten times what we have seen. Furthermore, he will be willing to sell out to the highest bidder a death machine whose possibilities even he is just beginning to realize!"

Doc leaned over once more to inspect the half-cooked corpse of King Cortlandt. It appeared that Cortlandt had seen death approaching. His body was at least a dozen feet from his desk. His dead face was contorted with an expression of terror and surprise, as if someone he had trusted had turned upon him. Doc Savage remembered the moments of terror that had come with the first threat of the rustling death. The intense premonition of disaster, the horrible fear of the unknown and unfathomable, had been the principal reaction of everyone who had been subjected to the weird force. Doc's trilling note welled into the air again. King Cortlandt had apparently tried to leave a message to those who discovered his body. With one fingernail, he had managed to scratch a number into the varnish of the floor. Doc recognized the number. It represented the bill concerning the power project that Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton had proposed; the bill would have made King Cortlandt a multimillionaire if he had lived.

Doc Savage straightened.

"We will fly immediately for the Southwest," he said. "It is likely that the rustling death will strike next in that direction."

AS they left the office, Monk tried to piece some of the bits of tangled yarn together in his mind.

"Golly, Doc," he piped, "this Cortlandt guy couldn't have been Krag. We traced a call from Krag back to a drugstore in a city two hours away from Washington by plane. And fifteen minutes later Senator Weatherton got Cortlandt on the phone in Washington."

"It is entirely possible that the location of Krag's voice does not tell us much," Doc said quietly. "It may be that the real criminal behind this instructs an assistant to simulate his voice to throw suspicion away from his actual location. He uses some device to disguise his own voice. An assistant could easily do likewise."

Monk's mouth dropped open. Then he snapped it closed in sudden decision. An expression of dawning comprehension swept over his face.

"If an assistant could do that, he could bump off this main guy and take over for himself."

Doc Savage nodded.

"But he would first have to learn the identity of the real Krag," Doc explained. "And so far, no

henchmen we have located had been permitted to know the identity of their boss. And the second thing any ambitious assistant would have to do would be to gain complete control of the rustling death." Monk grunted in annoyance.

"Yeah," he agreed. "And it ain't likely that the master mind would let any of his assistants find out too much about that."

Ham paced thoughtfully along beside the chemist.

"I was beginning to think this Tester Lyons guy was not on the level," he complained. "But he certainly walked right into a trap with us in Cortlandt's other office."

"It's Vanderlee," Monk insisted. "I've said that all along."

The mention of the missing inventor's name made them look around for Nada Morrell. The girl had disappeared. They all knew of the phone call she said had brought her to Washington.

"I'm not sure she doesn't know more about it than she admits," Monk said.

Senator Weatherton bristled. He denied that his niece could be involved in anything improper. He said he would go in search of her. If possible, he said, he would get in touch with Doc in the Southwest. They parted not far from the House Office Building. Doc, Monk and Ham took a taxi to the airport.

THE big four-motored transport was refueled and ready for a quick take-off. As they approached the ship, Monk asked Doc what their exact destination would be.

"The site for the power dam," Doc told him. "That is where we will find Long Tom, Renny and Johnny."

A figure moved silently in the dark on the other side of Doc's plane. The man apparently had paid no attention to Doc's plane nor to the conversation that had taken place. He wore the uniform of a ground maintenance man of the airport. He had a flat head that looked as though he had grown up with a flatiron weighting down his skull. The man was Flathead Simpson, the "janitor" who had picked up the rustling-death device that had nearly killed Doc and Long Tom in the New York office building. Flathead was a vague, dim figure as he drifted away. Doc was reading a note that had been wedged into the instrument panel. As he read it, a radio receiver, tuned to a news broadcast, blared out information about the rustling death of King Cortlandt. Doc handed the note to Monk and Ham without comment. It was from Tester Lyons.

Waited for you here until the excitement began. Couldn't stand it any longer. On my way to House Office Building. Will be right back. Wait for me if you can.

Lyons

"Goin' to wait, Doc?" Monk inquired.

The bronze man shook his head.

"I do not believe there is any time to be lost," he said quietly. "We will fly at our greatest speed to the Southwest."

Doc lifted the plane into the cool night air. When he had leveled off at ten thousand feet, he set the robot control. A flashing light on the instrument panel indicated that someone on their secret wave length was trying to establish communication. Doc flicked a switch. The voice of the F.B.I. agent, whom Doc had contacted the day before to learn of the activities of Krag, came through. Doc acknowledged the establishment of contact.

"The department is extremely anxious to have you help us locate and identify this man called Krag," the agent told Doc. "We have just received reliable information that Krag has contacted a dangerous foreign power. Krag offered to sell the secret of the rustling death. The state department is extremely concerned."

Doc Savage's mouth tightened slightly.

"It is as I feared," he said simply. "We can only hope that he will dicker over a price long enough for us to get into action."

Doc flicked off the radio. His voice was curiously tight.

"In the hands of an enemy, the death device could be disastrous before a defense could be figured out against it," he said.

Ham touched on a question of doubt regarding the wisdom of their present direction.

"Now that Cortlandt is dead and that we know his plans in the Southwestern irrigation project, isn't it likely that Krag will abandon this part of the venture?"

Doc shook his head.

"By the time Cortlandt's part had been learned and it was therefore necessary to kill him, Krag had undoubtedly moved equipment for the rustling death to the power site," Doc explained. "If he is now negotiating with a foreign power, he will have to destroy all equipment that he doesn't actually sell. And he also has to wipe all of us out. Krag cannot yet be sure how much we know."

"How'll he know where we've gone?" Ham wanted to know.

"He had a spotter at the airport," Doc said. He described Flathead Simpson, though he did not know the spotter's name at the time. Doc Savage had deliberately permitted the eavesdropper to overhear their direction and escape. As Doc toiled the big transport through the night, he knew he would be followed. In fact, he preferred it that way.

Chapter XIII. HIDDEN TERROR!

IT was shortly after daybreak when Renny, piloting the chartered plane, sighted the desert town nearest the proposed power-dam site. Cactus and mesquite spread out in the parched, sandy land. The town itself was of little importance. It was comprised of a couple of dozen adobe huts. It was known as Cactus City.

Two automobiles began to crawl out of the dust-dry main street of Cactus City as Renny put the plane in a wide bank. Long Tom looked over the big engineer's shoulder with a powerful pair of binoculars.

"They've got surveying equipment stacked in the back seat of one of the cars," he said.

"It's probably the government surveying party," Renny offered.

Renny circled twice, then put the ship into a long glide. He selected a wide flat of sand that looked sufficiently solid to take the oversized inflated tires of the landing gear.

Renny taxied toward the two-car motorcade, swung the ship around parallel with the road and leaped out. Johnny and Long Tom followed him.

The head car screamed to a stop. An incredibly large man untangled himself from behind the wheel and stepped out to the road. There were two items about the large man that were peculiar. One was the oddly elliptical face that gave him the expression of an amiable, if slightly surprised, goat. The other item was a brace of six-shooters, one of which was clutched in business-like fashion in each of his fists.

"If yuh hombres is honin' fer trouble, yuh'll git it pronto," he said in a flat Western drawl. "I hear some coyote named Krag's proddin' down this way an' we're set fer him."

Renny drew a deep breath.

"We are just as determined to get this Krag as you are," he rumbled. "We are Doc Savage's men." The big man's face broke into a smile.

"Tarnation," he blurted. "Why didn't yuh say so. My name's Goat Smith."

He put out a hand that was almost as big as the quart-sized fist that Renny used to grip it.

Renny told Goat Smith that they were looking for a surveying party.

"Reckon that's us," Goat Smith said. "We're foggin' out to a power site right now. Some fool in Congress wants to spend money on a creek that ain't got no more water 'n yuh kin spit."

Renny talked fast then. He drew Goat Smith aside and explained to him that it was essential to keep the surveying party away from that site for at least another twenty-four hours. Renny didn't tell the boss of the gang that Doc Savage expected the rustling death to strike there. He relied on Doc's prestige and the power of his own honorary F.B.I. badge to persuade the tall man. And it proved to be enough.

Goat Smith looked narrowly at the seven men who still lounged in the two cars.

"Don't have to tell these jaspers twice that there ain't no work to do today," he said. "They'd rather set than move around anyway."

He sighed. Then he leaned over closer to Renny.

"'S funny thing," he said softly. "As I told yuh, there ain't no more water 'n yuh kin spit in that arroyo where they're goin' to build that dam. But yuh kin hear water roarin' somewhere down under that dry ground like a waterfall."

Renny tried to look surprised. That phenomenon was what he and Johnny had discovered. That faint, subterranean roaring had set the two of them off in an investigation as to its reason. The underground river, Johnny's geological probing convinced them, was the unknown source of a tremendous irrigation project that would mean literally millions of dollars.

"We got here late yesterday, a day 'head of schedule," Smith said. "An' while we were out there, we started down a deep coulee that yuh oughta know about. There was a thumpin' sound comin' from down there."

Goat Smith described the gulch and the noises they had heard. Renny's interest was far from simulated as the surveyor talked. He had Smith give a detailed description of the surrounding terrain and locate the coulee for him as accurately as possible. Then he left Smith.

The two touring cars turned around and headed back toward Cactus City. Renny tore over the sand toward Johnny and Long Tom who had retired a few hundred feet, believing that one man speaking in a confidential manner could probably accomplish more.

"There's a big Diesel plant already installed down here," Renny blurted. "It looks like the set-up for the rustling death is all set to do business."

Renny had recognized the characteristic thump of Diesel engines from Smith's description. And he could think of no other reason for a Diesel plant to be already operating out in the desert.

The big-fisted engineer climbed back into their chartered plane. He drew rapid lines in a cross section on a topographical map of that part of the desert area.

"This must be the coulee that he meant," Renny said. "It's about twenty miles from the site of the power project and might not be found easily."

"A concealment made secure by nonexpectation," Johnny said. "One would certainly not find it unless conducting a specific search."

"Let's go," Long Tom snapped. "You guys say you were all over this area and you didn't find it. Maybe this Goat Smith was lying."

Renny gunned the plane into a take-off. They soared up into a cloudless sky that the desert sun was heating into an inverted bowl of shiny brass. All three of Doc's aids studied the map closely as Renny flew the ship southward.

Presently, the instruments indicated that they should be directly over the gulch Goat Smith had told them about. In addition to that, various landmarks that the lanky surveyor had mentioned checked with their instrument bearings. But below them, as all three studied the terrain with powerful glasses, there seemed nothing to indicate the presence of anything more than rocks, trees, sagebrush and cactus. There was a coulee that had a small brook. Green trees grew beside that. But they could find nothing more.

Long Tom checked the map carefully.

"That's where it ought to be," he said. "And if there is anything there, it's well located.

Flying to the power-dam site from the east, a plane would almost have to come over this spot."

On either side of that area, jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains rose to heights that almost prohibited flying. Renny put the plane's nose down toward the nearest flat stretch of sand that he could see.

"I think Smith was either lying or had a pipe dream," the big engineer grumbled. "But I guess we'd better investigate."

Long Tom and Johnny both agreed. The ship bumped over sand ridges that could not accurately be estimated from the air. Renny cut the motor and the three men climbed out of the plane. Each of them slid his superfiring machine pistol from its holster and checked the mechanism. Then they headed for the gulch that had been but dimly visible from the air.

A small stream bed led between two rocky sandstone buttes that loomed like reddish shoulders into the morning sky. The entrance to the coulee was narrow and shaded from the early sun. A grove of sycamores made a green arch over the stream just above the towering shoulders of sandstone.

Then the three men stepped into a world that was different from the sagebrush and cactus of the flatlands they had left behind them. Silt, carried there and spread out on a miniature delta, had given birth to trees and green shrubbery. It was a natural oasis in a desert—for a few hundred feet. Then the hand of man showed itself. Giant trees, whose greenness came from chemicals, loomed beside the sycamores that nature had put there. The trunks of these new trees were milled four-by-fours. Their greenery was a continuous clump of clever camouflage.

And with the sight of this manmade forest came a pulsing thump-thump-thump that told them that Diesel power of considerable strength was turning over.

"Goat-face told the truth," Renny boomed. "There's something going on here that shouldn't be."

Long Tom's unhealthy pallor seemed to be suddenly intensified.

"Listen," he whispered.

Above the pounding of the Diesel engines rose a rustling sound that was at first faint and then mounted with a gradually increasing volume. Big Renny, in the lead, wavered slightly.

"Holy cow, I feel funny," he rumbled.

Johnny was staring ahead as if expecting to see a ghost pop out from between the prop trees.

"An incomprehensible psychological upset," he said. "My brain is reeling and there seems no reason for it."

There was sweat on Long Tom's face. The electrical genius almost never perspired.

"It feels as if something you can't see was pressing against your brain," he offered.

A RAUCOUS laugh filled the air behind them.

"Yuh ain't seen half of it yet, pardners," the unmistakable voice of Goat Smith said. "Yuh sidewinders kin go along or fight it out, now. It makes no difference to us."

Long Tom whirled and drew his superfirer all in one swift motion. He could see no one on the back trail at all. Johnny spoke then in Mayan.

"They have us covered," he said. "We can fight it out now and lose. And dead, we will be of no help to Doc. It is perhaps best to play along."

The logic of Johnny's remarks was obvious. Long Tom lowered his machine pistol.

"You win for the present, Smith," he said. "What do you want us to do?"

Goat Smith laughed.

"Just keep on goin'," he said. "We'll take yuh when we want to. We could have done it when yuh first come down. But we thought Doc Savage might have some gadget that would give the play away then. This way it's better." His voice hardened. "Throw them guns away, lobos."

Three superfirers hit the stream bed.

"Doc won't walk into a trap, anyway," Renny said with more hope than certainty.

Goat Smith laughed again and stepped out from behind a big boulder. He was followed closely by the seven other members of the "surveying party."

"Savage is on his way here, now," Goat said. "An' he's got to fly over this coulee to get to the power-dam site."

Smith chuckled harshly.

"Get goin'," he ordered.

Doc's three aids moved ahead. Renny staggered slightly. A vacant expression crept into his eyes.

Long Tom began babbling meaningless words. Goat Smith yelled some instructions to someone ahead of them.

"Cut it off, Scar. We got 'em. No use makin' them all the way loco, yet."

The rustling noise subsided and there was only the pound of the Diesels to blanket the rippling of the tiny brook that ran through the coulee. Renny ceased staggering. Gradually the minds of the three men cleared. They rounded a rather sharp turn in the long gulch.

"Holy cow!" Renny said. "Look!"

Under a low camouflaged screen to cut out all visibility from above, there was an elaborate layout of machinery. Most of it was unfathomable to Renny and Johnny. Some of it even to Long Tom, the electrical wizard. Two batteries of lightweight Diesels were hooked up to powerful-looking dynamos.

The dynamos were connected by heavy cables to square boxes that were apparently step-up transformers. Then there was other apparatus, apparently designed for the production of ultraviolet light, which, as far as Long Tom knew, was entirely harmless. The whole of it baffled the electrical expert. The terminal of the complex hook-up seemed to be in a compact cyclotron, the usually massive laboratory machine used for the production of subatomic beams.

"Keep goin', hombres," Goat Smith said from behind them. "Yuh ain't got no interest in this business, even if yuh think yuh have."

Beyond the maze of electrical equipment and the pounding Diesels, the coulee deepened. A black, square hole at one side offered an entrance to a huge cavern that was lighted by the power plant. The rocky floor of the cavern glistened with dampness. Sprawled against one wall were five men, all tightly bound.

A scarred, ugly-looking man towered over the five prisoners. It was the pilot who had flown Ward Hiller and Fox Strang. When Hiller had been killed by the rustling death, he had been in a chartered plane. Goat Smith laughed when he ordered Renny, Long Tom and Johnny into the cavern.

"This here's the surveyin' party yuh was huntin'," he sneered. "Now, yuh've found 'em."

Goat Smith was obviously very proud of himself. He strutted. The scarred pilot looked on grinning. Both of them suddenly snapped out of it. A loud-speaker in the cavern barked into life. The dry, brittle voice of Fox Strang snapped from it.

"Tie Doc Savage's men up quickly," Fox ordered. "The bronze man's plane has been sighted. He'll be here in less than half an hour."

Goat Smith moved swiftly. He made a grab for Long Tom. And, instantly, he realized that he had underestimated the weak-looking electrician. Long Tom let out one yell in Mayan and plunged at the tall, rangy crook. One compact fist smacked Goat Smith on the jaw, sending him reeling into the rough wall of the cavern.

Renny and Johnny swung into quick action. The big engineer's quart-sized fists pumped like pistons. Goat Smith's mobsters went down like pins in a bowling alley. Johnny plunged in. But he paused to pepper the floor of the cave with anaesthetic capsules. He and the other two of Doc's aids held their breaths for a moment. Unless breathed within a few seconds of release, the gas was ineffective. But if inhaled within those first few seconds, it would keep the victim unconscious for several hours.

Goat Smith and the scarred pilot stumbled. They sagged to the floor as if they had grown suddenly, irresistibly weary. The rest of the gangsters were similarly affected. Renny's big voice was booming a veritable battle cry. It looked like clear sailing. Goat Smith and his mobsters were all snoring gently on the floor.

But the loud-speaker burst into life again. Fox Strang's brittle voice crackled out again.

"Clever, my friends—but useless. You cannot escape."

The ominous rustling noise welled up again. This time it was accompanied by a crackling roar as if a gigantic spark gap were open. Renny leaped for the mouth of the cavern. It was as if his big body were held in an invisible vise. His muscles strained mightily, but he scarcely moved at all. Fox Strang's voice came again.

"If I gave you the full force of the rustling death, you would virtually disintegrate."

A strange, enveloping heat filled the cavern as Renny, Long Tom and Johnny sank to the floor of the cave. There was a sharp click then, a heavy clanking noise, and a grille of steel dropped down over the square door that led to the floor of the cavern. Fox Strang's voice broke into a cackling laugh.

"And now, my friends, we will greet the great Doc Savage!"

Chapter XIV. DOC DISAPPEARS

THE four-motored transport bored through the hot, dry air at two hundred and forty miles an hour. Doc was at the controls, silently glancing from the instrument panel to the vast area of sagebrush and sand below them.

Monk and Ham had grown tired of making cracks at each other. The two men were silent, side by side in two chairs.

The bronze man moved several small levers at the edge of the instrument panel. Monk and Ham knew that the levers had been recently installed. But they didn't know what they were for.

Doc's two aids moved up behind him and looked over his shoulder. From the map spread out beside the instrument panel, they could see that they were rapidly reaching their objective. And something aside from the map told them they were nearly there. Monk heard it first. It was the awesome sound that came with the rustling death. The big four-motored ship began to pitch about on air that seemed to have not a breath of wind!

The plane went up and down five or six hundred feet at a time. Monk put both hands to his head. He could feel that brain-numbing beat of the sound that he could not hear; could feel his mind whirling like a thing over which he no longer had control.

Then they felt the heat. The thermometer on the wall of the plane went up and up. The mercury showed an inside temperature of 120°, despite the fact that the big ship was heavily insulated against either heat or cold. The metal chair frames grew too hot to touch. Sweat dripped from Doc Savage's chin as he continued to manipulate the small levers on the instrument panel. The gold-flaked eyes stirred more slowly, then began to look almost vacant.

"I do not know how long I can resist this thing," Doc said. "Get parachutes, both of you. Put them on and fasten yourselves to the automatic safety seats."

Monk and Ham hastened to a 'chute rack. Then Monk yelled shrilly.

"Habeas and Chemistry," he cried. "We've got to get them off safely."

In answer, Ham went to the compartment in the tail where they had left the pair. Both of the animals were panting with the terrific heat. They were overjoyed to see Monk and Ham, but even that was subdued. The animals could sense fear.

Monk gave Habeas an affectionate scratch between the ears. Then he strapped on a special 'chute that he'd had manufactured for the porker. He smeared the hog's snout with a chemical somewhat similar to the one he had used to locate Ham in Washington. Then he opened a sliding port in the side of the ship and tossed him out into the slipstream. A moment later, Chemistry sailed out of the port. Twin parachutes opened automatically. At least the animals would reach the ground safely. Monk and Ham turned then, braced themselves. The big plane was doing everything except twisting itself in two. The mercury in the thermometer registered 130°, right through the insulation. Doc Savage's muscles bulged as he fought the controls.

Monk glanced at an indicator which showed the temperature of the outside skin of the plane.

"The triple insulation on the gas tanks is all that keeps us from blowing apart right now," he muttered.

Suddenly, the motors screamed in a power dive. Wind shrieked past the wings and fuselage. The big plane twisted into a terrific tail spin, then straightened in a vertical dive that made Monk think his feet were coming right up through the top of his head. Less than five hundred feet from the ground, Doc pulled her out. Centrifugal force put both Monk and Ham on the floor, unconscious. Even Doc could scarcely move as he set the ship down on the sand and braked her to a stop.

Monk sat up groggily.

"Golly, Doc, we beat the rustling death. How'd you do it?"

Doc Savage's voice was weary. That was extremely unusual. The bronze man seldom gave any indication whatever of muscular or mental strain.

"We beat it only because it was not aimed properly," Doc said. "Those levers actuate a system of mirrors which create a false impression of our altitude from the ground. Had the rustling death been aimed properly, we would not be here now."

Monk shuddered.

"Jehoshaphat, Doc! Isn't there any way to stop it?"

Doc Savage hesitated.

"I cannot tell," he said. "It depends upon what principle is being used in this death ray. It has not yet been possible for me to find that out. It must be something far in advance of any scientific methods that are generally known."

Ham sat up then. He picked up his sword cane, unsheathed it and inspected the chemical.

"What do we do, now'?" he asked.

Decision on the next step was taken pretty much out of their hands right then. The interruption came in the form of a fast, two-motored plane that roared out of the east. The ship looked like a medium bomber. As it circled overhead, it could be seen that it carried neither insignia nor number. The bomber circled once, then nosed down, four machine guns spitting from the wing tips!

DOC SAVAGE'S plane was bullet-proofed. The machine-gun slugs splattered harmlessly against the sides. But the sliding port through which Monk and Ham had dropped Habeas Corpus and Chemistry was still open. A stream of slugs roared into that.

Instantly, Doc's two aids were groggy. The slugs were a gas-releasing type. The gas was one that deadens nerve centers--immobilizes but does not take consciousness away. Monk and Ham were prone and helpless on the floor. They were unable to move even their heads to see what had happened to Doc Savage.

They were still that way when the bomber landed and disgorged heavily armed men!

The leader of these men stuck his head through the open port. It was the formerly vacant-eyed, stupid-appearing "janitor" and airport attendant, Flathead Simpson.

There was nothing stupid-appearing now about the man with the misshapen head. His eyes darted around the cabin of the plane, missing few, if any, details. When he spoke, it was in a guttural foreign tongue. He gave orders to the swarthy men who were with him. The only understandable words to Monk and Ham were "Doc Savage."

While his men were scrambling about, looking under things, over things, Flathead Simpson got the door open and came into the cabin of Doc's plane. He personally searched every nook and cranny that he could find there. Then he turned to Monk and Ham.

"You two will not be able to talk or move for a while longer," he snarled gutturally. "But when you are able, you will tell me where the bronze devil went. Yes?"

Monk tried to get his answer in a glare of defiance. But even the muscles of his eyes would not answer. Flathead turned to the short-wave set. He turned it on and shifted the wave band to one of his own choice.

"Fox?" he snapped into the microphone. "This is Simpson. The one you ordered around as Flathead. Yes. I am coming in with the two Doc Savage men. They will be in my plane. My men will follow in Savage's ship. My country has come to an agreement with Krag and he will be here shortly."

He snapped it off, turned toward Monk and Ham. His lips were twisted sardonically.

"It is a fine joke, no?" he rasped. "I worked for Krag for quite a while. I do not know who he is. But neither does he know who I am. But I know, all the time, one thing. Either my leader gets the rustling death, or I destroy it."

A wild light of fanaticism glittered in the flat-headed spy's crafty eyes. He smacked one fist into the palm of the other hand. He could not resist a bit of gloating.

"My leader pays Krag a great fortune for the rustling death. Me, I think it is too much. But my leader is the smart one. When he comes into this country again with the rustling death, he will just take the money back from Krag. All money then will belong to my leader."

Simpson laughed. It all seemed ingeniously simple to him.

FLATHEAD SIMPSON gave orders with an air of imperious authority. The foreign agent's back straightened to ramrod stiffness. He screwed a monocle into one eye socket and bent an uncompromising glare upon his men.

Flathead alternated between his native tongue and a heavy, guttural English. The fact that he seemed entirely unperturbed at the fact that Monk and Ham were sufficiently conscious to listen did not make either of Doc's aids particularly good insurance risks.

"Georg, Emile, Dorfman," he snapped, singling out three of his aids. "Search the bushes."

The sandy soil was dotted with thick barrel cacti, creosote bushes and mesquite. Georg, Emile and Dorfman hastened to comply.

They spread out fanwise and did a thorough job of searching the desert in strips about a hundred feet wide. The only thing they didn't do that might have helped was to count the shrubbery as they went along. At one point after they had passed one stretch and when Flathead Simpson had his back turned, a sizable clump of mesquite moved quietly from a section that had not been searched to one that had been.

Naturally, when they finished, they had not found Doc Savage. The foreign agent with the misshapen head was impatient. He strode toward the two-motored bomber.

"Carry the two men to my ship," he instructed. "I will keep them in sight until they are finally disposed of."

The spy leader called four of his men over to him then. He addressed the tallest of them, a burly brute of a man with powerful shoulders.

"You, Igor, know the directions," Flathead said. "You will take these three men and pilot the big ship to the valley of the rustling death. We may have need of the ship later."

Igor saluted, clicked his heels and strode to Doc's four-motored bomber. The other three followed him. Other members of the spy gang were hauling Monk and Ham over to the bomber. Flathead took over the controls of his ship, swung her around into the wind and climbed rapidly into the hot desert air. He leveled off at only a few hundred feet and set a course northward.

Igor growled guttural orders to his three companions and climbed into Doc's big ship. The burly spy was a little awed by the complex instrument panel. The mass-production planes he'd been familiar with in his own country were nothing like this. As he tried to take off, he found that he was not only awed but considerably baffled. It was necessary for him to stop and carefully study several controls which were new to him.

Finally, he grunted in understanding, gave the ship the gun. The four motors roared in a tremendous crescendo of power, and the big plane mounted into the sky. When Igor leveled off, the other plane had disappeared. Without hesitation, he set a course and began watching the ground. Things might have gone smoothly then, if one of his aids had not gotten curious. He saw an access trap that led to a storage space where the wings joined above the fuselage cabin. Curiosity got the better of the man. He tugged at the knobs that opened the thing.

It opened suddenly! The fast-moving form of Doc Savage plunged down on top of him!

Doc's hands reached out. One seized the swarthy man whose curiosity had opened the trap. The other hand seized a second of the foreign spies. The third one backed, whipping out a flat, black

automatic. He squeezed the trigger, and the gun blasted lead and flame.

The man's aim might have been accurate when he had squeezed that trigger. But he was firing at a moving target. Doc and the other two men were weaving about the center of the ship. The lead from the automatic missed Doc Savage and made a great, bleeding hole in the back of the skull of Igor, the hulking espionage agent who was at the controls of Doc's plane.

Igor slumped over the instrument panel. The two men in Doc Savage's grip went limp, and the bronze man plunged toward the tail of the ship and seized the spy who had emptied his automatic. The man was struggling to reload. He didn't get the opportunity.

Doc whirled around, leaped for the controls. He hauled the dead Igor back and set the plane on robot control. Then he pulled a hypodermic from his equipment vest, jabbed the needle into the neck of one of the unconscious spies. The man's eyelids flickered. He looked up at Doc, terror in his face.

"Where is the valley of the rustling death?" Doc demanded. He pressed fingers against certain nerve centers in the man's neck. The pressure acted like scopolamine, the truth-producing drug. It robbed the man of any will to refuse to answer. But it became apparent that Igor was the only one of the four who knew the directions.

"I . . . I don't know," the man insisted. "N-none of us know where it is."

Doc leaped back to the control panel and wedged himself into the pilot's seat. He banked the plane into a wide, circling spiral and checked the terrain closely.

Doc saw great stretches of sand, sagebrush and cactus. Here and there were defiles of varying sizes in which there were stream beds. From those, green trees towered, shouldering their leafy heads together to hide whatever secrets they might hold from prying eyes.

Doc Savage had known when he dodged from his mesquite clump and into the plane that there was little time to be lost. The conversation the master spy had had with Fox Strang, and the fact that Renny, Johnny and Long Tom had not communicated, convinced the bronze man that his three aids were prisoners. Monk and Ham were now in the hands of the gang. That they would all be killed as soon as the flat-headed spy had concluded his arrangements with Krag was a foregone conclusion.

The bronze man set the robot controls to continue the sweeping circles.

From an after compartment, Doc took a small moving-picture camera. Attached to the machine was a small tank and heating device with an electric motor.

Doc clamped the camera to an open window, then pointed it at the ground. The whirring click of the machine sounded faintly above the muffled drone of the motors. The tank and motor were a fast-developing apparatus. Sixteen-millimeter film began to emerge from the tank like a ribbon. Doc ran the ribbon through a second machine which was a projector. The terrain below spread out on a small screen. There was one peculiar thing. The trees were invisible. Doc Savage's gold-flaked eyes stirred swiftly as he watched that panorama unfold. Then the weird trilling sound of Doc's filled the cabin of the plane. In one coulee, the trees stood out plainly. The heavy green foliage registered in dull monotone.

Swiftly, Doc whipped up a relief map and checked the corresponding coulee. He whirled toward the controls. But he was just a split second too late to stop one of the four spies who had regained consciousness. The spy did not try to take over the plane. He merely switched on the short-wave broadcaster.

"Savage is in the plane," he snarled gutturally. "We're prisoners and Savage is going to land."

The bronze man leaped to the spy, ripped him away from the microphone. He put him back to sleep with a single twist of his neck. Then Doc snapped off the automatic control, headed the nose of the plane for the coulee that had appeared on the screen to be richly equipped with foliage.

Doc had used a simple test. The infrared film which he used would not show any genuine foliage. Chlorophyll, which is the green-producing quality of plants, is invisible to the infrared ray. Any trees that showed their foliage on an infrared film had to be an artificial camouflage, even if the human eye could not detect it. Doc nosed his plane down toward a wide stretch of sand that spread out at the lower end of the coulee. Then he went quickly toward the tail of the big plane. When he came back, he was carrying a compact package under one arm.

At that moment, the terrific heat of the rustling death struck. The brain-numbing bombardment of soundless sound beat against the bronze man's brain like some weird cosmic ray, bent on destroying sanity. Wisps of smoke began to curl from the all-metal wings of the mighty craft. The rustling silk and crinoline blended with the weird mind-robbing quality of the thing.

The right wing began to crumple. The huge ship was doomed. The tip of the wing came off altogether. The strain weakened the insulation on the wing gas tank. That let go with a flat, roaring boom! The fuselage hurtled through the air, a projectile of death. The whole ship was enveloped in a mass of smoke and flame!

The plane that had cost Doc Savage as much as a flying fortress costs the government, plunged toward earth in a blazing shroud. A pall of smoke settled slowly over it.

SEVERAL figures rushed out from the coulee as the plane crashed. One of them was long-nosed, pinch-faced Fox Strang. He was closely followed by Flathead Simpson. Flathead's back was still straight as a ramrod and he still had the monocle in his eye. Fox Strang barked orders to his

gunmen.

Three of them rushed out with a portable fire-fighting apparatus, set it up and poured chemicals on the still blazing fuselage of the plane. Gradually, the blaze subsided. Strang raked around inside with a long hook, somewhat like firemen used to work with on old-fashioned coal-burning steamers.

There were bodies inside the death plane. It was still too hot to go inside to look them over. But Fox Strang managed to hook one of them close to the edge of the ruins. His flat chuckle rattled out again like the breaking of bunches of dry sticks.

"It is Doc Savage, boys. We bagged the bronze man this time. Now we can take our time with his aids. This is a triumph."

Fox rubbed his hands together in high glee.

"We will have a celebration, boys. Enemies of Doc Savage all over the world will pay homage to its. We have done what no one else has ever been able to do."

Strang, the espionage agent and their combined entourages turned toward the heavily wooded coulee. Strang and Flathead walked arm in arm toward the faint thumping of the Diesels.

"I am expecting a message from the boss, soon," Fox said. "He is on his way here, now."

Chapter XV. NEW PRISONERS

MONK and Ham were temporarily imprisoned in the bomber of the foreign agents. Both were virtually helpless, due to the nerve gas that had robbed them of motive power. It happened, however, that the gas was quite similar to one on which the hairy chemist had been quietly working for some time. As was the usual custom of Doc and his aids, when any offensive device was developed, they also perfected an antidote before bringing it into use. Monk had an antidote for his own nerve-deadening gas. He had some of it in glass vials in one pocket. He rolled over on that pocket, now, and banged his body up and down on the floor of the plane's cabin.

A thin vapor lifted up into the air. It had a pungent, sweetish sort of odor. The first reaction was a sneeze from Ham. The dapper lawyer had been the first to succumb to the gas. He also had been first to come out of it.

Monk struggled to his feet.

"Come on, shyster," he grunted. "Let's get out of here."

Monk took a couple of steps forward and fell flat on his face. Ham stumbled awkwardly.

"This gas isn't quite the same as mine," Monk complained, "so my antidote is only partially effective."

"Keep going," Ham snapped. "You look more natural on all fours, anyway."

Monk staggered back to his feet with some difficulty. He climbed from the plane to the ground and walked as well as he could to the shelter of thick underbrush that flanked the real trees in the coulee. Ham moved quietly along beside him. A hundred yards from the plane they halted in a small clearing to hold a parley on strategy. Both men still found considerable difficulty with locomotion. Ham leaned against a small willow tree, bracing himself with one hand.

Monk turned away for a moment. There was a sudden commotion on Ham's side of the clearing. The dapper lawyer shot up into the air as if he had been sitting on a small volcano. With a squealing grunt of pure delight, Habeas Corpus plunged across the clearing and sat down in front of Monk.

Doc's plane had been approximately over this area when Ham and Monk had shoved their two pets out with their special parachutes. The chemical Monk had smeared on Habeas' snout had brought him in Monk's direction as soon as the alien bomber had come down in the valley of the rustling death.

Ham struggled back to his feet, giving an uncomplimentary opinion of all hogs in general and Habeas Corpus in particular. But a soft, anxious chattering behind the lawyer made him turn around. Chemistry huddled there, chattering with the pleasure of seeing his master again. Ham sighed.

"Guess I'll even have to forgive Habeas," he said. "Well, we're all in the same boat, anyway. Did you hear what Fox Strang was yelling just before we got loose?"

Monk nodded. There was an expression of misery on the chemist's homely face. He had heard Fox Strang say that Doc Savage was dead. He didn't like to talk about it or even think about it. But he knew it was something that would have to be faced.

"Strang identified Doc's body," Monk admitted. "It sure looks like the end."

Ham cleared his throat, but he couldn't think of any words to say.

"We have to find Renny, Long Tom and Johnny," Monk said finally. "Doc would want us to get them out of this thing first off."

Ham nodded.

"They're bound to be around here somewhere," he said.

The two men thrust their way through the underbrush.

At that moment, a roar of surprise welled up from beside the foreign bomber. Their escape had been discovered. Fox Strang began to yell orders.

"Spread out. Get those two birds or we'll all be in plenty of trouble."

The guttural voice of Flathead Simpson cut in, half in English and half in his own tongue. He ordered his men to help in the search. Monk and Ham crashed through the underbrush. They strove their mightiest to get away. But the effect of the nerve gas was still upon them. Their muscles

simply would not respond properly. The mobsters and spies swiftly overhauled them. The fight that followed was one that several mobbies remembered for quite a while. Even without their full strength, Doc's two aids gave a thorough accounting for themselves. There was plenty of blood around the small clearing where the gangsters caught them. One mobby emerged minus an ear. There were several broken arms. Monk had most of his clothes torn off.

"Take them to the cavern with the others," Fox Strang rasped. "When the boss gets here, we'll dispose of the bunch of them."

Strang came up and leaned over the two captives and burst into a fit of rage that almost gave him apoplexy.

"This isn't the chemist, you damn fools," he raged. "This is that damned monkey that belongs to the lawyer!"

Ham cocked his head on one side and looked at Strang.

"Of course," he said calmly. "I prefer more pleasant companionship than the chemist."

Fox Strang merely glared at him. He couldn't think of any proper retort.

"Take him to the cavern," he rasped. "I'm sick."

THE mobsters made another attempt to corral Monk. But the hairy chemist had a good head start by that time. Also, the effects of the nerve gas were dissipating to a considerable extent. Monk had shifted Chemistry into the hands of the mobsters while the mêlée was at its height. The monkey had been used before to double for Doc's aid. He carried on the fight just as if he had been Monk until he was overpowered.

Monk crowded through the underbrush, now, followed by Habeas. He came to the area of the camouflaged foliage and saw the complicated power plant of Diesels, dynamos and cyclotrons. Monk didn't know enough about highly technical electrical apparatus to understand the underlying principles here. But he knew he was looking at the source of the rustling death.

He cut off onto the side of the wide gulch, got lost in the underbrush and finally found his way back to the center. Monk knew only that he was searching for a cavern. He'd heard Fox Strang direct that Ham be put in a cavern with the rest of Doc's aids.

After what seemed hours of wandering, he saw the iron grille that made a prison of the cave that held Renny, Long Tom and Johnny. Monk rushed to the grille. He called the names of Doc's three aids. Renny lumbered over to the grille. The big engineer put one huge hand between the bars and gripped Monk's arm.

"It'll take dynamite or something as strong to do anything with those bars," he told Monk.

"Where's Doc?"

Monk dodged the question.

"I've got some chemicals with me that will cut steel. If I've got enough—"

The chemist's hands went into his pocket. But at that instant, a yell went up from the center of the coulee. Renny gave Monk a shove.

"Run!" he bellowed. "They've spotted you!"

Monk took one look. A dozen gunmen escorting Ham to the cavern prison were whipping out automatics, blasting lead at the chemist. Slugs whistled through the air, ricocheting off rock beside Monk's head. Bullets smashed into the bulletproof clothing that he wore. Monk fled. It would be suicide to face all those guns at the moment—not only suicide for himself, but for Doc's four other aids as well.

Monk went well over the next rise of ground into an adjoining arroyo before he slowed down. As he did, he heard an excited squealing from Habeas Corpus, who had been running ahead of him. Monk quickened his pace. Then his mouth dropped open.

"Doc!" he blurted.

Monk rushed toward a small pool of water that bubbled from the ground. Leaning over it, drinking, was Doc Savage!

But as Doc turned slowly, two things became immediately apparent to the hairy chemist. One of those two things made his blood run as cold as the bubbling spring water that the bronze man was drinking. There was no recognition in Doc Savage's eyes. The flake-gold pupils were dull and flat. Doc's jaw hung loosely. His movements were slow, completely without drive or interest. Doc grinned foolishly. He picked up a pebble and showed it to Monk.

"Pretty?"

Monk felt the life running out of his veins. A sinking sensation tied up the pit of his stomach. He reasoned that Doc had succeeded in making up the corpse of a spy to look like him. It was probable that Doc had performed that shift of identity before the rustling death took sufficient hold to rob him of his mental facilities.

But Doc had obviously remained too long in the plane that was being bombarded with the terror ray. Monk suspected that the bronze man had to wait until flame and smoke had obscured the ship, before he dared leave it in a parachute.

But he had been forced to wait too long. Doc's mind was definitely affected! Monk felt a wave of indescribable horror sweep over him. Doc's mind had been one of the most brilliant that had ever been known.

Suddenly, Monk heard voices. They were the tones of Fox Strang and Flathead Simpson. The chemist put one hand on Doc's arm and pulled him back into the bushes. The voices came nearer. Doc Savage looked at Monk. Then he looked in the direction of the voices. He held out his pebble. Apparently, he wanted to show it to the strangers.

"Pretty?"

It was all Monk could do to hold him down and keep him quiet. In his peculiar mental state, the bronze man seemed reluctant to put forth any real effort, so it was possible for Monk to restrain him. Fox Strang was so pleased with himself that a minor noise would not have disturbed him in the least.

"The boss sent a short-wave message," he said in his flat voice. "He is on the way, now, and will be here shortly."

Fox laughed brittlely.

"The boss and I will have millions," he gloated. "You can have the rustling death."

The flat-headed foreign agent grinned sardonically. He adjusted his monocle. The eye behind it glinted with malicious enjoyment. Perhaps he was thinking of the day he had mentioned to his confederates—the day when he thought his leader would use that same rustling death to invade this country and take those millions back from Krag.

Fox Strang chuckled again.

"We have two more visitors coming, too," he said. "They are special guests of the boss."

LESS than a hundred miles from the valley of the rustling death, a trim speed plane raced through the sky at an altitude of twelve thousand feet. The pilot was demure, brunette and pretty Nada Morrell. The girl's oval face was serious.

The ship was a two-seater. The passenger in the front compartment, under the long transparent hood, was tall, distinguished Senator J. Wyndham Weatherton.

The legislator and his pretty niece talked over a communication circuit within the ship. Nada was leaning forward, watching the fast-moving panorama of rugged Western terrain beneath them.

"He told me to hold this beam until we arrived," she said. "When we get right over our objective, we will hit a dead spot on the beam. Jan said he would meet us shortly after we landed on the nearest level space from that dead spot."

J. Wyndham Weatherton snorted. He mopped perspiration from his brow. His gray face was lined with worry. The senator gave every indication possible that he was a man who regretted a too hasty decision.

"I've yielded to you, Nada, because you really love this man. You say he is not guilty in this thing, and I would like to help you prove it. But—"

Weatherton looked over the side at the wild and unfriendly scenery. He had the expression of one who expects mountain lions and rattlesnakes to suddenly emerge from every cave and crevice.

"I tell you, Nada, if it weren't for the fact that Doc Savage is out here somewhere, I wouldn't have sanctioned this trip."

The girl's lips tightened. She twisted a dial on the instrument panel that brought her the radio beam she was following. The beam suddenly grew in intensity. Then it stopped altogether.

Nada Morrell drew in her breath. Her cheeks were crimson with excitement. Her dark eyes were wide, dilated. She banked the plane into a wide circle. Below, she could see only the bright-green verdure of waving treetops that made a long plume of a ridge. At one end of that was what, from her altitude, looked like a flat expanse of sand. Nada pushed the stick ahead, let the nose of the speed plane drop toward the ground.

Air whistled past the struts and around the wings as the ship picked up speed. Twelve thousand feet became eight; eight became five, and five dropped to three. Then Nada saw the four red flags that staked out an area of the flat sand. Above one of them, an improvised wind sock fluttered in the light breeze.

Nada smiled then. That was sufficient evidence to her that she was expected; that this marked field and the wind sock constituted her welcome. The girl banked the plane into a wider circle. She dropped altitude, turned and came in for a skilled upwind landing. Nada snapped the hood back when the ship rolled to a stop. She leaped lightly from the plane.

When she saw Fox Strang her expression changed.

"Where is Jan?" she said in a low, tense voice.

Fox Strang bowed low in mock obeisance.

"The master is expecting you," he said in his brittle voice. "I will do my best to entertain you until he arrives."

Nada Morrell's eyes narrowed. With one swift motion, she whipped a small automatic from a pocket of her flying suit and leveled it at Fox Strang. Behind her, Senator Weatherton snapped into decisive action. An old-fashioned .38 revolver was steady in his fist.

"I've had about enough," Weatherton said flatly. "And if I go down getting a few of you, I'll be content."

Nada Morrell stamped a trim foot impatiently.

"Where is Jan?" she repeated. "I'll bet you've got him prisoner somewhere."

Fox Strang laughed.

"I'm not answering questions today," he sneered. "But I can tell you that you won't get anywhere with those guns. Half a dozen machine guns are trained on you, right now! Better drop your toys." As he spoke, some of his mobsters moved out of the coulee and displayed their Tommy-guns. With a sigh, Senator Weatherton tossed his revolver to the sand. Nada let go of hers with more visible reluctance. Fox jerked his head at a couple of his boys.

"Escort the senator and his niece to headquarters," he snarled. "And be nice, or you'll wind up like idiots. The boss is interested in that babe."

At those words, Nada Morrell turned her head. She did not speak. But for the first time there was a suspicion of doubt in her large, dark eyes. The gunmen led her up the deep coulee with the senator.

Chapter XVI. BUSINESS BEFORE PLEASURE

AFTER Fox Strang and Flathead Simpson passed by, Monk emerged from the bushes in which he and Doc had hidden. The hairy chemist wanted to follow the gang leader and the spy. He watched Doc narrowly out of the corner of one eye.

Monk had never before been confronted with a situation such as this. The bottom of everything that he depended upon had dropped suddenly from beneath him. To have Doc there and not be able to depend upon him for anything was a sorrowful situation.

"Let's follow them," Monk suggested tentatively.

"Sure," the bronze man agreed. He followed Monk with a loose-jointed gait that was not at all like Doc Savage. Monk groaned. He scratched his head angrily. Something had to be done, but Monk simply didn't have any ideas.

The chemist heard the drone of Nada Morrell's plane motor. He saw the ship circle above them. He didn't recognize it, but he assumed that these were the two "visitors" Fox Strang had spoken about. Monk quickened his pace. The route he was taking led down an arroyo, adjoining the deep coulee that held the power plant of the rustling death. The two converged near the bottom. As Monk and Doc reached the bottom, Nada and Senator Weatherton stepped out of the ship and confronted Fox Strang. Monk stopped and listened to the conversation. Doc Savage walked blandly ahead as if he were on an afternoon stroll. Monk muttered to himself. He made a quick decision. He dabbed in his pocket, pulled out a small vial of powerful anaesthetic and saturated a handkerchief with it. Then he crept up behind the bronze man, leaped upon his shoulders and held the handkerchief over Doc's nostrils. Doc made scarcely any struggle at all. He slumped down on the ground and began to snore softly. Monk blinked his little eyes. What he was doing brought him almost to tears. He took a small roll of tough rawhide from a pocket and tied Doc hand and foot. Then he rolled him out of sight under a thick clump of mesquite. He shook his head sadly.

"Golly, Doc," he moaned. "I hate to do this, but they'd just shoot you down like a clay pigeon if you walked out there."

Monk left him there and crawled through the underbrush toward the clearing where Nada Morrell's plane had come down. He saw the gunmen escort Nada and the senator up the coulee. Then he saw Fox Strang move quickly to the fuselage of the girl's trim speed ship.

Strang quickly opened a baggage compartment that had an outside access trap. As he worked, he laughed brittlely. He was hugely enjoying some joke of his own.

A body squirmed from the trap. At first, Monk could not see his face. The man was clad in flying togs. He wore the type of flying helmet that has earphones built into the leather. A microphone hung around his neck. Fox Strang could hardly restrain his mirth.

"Krag a stowaway with the good Senator Weatherton," he laughed. "That's one for him to live down."

Flathead Simpson stood beside Strang. He spoke in his heavy guttural.

"The senator is going to live nothing down," he snarled. "You well know he is not to live at all."

Krag straightened then. He pulled a small but powerful short-wave transmitter from his voluminous flying suit, dropped it on the ground. Then he pulled off his helmet. Monk gasped. He saw the wide forehead, narrow chin and pale features of Jan Vanderlee! Flathead Simpson advanced toward him and thrust out one hand.

"If everything is as you represent it, Krag, our bargain is complete."

Krag laughed nasally.

"It is even better than your leader desired," he said thickly. "The extent to which the rustling death has been perfected in this valley will amaze even you."

Krag, the espionage chief and Fox Strang turned toward the coulee. For a moment the speed plane of Nada Morrell was unguarded.

Monk wriggled slowly toward it. He had only one wild idea. If he could get to that plane, whip it into the wind and up, he might get away. There was just a chance, an extremely outside chance that he might be able to get beyond the range of the rustling death before it could be directed at him. If he could do that, and get to an army post—

Three gangsters landed on Monk as if they were holding football practice! The wind went out of

the hairy chemist. But he struggled up, began to slug and yell. Monk yelled his loudest. When he yelled, he fought better. An angry squeal of rage welled up beside him. Habeas Corpus lunged from the underbrush to help his master battle.

Mobsters yelled in pain at the bites of the infuriated pig. Others yelled at the pain of Monk's fists. But there were too many of them for Monk to battle. Slowly, they bore him down to the ground. The chemist's brain was reeling from repeated blows as he was finally subdued. His last voluntary act was to yell an order to Habeas to get out of the way and save himself.

One of the gangsters sat on Monk and rested for a moment.

"We were watchin' you, wise guy," he said. "You were pretty optimistic to think you could do anything by yourself."

Monk grunted noncommittally. He permitted himself to be dragged to his feet and prodded toward the deep coulee. At least, the gangsters had apparently not discovered Doc where Monk had hidden him. That was some consolation, even though Monk did not know what help Doc could be in his present condition.

KRAG and his two companions had halted to watch the recapture of Monk. Then they turned and strolled up toward the center of the coulee. Monk could hear snatches of their conversation. He steamed in helpless indignation as he listened. Krag was not going to give the foreign agent anything until he was sure of his profits. And Krag had the stronger force of armed men in the valley of the rustling death. He mentioned that.

Flathead Simpson nodded.

"There is two million dollars in currency in my bombing plane at present," he said in his guttural voice. "If anyone but me tries to take it, the plane will explode with a force that will take half of this valley. The leader takes no chances."

He paused.

"It is yours, however, if the rustling death lives up to your promise. And there is an additional two million dollars on deposit in two New York banks. The rustling death is worth that to my country."

Krag nodded his pale, wide forehead.

"You shall see," he promised. "The formula is not too difficult. It will be easier for you to learn the secret and build your own machines than to transport this one. This should be destroyed so that you alone will have the secret."

The foreign agent nodded.

"The machines and the men who know about it must be destroyed," he said flatly. "That includes Doc Savage's aids, and your other visitors. Your own men do not know the secret, my identity or yours."

Flathead Simpson chuckled very hoarsely.

"It would be of considerable interest to Washington to learn my real identity."

He laughed in mirthless amusement. Krag nodded.

"They all go, of course," he said. "Except the girl. She is important to me."

Flathead shook his head.

"Today, she is delightful. Tomorrow, she may be a menace. My country does not recognize such sentiments. She must die with the rest of the meddling persons."

The young mastermind sighed. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I thought a great deal of her," he said. "But, as you say, pleasure should not interfere with business."

Monk groaned as he was prodded on up the coulee and toward the cave in which Doc Savage's other four aids were imprisoned. As he got there, he heard another voice.

"I hope yuh guys'll let me an' Scar outta here when yuh put that ape in."

Goat Smith looked out with his curious face. He and the scar-faced pilot had recovered from the anaesthetic capsules Renny had broken on the floor of the cavern.

The two gunmen who thrust Monk inside tried to let Goat and Scar out. But Doc's aids all headed for the door behind them. There was a mêlée at the iron grille. In the end, Monk was thrust inside. But Goat Smith and his companion remained inside as well.

THE Diesels, dynamos and cyclotrons of the rustling death were located within sight of the cavern in which Doc's aids were imprisoned. On a wide platform beside the machinery, there were now five persons.

One of them was Krag, who began manipulating a small but intricate instrument panel. Beside him, inspecting the operations for his leader, was Flathead Simpson. Fox Strang was merely an interested spectator. The other two watchers were tightly bound. They were Senator Weatherton and his niece. Their presence was Flathead's idea. The spy had a twisted sense of humor.

"It will please me to have one of the nation's legislators watch the demonstration of the power I am going to take away with me," he said. "Even if the esteemed senator then must die."

Krag had become so immersed in his invention that nothing else seemed to interest him. He looked at his watch, then gave quick orders to Fox Strang. The gang leader directed the clearing of

imitation foliage that camouflaged the machinery of the rustling death. Krag turned to the foreign agent.

"An air-mail plane will be along within half an hour," he said. "She will be flying at ten thousand feet. Within half a dozen seconds, I will completely disintegrate the ship."

Flathead nodded.

"But is so much machinery necessary at all times?"

Krag shook his head.

"I will cut out the dynamos and Diesels entirely. The portable storage transformer will carry the full load. It will—"

A plaintive voice interrupted him.

"I wish yuh hombres'd let Scar an' me outta here, now. We got them Doc Savage hombres hogtied."

Krag flinched in annoyance. Flathead leaned over toward him, whispered in his ear.

"They've all got to take it, anyway," he snarled. "Let them out and give them the rustling death while we are waiting for your mail plane."

Krag nodded. A smile of cruelty twisted his lips. He jerked his head at Fox Strang. The gang boss leaped to obey. He raced to the cavern prison and fumbled with the grilled door. The tall, long-faced man with the Western drawl ambled out, followed by the more squat Scar. The iron door clanged again. Fox Strang muttered. He seemed to have some trouble with the lock.

The tall Westerner ambled slowly toward the machinery of the rustling death. Suddenly, Krag rapped out orders.

"Smith, Scar! Stand still!"

A snarl escaped Krag's lips as he stepped up the lever of a rheostat. A faint rustling sound filled the air. The two men stood stock-still, expressions of surprise frozen on their faces.

"They are only getting a touch of it, now," Krag explained to the foreign agent. "The control is completely flexible."

A yell welled up from the cavern prison then.

"Why, yuh sidewindin' son of a Mex coyote, yuh think that there is me an' yo're double-crossin' me!"

Goat Smith, clad in his shirt and shorts, burst out of the cavern grille and started plunging down the side of the coulee. He began to yell as he ran.

"Hey, fellers! This lobo's fixin' to kill the bunch of us who know anythin' 'bout this business." Gangsters who had been on guard with Tommy-guns began to mutter. Krag grew nervous. One hand hit the rheostat, shut it off accidentally. The "Goat Smith" and "Scar" who had ambled from the cave before, fell down at the sudden release of power. Wide-brimmed hats rolled from their heads. Monk and Ham scrambled to their feet, rushed toward the control panel of the rustling death.

The real Goat Smith, followed by Scar, also in shirt and shorts, plunged toward the figure of Krag. They were yelling about the double cross. Krag was in the middle. Monk and Ham hit him first, before he had a chance to get his hands back on the rheostat.

Monk waded in yelling. Ham fell across the instrument panel, blocking any attempt to get at that. Into that situation, Renny's big voice boomed.

"Here's the real Jan Vanderlee. He was tied up back in the same cavern we were in!"

The young man with the pale face and pointed features raced out of the cave and toward the wide platform. A gasp of amazement escaped Nada Morrell's lips. Jan ran directly to her and began to untie the bonds that held her.

Gangsters with machine guns appeared from the dimness of the coulee's heavy underbrush. They seemed undecided as to what they should do. Fox Strang's brittle voice began to yell.

"It's all a trick! Don't fall for it! Doc Savages men are trying to make suckers out of you. They're the ones to kill. Get them!"

The mobsters pressed closer. One of them tentatively touched the trigger release of his Tommy-gun. It went br-r-r-r-t! But he hadn't been aiming at anything in particular. He yelled at his companions.

"Fox is right. Let's get them guys."

It was difficult to decide anything by shooting. Goat Smith, Scar, Krag and Monk were one blur of action. Monk was yelling at the top of his voice. Ham, leaning on the instrument panel stood it as long as he could. Then he hurled himself in to help Monk. The mobsters were about decided who their enemy was when a voice that made them all hesitate filled the air.

"Goat Smith is correct. Every one of you is scheduled to die because of your knowledge of the rustling death. Turn on your masters. They are going to betray you with death!"

The voice was that of Doc Savage!

THE bronze man stepped into sight from the edge of the clearing. The gangsters gasped. Fox Strang had been the one who identified the body in the burned plane as Doc. Fox had thought it was Doc. But the mobsters didn't believe that, now. With yells of rage, they turned toward Fox Strang and Flathead Simpson.

Fox Strang began to run. Krag squirmed from the tangle of men in which he was battling. Monk reached out for his face, wrenched away a plastic mask that had completely changed his features. The

real Krag was revealed then. It was the round, chubby face of Tester Lyons! With a scream of fear, Lyons began to run from an ugly thug with a Tommy-gun. In that instant, Flathead Simpson acted. A crafty expression of triumph glittered in his eyes. He leaped to the instrument panel of the rustling death. Doc Savage was racing toward the foreign agent. But the bronze man had been too far away. The spy twisted the rheostat before Doc could reach the platform.

Doc Savage backed away.

"Run!" he shouted. "All of you run. Go straight down the coulee. It is your only chance." Flathead Simpson laughed raucously. He snarled instructions to his confederates. They huddled behind him in a tightly knit group. Then Flathead twisted the rheostat to its highest point. He swung a device, somewhat similar to a directional radio beam, down the coulee. That was the direction in which everyone was fleeing.

The scramble down the coulee was a mad rush of tangled bodies. The real Jan Vanderlee pushed Nada Morrell ahead of him. Senator Weatherton, whom Vanderlee had also freed, was close on their heels. Doc shouted some of his instructions in Mayan.

His five aids rushed down the gulch, not understanding why they were fleeing a death that seemed a certainty. Flathead Simpson paused just a moment. He was enjoying the sight to the fullest. Perhaps he visualized how an army could be put to rout with the rustling death.

"They will all die!" he snarled. "My leader will get the rustling death. And he will be saved four million dollars. A traitor does not deserve that, anyway, no matter what country he is betraying."

He laughed harshly and swung his directional control device straight down the valley. The horrible rustling of silk and crinoline rose to a crackling crescendo. The temperature of the entire valley rose as if a giant fire were raging beneath it. The curious, brain-numbing throb of the soundless pulsations beat down upon the fleeing mob.

And between the death device and the others, a bronze figure moved with speed and precision. Doc Savage was braving the rustling death in a mighty effort to save the lives of the others and to halt the theft of a horrible device by enemies of the United States!

THE bronze man was behaving in a peculiar fashion. He swept through the coulee waving an instrument that looked not unlike the portable sprays used in covering large fruit orchards with insecticide.

Sweat poured from his body. The heat was nearly unbearable where he was racing back and forth with his queer spraying machine. A multi-colored vapor hissed from the nozzle of the sprayer. The air in the deep coulee was still, without a vestige of wind. The queer vapor hung in the air like some great artificial cloud.

Between the machine of the rustling death and the cloud of vapor, trees snapped in two and began to burn. Huge timbers disintegrated. But behind that screen, nothing much happened. The tremendous temperature drove animals from their lairs. Birds left their nests in a brilliant flurry.

But no life was taken. Trees did not burn or disintegrate. Doc Savage's gold-flaked eyes were whirling like tiny windstorms as he watched the effect of his work. Then he raced off on a tangent and cut behind the curtain of vapor.

Doc was not where he was protected by the weird cloud wall he had erected. The bronze man advanced swiftly from one side of the coulee. Flathead Simpson was so intent upon the lower end of the coulee that he at first did not notice Doc Savage. He was cursing to himself in two languages, enraged with the lack of sudden death he expected to be brought down by the machine that he operated.

Then he saw Doc out of the corner of his eye. With a scream of rage, he whirled around and swept his beam director toward the bronze man!

It happened that the foreign agent's countrymen were between himself and Doc. With screams of terror, the spies fell to the wooden platform. Doc Savage sent one hand up in a looping throw. A tiny glass ball sailed through the air, exploding behind the foreign agent. Simpson started. He lunged forward, tripped. He fell over the instrument panel, got his coat tangled up in the rheostat. He rolled off, fell in front of the beam director. Flathead screamed. The lower part of his body seemed to dissolve into the air.

Doc Savage skirted the beam director. He found the rheostat and shut it off. Instantly, the ominous rustling sound ceased. Quiet descended upon the coulee. Doc looked down at what was left of Flathead Simpson. The flat skull seemed to have fallen off onto the wooden platform. Doc picked it up; he looked at the face that was now revealed.

A slight frown of worry crossed the bronze man's features. He replaced the flat skull which was really an expert piece of make-up. Doc decided that the real identity of the master spy who called himself Flathead Simpson had better be for the confidential ears of Washington alone. Hysteria might mean national tragedy following the public indignation that would result from too wide publicity of his identity.

DOC turned from the platform and ran lightly down the coulee to the flat stretch of sand where

Nada Morrell's speed plane rested.

Tester Lyons, Fox Strang were on the ground, dead. Also among the fatalities were Goat Smith and Scar.

"They shot it out," Ham explained. "Most of the mobsters are over there."

He pointed toward the ruins of Doc's ship. Monk, a superfiring machine pistol in one hand, was calmly tossing what looked like marbles at a huddled and very frightened group of gangsters. One by one, the killers lay down and began to sleep. Monk was breaking anaesthetic gas bombs in the midst of the mobsters. Later, they would be given a longer sleeping potion, then be transported to Doc's "college" where they would undergo the operation which would remove the tendency and memory of crime.

Jan Vanderlee extricated himself somewhat unwillingly from the arms of Nada Morrell. He walked toward Doc, frank gratitude in his eyes.

"I don't pretend to understand what you did, Mr. Savage," he said. "All I can ask you to believe is that what I had developed was not a death ray."

Doc nodded.

"You developed a remote-control beam for boats, planes and torpedoes which could not be intercepted," Doc said. "You were using a new application of ultrasonic rays."

Jan Vanderlee nodded. "But I don't understand how--"

"King Cortlandt hired Tester Lyons to apply to you for a job," Doc said. "Cortlandt wanted to find out what you had. He was a speculator before he was a congressman. Lyons told him what he thought could be done as a result of your experiments, though you didn't realize it.

"You had experimented with neutrons, with electrons and with ultrasonic rays, individually. Lyons found a way to combine them all. It has already been suggested to the army that electrons alone, carried on an ionized beam of ultraviolet light, be tried as a death ray. Tester Lyons bettered the idea and the equipment. He used a carrier beam of ultraviolet, the electronic charge for destruction and disintegration, and the ultrasonic ray for tremendous heat and mind-deadening qualities."

Long Tom, who had just come up with Renny and Johnny, overheard Doc's explanation. The pale electrical genius showed more animation than was usual for him.

"Gee, Doc, I never saw anything like it. And the way you stopped the thing was tops."

The bronze man seldom claimed credit for any of the many things he had done to save lives and, sometimes, even nations. Long Tom had just isolated and analyzed some of the "fog" Doc had thrown in the path of the directional beam of the death ray. He had also recognized the spray device as an instrument that had been in a fireproof compartment of Doc's plane.

"Doc sprayed the air with a tinted gas that filtered out the ultraviolet light," Long Tom said.

"Without the ultraviolet carrier beam to ionize the atmosphere, the air acted as an insulator and stopped the death rays."

Ham was still a lawyer to the end. Who was guilty and why were always the things Ham wanted to know, rather than the scientific angles. He wanted to know about King Cortlandt.

"Cortlandt only wanted to use it as a means of extorting money and action on legislation that meant money to him," Doc explained. "Lyons merely worked for him. When Tester blundered into the death ray that Cortlandt had set up in his office and not told him about, he decided to kill him and take over. He also knew what we had discovered about Cortlandt. You will remember that it was not until after Cortlandt was killed that the foreign agents were able to make any contact with Krag." Monk gulped. There was an expression of extreme embarrassment on his homely face.

"I see," he said. "Cortlandt was Krag until Tester took it over. Say, Doc--I . . . I guess I shouldn't have tied you up back there. I thought you were a little--"

Monk got red. He perspired. His expression of embarrassment changed to one of agony. Doc relieved his mind.

"You did properly," he said. "Ultrasound can completely unhinge the mind to the point where one needs restraining. Fortunately, it is temporary and leaves without treatment."

Monk sighed. A droning hum from overhead made him look up. They all looked up. It was the mail plane. Nada Morrell drew a deep breath.

"Just think--that was scheduled for destruction."

THE END