

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. SWAMP TERROR

A CAMP cook was the first to disappear. Nothing much was thought of that. The cook was believed to have a weakness for swamp "corn." It was decided he had been the victim of an accident. That he probably had stepped into a sink-hole in the darkness.

Afterward, it was learned that that was a mistake.

A youth, hired as a handy man about one of the camps, vanished next. He took a rifle late one afternoon and entered the swamp to see if he could kill some squirrels for supper.

He never came back.

Some uneasy comment followed that. But the youth was known to have been of the restless, wandering type. Finally, it was believed he had just jumped this job and gone on.

Then the first rumors were heard.

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The earliest stories mentioned chains and strange *clanking* sounds in the night. Government engineers on the job grinned broadly. The swamp men they were using as helpers didn't grin at all. They looked queerly apprehensive, and that was odd. They weren't the type of men that frightened easily.

A few days later came the rumor of a peculiarly venomous type of snake. At least it was supposed to be a snake.

Swamp men called it "The Crimson Serpent!"

The natives now looked almost terror-stricken. Singly and in pairs they quit their jobs. Within a week almost half of them had vanished into the dark recesses of the swamp.

That was serious enough.

And then came the first definite evidence of the weird terror of the swamp! It came with terrible suddenness. It left another man dead, horribly dead. It changed young Bill Craig from a strong, husky engineer into a trembling shadow of fear!

EVERYONE had anticipated trouble. But not even the most pessimistic had any idea of the strange, malignant thing that was to be encountered.

The job was a flood-control project. And flood-control work, particularly where it means building dams and inundating a considerable section of territory, always brings difficulties.

In this case, even more than the usual trials and tribulations had been expected. The area to be affected was the almost inaccessible, impassable swamp in the southeastern part of Arkansas, between the Mississippi and Ouachita rivers. The residents of that swamp were far from friendly to State or government officials of any kind.

Those in charge realized that. They had gone to the one man they believed could help them.

They had asked the aid of Doc Savage.

Doc Savage was known by reputation even to the swamp dwellers. They knew they could trust him. Doc had assured them the engineers would not be accompanied by Federal officers, that there would be no attempt to hunt down petty law violators.

He even had one of his own men, Colonel John Renwick, known as Renny, appointed as chief engineer for the necessary survey work, so that any trouble between the swamp dwellers and the government men could be ironed out promptly.

That was all Doc thought there was to it.

Young Bill Craig knew the swamp men, also. He was a graduate of Yale, but he had been born and reared in Arkansas.

Young Bill was one of the few engineers who did not laugh at the whispered stories of the natives. Strange stories had come out of the swamp for years, but this one seemed too real, too vivid, to be dismissed easily.

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It was with difficulty he forced himself to go out on the job. The swamp seemed more fearsome, more dangerous than ever before. His men were strangely silent.

As the morning hours slipped by, his nerves became more and more tense. It seemed as if the swamp were waiting. Waiting for some terrible thing to occur.

A premonition of coming disaster gripped him.

Young Bill Craig tried to dismiss that premonition as he pushed farther and farther into the swamp. It didn't do any good. The feeling of dread continued to grow.

Probably because he could speak their language, Young Bill still had his crew intact. Two natives were along to cut through the tall grass and thick vines so that he could use his micrometer theodolite. A couple more handled the long steel tapes. Nearby were two guides in the long, slender boats that were used in the bayous.

Near sunset, Bill Craig thought it became unusually quiet. The swamp men seemed to be listening, with ears strained.

The sound itself came without warning. It resembled that of a logging chain being dragged over rough ground, so that the links clanked together.

Bill Craig was leaning over, peering through the telescope of the theodolite. One of the swamp men happened to be facing him as he jerked erect.

Utter terror was pictured on the other's leathery face!

For a time no one moved. Then Jute gave a nervous laugh. Jute was one of the guides. He was fingering a long-barreled rifle and looking in the direction from which the sound of the clanking chain had come. That laugh freed Bill Craig's frozen muscles.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

Jute sent a stream of tobacco juice against the thick trunk of a cypress tree, but did not answer. He was a lean, lanky man wearing faded overalls.

Bill Craig glanced at the others. They had regained control of their features, but they couldn't hide the look almost of panic that lurked far back in their eyes.

Had Bill Craig been older and more experienced, he might have pushed his question. Then again, he probably wouldn't. He knew enough of the swamp dwellers to know he stood more chance of getting information if he let them volunteer it than if he tried to force them to talk.

He gave his big shoulders what he hoped was an indifferent shrug and turned back to the theodolite.

"Back to work." he rapped. "We've still got an hour before dusk."

When he looked up some moments later, he noticed that Jute had disappeared. He hadn't heard him go, but then Jute knew how to handle a boat noiselessly.

Bill Craig smiled with satisfaction. That was more like it. Jute, of all of them, had seemed least impressed by the sound they had heard. He had spent his life in the swamps, and was quite capable of taking care of

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himself. Undoubtedly he would reappear soon with some quite simple explanation of the chain rattle.

Then a new sound came. It was a metallic sound, also, but one such as Bill Craig had never heard before. If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn that it was a sound such as would have been made by men marching in armor.

It was only seconds after that when the screams began!

It was just dusk. That made it harder to tell distance or direction. Besides, sound carries far over water.

The screams didn't sound human. But Bill Craig knew no animal could make such sounds. They were too frenzied, too filled with unbearable agony.

Yet it didn't seem possible that anything could make Jute, if it was Jute, scream like that.

The young engineer stood frozen for several moments. Then he turned to leap toward the other guide and the second boat.

He was just in time to see that boat flash away.

Bill Craig's hesitation had been short, but it had been long enough for the rest of his crew to reach the boat. He was left alone.

Young Bill yelled. Then he cursed. He did a good job at both. The boat did not pause. It went away. As near as Bill could tell, it was going in a direction opposite to that from which the screams were coming.

Physical danger was something Bill Craig did not fear. He had a small gun in his belt for use in killing snakes. He got this gun out and began to run to help Jute.

He could still hear the screams. They were fainter now, but no less horrifying.

Before Bill Craig realized where he was going, he fell off the hammock of ground and went into the water. It was stagnant water, filled with crawly things.

It took him some time to get back to land. He found he had lost his gun. The screams stopped.

For a moment, panic seized the engineer. The only way to get out of the swamp was by boat. He had no boat, and something horrible was near at hand.

He floundered about aimlessly. Twice more he fell into water. Then he stopped. He stopped because he heard again the sound of a clanking chain.

The sound was close by, but it was almost dark and he could see nothing. He made himself as small as possible, shivering. After a while the sound of the chain faded.

BILL CRAIG didn't know a night could be so long. He was almost thankful for the swarms of mosquitoes that buzzed about him. They kept him awake and kept him busy slapping. Occasionally he could hear some animal moving about. Once he heard the piercing scream of a cougar.

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Unknown peril seemed lurking on all sides. He didn't even dare light a cigarette.

Something was horribly wrong, and his only hope was that he might live to tell about it. There was no question in his mind but that Jute was dead.

As soon as the first rays of daylight came he fished out a compass and started to work his way back to civilization. The path that had been cut through the vines and grass helped some, but he couldn't follow a straight line. There were too many bayous to cross, and he knew cotton-mouth moccasins were plentiful.

It was almost noon when he found Jute's boat. The boat evidently had drifted down one of the winding creeks until it had tangled up in the low-hanging limb of a big tree.

Jute's rifle was in the bottom of the boat. Bill Craig felt a little better when he got his hands on that. Then he remembered that the rifle evidently hadn't done Jute any good, and he felt afraid again.

Despite his fear, he poled the boat back up the creek. He kept as near in the center of the bayou as he could, and had the rifle where he could grab it instantly.

He almost missed finding Jute at that. Then he wished that he had missed him.

The lanky guide appeared to be standing up with his back against a tree. The only thing was that his feet dangled several feet above the water.

After a bit, Young Bill saw why Jute didn't fall. Vines were wrapped about his body. They were rattan vines, and appeared to be encircling Jute just as they encircled trees on all sides.

One loop of the vines was about Jute's throat. It was very tight. Jute couldn't have done much screaming after that vine had encircled him. The guide's face pictured almost unbelievable pain and horror.

Bill Craig saw the rest of it then, and turned a little sick.

Jute's shirt was gone. A big red snake, its head buried in the flesh, appeared clinging to the guide's skinny chest.

The young engineer jerked up the rifle. He almost pulled the trigger before he saw it wasn't a snake on Jute's chest at all. It just looked that way.

Bill Craig had to get over being sick before he could get closer and make the examination he knew had to be made.

What he saw made him sick all over again. Frantically he turned, poled the boat away. Jute's body would have to be recovered, but he wanted someone else to inspect it before it was moved.

Hair rose on the back of Bill Craig's neck. He had the eerie feeling that deadly, venomous eyes were watching him. Unreasoning fear gripped him.

For he knew that the mark of the red snake had not been left on Jute's body by any animal.

It might be called "The Crimson Serpent" by the swamp men but the Crimson Serpent was human.

Chapter II. CHAINS CLANK

COLONEL JOHN RENWICK, known to his friends as Renny, found Bill Craig just as the young engineer was about to emerge from the swamp.

Renny was another who had not scoffed at the rumors he had heard, although he had not credited them, either. When Bill Craig had failed to return to camp, Renny had gone to look for him.

Bill Craig was big, but he appeared small compared with the giant aid of Doc Savage.

It was some time before Renny could get Bill Craig calmed enough to tell a coherent story. At first all Bill Craig could do was babble:

"The Crimson Serpent! The Crimson Serpent!"

But Renny knew how to handle hysteria. His features hard, his mouth thin and grim, Renny's huge opened palms smacked the other crisply on either cheek.

The blows did not appear hard, but Bill Craig's head rocked from side to side as if hit by a sledge hammer. Reason returned to his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he stammered,

"Tell me about it," Renny said. His voice was surprisingly gentle.

Bill Craig's nerve returned. After all, this was one of Doc Savage's men, the one who had faced countless dangers unafraid. Hesitantly at first, but with rapidly reviving courage, the young engineer told what he had heard and seen.

"Holy cow!" said Renny when the story was complete.

For a time the giant said nothing more. His thin lips were even tighter. Then: "We'll go see," he rumbled.

Bill Craig gulped. He thought of mentioning the feeling he'd had of unseen eyes, venomous eyes, watching him. He changed his mind. Without a word he held the boat steady while Renny got in, then turned back into the swamp.

ORDINARILY, Renny enjoyed going through the swamp. Unlike many, he got a secret thrill out of the practically primeval wilderness.

This time he didn't. For once, the swamp seemed ominous. Renny, also, felt that beady, unwinking eyes were watching them. He didn't mention it, either.

Renny believed Bill Craig's story. The young engineer wasn't the kind to be easily frightened. Only one thing didn't seem reasonable. That was Young Bill's description of the wound in Jute's chest.

That wound, Bill Craig insisted, looked as if it had been made by human teeth.

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Renny's puritanical features became more severe. That was something he'd have to see for himself before he could credit it.

Bill Craig's back became tense. "Almost there," he whispered.

Renny said nothing, but he didn't see anything unusual about the other whispering. He felt the same way himself. The huge, overhanging cypress created an artificial gloom. The air was hot and humid, filled with the heavy peculiar odor of bay trees. From somewhere near came the flat splash of an alligator.

The boat rounded a bend. An almost inarticulate sound came from Bill Craig. The young engineer's face whitened. One arm raised, pointed toward a big tree.

"It-it-the-body is gone!" he gasped.

RENNY'S expression did not change. It was almost as if he had been expecting such a development. But he asked:

"You're sure this is the spot?"

Bill Craig nodded wordlessly. Close inspection showed he was correct. There were dark-brown stains on one of the rattan vines about the tree.

"Friends may have found him," Renny said. The big engineer spoke calmly, but he didn't feel that way. And he didn't believe Jute's friends had come back for him, either.

Neither did Young Bill. "But-but " he started.

"I'm going to notify Doc," Renny added softly. "This is a case for him."

They got out of there swiftly. Renny's enormous arms helped drive the boat at an astounding pace. It didn't take them long to get back to camp.

Bill Craig was almost light-hearted, Doc Savage was to be summoned. Everything would be all right.

Young Bill had never seen Doc Savage, but he'd heard much of him. Everyone had, he guessed. There were so many stories told about him that he was almost a legendary figure.

It was exciting enough to work for Colonel Renwick, but to have Doc Savage on the scene also

Bill Craig's eyes shone. He wasn't beyond the age of hero worship. Now he was going to get to see the famous Clark Savage, Jr., himself.

If half the stories they told about him were true, then the menace of the swamp, whatever it was, was as good as conquered. That was the way Bill Craig felt.

Doc Savage was known as master of many sciences. He was recognized as one of the outstanding physicians and surgeons. But it wasn't of these things Bill Craig was thinking.

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He was thinking of Doc Savage, the adventurer, of the Doc Savage who was the unrelenting foe against the forces of evil. With his five aids, of whom Renny was one, Doc Savage was known the world over as the man who had conquered perils that had threatened nations.

So busy were his thoughts that it came as a surprise to Bill Craig to find they had left the swamp behind.

The camp had been laid out on solid ground just outside the wilderness. It was some miles from the closest town, but served as a base for operations.

A series of wooden shacks had been thrown up. There was one big building, Renny used that as his headquarters, where he correlated the work of the engineers. Near it was a long structure that was used as a mess hall.

Smoke was coming from the mess hall stovepipe. The few workers left in camp were at lunch.

"Tell them nothing," Renny ordered crisply. "It won't do to have this getting out until we know what it is all about."

Bill Craig nodded. Renny turned toward his office, reaching for his keys. A small, compact short-wave radio sending and receiving set was there. All Doc's aids had similar sets. With them, they could communicate with Doc Savage no matter where they were.

Renny stopped suddenly. His jaw dropped. He'd left his office door closed and locked. It was open now. A stranger sat inside, feet cocked jauntily on a desk.

RENNY'S monstrosity of fists made tight balls. He advanced menacingly.

"It ees not permeeted to hit a gentleman of the press," the stranger said lazily.

Renny's advance stopped. The belligerence went out of his eyes. He looked as near stupid as was possible.

"Holy cow! Why didn't you say so before?" he grumbled. He went on without pause: "Work is comin' along as good as would be expected, but it's quite a job. You can say "

The other's feet came off the table, hit the floor. He held up one hand. He was a small man with black hair plastered close to his head. He was almost elegantly dressed. A perfumed handkerchief was jammed into the breast pocket of his coat. He showed very white teeth as he grinned.

"Très bon,

a very good act, Colonel Renwick," he complimented. "But it ees of the red serpent and the murder that I weesh to know."

Renny blinked rapidly, but that was all. "Your name?" he rapped.

"Georges Douter." The little man bowed, "Federation Press man for thees district, and a very good reporter."

Renny sighed. "I was afraid of that," he said. His manner became confidential. "Can't you lay off for a day or so? Then maybe I'll have a real story to give you. If you spring anything now, you'll scare off what few

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workers I've got left, might even defeat the ends of justice "

He broke off suddenly, and his lips became thin again, his voice cold. "Just how did you know there had been a murder, anyway?" he snapped.

Georges Douter smirked. "Naturally I know some of the natives, even in the swamp. Rumors have come to my ears. Now if you'll just confirm them?"

Renny's jaw snapped shut. "I've nothing to say."

The other bowed again, grinned sardonically. "That ees confirmation enough. I shall send out my story."

He started toward the door. Renny's hand shot forward, he appeared to reach out and nab the little man. Then he stepped aside. Georges Douter laughed and walked out. Renny watched him as he went to the edge of the clearing and disappeared. A few moments later he heard the sound of an auto.

A thin ridge appeared in Renny's forehead. He wondered just who *had* put on the best act.

Georges Douter had talked with a French accent. That was all right. Lots of residents of the Mississippi bottom lands in this district spoke French. He might even be a native of the district. For that matter, he might even have heard of the red serpent and Jute's murder as he said he had.

But he wasn't a newspaperman.

RENNY had encountered plenty of reporters in his time. He had even known a few, mostly cubs, who carried guns. But he had never met one who carried a gun on his hip, another in a shoulder holster and a knife sheathed under his coat at the back of his neck.

That was too much arsenal even for the greenest cub.

No, Georges Douter was not a reporter. But Renny had seen no reason for disclosing that he had learned that fact. The big engineer had discovered long ago that hasty action often was unwise.

But the whole thing was getting more complicated. Doc should be notified without loss of time. He walked toward a rear room where he had installed the radio sending-outfit.

A moment later and he was racing back out of the building. He ran toward the spot where he had last seen Georges Douter, even though he knew it was useless. His fists were clenched. It was one of his tricks to break oaken panels of doors with those fists. Right now he wanted to use them to smear the features of the dapper little fake reporter.

The radio set had been sabotaged. It wouldn't work.

Georges Douter grinned as he heard the words Renny was using. He didn't understand American idiom enough to recognize all the phrases, but the tone of the big man's voice was sufficient to indicate what they probably meant.

The little man wasn't far away. In fact, he'd moved back to the edge of the clearing, where he had a good view of the camp. But he was well hidden.

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He'd driven his car into a hiding place where he was confident it wouldn't be found. Then he had raced back to one end of the camp ground and burrowed under a thick bush. He didn't seem concerned over how his clothes would look when he got out.

He had a gun out when Renny came back into view walking toward the office building. But he didn't use it.

The engineers who had been in the mess hall had raced out when they heard Renny shouting. They took one look at the big engineer's face and quietly returned to their lunch.

That is, all but Bill Craig. Bill Craig followed Renny. Together they inspected the radio transmitter.

"You could drive into town and call up," Bill Craig suggested.

"Go look at our cars," Renny advised.

Bill Craig did so. He returned in a few minutes looking rather pale. Three ancient flivvers were used as transportation for the engineers. The carburetor floats were missing from all three. That was something baling wire wouldn't fix. It was only two hours' drive to the nearest town. It would take a day to walk the distance.

"Don't say anything about it," Renny rumbled.

"It--it doesn't make sense," Bill Craig faltered.

"Of course not!" Renny snapped. He had the transmitting set apart, was making two drawings. "But why don't you think so?"

"The murder of Jute, all the strange sounds and things I heard, might just have been a plot to run us off this job, to get us out of the swamp," Young Bill said swiftly.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. But if that was it, why then would an effort be made to keep us from getting into communication with anyone, and particularly to keep us from getting out of here. That is, unless " Bill Craig's voice faltered suddenly.

"Unless what?" Renny asked, more kindly.

" unless someone, *something* intends to kill us all," Bill Craig breathed.

Renny did not answer for a moment. Then he handed the young engineer one of the two drawings.

"Can't you think of anything pleasant?" he roared. "Here! You make this part. I'll make the other. Only two important doodads are busted on this set. If we're any good at all we'll have it working by night."

Renny's voice had excellent carrying power. Georges Douter heard his words without difficulty.

A peculiar expression crossed the little man's face. Without haste, he wiggled his way back out of the bush that concealed him. Then he slipped through bushes and trees until he came to the car he had secreted. He curled up in the rear seat and went to sleep.

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Consequently, he didn't see Renny when the big engineer dodged out of the camp an hour or so later. No one else saw Renny either. His actions after that were peculiar. He completely circled the camp. Once in a while he stopped. Each time he stopped he was very busy. His arms had been loaded with small packages when he left the camp. When he returned, they were empty.

Of all this, Georges Douter was unaware. It was growing dark when the little man awoke. He glanced at a wrist watch and gave a grunt of satisfaction. Then he inspected the two guns he carried, made sure they were ready for action.

After that he waited.

He didn't have long to wait.

The sound of clanking chains came just as the sun disappeared.

Chapter III. A THREAT

BILL CRAIG had just completed work on his part for the broken radio transmitter. He said, "Damn!" quite emphatically.

Renny nodded somber agreement, his features more puritanical-appearing than ever.

"The message to Doc will have to wait," the big engineer said.

He reached to a high shelf, removed two peculiar-appearing weapons. They seemed to be oversized pistols, with large drums mounted on the top. He gave one of them to Bill Craig.

The weapons were those often used by Doc and his men. They threw shells with extraordinary rapidity. Sometimes they were loaded with mercy bullets bullets that merely brought unconsciousness, a type that barely penetrated the skin, then released a drug that caused the coma. On other occasions they were loaded with an explosive type of bullet that had great penetrating power as well as causing a tremendous blast.

This time they were loaded only with the mercy bullets.

Sound of the clanking chains had been heard by others in the camp as well. Those who had scoffed at the natives for being superstitious suddenly became very self-conscious. They glanced at each other quickly, then began to talk loudly, endeavoring by sheer lung power to overcome the fear they felt.

"Don't take any chances," Renny warned. "But try to get close to whatever is making that noise. When you are close, don't hesitate open fire at once."

Bill Craig's head bobbed agreement The young engineer was pale, but his lips were almost as tight as those of Renny.

Renny turned out the lights in the building and the two slipped outside.

The chain sound had come only once. A second sound came as Bill Craig and Renny moved noiselessly toward the swamp. It was the same noise the young engineer had heard the night before, a metallic sound

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such as he had imagined men might make while walking in armor.

Renny's thin lips split in a noiseless whistle. He ducked low and dodged forward rapidly.

Georges Douter had circled the camp and was near the edge of the swamp also. The little man had one of his guns in his hand, but he acted as if he did not expect to use it.

His teeth showed as he heard Renny and Bill Craig plunging onward. He squatted on his heels and waited expectantly.

A gigantic roar almost split his eardrums. It was the bull-fiddle roar of one of the queer weapons Renny had produced.

The roar stopped abruptly. In the same instant there was a blinding flare of light. It burst just beyond the edge of the swamp, but was gone so swiftly Georges Douter was unable to see a thing. He couldn't see anything for several seconds afterward, either.

The scream came a moment after the light had faded. It was a high-pitched, frenzied shriek. It stopped at the highest point. It was not renewed.

Clanking of metal sounded almost immediately afterward. It faded into the distance rapidly.

GEORGES DOUTER had not moved. He remained in a crouching position, his gun still held negligently.

A minor eruption took place at the camp. Lights flared on from many sides. Men rushed out of the buildings. Most of them had rifles. A ragged volley of shots was fired into the swamp before saner heads quieted the hysteria.

"Colonel Renwick? Bill Craig?" one of the men shouted.

There was no answer from the swamp.

Georges Douter nodded, as if a question had been answered as expected. He got to his feet, but remained out of sight.

Men were rushing for flashlights at the camp. One or two flashes did appear, but no one seemed anxious to use them.

Georges Douter grinned without mirth. He took a fountain-pen flashlight from his pocket, shaded it so that the glare would not be visible at the camp, and went rapidly toward the spot from which the scream had come.

He found the body on a narrow strip of land that projected for a ways into the swamp. The body was on its back. Near one outstretched hand was an over-sized pistol with a big cartridge drum on top.

The man's face had disappeared. In its place was a crimson-appearing mass, like a coiled snake. Blood still trickled from the hideous wound. It looked as if the "snake's" head vanished into the man's skull. The hole in the scalp and bone was responsible for that.

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Faint clucking sounds came from Georges Douter. The sounds indicated neither pity nor exultation. The little man's face was expressionless, but he did not appear surprised.

The tiny beam from the pencil flash darted back and forth. Georges Douter reached forward suddenly and picked up a piece of broken string.

"Oui.

As I expected," he nodded.

Men were approaching cautiously from the camp. Georges Douter doused his flashlight and vanished.

He stopped at one of the ancient flivvers, replaced a carburetor float, then made his way without haste to his hidden car. Its motor started almost without noise. No one heard him as he edged out on the rough road and headed toward the nearest town.

A mile from the camp, he turned on his headlights. He laid one gun on the seat beside him so he could use both hands on the wheel, and increased his speed as much as he could. He was humming faintly.

He was still humming when lights of the town came into view. He drew off to one side and stopped the car. Then he went to the trunk in the rear and worked swiftly.

When he got back into the car, his appearance had changed. His natty-looking clothes had been replaced by a suit of coveralls, a faded shirt and an ancient hat. The coveralls hung to the ground, hiding the shoes with built-up soles which added several inches to his height.

In place of shining teeth, he appeared to have two gold plates in the front of his mouth. Marks of dirt, artfully applied, made him look ten years older.

He drove up in front of a small telephone exchange and halted. Only a few people were in sight, but he waited until the street was momentarily clear before he got out and went inside. A grimy hand produced several bills.

The girl behind the desk looked at him without interest.

"I want to make a long-distance telephone call," he said. He spoke with an Arkansas drawl.

"Whom do you wish to call?" the girl asked indifferently. She lost her indifference a moment later. She sat up straight and went into action swiftly.

"I want to speak to New York to Doc Savage," said Georges Douter.

THE telephone bell rang sharply in the eighty-sixth-floor office in one of New York's biggest skyscrapers. There was no one in the office. The bell rang three times. Then there was a click, followed by a faint buzzing sound.

"This is the office of Clark Savage, Jr.," a recorded voice said into the telephone transmitter. "Mr. Savage is not here at the moment. If you have any message for him, it will be given to him when he comes in."

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

For some minutes there was an excited flow of words from the other end of the line. Then the connection was broken. A few seconds later a disk resembling a dictaphone record stopped revolving, and an electric robot replaced the receiver on the hook.

It was half an hour after that before the first visitor arrived at the office. He came silently and furtively.

He was a peculiar-appearing man, with long arms that hung, gorillalike, far below his knees. Tiny eyes appeared buried in pits of gristle, while his mouth was so big it looked like an accident.

He was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, the chemist among Doc's aides.

A few moments later, footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. A door, robot-controlled, opened noiselessly in what had appeared to be a solid section of the wall. A tall man paused for a moment in the doorway.

This man was the ultimate in "what the well-dressed man wears." A natty derby was perched on his head. His light-colored suit was faultlessly pressed, the corner of a handkerchief peering from the breast pocket of his coat. A white carnation was in one lapel. In his hand was a stylish cane, which he spun debonairly.

For a moment he seemed to be posing. Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks was justly proud of his title of fashion plate among the five helpers of Doc Savage. His present ensemble had been picked up from his tailor less than four hours before. Known as Ham to his friends, he was Harvard's gift to the legal profession.

Usually Ham liked to fight and argue with the chemist, who was called Monk and was really one of Ham's closest friends. But he couldn't fight with Monk at the moment, for the chemist was wandering over to the small box that held the machinery for recording telephone messages. It was purely a routine check, a matter of long habit.

A glance at the disk showed someone had telephoned in their absence. He removed the disk, started toward a machine where he could "play back" whatever message it contained.

He tripped over a wire leading to one of the several fans he had used to fool Ham. For an instant, he fought for balance, juggling the disk in his two big hands. Then he went down.

"Break it'?" Ham asked without sympathy.

Monk grunted. The disk was still intact, but he'd taken a hard fall to protect it. Still grumbling, he put it on the machine, started the disk turning and put on a pair of headphones.

An angry howl burst from him. Ham whirled. The dapper lawyer took one look at Monk's face and made a dive for a second set of headphones.

"I-I'll repeat it," Monk said queerly. His hands were opening and closing, a look of pain had filled his small eyes.

Once more the record turned. Ham's features became grim suddenly.

"This is the Oracle," came a voice from the disk. "I am calling to give you a warning it would be well not to ignore. Also, I have some information. The information is this. Your man, whom you call Colonel Renwick, was killed tonight. He was killed for trying to meddle into some thing that was none of his business. He died rather horribly. He died the death of the Crimson Serpent." The voice paused for a moment, became stern and

hard. "Do not try to investigate his death. Stay away. If not, the Crimson Serpent will kill again!"

Chapter IV. A GIRL CALLS

FOR a moment after the voice ceased, neither Ham nor Monk spoke. They sat silently, eyes locked.

Still without a word, Monk slipped off the earphones, went to the telephone. He asked for a record of the last long-distance call for Doc Savage.

Ham went into the next room. There was a radio transmitter there. He sounded Renny's call, time after time.

There was no answer.

Monk got the chief of police of the small town from which the warning had been telephoned. His shoulders sagged as he joined Ham.

"I'm afraid it's so," he mumbled. "Some of the men from the camp where Renny was located have got into town. They tell a strange story of chains and screams and say Renny got killed."

Ham's expression grew grimmer.

"Well, what are we waitin' for, daggonit?" Monk raged. His shoulders hunched, his long arms sprung back and forth. "Let's go. The speed ship's set to go, we can get down there before morning. I'll tear that swamp apart, if necessary, but when I get my hands on that Crimson Serpent "

"We'd better get Doc first," Ham said quietly.

Monk subsided slowly. If there was trouble to be found, he didn't like to wait. But he knew Ham was right. Doc Savage should be notified.

A banquet was being held in one of Chicago's largest hotels. The big dining room was crowded with men of international reputation.

The occasion was the annual dinner of the Scientific Adventurers' Club. Those present included men who had visited both poles, who had penetrated jungle-guarded spots where no other white men had ever been. Others had risked life and health to ferret out secrets of ancient civilizations.

All were accustomed to danger. To a layman, whose only peril is fighting a way through a subway rush hour, it would have seemed none of those men could ever know excitement.

Yet all were showing excitement now.

The last course of the banquet had been served. The time for speeches had arrived. And all attention was centered on the man who rose to speak.

Clark Savage, Jr., was the guest of honor. After long urging, he had consented to tell of one of his most thrilling adventures.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

"I understand it will be of the time he penetrated the earth to such a distance that he encountered a strange substance never before found," one guest whispered to his companion.

"I've heard rumors," the other replied excitedly. "There was something about a 'living fire' connected with it, that caused men to die in flames without apparent cause."

Sudden silence fell over the assemblage.

THE man who arose did not seem so large at first glance. It was only those near him who realized that the excellent fit of his dinner jacket concealed a body so perfectly symmetrical, so well put together, that it gave the impression of easy flowing strength rather than size.

The man's face was bronze-colored. His hair, only a shade darker, was pressed close to his head. But it was his eyes that first drew attention. Those eyes appeared to be deep pools of whirling gold. They had a strange, almost hypnotic intensity.

Then he began to speak. He did not raise his voice, but it had a peculiar carrying quality that enabled it to be heard in every corner of the large dining room.

"The discovery I wish to tell you about," Doc Savage began, "was made far beneath the southern California desert. It concerns the finding of a substance that, under certain circumstances, transformed men into living fire."

Every listener was leaning forward. It seemed the large audience scarcely breathed.

For several seconds Doc Savage stood motionless. Then he turned, spoke into the ear of the master of ceremonies seated at the table beside him. A moment later and he straightened.

"I am sorry but I must delay the story I had intended to tell," he said quietly. "News of great importance has just reached me that requires an immediate answer. If possible, I will return before you adjourn."

A flustered master of ceremonies started up, called on another speaker. Doc Savage slipped from the room. He did not appear to be moving fast, but he was gone almost before the others present realized what was happening.

A low murmuring filled the dining room. No one had seen a message delivered to the bronze man. That was not surprising. The wrist watch he wore was not the type to attract undue attention but it was useful for receiving emergency messages from his aides when necessary.

Acquired as the result of a previous adventure, the wrist watch really contained a delicate, ultra-violet ray receiver. Messages, flashed by the rays, were transmitted to the back of his wrist in the form of heat waves.

The only disadvantage in the watch Doc wore lay in the fact that it was a receiver only. He had not thought it necessary to wear a larger type that contained a transmitter as well.

Now he sped toward his room in the same hotel. He opened a small suitcase, took out a tiny microphone and donned headphones.

"This is Doc," he said quietly. "Please repeat the message you just sent by ultra-violet ray."

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

IN New York, Monk and Ham leaned back with sighs of relief. Swiftly, Ham repeated the message they had received over the telephone, the story that had been told Monk by the Arkansas chief of police.

"Ham and me want to beat it down there tonight," Monk put in excitedly. "We'll get whatever it was got Renny "

"Fit out the dirigible," Doc's voice interrupted quietly. "Meet me here in the morning. Bring with you "

Calmly, efficiently, he listed equipment he wished brought along.

Monk and Ham exchanged swift glances. Doc's instructions were indication enough. The bronze man was showing clearly that he did not think the solution would be as simple as Monk believed. Doc said nothing about Renny, but his aides knew the bronze man felt the loss of the big engineer keenly.

The hairy chemist opened his big mouth to speak. The mouth remained open, but no words came forth.

The girl was responsible for that.

She had entered through the corridor door Monk had used and had left unlocked. Small, weighing less than a hundred pounds, with perfectly black hair and large, dark eyes, she stood just inside the door, a look of amazement on features that would have been envied by any movie star.

She was looking at Monk.

"I do not think," she said slowly and distinctly, "that I have ever seen a face so homely, or a person who looked so much like an animal."

Crimson flooded Monk's features. He seemed unable to move. Ham whirled, took in the situation at a glance. The dapper lawyer's head went back, he roared with laughter.

"At last!" he gasped. "At long last a girl finally tells the truth about Monk's face."

The girl's gaze shifted slightly to take in Ham. "And I don't think much of giggling gigolos, either," she said flatly.

Ham's mirth choked off in mid-gasp. He looked as if his collar had suddenly become too tight for him.

"If you will kindly explain this intrusion," Ham began, with cold dignity. "I am sure "

"I am not sure," the girl broke in frigidly. "I am not sure at all that I wish to hire a man gorilla and a laughing gigolo."

"Hire?" Monk blurted stupidly.

"Hire was what I said," the girl snapped angrily. "I really do need a detective. Perhaps you will do, although neither of you look quite bright." She shrugged small shoulders. "However, the task I have is not very difficult. And you were recommended to me highly, although I cannot understand why."

"Lady," Ham began grimly. "I don't know who told you we were detectives "

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

"Don't apologize," the girl rapped. "I don't believe much detecting ability will be needed. I want you to find a man for me "

"I don't blame him for runnin'," Monk grunted, almost inaudibly.

" and I have reason to believe he has gone to the Arkansas swamp lands," the girl concluded coolly.

MONK'S expression did not change, but huge muscles tightened suddenly under his shirt. Irritation vanished from Ham's face, his expression became urbane, his voice smooth.

"I don't believe you told us your name," the lawyer said crisply.

"Consuelo Manresa," the girl answered, "but now that I think it over, I am not sure that I want "

"And the person you are seeking?" shot Ham.

"S—sometimes he is called Georges Douter." The girl appeared bewildered by Ham's sudden change.

"Small, with dead black hair, usually well dressed "

Ham shot an inquiring glance at Monk. The hairy chemist shook his head. "Not the guy that made the call."

Consuelo Manresa apparently didn't hear him. "But he is excellent at disguises," she went on. "And he has a rather conceited opinion of himself. Sometimes he describes himself as the Oracle "

Monk and Ham both went into action together. That was a mistake. But they were thinking of Renny. And here seemed a connecting link with the man who had told them Renny was dead.

They both leaped for the girl at the same time. Monk was a trifle closer. Ham moved slightly faster. Consequently Ham smashed into Monk. They both went down.

Consuelo Manresa leaped back, her large, dark eyes flashing.

"Peegs!" she shrieked. "Madmen!"

A small gun came to one of her exquisitely manicured hands. She backed swiftly toward the door behind her.

Monk and Ham tried to get up.

Pf-f-f-t.

The small gun made a hissing sound and lead whistled over their heads. They remained still.

"I will not deal with a man gorilla and a gigolo who both are mad!" the girl cried. She slammed the door behind her.

It was only seconds before Monk and Ham got that door open again. The girl had vanished. That wasn't so hard to explain. There was a stairway nearby. Once there, she could go either up or down, could find a hiding place in a score of places.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

Evidently, she did. She couldn't be found.

"She was right when she called you a gorilla!" Ham raged futilely. "If you hadn't got in my way, I would have had her."

Monk had regained some of his customary good humor. Seeing Ham so upset was partly responsible for that. It wasn't often the dapper lawyer got that way.

"Yeah, but I notice she was lookin' at you, not me, when she yelled 'peeg,'" Monk grunted.

THE bickering continued for some time. Neither Monk nor Ham would have admitted it, but it helped keep them from thinking of big Renny. They didn't like to show emotion.

They didn't mention the girl again either. That one small, dark-tressed Spanish girl could escape from the view of them so easily was not a memory they could view with much pride. They had a secret suspicion she was laughing at both of them.

But she wasn't laughing. She made her way from the office building fast enough, went to a large hotel. There she put in a long-distance call. A thin furrow creased her high forehead at the message she received.

Then she packed. Pretty girls usually carry a large assortment of clothes with them. This one, quite evidently, was different. She packed all her belongings into one small bag. After that she checked out of the hotel and got into a taxicab.

She was still in the cab when she saw Monk and Ham get out in front of a dilapidated building on the water front. The sign on the warehouse read "Hidalgo Trading Co.," but it really belonged to Doc Savage; in fact, it housed his planes, dirigible, yacht and even a submarine.

It was still dark and the girl's cab was parked some distance from the front of the building. Monk and Ham failed to notice it at all.

Not long afterward, a silver shape rose slowly over the Hudson and pointed its nose west.

The girl nodded with satisfaction and spoke to her driver. She held a large bill in her hand.

The driver made a record trip to the Newark airport. The girl produced more large bills. When a private plane took off a few minutes later, she was aboard. The plane took out after the dirigible.

An alert newspaperman, with an eye for beauty, tried to learn who the girl was, and why she had hired a private plane. All he could find out was her name. He was to recall that name later, but at the time the world at large had not yet heard of the horror that had gripped the Arkansas swampland.

Chapter V. AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY

MONK and Ham loafed along in the dirigible on their way to Chicago. They wanted Doc to get a little sleep before they started on the next lap of their trip.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

Doc wasn't asleep. The bronze man had been busy constantly after receiving the message from his aides. He made many long-distance calls. Little information resulted.

Stories of engineers on the flood project merely confirmed what Monk and Ham had been told. Something mysterious and deadly was loose in the swamp. Renny had been killed; another engineer, Bill Craig, had disappeared, probably, one excited witness declared, carried away by the strange thing that made the sound of clanking metal.

Doc asked that as little publicity as possible be given the occurrence. Then he himself called a newspaper office. He didn't, however, talk about what had happened. His conversation was on an entirely different topic.

It was about this time that the ring he wore began to act peculiarly.

The ring itself was uncommon. It appeared of some rare blue stone. Occasionally it seemed to show a thread of dancing light. Right now that light was more than a thread, it seemed to be a whirling disk beneath the blue.

Doc lifted the telephone receiver, and placed another call. Then he set the receiver silently on the table and went to the door. A moment later he drifted shadowlike down the hallway.

At an adjoining doorway he stopped and listened. No sound came from within.

A small piece of metal came to the bronze man's hand. He picked the lock on the door silently. Then he leaped inside, flashed on the lights.

The room was empty.

Doc whirled, reached down to the floor. His fingers caught a tiny, almost invisible wire. The wire led out the door, on down the hall. It did not lead far. It had been broken, evidently by a sharp jerk. The other end had vanished.

The bronze man showed no emotion. There was a complicated listening device in the room adjoining his. It was of the type which permitted a listener to pick up telephone conversations even without direct contact with the telephone wires.

The blue ring on Doc's finger had shown that such a device was in use. The ring, extremely sensitive to electrical circuits when boosted by coils, had flashed the warning the bronze man had seen.

But whoever had been seeking to listen in on Doc also had been shrewd. The thin wire leading from the room could have led almost any place. With a pair of headphones at the other end, a spy could eavesdrop in comparative safety.

Doc's rush to the other room evidently had been seen. The wire had been broken at once, destroying any link to the spy.

The bronze man got the listening device and returned to his own suite. He did not appear perturbed. There were several fingerprints on the case that contained the listening device. Doc brushed powder over them, inspected them through a glass.

He did not need a check to identify those prints. He knew them as well as he knew his own.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

THERE was no light in the hotel room directly across the street from Doc's suite. But two men were there. One had been peering through the window, using a pair of high-powered binoculars.

"He spotted it," he said. There was relief in his voice.

"I told yuh that guy was smart," said his companion.

The man with the binoculars placed them on a table, then drew down the blinds and turned on the lights. He was a small man, nattily dressed. He had thin features, and the hat he wore had a small feather in its band.

"Just so he ain't too smart!" he said.

The other grinned. He was bigger, and looked more like a night-club bouncer, with cauliflowered ears and a battered nose.

"No guy would be smart enough to figger this one out." he chuckled.

Noise came faintly from an adjoining bedroom. A gun leaped to the hand of the thin-faced man. His companion's big shoulders hunched.

Both spun, approached the door cautiously. The big man took a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, then jumped back. Then the thin-faced man laughed.

"Still O. K.," he rapped. He strutted into the bedroom, the gun going back into his pocket.

A man lay on the bed. It was hard to tell what he really looked like. His features showed the marks of a recent beating. He was spread-eagled on the bed, each hand and each foot tied to a bedpost. His eyes were blank, but occasionally an arm or leg would jerk convulsively. That, evidently, had caused the noise the others had heard.

The thin-faced man looked at him judiciously. "He's comin' out of it, I think," he said. "Maybe we oughtta give him another shot."

A frown creased the bigger man's homely face. "We ain't supposed to give him too much of that dope," he protested. He walked over, leaned down to look into the bound man's eyes.

Several things happened at once.

Ropes appeared to fly apart at both ends of the bed. The bound man was no longer bound. He reared up, looped one arm over the head of the bending figure, slapped the other fist into the man's face and head. The big man sat down.

The thin-faced man jerked for his gun. He had it half out of its holster before the man on the bed got up. Then the other cracked him with a right that threw him clear across the room.

The erstwhile prisoner started to run toward the door. He didn't get there. The bouncer was only groggy. He caught the other by the legs, brought him down in a football tackle.

After that, fists appeared to be flying from all directions.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

The bouncer tried to get up. That was a mistake. His opponent flexed his legs, caught the bouncer in the belly and threw him into a wall so hard that his neck cracked.

Then the former prisoner, more battered than ever, weaved to his feet. The words he muttered were almost indistinguishable, but once in a while it seemed that he said, "Doc Savage."

Groggily, he moved toward the door and freedom. He didn't see the newcomer just outside the door. That newcomer drew a gun, stepped to one side and brought the butt of the weapon down hard as his victim came into range.

MONK and Ham spent a peaceful night. They hadn't expected anything to happen in Chicago.

They came down at an airport off the usual track and telephoned Doc. That was when they got their first surprise. They had expected Doc would come out at once and that the three of them would head immediately for Arkansas.

"Our plans are changed. Join me at the hotel here," Doc instructed crisply.

The dapper engineer and the hairy chemist were more bewildered when they reached Doc's suite. The bronze man wasted no words. Without explanation, he showed them the listening device and handed each a magnifying glass.

A low whistle came from Ham. Monk's jaw dropped. "Renny's fingerprints," the chemist ejaculated in amazement.

"But how " Ham started.

In crisp sentence, Doc explained how the listening device had come into his possession.

"Could those prints have been made after Renny was dead?" Monk demanded.

Doc shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "They contain the natural oil of fingerprints made by a person who is alive. Also, it seems apparent that they had been made within an hour or two at the most before I first saw them."

"Then Renny's not dead! He's here!" A delighted grin spread over Ham's face. He pounded Monk on the back. "We won't have to go to that swamp, after all."

"Always thinkin' of your clothes," Monk grumbled.

"Perhaps it was intended that we should believe it unnecessary to visit the swamp," Doc put in quietly.

Ham's eyes flickered, then narrowed. "It could be. That would mean Renny is a prisoner and naturally he is, or he would have shown up. So we will have to take time out to find him. But why would anyone go to that much trouble to keep us away from the swamp? What could be behind it?"

Doc did not answer. His aides shrugged. They were accustomed to the bronze man's habit of apparently failing to hear questions that he did not wish to answer at the time.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

A slow grin was spreading over Monk's homely face. "Renny's alive, but still there may be some fighting," he piped.

Ham frowned thoughtfully. "The bringing of Renny here would seem to indicate that more than just opposition of the swamp dwellers is behind all this. We should check and see if there was any real strong outside opposition to the flood-control project."

"I did," Doc said simply. "Through newspaper friends here I checked with all congressmen who had anything to do with recommending the dam. Their answer in every case was the same. The only opposition came from those who lived in the swamp."

"What now?" Monk demanded.

"Ham is right," the bronze man said. "We know Renny is alive. But our first step must be to find him. We will "

The bronze man broke off. The door to the room had opened. Monk and Ham whirled to face it. They, too, showed surprise.

Two men were entering the room. One was medium-sized, well dressed, with a look of sleek efficiency on his round face. He wore a pink carnation in his coat lapel.

The other was a veritable giant, but a giant who looked as if he had been run through a sausage grinder, or else had been the object of a gang attack.

It was Renny!

DOC and his aides were not the only ones who were surprised.

From a room down the hall a head was projecting cautiously. It was the head of a black-haired girl with large, dark eyes. Just now those eyes were open even wider than usual.

"It couldn't be!" she gasped uncertainly. "That is the one that must be known as Renny. And he is dead!"

Then the girl's lips snapped together in a very businesslike gesture. She glanced cautiously up and down the hallway. From her purse reappeared the small gun she had used on Monk and Ham.

A moment more, and she floated down the hallway silently. She stopped just outside the door to Doc's suite. After a brief hesitation, she put the gun back in her purse, drew out lipstick and powder instead.

Had anyone seen her, it would have appeared she merely had stopped to apply some make-up. But her ear was very close to the door.

Monk and Ham were bubbling excitedly. The stranger who had entered with Renny was standing at one side, smiling amusedly. Only Doc showed no emotion.

Renny's eyes were slightly fogged. He appeared to have difficulty in speaking, as though his tongue was thick.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

"I found him down the street a few minutes ago," the stranger said quite smoothly. "I recognized him, knew he must be looking for you, Mr. Savage, so I brought him here."

Doc's gold-flecked eyes turned inquiringly toward the stranger. The bronze man did not speak, but the other appeared to lose some of his self-assurance. A faint glow of color came to his cheeks.

"I am Fletcher Carter, a private detective," the stranger explained hurriedly. "Knowing faces is part of my job. This man of yours looks as though he had been beaten and drugged."

Doc nodded, "He has been drugged," he said. The bronze man turned to a small bag, selected a hypodermic and a vial of almost colorless liquid. He made a small injection in Renny's huge forearm.

Almost immediately the big engineer's eyes cleared, he stood more erect.

"What happened to you? How did you get here?" Monk was demanding heatedly. "Say something, can't your

Renny looked around slowly. "I've been fighting," he said at last.

"Sure, we know that." Ham put in. "Your appearance is enough to show you must have battled at least a half dozen."

Renny's eyes became a little baffled. "I fought once last night, and didn't get away," he said, almost as if speaking to himself. "This morning, I seem to remember there was only one man guarding me. I knocked him out, got to the street, but after that "

"The type of drug used on you often brings recurring spells of blankness," Doc explained briefly.

"But what happened in the swamp?" Monk almost shouted. "You're supposed to be dead."

Renny shook his head. "Bill Craig and I heard sounds of chains, then noise, as if of armor. We went to investigate. He saw something and started firing. There was a big flash, and about that time something must have hit me over the head. I remember nothing more until I realized I was a prisoner some place."

Monk and Ham exchanged glances. It was apparent now that Bill Craig must have been the one killed. He also had been a big man, they had been told. With his features wiped out, a natural mistake had been made.

"What was the flash?" Doc asked.

Ham gasped. Doc, as usual, had caught the one real significant fact in Renny's story. The dapper lawyer would have bet he knew what was coming.

He was not mistaken.

A slow smile spread over Renny's big face. One of his hands went to the belt he wore. The belt was thick and broad, and at each end was a thick roll, the size of a man's thumb. These rolls came together to form the fastening.

Renny flicked back a false top on one of these rolls. From inside it he withdrew a short, stubby, pen-type camera.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

"I rigged a flashlight trap around the camp," he explained. "The flash went off when I was right by one of the dozen cameras I had set out. I grabbed this one, put it in my belt just before I was knocked out."

"So you got a picture of that 'Crimson Serpent,' eh?" Monk howled delightedly.

"Give it to me, I'll develop it," Ham blurted.

"I'm so sorry. I will trouble the Colonel Renwick to give the camera to me," came a soft voice.

As one man, the five occupants of the room turned toward the door.

Standing there, the small gun firm in one fist, a look of determination on her pretty face, was Consuelo Manresa.

Chapter VI. A SURPRISE ATTACK

"THE girl crook!" Monk rapped disgustedly.

"Who doesn't like ape-men or gigolos," Ham mimicked.

Fletcher Carter had a startled expression on his face. One hand played nervously with the carnation in his lapel. The private detective looked as though he were witnessing something he couldn't quite believe.

Renny's big fist merely closed tightly about the small camera. With that fist closed the camera disappeared entirely.

"Won't you come in?" Doc asked.

The girl's lips compressed. Her finger tightened slightly on the trigger of her gun. "Give me that camera!" she repeated slowly.

The next moment she gasped, half in fear, half in surprise. Doc had moved so swiftly she could not have fired even had she so wished.

There had been a bronze streak as Doc leaped. Then he held the girl's gun in one hand, had her by the wrist with his other.

"Won't you come in?" he said again.

Slowly, as if drawn more by the impelling quality of Doc's gold-flecked eyes than his grip on her wrist, Consuelo Manresa came farther into the room.

Fletcher Carter gulped. He seemed about to say something, then changed his mind. All attention was on the girl. Fletcher Carter left the room, closing the door softly behind him. Only Doc Savage saw him go.

Swiftly, Ham and Monk between them were telling Doc of the girl's appearance at the bronze man's New York office, and how she had acted then.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

"We will be pleased to hear your story," Doc invited politely.

Consuelo Manresa's lips closed tightly. It seemed she was going to refuse to say anything at all. Then she apparently thought better of it.

"You can't make me tell," she said shortly.

She was right. An hour later they still knew no more than they did at first.

Consuelo Manresa had regained her composure, but she wasn't giving any facts. Her large, dark eyes hardly ever left Doc's face. It was plain to see she was taking more than a passing interest in the bronze man.

Doc tried to ignore it. That was made more difficult by ill-concealed snickers from Monk.

Ham, who had been doing most of the questioning, threw up his hands in disgust.

"Send her down to jail and let the cops cool her off for a day or two!" he snapped angrily. "She might talk to them then."

It was then the attack came.

CONSUELO MANRESA was directly responsible for the fact that the attack came as a surprise.

There was only one thing that ever upset Doc Savage. That was feminine admiration. The bronze man knew there was no place in his life for a girl. For that one reason, probably, almost every attractive woman he met seemed to show more than ordinary interest in him.

Consuelo Manresa had been laying it on rather thick. Her long, languorous looks at the bronze man had been highly eloquent. They had embarrassed Doc exceedingly. As a consequence, his highly trained senses were not as alert as usual.

Monk and Ham were too busy badgering the girl to pay attention to anything else, and Renny had been too interested in their attempts to extract information from her to hear the cautious, almost silent footsteps.

The attack came from three directions at once. The door to Doc's suite had not been locked after Fletcher Carter left. In some manner the raiders had gained entrance to adjoining rooms, then into Doc's suite from the sides.

There were a half score of them. They burst into the room without a word. Each man was swinging a vicious-looking blackjack.

Ham didn't have a chance. He was closest to the hall door and had his back turned. One of the swinging blackjacks clipped him just behind the ear, even as Monk was shouting a hoarse warning. The dapper lawyer merely folded up and went to the floor.

Five men swarmed over Doc Savage. The others went after Monk and Renny.

The fight was probably an epic. Monk was never quite sure afterward. It was too fast and too fierce for any clear thinking.

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Dimly, the hairy chemist saw Doc go to the floor under the mass weight of his attackers. Renny was working his jaws, but no words came. The big engineer also was working his giant fists. Those fists were doing plenty of talking for him.

Despite the overwhelming advantage the attackers had in numbers, as well as the fact that they had blackjacks, Renny was doing a very creditable job. Each time one of his fists hit, the impact sounded like that of a battering-ram.

Monk himself was swinging his long arms with feverish good will. He drew his bullet head down between his broad shoulders, to offer as little target as possible, and waded in.

The room was a struggling mass of fighting men. One thug, knocked end over end by Renny, slammed into Consuelo Manresa, knocking her from her chair.

Monk saw another attacker slip behind the big engineer, raise his blackjack. The hairy chemist tried to shout a warning. It was never uttered.

At almost the same instant the building fell in. Or at least that was how it felt to Monk. He went down in a wave of blackness.

MONK'S head didn't feel any too good when he finally recovered consciousness. He looked around him groggily. Renny and Ham also appeared just returning to their senses.

There was no sign of Consuelo Manresa or Doc.

"You know." Renny said soberly, "I'm just about getting fed up with being knocked around." His severe features were set tightly. One big fist massaged the top of his head. "I want to do some knocking around myself."

"W-what h-happened?" Ham gasped.

"You would have to ask!" Monk snorted disgustedly. "Letting yourself get knocked cold the first wallop and leaving the rest of us to do your fighting for you!"

The lawyer looked around, comprehension dawning swiftly. "Looks like you didn't do so well yourself," He said dryly. "Where's Doc?"

Monk gulped. Renny said nothing. From the looks of things, the gang that had attacked them had gotten Doc.

"D-did you I mean have you still got that camera?" Monk asked Renny.

The big engineer shook his head slowly. "I gave it to Doc only a few minutes before the fight started," he explained.

"Girl, Doc and camera all gone!" Ham said bitterly.

The lawyer went to the telephone and did some calling. He looked even more disgusted when he had finished.

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"Some hotel," he rapped. "There's a convention going on, with a lot of noisy parties on every floor. Nobody paid any attention to our little fuss here."

"If Doc only got away!" Renny said wishfully.

There were at least five in the group of attackers that were convinced Doc not only hadn't got away, but wasn't going to do so.

They were sitting on a big burlap sack. The sack was in the rear-end of an innocent-appearing truck. Occasionally the sack heaved and bucked as if the occupant had no desire to stay there.

When this happened, one of the five would raise a blackjack and tap, sometimes gently, occasionally not so gently. No sound came from within the sack, but that was not surprising. The occupant was gagged.

One of the five was the big man with the cauliflowered ears who had been guarding Renny. The others called him Bouncer.

"Getting this bronze guy oughta make up for my lettin' that other mug go!" he growled.

Bouncer's features showed he had been in a rather hectic battle. One of his companions grinned. "Think this mug will be any easier to hold?"

Bouncer scowled fiercely. He reached in his pocket and took out a gun. "I got permission to use this thing, if necessary, on this one," he barked.

"What's it all about, anyway?"

Bouncer frowned and tried to look wise. It appeared the best way to hide the fact that he didn't know the answer.

"The big boss didn't want this bronze devil or his side-kicks gettin' out of Chi," he said gravely. "That's why we were holdin' the big stiff they call Renny. But this is even better. None of those other guys is going any place as long as we hold Doc Savage."

After that there was silence. The truck went for a long ways. Ahead of it was a touring car. That car held the others who had been in on the hotel raid. A pretty black-haired girl with large, dark eyes was with them. She did not appear alarmed.

FINALLY the truck went into a big garage on the outskirts of the city. The garage had been an alky loading depot during prohibition. The truck went down an incline into an underground cellar.

"You guys find out where the big guy wants this mug taken," Bouncer said.

A couple of the others looked at him questioningly, but said nothing. One man remained close to Bouncer as the others climbed stairs to rooms up above.

When they came back, Bouncer was alone. "We're to bring Savage up," one of them said.

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Bouncer nodded and helped pull the burlap bag out of the truck. "You guys go ahead, I'll be along in a minute," he growled. "I got to find where Slinky went."

As soon as the others were out of sight, Bouncer went to the rear of the building. There was a bound figure there but he paid no attention to that. It was the man who had been with him a few minutes before.

He scouted around for a few minutes until he found an exit. Then he pulled a pair of earphones from his pocket and took up a comfortable position.

Words came clearly through the earphones. The voices were those of the men carrying the bound figure upstairs.

After a bit there was a solid thump as the sack and the man inside were dropped to the floor. Then came the voice of Consuelo Manresa.

"You're sure you've got Doc Savage, that he won't bother us anymore?"

Someone laughed harshly. "He'd have to be a Houdini to get out of the ropes we got on him, let alone that sack."

A peculiar expression came over Bouncer's features. His hands worked swiftly. A few minutes later the man wearing the earphones did not look like Bouncer at all.

He looked like Doc Savage.

Doc possibly could have used some of his tricks and frustrated the attack at the hotel. He didn't. He wanted to find out what it was all about.

He had spotted the real Bouncer immediately, and had seen the other was carrying a sack. It was plain then that someone was to be abducted, probably himself.

During the wild fighting, he had rolled Bouncer into the adjoining room, tied him up and put him in the sack. Then, a master of disguise, he had altered his own appearance.

Under close scrutiny he probably would have been discovered. But the flight from the hotel had been swift, and the ride in the truck had been made in semidarkness.

Voices were coming again over the earphones. At the sound of one of them, Doc's gold-flecked eyes flashed suddenly.

It was the voice of a man speaking with a thick French accent. He was addressed as "Douter." This was the man, Monk and Ham had told Doc, that Consuelo Manresa wanted them to find; was undoubtedly the man who had telephoned the mysterious warning to stay away from the Arkansas swampland.

"Everythin' et ees goin' smoothly there," Douter said. "I could no do better myself. Still "

The voice broke off suddenly. Almost instantly, alarm bells sounded throughout the garage building. The door to the rear exit Doc had found closed, evidently operated by some mechanical device. Only the bronze man's quick leap put him in the clear.

Evidently someone had become curious, had wanted to look at the captive in the burlap sack. That was a hazard Doc had anticipated when he had hidden a small radio transmitter inside the sack with the real Bouncer.

Now his ruse and the radio transmitter both had been discovered.

Chapter VII. A PICTURE IS STOLEN

ONLY rambling buildings surrounded the big garage, but Doc had no difficulty in making his escape. He walked a short distance until he came to a main highway.

Almost at once a coupé drew up beside him, a door was opened. Doc got in. The driver was the man who had identified himself as Fletcher Carter, private detective. He had a fresh carnation in his coat lapel.

Doc said nothing. Carter drove for several minutes before his curiosity overcame him.

"Did you find out anything?" he blurted.

The bronze man's gold-flecked eyes surveyed him calmly. "About what?" he asked.

Frank admiration showed on Fletcher Carter's face. "I'd always heard you were a cold one. You sure are," he said. He sighed, "Since you won't talk, I'll have to, I guess.

"It's this way. I hung around the hotel, and saw that bunch leaving with a burlap bag. I knew the boys. They're bad. And I figured that you or one of your men must have been in the bag, since I saw the girl goin' along.

"So I trailed them out here, and was just trying to decide whether to try a lone-handed rescue or to call the cops when I heard the alarm bells go off.

"Then I knew whoever had been caught had got away, so I was cruising along, looking for you."

"Where do you figure in this?" Doc asked softly.

Fletcher Carter grinned. "I get around," he confessed. "I know somethin' is going on, somethin' big. Private dicks make their coin by hanging where big things is goin' on and jumping in at the right time."

Doc appeared to consider, as if deciding whether to say anything more.

"You might help me a little, at that," he said. "You say you recognized the men carrying the burlap bag. You evidently knew about the garage. Who owns it?"

Carter shook his head, his smile faded. "You sure ask tough ones," he complained. "I recognized the thugs, yes. They are all gangsters. But who owns the garage? Frankly, I don't know.

"A lot of the big gangs got knocked off by G-men after repeal, you know. The big shots then mostly disappeared; their gangs broke up.

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"Now there is a new big shot, a new gang. But who the big shot is, I don't know. The garage probably belongs to him, although not necessarily. Some of the old boys may be moving back in with a new racket."

Doc nodded, but said nothing. Carter wheeled his coupé expertly up in front of the bronze man's hotel.

"But what connection all this could have with trouble in the Arkansas swamps, I can't figure out," Carter complained. He looked at Doc expectantly.

The bronze man got to the sidewalk. "It is an interesting problem," he agreed. "Thank you for the ride." He turned, walked into the hotel.

Fletcher Carter looked after him, cursing bitterly. Now that he thought it over, he realized that he had done all the talking, had given all the information. Doc had contributed no facts at all.

AN alert country correspondent for a Chicago newspaper was doing a lot of talking, also.

The correspondent had heard rumors of the trouble in the Arkansas swampland. He had gone to the scene. And he had gotten a break.

The Crimson Serpent had struck again!

Hank Hendricks had lived in the swamp all his life. He had operated a still there for almost the same length of time. At least, he began to help his dad run one as soon as he could walk and talk, and had started his son in the trade as soon as the son could walk and talk.

With the son, Bill, he had been tending his still, as usual, during the early part of the preceding night. Then the two started to make a few deliveries.

The deliveries were never made.

Hank Hendricks couldn't tell a very clear story of just what happened. He was too excited, and, for the first time in his life, was too frightened.

But his story agreed with those that had been told previously. First, he had heard a clanking of chains. Then had come a sound like that of moving metal.

Hank had wanted to turn back. His son, Bill, had laughed and continued to paddle ahead in their boat.

Then Bill had screamed. Hank, himself, said he felt as if he had been gripped in hands of steel. He had been paralyzed with fright, expecting death any moment.

He had received a warning instead.

When he finally recovered enough to light a lantern, Bill was dead. His shirt had been torn from him, and he was lying on his face.

The mark of the Crimson Serpent was on his back.

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"You gotta stop buildin' 'at 'ere dam!" Hank Hendricks shrieked. "At's the warnin' I got. I'm a-tellin' yuh! If yuh don't, all us swamp men are goin' to die!"

Then Hank had rushed back toward home, after sounding a warning of his own. The swamp men would not be idle, he said. Already they were organizing.

Whatever the Crimson Serpent was, it didn't want the dam built. Therefore, the swamp people didn't either. They were going to fight the engineers themselves to keep that dam from being built.

Nelson Erhard, the country correspondent, could hardly relay the story, he was so excited. Then he found he wasn't being believed. The skeptical city editor in Chicago told him he had heard too many stories of swamp magic to fall for this one.

"But one of Doc Savage's men was supposed to have been killed by the thing only two nights ago!" Erhard bellowed. "It was only today he telephoned here to say it was a mistake. But he knows all about it. And he's in Chicago. Get hold of him, he'll confirm it."

Extras were on the streets a half hour later.

CRIMSON DEATH

LOOSE IN SWAMP

Government Project Periled

as "Snake" Killer Runs Amuck

DOC SAVAGE AIDE ESCAPES

DOC entered the hotel, expecting to get away at once for Arkansas. This was impossible to do.

Within the space of minutes, the hostelry was swarming with newspapermen and photographers.

Doc always made it a practice to shun publicity whenever possible. He would have shunned it now, but he was given no chance. Besides, the bronze man never antagonized the press. He always at least pretended to cooperate. Quite often he had found the help of newsmen invaluable.

He instructed Renny to answer questions to the best of his ability. The big engineer submitted with ill grace. Particularly did his severe features become strained at the constant popping of flashlight bulbs. He hardly was a pretty sight for easily shocked eyes.

Ham, on the other hand did his best to ease into every picture taken. He would have adopted different tactics if he had noticed Monk.

The hairy chemist, after each picture was taken, would sidle up to the photographer and confide that Ham really was only the valet for Doc. The photographer would nod wisely and make a special note to see that Ham's features were blocked out before the picture was presented to the city editor.

Questions of the reporters were the most annoying.

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"What is it all about? What is this Crimson Serpent? Is it a cult like that of the leopard men of Africa, who dress in animal skins and kill with steel claws? What is behind it? Could it really be the swamp dwellers themselves, or do you suppose there is some outside influence?"

Doc's men would have liked to know the answer to those questions themselves.

Doc left to Renny the answering of most of the questions. The big engineer confessed frankly that he didn't know what it was all about. Renny skirted questions, also, as to how he had gotten to Chicago. He didn't answer that, either.

The bronze man and his aides all were careful to refrain from mentioning any of the events that had befallen them since arriving in Chicago.

Nor did any of them mention the photograph Renny had taken.

One of the more astute newspapermen asked Doc about his other two aides. William Harper Littlejohn, the archaeologist, and Major Thomas J. Roberts, the electrical wizard. He was disappointed when he learned they both were out of the country. Littlejohn with an expedition in Egypt, and Roberts on a job for the government in Panama. The reporter had hoped they might already be at the scene, investigating the strange case.

It was with difficulty the rooms were finally cleared. Renny breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'd rather go back and fight the Crimson Serpent," he growled savagely.

Monk and Ham glanced quickly at Doc. The bronze man nodded. "Pack up the supplies. We will go at once," he said calmly.

"If we only had that camera of Renny's, and knew something about what we're runnin' into!" Monk growled.

Doc took the camera from his pocket, moved toward the bathroom.

"I am going to develop the film now," he said.

GERALD PETTYBLOOM, despite his name, or perhaps because of it, was a crime reporter. He had "contacts" with the underworld that on occasion had let him know about gang executions, even before the executions were carried out.

He was with the reporters who had interviewed Doc and his aides, but he said nothing about the information he had. A telephone tip had given him what might turn out to be an exclusive feature.

"Doc Savage has camera with picture in it, taken of the mysterious Crimson Serpent," his informant had whispered excitedly. "Or at least the picture was taken at the time that engineer was killed down in the swamp."

Pettybloom hadn't asked his informant for the source of the information. Failure to ask embarrassing questions of that kind had permitted him to go on living.

When the other reporters and cameramen rushed from the hotel to return to their offices, Pettybloom didn't. A twenty-dollar bill got him into the suite of rooms adjoining Doc's. Another twenty got him a key that

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would open a connecting door.

Pettybloom was so interested in what he was doing that he failed to notice a couple of hard-faced strangers who were shadowing him.

When Pettybloom entered the rooms next to Doc's, the strangers were only a few feet behind.

The crime reporter didn't see them. He had eased open a connecting door a half inch and had his ear to the crack.

His face lightened when he heard Doc say he was going to develop the film. It was with some impatience that he restrained himself after that.

A few minutes later, Doc reappeared. "I have made four prints," he said. "Here is the best of them."

Pettybloom saw nothing unusual in the fact that Doc would have to make more than one print to get a good one. The bronze man's aides did. Monk started to speak. Before he could, Doc spoke rapidly in Mayan, a language he often used when he wanted no one but his aides to understand them.

Shortly after that, Doc, Renny, Monk and Ham departed.

"Why didn't you just give the guy a print?" Ham asked curiously.

"This is one time I think publicity will do no harm," the bronze man said. "I believe greater publicity will be given if the reporter thinks he has really achieved a scoop, and his editor is less likely to doubt his story."

Pettybloom didn't hear that, didn't know that Doc had heard his cautious entrance to the next room and had seen him in a mirror.

Casting caution aside, the reporter leaped into the vacated rooms, rushed to the bathroom. A howl of glee came from him as he saw two prints there. He grabbed them, tucked one inside his shirt, put the other in a side pocket.

It was then the hard-faced strangers appeared behind him. One slugged Pettybloom very efficiently. There was a lot of force behind the blow. Before the reporter recovered, his pockets had been rifled and his assailants were gone.

"For a supposedly good reporter, he used a nutty method, but at least he got the picture for us," one of the attackers growled.

Pettybloom wasn't dumb. He'd already figured out that he'd been used by some crook to get a copy of the picture Renny had taken. He was thankful he had shown enough sense to hide the second copy he had.

He found his office in an uproar when he reached it. Another story had come in from Arkansas. A group of engineers, caught in the swamp at night, had just returned with a strange tale.

They had seen, they insisted, a band of mystery figures moving through the darkness. Those figures had pursued them, but they had escaped, they said. But that wasn't the strange part of their story. Without exception the engineers claimed that:

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The mystery figures were wearing armor! It was ancient armor! They were carrying guns of a type now seen only in museums, ancient, long-barreled weapons such as were used by Spanish explorers hundreds of years before!

The city editor was of a calm, even disposition. He rarely showed emotion. He was showing it now. He was yelling to all who cared to listen that it couldn't be so. That it was a fake, a publicity stunt of some kind.

Gerald Pettybloom eased up to the desk. With an expression that was almost smirking, he produced the picture he had swiped from Doc's rooms.

The city editor took one look. He became speechless.

Chapter VIII. "DOC SAVAGE IS DEAD!"

DOC and his men did not go directly from the hotel to the airport where the dirigible was waiting. That was an error. They stopped to get him new clothes to replace those almost torn from him in his repeated battles.

Ham and Monk had taken their usual precautions. They had hired four men to guard the dirigible in their absence. The men had been summoned from a local detective agency.

The guards were honest. What happened really wasn't their fault. They had expected their job to consist mostly of just shooing away curious spectators.

The airport was a private one, seldom used. But the guards weren't surprised when two cars pulled in filled with men. The dirigible could be seen from some distance away.

The men got out, strolled close to the guards, asking a few idle questions. The guards answered politely.

Then things happened suddenly. Four of the newcomers produced guns. Before the guards really knew what was occurring, they had been forced into an empty hangar, stripped of their uniforms, and bound and gagged.

Soon four men wearing the uniforms returned to positions near the dirigible. But this time the uniforms were worn by gangsters.

In the meantime, the other six of the late arrivals hadn't been idle. They went to work in groups of two, each hauling a package from one of the two cars.

One group went to the nose of the dirigible; a second became busy directly under the belly of the big ship; the third was occupied at the stern.

A casual observer would have thought them merely workmen. Sight of the guards would have dispelled any suspicion.

The three groups about the dirigible moved swiftly. They completed their jobs in only a few minutes. Then they drove their cars out of sight into the empty hangar. Only the guards remained in view.

When Doc and his men arrived, there was nothing to indicate anything was wrong. Ham paid off the guards. The dapper lawyer, usually alert, was totally unsuspecting. Inasmuch as he had not seen the real guards,

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having summoned them by telephone, he could not be blamed for that.

In the space of minutes, the dirigible soared gently into the air.

Not until it was almost out of view did those in the hangar reappear. In the lead was a big, heavy-set man with a busted nose and cauliflower ears. A gloating expression was on his features.

"Put me in a sack and let me get kicked around, will yuh?" he snarled. "It won't be long now. And, boy, just let me see it happen."

A moment later the two big cars were racing down the highway endeavoring to keep the dirigible in sight.

They didn't have far to go before it happened. First a faint cloud seemed to materialize at the bow of the airship. An instant later a flash of flame came from the center of the ship. Smoke bellowed out rapidly.

Then came a tremendous explosion. Tiny bits of debris drifted earthward.

GERALD PETTYBLOOM'S name was in headlines. He was delighted. This surely would get him a job in New York. The headline read:

EAGLE REPORTER GETS

PICTURE SCOOP OF CENTURY!

Beneath it, almost taking up the full front page of the *Daily Eagle*, was an enlarged print of the picture Pettybloom had found in Doc's room.

The picture was of a group of men in ancient armor! They carried weapons that resembled those used by the Spanish Explorers!

Coupled with the story told by the engineers in Arkansas, the picture created a stir throughout the entire nation. Here was something that appealed to the imagination, something that seemed almost like fiction, but which was supported by incontestable proof.

Camera experts inspected the picture, and wagered their reputations that it was real, had not been retouched in any way.

Antique experts looked through magnifying glasses and solemnly agreed that the first impression had been an accurate one. The armor was of the type used by the Spanish explorers. The guns, with the long barrels and rods to rest them upon, were of the kind those explorers had used.

It was the kind of yarn every editor dreams of getting. Star men from all the metropolitan papers in both Chicago and New York were dispatched to Arkansas by fast plane. Local correspondents there were deluged with calls.

It seemed a mystery for which there was no answer.

Then Pettybloom got a hunch. He yelled for reference books. When those came, he wrote rapidly. The headline in the *Daily Eagle* read:

Chapter VIII. "DOC SAVAGE IS DEAD!"

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SWAMP MYSTERY MEN

MAY BE DE SOTO KIN

Pettybloom had done himself proud. He recalled that Hernando de Soto, the famous Spanish explorer, had discovered the Mississippi in 1541 with a party of his men. De Soto had gone on West, returning to the Mississippi in 1542. It was there he died, or so history has it.

The crime reporter came through with another theory. He recalled famous Pitcairn Island, settled by mutineers from the *Bounty*.

Then he wrote:

Jealousy always existed among exploring parties. Why is it not possible to believe that De Soto became ill perhaps, even if he was not in violent quarrels with his men. One group, the larger group, slipped away in the night, leaving De Soto and a few faithful followers behind.

History shows the last trace of De Soto was almost at the place where these strange happenings are now occurring. If the Pitcairn Island mutineers could live for years without being discovered, think how much more likely it would be that Spanish explorers, and their descendants, probably married to Indians, could remain for centuries concealed in the trackless wastes of the swampland.

Proud by nature, these men and their descendants kept the Spanish tongue, kept the armor and guns their forebears had. They shunned contact with the outside world, created a kingdom of their own inside the swamp. Now, with that kingdom menaced by a flood-control project that would drive them from their hiding place, they are fighting back . . .

The story ran for three columns. Pettybloom really thought it was the best yarn he had ever done.

That is, until he received the telephone call that told him Doc Savage was dead.

THE tip, as usual, came to the crime reporter anonymously. Pettybloom never did learn that it was Bouncer who called.

Confirmation came rapidly. Scores of rural residents had been watching the dirigible, had seen the flash of fire and heard the explosion.

It took only a little checking to learn the airship really did belong to Doc. Then, too, the real guards at the airport were found and released, and they told their story.

The sensation was enough to knock even the swamp mystery off the front pages, or would have been had not editors been able to link Doc directly with the mystery.

The famous man of bronze, the papers reported, had lost his life while headed for Arkansas to solve that mystery.

Most newspapers were inclined to treat the fire and blast as an accident, pointing out that many other dirigibles had been similarly destroyed. Failure to find much wreckage was attributed to the terrific explosion.

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Gerald Pettybloom was no dope. He knew better. For one thing, he knew Doc's dirigible was mostly of metal alloy, very light, and besides it was filled with helium, which wouldn't burn.

The fire could only have been incendiary, probably of thermite composition designed to destroy the metal.

The explosion also could have been no accident.

For once in his life, Pettybloom was frightened. He really had a hold on something so big he was scared.

There was no question in his mind but that the swamp mystery and the destruction of Doc and his aides were linked. That meant someone in Chicago was very interested in the Arkansas swampland.

Pettybloom didn't see how that was possible, but he knew it must be so.

He called up a few members of the underworld he thought he could trust and asked what he believed to be discreet questions. At first he could get no information at all. Then he received what he thought was a hot lead.

He was promised the "real low down" if he would meet a certain stoolie at a South Side address.

Pettybloom went there. The stoolie didn't show up, but three thugs did. The reporter never did see their faces. They pounced on him from behind. He was terribly beaten up.

When he recovered, he found a note pinned to his shirt. The note warned him to forget what he knew, if he wanted to keep on living.

Pettybloom thought of another Chicago crime reporter who hadn't kept on living, but had been shot down because some of his "connections" thought he knew too much. Then he thought of Doc Savage, and of all the good the bronze man had done. The reporter wanted the killers of the bronze man punished.

He staggered to the street, staggered to a nearby cigar store. There was a telephone booth there.

He never got inside. A hard object was pushed into his side and a man, hat pulled low, stepped up behind him.

"So yuh couldn't take a hint, huh?" the man asked. His voice was quiet and without malice.

Pettybloom tried to run. The gun spoke twice, and the reporter went down.

That he wasn't killed was no fault of the gunman. He was taken to a hospital, unconscious. A minor mystery developed an hour later when he vanished, apparently kidnapped. Chicago police launched a hunt for him, but it was taken for granted he would never be found alive.

DOC SAVAGE had preferred that for a while everyone believe he and his aides were dead. The dirigible had no sooner taken the air than all aboard knew it had been tampered with.

Sensitive alarms were attached to all parts of the big ship. A glance at dials in the control room not only showed the airship had received visitors, but indicated where they had called.

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Without giving away that fact, Doc had inspected the ship swiftly. His gold-flecked eyes detected at once the three bombs that had been fastened to the dirigible.

The bomb in the bow was of poison gas. This had been removed by Monk almost before the ship was off the ground. Later, the fire bomb amidships and the explosive at the stern had been removed.

Doc and his aides knew they were being watched. But it was easy for the bronze man to counterfeit what was expected to happen; in fact, the gas bomb made the disappearance of the ship logical.

A smoke bomb was put in its place. The smoke hid the dirigible while Doc set off an explosive that sounded loud, but did no damage.

What the watchers from the ground failed to notice was that a cloud drifted across the sky after that explosion. That cloud was artificially made, but it concealed the dirigible from those below.

"This way our mystery armor-wearers won't be expecting callers," Monk grinned.

"I don't suppose they ever have seen an ape," Ham giggled. "It will be quite a shock to them when you drop in on them."

Renny's big fists opened and closed, his face more severe than ever. "Just so I can get a swat at those guys who knocked me over the head," he growled.

Doc said nothing. The bronze man only whirled the controls. The dirigible headed toward Arkansas.

Chapter IX. INTO THE SWAMP

DOC and his aides weren't the only ones heading south. Shortly after the dirigible lifted into the air, a plane took off from another airport. It carried two persons.

One was a small man with real black hair plastered close to his head. He was almost elegantly dressed. A perfumed handkerchief was jammed into the breast pocket of his coat. He handled the controls of the plane with negligent ease.

In the rear cockpit was a girl. She likewise was small, weighing less than a hundred pounds, with perfectly black hair and large, dark eyes.

Georges Douter and Consuelo Manresa also were on their way to Arkansas.

The small plane gained altitude rapidly. A strained expression was on the girl's face. She kept casting nervous glances around her.

Douter glanced over his shoulder. "There ees nothing to fear," he said.

The girl's mouth tightened. "But Doc Savage "

Douter shrugged. "Eef what Bouncer told us ees true, we no longer need think about Doc Savage."

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The small man doubled over with sudden mirth. "That Bouncer," he chortled. "Eef he wasn't mad when he got out of that sack!"

The girl looked thoughtful. "Doc Savage had been listening to our conversation. Do you suppose he heard anything "

Again Douer shrugged. "What ees the difference?" he asked calmly. "Doc Savage, he ees no more."

The girl looked doubtful. She heard of some of the almost miraculous escapes the bronze man had made in the past.

She paid no attention to the large cloud the plane skirted a short time later. Even if she had, she would have seen nothing. The dirigible was well concealed.

Monk and Ham also had been keeping a close lookout. That was not difficult, even with the airship securely hidden in a cloud.

Infra-ray light was directed through the artificial haze with strong projectors. Then, using telescopes, particularly designed for the work, it was easy to see anything that was passing below, or on either side.

Monk spotted the plane first. He said nothing until he could make out the occupants clearly. Then he erupted.

"That hussy!" he piped angrily. "Everywhere we go that female insulting machine has to go also!"

Ham swung his telescope, smiled sweetly. "Your irresistible allure," he jeered softly. "I'd always heard there was one type of woman that went for 'cave men,' but this is the first one I ever saw that was attracted by an ape man."

The hairy chemist snarled angrily, his big shoulders hunched about his bulletlike head. "You "

Monk halted suddenly. Renny had appeared beside him. The big engineer took the telescope from him, looked through it carefully.

"Holy cow!" he ejaculated. "The Frenchie! The guy who told me he was a reporter and wasn't!"

"That's the guy who called us, who said he was the Oracle and told us you were dead," Ham put in excitedly.

"Let's drop down and get 'em, Doc!" Monk shouted. The chemist jumped up and down, his long arms waving.

"Not yet," the bronze man cautioned. Doc did not mention that he had spotted the plane even before Monk saw it. Nor did he tell of Douer's conversation with the gang that had attacked them in Chicago.

"I believe we will learn more by following them," he added.

The dirigible picked up speed as the plane shot ahead. All attention remained on the plane.

That was why none aboard saw the second ship that was drifting along high above and behind.

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FLETCHER CARTER looked as self-sufficient as usual. He had a fresh, pink carnation in his coat lapel.

The plane he was in was almost a pursuit ship. It had sleek lines and the roar of its motor indicated it was capable of tremendous speed. A hired pilot was at the controls.

Occasionally, Carter would lift a pair of binoculars to his eyes. Each time he nodded with quiet satisfaction. Neither Georges Douter or Consuelo Manresa had spotted him. He did not intend that they should.

It was the pilot who first called his attention to the cloud following along behind Douter's plane.

"I never seen a cloud move that fast," the pilot shouted.

Fletcher Carter's lips formed a silent "o," and he swung the glasses upon the cloud. He watched it for long minutes. Then he grinned broadly.

A sudden gust of wind had ripped away a fragment of the filmy mist. For just an instant he had obtained a glimpse of a dark object.

Carter had still been in Chicago when the extras had hit the street blaring, "Doc Savage Dead."

"Just a slightly exaggerated report," he told himself. One hand played with the carnation in his coat, and his eyes became thoughtful. He spoke to the pilot.

After that, his plane dropped still farther behind, and climbed for additional altitude. It became a mere speck, invisible to the naked eye.

The six hundred fifty miles to the Arkansas swampland area were covered swiftly. But it was growing dusk when the dank, dismal-appearing expanse appeared below.

For the first time, Douter appeared uncertain of his destination. He swung out, skirted the edge of the swamp. Several times he circled once or twice over cleared areas that could have been used as landing fields, only to turn and go South.

"Lookin' for something?" Monk breathed.

Doc nodded silent assent. The bronze man's gold-flecked eyes were whirling strangely.

Ham and Renny strained their eyes through the gathering darkness.

They all saw it when it came. It was a flashlight signal. The light was directed toward the sky, and was being swung in a large circle.

Instantly the roar of Douter's plane was muted. The ship spiraled swiftly.

Below, a group of brilliant lights came on suddenly, evidently spotlights operated by storage batteries. A good-sized field was illuminated, one easily large enough for a plane to land.

"This is going to be close," Ham muttered.

Monk and Renny said nothing. They knew what Ham meant. It would be impossible for the dirigible to come down directly behind the plane without being seen. Yet if there was any delay, those they were following

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might get away.

The dirigible tilted suddenly. Doc's aides gasped. The bronze man had spotted a narrow tunnel between trees at the far end of the field. It was the only place for a quick landing. They would have to chance that eyes, blinded by lights, would not see the shadow of the airship.

Beneath them, Douter's ship landed. Two figures got out, to be met by a third.

Renny thought he saw a brief flurry of motion, but he couldn't be sure. The dirigible was moving too fast.

UNDER Doc's expert piloting, the dirigible slid into the space between the trees with hardly a sound. The space was so narrow that it seemed like a hangar created by nature.

None of those aboard the big airship spoke. There was no need for words. Each knew what he had to do.

Monk and Ham broke out long mooring lines. Swiftly they anchored the dirigible. Renny seized weapons and ammunition. The weapons were the mercy pistols Doc and his aides customarily used. But this time, as well as mercy bullets, Renny brought out several drums of explosive shells, bullets that created tremendous blasts when they hit.

Doc vanished. He whipped over the side of the dirigible and was gone before his aides even knew what was happening. He darted toward the swamp side of the clearing, moving silently and swiftly.

High overhead, with motor cut low, Fletcher Carter was peering down through night glasses. There was a regretful look on his features. Finally he sighed, spoke to the pilot.

"Much as I'd like to, that landing field looks a little too crowded for us," he said.

The pilot nodded, swung the nose of the plane in a big arc.

The bronze man was gone only a short time. But even before he returned, the bright lights about the improvised field to the rear of the dirigible had vanished.

Monk, Ham and Renny were moving about restlessly and impatiently.

Doc did not explain. He bounded back aboard the airship, and went to the stern. When he reappeared he was carrying what appeared to be a long, thin board, some two feet wide. The board was awkward to carry and undoubtedly heavy, but the bronze man handled it easily.

"Goggles?" Doc asked.

Renny produced four queer-looking sets of goggles. Each of them donned the glasses. The big engineer reached down, swung what appeared like a searchlight.

The strange part about the searchlight was that no light could be seen coming from it with the naked eye. It was another piece of equipment the bronze man and his aides used often.

Shooting an infra-ray light, invisible under ordinary circumstances, it lighted a perfect path for those wearing the specially designed goggles.

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Rapidly, but taking care to make no noise, the four moved toward the clearing. Renny swung the light in a wide circle.

Nothing was to be seen except the deserted plane.

A grunt of disappointment came from Monk. Not often did he think Doc Savage made an error, but he thought so this time.

"Daggonit, Doc!" He wailed. "If you hadn't run away, we'd have got here in time to see where they went."

The bronze man said nothing.

Ham shot a quick look at Doc, and his lips twitched. He knew Doc's habit of not explaining all he did, was willing to bet the bronze man had something up his sleeve.

Doc led the way to the swamp, without a word. Then it became apparent what the "board" he carried really was.

With quick motions, he pressed release catches. The "board" popped apart, became a long, narrow canoe. Inside were two thin paddles, made of very strong metal. The canoe was big enough to hold four persons.

Monk gazed blankly at the thick maze of foliage in front of them, at the many different paths a canoe could take through the almost stagnant water.

"B—but, Doc," he blurted plaintively. "Like I said, how are we going tuh know where they went?"

The bronze man did not answer that is, in words. Silently, he pointed toward the water.

Monk's eyes got very large. He gulped with embarrassment.

Before them was a perfect trail.

THE trail was plainer than if it had been footprints in snow. It was a brilliant yellow line, showing up clearly on the water under the infra-ray searchlight.

Monk was chemist enough to know what it meant. And he knew now why Doc had disappeared for a few moments.

Doc had wanted to continue trailing those ahead of them. He had known, naturally, they would take to the water. While the others were still getting from the plane, probably talking to their guide, he had found the boat they would use.

At the stern of the boat, low where it would not be noticed, he had fastened a small container like a pepper box, but with only one small hole open.

Through that hole dropped a steady, thin stream of powder, a powder that dissolved on the water, leaving what appeared to be a yellow trail behind.

No matter how many turns and twists the boat ahead of them took, they could follow without difficulty.

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Ham was doubled over with silent mirth. Monk, for once, was speechless. He had nothing to say as the four got into their canoe, but he did take one of the paddles. The savage sweep of his arms showed the suppressed feeling he was working off.

After a bit, none of those in the canoe felt like talking, anyway. Their surroundings were responsible for that.

In their many adventures, Doc and his aides had been in some strangely disquieting spots. But none more so than the swamp.

The hot, humid stink of the place closed about them. Creepers, long, dangling vines looked like deadly coiled snakes. The trees took on strange, unearthly shapes.

Bird noises were few. That was understandable. Those who had passed that way before them had frightened the birds.

The yellow trail on the water twisted and turned, occasionally going through towering grass where it seemed impossible for a boat to go until that grass was pushed aside.

Renny swung the searchlight suddenly from side to side. Nothing was to be seen. Neither Monk nor Ham gave evidence that they had noticed that startled move. But they knew why Renny had made it. They felt the same way themselves.

It seemed that eyes were staring at them. Hidden eyes, malignant eyes, that watched every move.

Doc's trilling sound came. It was so unexpected the other three jumped, nerves tense.

Then they heard it, too. Heard the noise that Doc's keen ears had detected in the distance.

Far ahead there was a faint sound. A sound like that of clanking chains.

Without orders, Monk's big shoulders bent to their work. The strong metal paddle bent under the force of his drive. Doc appeared to be moving effortlessly, but the paddle he was using bent more.

The boat shot ahead.

A queer sense of fatalism gripped Ham. He felt he knew what was going to happen next, even before it occurred.

He felt no satisfaction when the sound came the sound that could only be made by men marching in armor.

Then it came the scream they had all been expecting.

It was a shrill, high scream, seemingly forced unwillingly from tight lips.

It was hard to tell whether that scream came from a man or a woman.

Chapter X. SURROUNDED

THE sound of the scream came from some distance ahead. Evidently those they had been trailing also had been moving at a rapid rate. The canoe fairly cut through the water.

Then they ran into trouble.

It came so swiftly that Renny, in the bow of the boat with the searchlight, almost was knocked overboard.

A thick, tough vine was across the bayou, barely two feet above the water. It was stretched tight.

Doc's gold-flecked eyes flickered at the sight of that. It couldn't have been there when the other boat passed. Human hands had stretched that vine, had placed it there deliberately to delay those who were following.

Yet how could those ahead have known they were being trailed?

No one wasted time looking for answers. A sharp knife flashed to Renny's hands. The edge was razor sharp, but so tough was the vine that it took several slashes to sever it.

After that, progress was slower. Several other vines were found barring the way.

Then the brilliant yellow trail they had been following vanished. One moment it was there. The next it was gone. The water ahead was perfectly clear. But the bronze man did not hesitate.

Without loss of a single stroke, he swerved the canoe toward a narrow bayou on the right.

Then others saw what Doc's keen eyes had found.

There was a body directly ahead. A body that was held upright against the broad trunk of a tree by tightly twisted vines. Unconsciously, a sigh of relief came from Monk.

It was the body of a man.

The clothes had been stripped almost completely from Georges Douer. Ironically enough, his shoulder holster had been replaced about him. There was another leather sheath at the back of his neck. It still held its knife.

Neither gun or knife had done Douer any good. Coiled, stretching almost entirely over his thin chest, was The Crimson Serpent, the serpent of blood.

The Frenchman's eyes were open. His contorted features seemed to hold an unbelieving, baffled look.

There was no sign of Consuelo Manresa. There was no trace of the boat she had been riding in, or of the guide that must have been along.

Renny was swallowing hard, his features dour and stern. Ham looked as if he were seeing something that didn't exist.

Tiny noises were coming from Monk. The hairy chemist was torn between relief that Consuelo Manresa hadn't been killed, and anger at what he knew must have been true.

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There was no question in Monk's mind but that the dark-eyed girl must have led Georges Douter into a trap.

A faint whistle came from Ham. The dapper lawyer motioned to one side. Doc nodded. He had already seen it.

A pile of clothes had been left beneath a huge cypress on the other side of the bayou. The clothes had been folded deliberately and neatly. Why they had been left, was a question none could answer.

Doc drove the canoe to the foot of the tree. With skilled fingers he went through pockets. He extracted a thin, flat book. Wordlessly, he opened it.

A startled grunt came from Monk. The book was a passport, issued in France.

It identified Georges Douter as a member of the Sûreté, the French Secret Police.

For a moment, none spoke. Questions flashed to the mind of each, but they were questions that seemed to have no answer.

What was a French Secret Service man doing in an Arkansas swamp? What was the impelling mystery that had drawn Georges Douter thousands of miles from his gay Paris to meet a hideous, terrible death?

"It gets screwier and screwier," Monk growled. "First somethin' happens down here. Then we find it has some connection with a gang in Chicago. Now we find it must have some connection in France, as well."

"And the girl knew it," Ham put in, but for once he did not appear to be gibing Monk. Even the dapper lawyer was sobered. "She wanted us to locate Douter. And she was in New York."

"Strings leading from every place," Renny agreed somberly. "And all leading to this swamp."

Monk started to speak again, then his jaws closed. He had looked at Doc.

The bronze man appeared unaware of the scene about him. His head was tilted slightly to one side, lids half-masked his gold-flecked eyes.

Monk knew what that meant. The hairy chemist did not even try to strain his own ears. If the sound was too faint for Doc to be sure, then Monk knew he certainly couldn't hear it.

From boyhood, Doc had trained daily, exercising every part of his body, every faculty. His hearing far exceeded that of a normal man; his eyes were trained to detect things that any other person would fail to see.

Ham stirred uneasily. Again the dapper lawyer had the feeling that hidden eyes were watching him.

Renny felt the same. He was swinging the infra-ray searchlight ceaselessly.

"Holy cow, let's get out of here!" the big engineer rasped. His voice sounded loud and harsh in the stillness.

Monk's muscles bunched, his piglike eyes receded even farther in their pits of gristle until they could hardly be seen through the big goggles he wore.

"Maybe that girl wasn't in this," he said, but even his voice held no hope. "Let's go on, Doc. Let's find out what this is all about."

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Doc Savage said nothing. His eyes were open slightly more now, as if he were nearing something a little plainer.

Ham peered far back into the brush, his jaw dropping as he saw infra-ray light flash on something. It was a boat. Without examining it, Ham would have bet it was the boat which had carried Georges Douter to his death.

He motioned to Renny. The engineer turned the light squarely on the boat. The small can Doc had attached to the stern was missing. That explained that.

Evidently one of those they had followed had discovered it, probably by accident. They couldn't have known what it was for, but they had taken no chances. They had removed it.

Renny swung the light upward. Its rays pierced the dense foliage of a tree, some fifty feet away.

A gasp came from the big engineer. All eyes turned toward the light.

Peering at them through leaves of a tree was a face. It was a lined, evil face, with slitted eyes gleaming venomously.

Just beneath it was the barrel of a gun.

"LET us get out and look around," Doc said. The bronze man spoke unusually loud.

Doc slipped the goggles from his eyes as they stepped out upon the knee of the big cypress, worked their way toward the abandoned boat.

Monk, Ham and Renny made quite a bit of noise. They weren't surprised to discover a moment later that Doc had disappeared. They had expected that. Although they had heard nothing, they knew Doc had vanished up the tree above them.

The bronze man could move as silently through the treetops, and almost as rapidly, as any denizen of the jungle.

Renny could not resist another flash with the searchlight.

The face they had seen was no longer there.

Only seconds later, Doc reappeared. His features were emotionless, as usual, but his aides knew him well. They realized he was slightly puzzled.

"Gone," Doc reported briefly.

If the bronze man was slightly puzzled, his aides were more so. It didn't seem possible that anyone could move fast enough to elude Doc in the darkness.

The whole thing was getting more and more baffling. Ham felt nerves crawling on the back of his neck.

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Doc took the searchlight from Renny and replaced his goggles. On the far side of the boat was a single footprint.

It was a footprint different from that any of them had ever seen before. The hard mud showed every detail clearly.

It was the print of an armored foot.

Doc's head came up suddenly. "Quickly!" he rapped. He leaped toward their canoe.

The others had heard nothing, seen nothing. But they did not hesitate. They jumped after him.

"Watch for broken twigs. We should be able to trail the others that way," Doc snapped. Then he added: "If we are not too late."

Monk did not understand what was meant. He didn't particularly care. Doc had turned the nose of the canoe toward the center of the swamp. That was what the chemist wanted.

He was not one to mull long over puzzles. What he wanted was action. He was quite content to let Doc solve all the questions.

But even Monk wondered what Doc meant by that last statement. It wasn't like the bronze man to make a statement like that.

Doc back-watered suddenly. The canoe stopped, swung around, raced down another bayou. Again Doc stopped it. This time he turned back.

Then Monk and the others heard what Doc had discerned some minutes before.

The silence of the night had been broken. There was a faint, steady sound. It seemed to be coming toward them from all directions.

Perspiration broke out on Monk's homely features. Renny reached in the bottom of the canoe, grabbed up several of the mercy pistols, passed them to the others.

The canoe shot out into a miniature lake, then stopped. The sound they had heard was louder now. They could identify it. It was the steady, swishing sound of many paddies. It swelled in an ever-increasing chorus.

A moment later the first dugout came into view. It held several men.

Then scores of dugouts appeared. They came from every direction.

Doc and his men were surrounded.

LANTERNS and searchlights were carried by men in most of the dugouts. The searchlights came on, the lanterns were lighted.

The canoe with Doc and his aides was the focal point for hundreds of lights. They were the center of a silent, hostile mob.

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For long moments no one spoke. Then one dugout moved forward. It carried but a single man.

From descriptions given in the newspapers, Doc and his aides recognized the occupant as Hank Hendricks, the bearded still operator whose son had been killed by the Crimson Serpent.

"I give yuh fair warnin', and yuh wouldn't take it." Hendricks grated harshly.

Doc said nothing. The bronze man seemed to have added inches to his height, even sitting as he was in the canoe. His features were perfectly calm, his gold-flecked eyes quiet.

A rifle was on Hank Hendricks' knee. With one hand, the bearded swamp man shifted that rifle so that the muzzle was aimed at Doc. One finger rested carelessly on the trigger.

Monk moved his mercy pistol cautiously. Careful as he was, the movement was spotted.

"Don't try that!" a voice spat behind him. "I'd jest as soon shoot as not."

Monk breathed deeply. This was a tough spot. He didn't need a diagram to tell him what it was all about.

The natives had been opposed to the government engineers entering the swamp, to begin with. Then the Crimson Serpent had appeared. Rightly or wrongly, the natives had blamed work on the flood project for that.

Hendricks had sounded a warning. He had told all outsiders to keep away from the swamp. And the bearded native had lost a son.

Ham likewise saw the point. For years, this swamp had been shunned by peace officers of all kinds. It was a sanctuary for all those outside the law. Not that all of those that lived in the swamp were lawbreakers, but enough of them were. They would jump at an excuse that would keep the swamp inviolate.

Doc Savage had persuaded them to let the engineers work, to begin with. Now, even his influence seemed gone.

"You recognize me?" the bronze man asked quietly.

Hank Hendricks nodded, and for an instant his features split in a hideous snarl.

"Yeah, I recognize yuh. Yuh are responsible for the whole thing. Yuh just the same as killed my son. If we uns hadn't listened to yuh, if we hadn't let them damn engineers in, I'd "

"Hold it, Hank," someone cautioned from the background. "Ye said yerself we'd let these fellers go."

Hendricks spun his head. "Thet's what I said. But I changed my mind. You didn't lose a son. You ain't suffered like I has."

He turned back, his rifle came up.

Doc had not appeared to move. Only his aides had seen the quick gesture he had made. One hand had darted under his shirt, into the equipment belt he always wore about his waist.

Now that hand was again resting on the edge of the canoe, over the water.

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"If you will only let me speak, and try and explain what is happening " Doc began.

"Yuh can't speak. None of ye can lie out of this trick!" Hank Hendricks shrilled. The rifle in his hand came up.

Monk's shoulders rose and fell. Now it was coming. A fight was inevitable. They were hopelessly outnumbered. Besides, they had no wish to kill these people. They were doing what they thought best. They didn't deserve to be shot down. And mercy bullets wouldn't work here. If they were to escape at all, they would have to use the explosive shells, bullets that were so powerful that even one would wipe out an entire dugout and all the men in it.

Then Monk gasped. He thought he was going blind. The scene in front of him faded with astonishing rapidity. The lights grew dim, then vanished. He could no longer see Hank Hendricks. He couldn't see anyone.

Dimly he was aware that the canoe made a violent lurch forward just before the shooting started.

Chapter XI. GUNS ROAR

BULLETS were whistling overhead. Startled shouts came from all sides.

Then the firing stopped as quickly as it had started. A man shrieked loudly.

"I can't see! I can't see!"

Others took up the cry. The secluded lake in the swamp became a bedlam of noise.

Monk, Ham, and Renny couldn't see anything either. They didn't know just what was happening, but they knew Doc was responsible for it.

Their canoe was moving rapidly through the water. Once it struck another boat. A hand reached out, grabbed Monk by the arm. The hairy chemist grunted. This was something he knew about.

One of his long arms streaked forth, grabbed an unseen opponent around the neck. The other opened his mouth to yell. Monk's huge paw smashed him squarely in the open mouth, knocked out several teeth and gagged any outcry.

Several words were spoken rapidly in a strange tongue. Disgustedly, Monk let go of the man he had grabbed. Their canoe glided on. Monk would have preferred to remain for a little fighting, but he obeyed instantly when Doc spoke in Mayan, ordering him to let go.

It came as no surprise to Monk that evidently Doc was the only one who could still see. He had expected that.

Sounds of shouts and angry cries began to fade. The canoe leaped on through the winding bayous.

Gradually vision returned to Doc's aides. Ham's features were bewildered. Big Renny rubbed an arm anxiously over his eyes.

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"Holy cow, I can see again!" he rumbled.

"The chemical I used does not have long or permanent effects," Doc said quietly.

"What is it?" Ham gasped.

"A chemical which, mixed with water, produces almost the same effect as tear gas, but without the painful, smarting effects," the bronze man explained.

He did not add, as he might have, that it was a compound he had discovered himself, and one that soon would probably be adopted by police for controlling unruly mobs. He took two pieces of glass from his own eyes. They were lenses made to fit directly over the eyeballs. Use of them had enabled Doc to see when the others could not.

Those behind, evidently had also recovered their eyesight. There were sounds of splashing and of many boats moving through the narrow bayous as the pursuit started.

Monk got into action again, aided by wielding a paddle. The speed of the canoe increased.

Renny was an engineer and accustomed to keeping his sense of direction. But even he admitted to himself that he would have become lost had he tried to find his way out of the swamp.

Doc did not hesitate. The bronze man's sense of direction also was highly trained. Doc did, however, take a circular, rather than a direct route to the edge of the swamp.

His action had its effect. Soon the sound of pursuit began to fade.

"But now what?" Monk demanded. It was a question that had occurred to the others, also. They had lost the trail of the girl, the only clue they had.

Doc did not answer for a moment. His gold-flecked eyes flashed queerly. "There is one thing more we can try " he began.

He broke off suddenly. They had almost reached the edge of the swamp, were nearly back to the dirigible.

The bronze man held up his hands, stopped paddling. "Get your mercy pistols ready," he said quietly. "A group of men are approaching the dirigible!"

It was some minutes before the others detected the sound. Then they heard it. It was the sound of several men moving almost silently through the underbrush.

"The natives?" Ham whispered.

Doc shook his head. "They could not have reached here yet," he answered.

"Do we fight?" Renny demanded belligerently.

Again the bronze man shook his head. "Not if we can help it. We need the dirigible. Run for it!"

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The canoe was abandoned. With Doc in the lead, the four streaked through the brush.

They were almost to the big airship when the light came on. It was a huge light, evidently one of the type that had been used about the improvised landing field.

It caught the four men directly in its rays.

Monk muttered inarticulate words. Ham was using expressions that would not have been permitted in a court of law.

Pistols barked. Renny grunted as a slug caught him in the side. Only the fact that all Doc's men were wearing the bullet-proof underwear that was part of their usual attire, saved him from injury.

Then came a tremendous blast. The light went out.

Doc had not slowed his pace in the least. He had fired on the run. He had been using an explosive bullet. The huge light that had been directed on them went into a thousand pieces.

From somewhere near a man yelled in fright. Again the gun in Doc's hand spoke. The bronze man never killed when it could be avoided. He was not trying to kill now. He had directed the explosive bullets high over the heads of the onrushing group.

That group stopped. Parts of trees rained down on them. The thunder of the gun was terrific.

The attackers turned and ran. A minute later Doc and his aides reached the dirigible.

The bronze man took no part in releasing the mooring lines or getting the big ship back into the air. He left that to the others.

Instead, he went to the small but very complete laboratory with which the dirigible was equipped. For a time, he worked swiftly.

Major Roberts, Doc's aide known as Long Tom, who was busy at Panama, would have understood what the bronze man was doing had he been present. It is doubtful if the others would. Long Tom was the electrical expert.

The dirigible had been in the air for some minutes before Doc reappeared. He was carrying what looked like a huge porcupine except that the object he had bristled with large horns instead of quills.

Ham recognized what it was first. An expression of delight crossed the dapper lawyer's face.

Doc had rigged the big object at the side of the dirigible. In that position, all of the many horns were turned down. Then the bronze man turned a switch, and produced a pair of headphones.

"A listening device!" Ham shouted gleefully.

Monk's homely face split in a wide grin. He could understand now why Doc hadn't wasted time to stay and fight. A listening device of the type the bronze man was using, would enable them to float along noiselessly in the air, but follow the course of anything below them, even a canoe with muffled paddle.

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If they could pick up the trail of the men in armor, a sound easily identified, they could trail directly along to the heart of the mystery that confronted them.

Monk ambled to Doc's side, put on a second pair of headphones.

Doc was whirling a dial and working what appeared to be a loop aerial.

Monk grunted delightedly. Faintly, at first, then stronger, came a sound of clanking armor in the headphones. The chemist whirled, motioned to Ham at the controls to change direction.

Then a new sound came, a sound they didn't need earphones to hear.

It was the sound of many shots, almost as if an army were attacking.

THE sound of the shots came from the extreme—lower end of the swamp. It was there the dam was to be built which eventually would flood this swamp, but which also would act as a breakwater, would prove invaluable in time of floods.

And it was there that the main body of government workers were located.

"The natives are attacking them!" Renny exclaimed incredulously.

Monk's homely face pictured disappointment. Time was everything right now. If they went to the aid of the government workers, they would lose the trail of the men in armor. If they lost that trail, they might never solve the mystery of the Crimson Serpent.

But Monk knew, even before Doc acted, what the answer would be.

The bronze man dropped the earphones, rushed to the controls. The dirigible spun. Powerful motors roared, bit into the air. The airship lunged forward.

"Lights! Flare powder!" Doc rapped.

The others jumped to obey. No other instructions were needed. They knew what Doc intended.

Sound carries far in the night, particularly to those up above. The firing had sounded close at hand. Actually, it had been miles away.

It was ten minutes before the dirigible approached the main government camp.

Doc had soared upward, putting the dirigible high above the scene. As they neared, he silenced most of the engines. All lights had been extinguished.

Then he tilted the nose down, kicked on all the motors. At the same instant, two powerful searchlights were turned on in the nose of the big ship.

The dirigible thundered down. And the lights showed a strange scene.

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Government workers had taken refuge behind a small earthen ramp that had been thrown up. There was a ditch behind it, giving them ample protection. But it was apparent from the first that they had but few weapons.

Opposed to them was a sight such as none of those in the airship had ever seen before.

Men in armor were moving steadily forward.

The armored men were not moving rapidly. Their guns handicapped them there. Those guns were not modern weapons. They were of the ancient, long-barrelled type, that had to be rested on a metal stand before they could be fired.

Only for an instant was the picture clearly defined. The sudden roar of the airship's motors, the powerful beams of the searchlights had their effect.

The men in armor turned and fled.

It was then that Monk and Ham dropped the flare powder. Brilliant orange and red lights sprang upward as the flares hit the ground.

The retreat of the armored men became a rout.

THE flares faded, the searchlights were extinguished. Even those lights were not powerful enough to penetrate the dense growth of the swamp into which the attackers had vanished.

The dirigible leveled off, circled and came back over the camp. Men were running back and forth aimlessly, unable to understand what was happening.

Doc spoke briefly to Renny. The dirigible came to a stop, however, practically invisible in the sky. A rope ladder was dropped from the underside.

A few moments after, the bronze man appeared in the midst of the excited government workers. So swiftly had events occurred that none knew where he had come from.

His calm question brought a half-hundred answers at once.

"They appeared without warning! Two of the engineers got shot! We wouldn't have had a chance if it had not been for something that roared out of the sky!"

Skillfully, Doc dodged from the excited group, went to the tent where the two wounded men had been taken. The camp physician was busy there.

Without a word, the bronze man aided. Seconds later he held a lead pellet in his hand. It was a bullet extracted from the wound of one of the men.

The bullet showed the momentary impression from the sky had been correct. It had never been fired from a modern rifle. It had been hand-cast.

And it was perfectly smooth. It had no marks of rifling on it at all.

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It could only have come from a very ancient gun.

Undoubtedly it had been fired from a weapon such as the ancient Spanish explorers used! The men were dressed in Spanish armor!

"There was something strange I noticed," the camp physician told Doc conversationally. "I've traveled a great deal. Once I spent several years in Spain. These men tonight those who attacked us were speaking Spanish. But they were speaking an odd dialect, one that I did not think had been used for two hundred years!"

IT was easy enough, through the listening device, to pick up the trail of those who had fired on the camp. The difficulty was in keeping the dirigible moving slowly enough.

Monk and Ham debated angrily on the number of men there had been in the party.

Ham was convinced there had been several hundred. Monk said fifty, at least.

Doc did not join the argument. He had counted the men. There had been exactly twenty.

Renny said nothing at all. The big engineer was trying to think. His huge fists, which he had often used to smash through solid oak doors, opened and closed.

There quite evidently was an effort to balk the flood project. Or was there? The swamp dwellers apparently thought so. The attack on the government workers bore that out. But why? And what could the flood project mean to a French Secret Service man, or to a gang in Chicago?

And, most of all, where did the men in armor come from? Renny, also, thought of De Soto. That theory seemed almost beyond belief, but the big engineer had too much experience to dismiss any theory as fantastic.

Slowly the dirigible floated onward. It was moving silently, lurking several miles behind those they were trailing.

The night had closed in. The moon was not yet up. The dank gloom seemed to hold hideous secrets.

Even Monk and Ham quieted their bickering. It was getting them, also.

How far they went, they did not know. It was difficult to estimate distance at the slow speed they were traveling. But they knew they covered many miles.

Then the sound of the armor clinking ceased.

Ham's breath came out in a slow sigh. He glanced at Doc. Whatever it was, wherever it was, at least they were close to their destination.

The infra-ray beams were turned on. Through the telescope they could see nothing but an apparently limitless swamp. In places, trees loomed high. Always there was thick, heavy vegetation. Only occasionally could they see a cleared spot, and that was small. It was going to be impossible to bring the dirigible down here.

Monk gasped suddenly. Renny started. The others had seen it also.

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There had been a faint whir, like the sound of wings on a giant bird. A dark object had shot by in front of them, descending swiftly.

Doc alone showed no surprise. He seemed to have been expecting something of the sort to happen.

"A gyro," he said briefly.

Color returned to Ham's features. "But what's a gyro doing here?" he started. Then his lips closed tight. Too many strange things were occurring to show much interest in one more new fact.

The dirigible halted, then nosed down. They were making no noise, they did not believe they could be heard.

In that they were mistaken.

Strong lights came on suddenly, flickered a moment, then focused squarely on the floating ship.

Then, clearly through the still night, came a girl's voice, a voice lifted in screaming warning.

"Go back, Doc Savage! Get away while you can!"

Chapter XII. A TRAP

THE screams choked off in a sort of gurgle. Then there was silence. The strong lights went out. Perhaps the men who controlled them wished to see if Doc would heed the warning. Or perhaps they knew the lights made a perfect target.

Ham leaned so far out of the cabin window that he almost fell out.

"That girl's O. K.," he said flatly. He gave Monk a dirty glare. "I told you she was all right, you empty-headed carcass of a stuffed baboon!" The dapper lawyer apparently had forgotten that he had said no such thing.

Then a second scream split the air. There were words in it, they were difficult to understand. It sounded like a cry for help. Monk looked disgusted.

"O. K. nothing!" he roared. "She's a phony. Tryin' to lure us into trouble. She knows a gigolo like you wouldn't have sense enough to know the difference."

The scream came again. Ham shuddered. He was very much puzzled. First there had been a warning; then what sounded like a plea for help.

Monk grunted suspiciously. "Don't pay any attention to it, Doc," he muttered. "It's a trap."

Doc contradicted him quietly. "That scream," he said calmly, "was made by Consuelo Manresa in agony."

Monk's jaw dropped. Then he snapped it shut. A look of anticipation came to his eyes, his long arms swung suggestively.

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"Why, those dirty thugs!" he bellowed. "Torture a woman, will they? Let's go down there. When I get my hands on them, I'll make them wish they'd gone back to Spain in 1542 and hadn't hung around here!"

Monk wanted very much to get into a first-rate scrap. He hoped now that Doc wouldn't let a woman suffer. Doc made no move to go to the rescue. Monk thought that strange.

Renny uttered an ejaculation of surprise. Renny had turned on the infra-ray power beam. He was looking at the ground through the telescopic filter. The dirigible was steady in the air. It floated only a few hundred feet up, dropping slowly. But Renny could see objects in the swamp with great clarity.

"There are many men down there, Doc," Renny said. "They seem to be swamp men. At least, they were dressed that way."

Renny had decided not to take anything for granted any more. Monk and Ham grabbed for a pair of infra-ray filter telescopes, peered through them. Monk let out a squall.

"Our other friends are down there, too!" he shrilled. "Look at them guys in armor with the swamp guys. And lamp the guns they've got?" Monk chuckled hoarsely at the sight he saw.

He had good reason. The scene below looked as though it might have come from a musical comedy. Swarthy, bearded men in ancient armor seemed to be mingling with the swamp folk.

They appeared frightened at the presence of the dirigible.

DOC'S listening device picked up many sounds from the swamp. There was the sound of metal rubbing against metal as the men in armor walked. There was excited conversation in Spanish.

One bearded man tilted back his helmet, seemed to see the airship for the first time. He fell to his knees, shouted hoarsely, pointing.

"Pure Castilian," Doc observed. "And a sentence structure as ancient as the Inquisition."

"What's he say, Doc?" Monk demanded.

"He says we're a big, evil bird," Doc translated. "He "

Doc stopped in the middle of a sentence. He leaped quickly from the rail, moved silently toward his little laboratory.

But Monk was fascinated by the impossible sight below him. The armored men began to point ancient blunderbusses in the air. The weapons roared, belched flame and the smoke of old-fashioned black gunpowder.

Monk burst into gales of glee.

"Wow!" he bellowed. "They couldn't hit us at a hundred yards with those things!"

That was why Monk did not think it unusual when Doc suddenly turned on every light in the dirigible. Even the landing lights glared downward. The altimeter registered eight hundred feet. She was dropping slowly.

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Monk's shrill laugh welled from his throat. At precisely seven hundred and ninety feet of altitude, Monk's sense of humor left him completely.

Boom! S-s-s-s-sing!

The big dirigible shuddered, sank suddenly by the head.

"That," Doc's voice came quietly, "was a two-inch antiaircraft shell."

Even Monk knew that the ancient conquerors from Spain hadn't owned that kind of equipment!

Renny's booming voice cut loose with a roar of amazement. He started moving, not waiting for even Doc's instructions.

"I'm dumping ballast forward, Doc," he shouted. "I'll try to get her up."

Doc Savage made no answer. He glided silently along the deck of the ship, peered downward. Then he went over the rail, clung to a network of guy ropes. He swung one hand back and forth in a strange motion.

"Go to the motor room, Ham," he said quietly. "Get under way."

In an instant the big propellers whirled to life. But the ship was sluggish. She still floated less than eight hundred feet from the ground a mere pot shot for a modern gunner.

MONK hung gaping over the window sill. He realized what had caused Doc's trilling sound a few minutes before. A big mound of swamp grass and climbing ferns had sprung apart as if by magic. In its center loomed the two-inch gun. It boomed regularly. It seemed impossible that it could miss at that distance.

Doc had undoubtedly spotted that hummock as a gun trap even before it had opened.

Another hummock of seemingly rotten vegetation cleaved in two. A sharp *rat-at-at-at-at* introduced Monk to a multibarreled antiaircraft weapon, the most modern thing in warfare. Heavy slugs whistled through the rigging, dug into the metal bag of the dirigible.

It was apparent now why the men in armor had rushed out. They had been trying to lure Doc's men down to what looked like an easy fight. But what the link was between those ancient muskets and weapons of modern warfare, Monk could not imagine.

The hairy chemist shook his head, suddenly aware of their predicament

"The lights!" he shrilled. "We got to put them out! They'll smear us!"

Doc spoke quickly in Mayan. Without a word, Monk obeyed his orders. He leaped to the after-ballast tanks, slammed back the levers that emptied them. But the ship was still losing altitude. Her head sagged.

Suddenly a shout of triumph welled up from the ground. The ship shuddered, lurched sideways. There was a hiss of flame from amidships. A lurid red blaze burst out. Smoke poured from the motor compartment

Ham rushed through the hatchway. His face strained, white.

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"D-d-don't know what it hit," he gasped. "But it was something."

It seemed indeed to have been something. Heavy smoke mushroomed from the control-cabin windows. Flame licked out at the rigging. The two-inch gun boomed again below and a fresh blaze broke out in the bow. Red flames licked hungrily at the bag. The ship began to sink.

Doc Savage climbed quickly back from the guy ropes. He paused a moment beside Renny in the forward observation cabin. Then he turned toward Monk and Ham.

"Jump!" he shouted. "Take to your parachutes! We are too low to get away."

THE bronze man began adjusting a parachute to his body. Monk tightened the straps of a chute about his shoulders, slung one leg over the sill of a window. Ham was right behind him, bumped against him. Monk took up the quarrel.

"Don't shove, you overrated process server!" the hairy chemist shrilled. "Look what your lady friend has got us into now!"

Ham noticed that Monk's chute was properly adjusted. So he pushed him through the window.

"I hope it doesn't open, you accidental freak!" Ham growled. "We'd all be better off."

Then Ham jumped, held his own rip cord until he saw that Monk's chute had billowed safely out above him.

"Doc thinks it would be a good idea if we drowned you," Ham confided across a hundred yards of atmosphere. "Maybe you'll land in one of those deep sinkholes they have here."

Monk twisted angrily.

"Doc never said no such thing!" he roared. Then he grinned sheepishly for having bitten on that one. Monk was always so determined to please the bronze man that the slightest hint to the contrary dug deep under his skin.

"Doc " he began. Then his mouth froze in a mask of horror.

"Doc, Doc!" Renny's big voice boomed. "I'm stuck! I'll have to stay aboard."

Monk and Ham could only swallow, speechless as they looked toward the dirigible. Flames billowed all about the ship. Smoke poured from every window. A gust of wind seemed to whip the bag toward the south. Then she settled, flaming, beneath the mighty cypress tops a mile away or more away.

A ragged scream welled from her as she sank. The voice was Renny's.

So horrified were Ham and Monk that they didn't see the ground rush up to meet them. They landed with a double thump in deep ferns beside a cypress knee, the huge gnarled roots that provide solid footing in the weird Arkansas swamps.

Monk rubbed his eyes free of a more-than-suspicion of moisture. Then he snapped erect. In the excitement, there was one thing neither had noticed.

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"Where is Doc?" he demanded. "I didn't see him get clear."

Ham swallowed with difficulty.

"I d-d-don't know," he stammered slowly. "But it doesn't seem likely he'd leave Renny in a jam."

Monk didn't answer. He couldn't. The barrel-chested chemist stood up. He flicked on a pencil flashlight, looked around him. In this setting he looked like a mighty ape in his native habitat.

THERE is no place more eerie than a cypress swamp in the night. And few places are more dangerous to a man without a boat. Sinkholes without bottoms await the unwary trespasser. Deadly moccasins as thick as a man's wrist carry potent poison.

Even the wind that whispers through the ghostly trees carries the scent of fresh meat to the swamp cougar. And in this morass of low bayou moss and sinkholes, another menace stalked. It was one that both Monk and Ham knew was there, but which neither understood. The menace of the Crimson Serpent.

Monk grunted. He wished he could hear a noise. Any kind of a racket. The dark silence was oppressive. He flicked on his light again.

"Whaddya look so scared about?" he growled. "This ain't nothing."

"Not for you," Ham replied tartly. "You can take to the trees and be more at home than you've been in several generations."

"Well, I wish I knew what happened to Doc and Renny," Monk complained, as he plodded beside the lawyer. Monk played his flashlight about. Suddenly Ham stopped short. He seized Monk's wrist with one hand. The chemist stopped, flicked off his light.

Far off, he heard a twig snap. Then another, closer. Monk's sense of hearing was more highly developed than any of the group except Doc's. Ham attributed that to his theory that Monk's simian ancestors had been forced to develop good hearing or be eaten by the other animals of the jungle.

Ham pressed his fingers on Monk's wrists, conveyed a message in Morse code.

Chapter XIII. A TORTURE ROOM

TWO huge cypress trees were near them. Silently, each of the two climbed one. Monk opened his mouth, tensed his chest muscles. He scarcely breathed at all. Whoever was approaching was using utmost stealth. Monk marveled at the woodsmanship of the man.

He didn't realize his presence until the woodsman was directly below him. Then Monk jumped. As he jumped, he howled. Monk fought best when he created the loudest racket. He struck a huge body with the force of a battering ram.

Then Monk went through the most amazing convulsions he had ever known. He felt himself tossed in the air

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like a chip before a storm. His powerful arms were as helpless as a child. He landed, sitting down, in a clump of ferns.

When he found his voice, it carried an extremely crestfallen note. Ham jumped down from his tree, grinning widely at Monk's discomfiture.

"Doc!" Monk yelled. "How did you get here?"

"Renny and I have hidden the dirigible," the bronze man explained. "He is still aboard."

"B-b-but how " Monk began.

Doc spoke swiftly, in a tone that carried only to his two aides. He had noticed the fake hummocks, had suspected what might be coming. The ship was too low to escape from high-powered weapons, so Doc pretended to fall into the trap. To do so it was necessary to turn on the lights. In the gloom, a dark shadow would have been sufficient target. But Doc had dusted a fine powdered chemical from the ship. The chemical dust had set up a field of light refraction, similar to a mirage. The gunner's aim had been accurate, but the dirigible had not been where they thought it was. The refracting dust had bent the light rays. Doc had created a harmless fire aboard the ship.

"I believe we are near the center of this mystery," Doc told his two aides. "I want you two to follow the tracks of the men who abandoned those anti-aircraft guns and see what you can learn. But be careful."

"O. K., Doc." Ham replied. "But where are you going?"

The bronze man apparently didn't hear him. That was a habit of his when he didn't want to answer a question.

Then, suddenly, Monk and Ham noticed that the bronze man had disappeared.

LATER, Ham blamed Monk's curiosity for the jam they got into. Monk blamed it on Ham's gullibility. Ham, as assured himself, had always been a sucker for women. Monk had to forget a great many of his own infatuations to arrive at that conclusion. But, he preferred to forget those anyway.

They found the contrivance not far from the hummocks that concealed the antiaircraft guns. At first they didn't know what it was.

"Imagine anyone carting a victrola out in a swamp like this!" Monk finally grunted. "Wonder what's on the record."

Ham didn't object to Monk's finding out. Later he said he would have, but Monk didn't give him time. The chemist started the flat disk moving, planted the needle in the groove.

The blood-curdling scream that came out of it made both men whirl around. Then Monk hastily removed the needle.

"That's where the scream came from!" he bellowed. "That frisky dame wasn't even here to scream for herself. Why, you sucker!"

Ham stiffened.

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"Yes," he rapped. "And that's why Doc didn't investigate a scream he knew was made in agony. He realized it was coming from a talking machine. I wonder where she is."

Ham's question was answered more quickly than he had any idea it would be. The voice of Consuelo Manresa came suddenly from the night. It sounded frantic. Her footsteps stumbled in the swamp grass and roots.

"Oh, Meestair Savage!" she called. "I heard your two men."

Monk twisted uneasily. He whipped his mercy gun from a shoulder holster. The footsteps came closer.

"Let her come," Monk growled. "She better have a dangd good explanation."

Consuelo Manresa burst into the circle of Monk's flashlight. Her clothes were torn. Red marks on her wrist indicated that she had been bound. There was a look of fear upon her face. But Monk wasn't going to be fooled by any histrionics this time. He seized her by the wrist, barked at her harshly: "What's the idea? Why'd you record that phony scream to trap us?"

The girl's dark eyes dilated.

"That scream is not phonee!" she cried. "They make me do eet."

She bared an arm that showed the red marks of a hot poker or some other instrument.

"I was here when I cry the warning," she protested. "They did not know I have escape. Then they stop me an' turn on this theeng. Now I escape again."

"Hm-m-m," Monk grunted. "A likely story."

Ham straightened his shoulders, took on his most judicial air. It looked as though this girl had led them too many times into a trap. Ham decided to find out what it was all about.

"Who are *they*, Miss Manresa?" he began in his best courtroom manner.

Consuelo Manresa shuddered, "I do not know," she moaned. "They are Spanish. But they speak a Spanish I do not understand very well. They are they are terrible!"

"Why are they trying to stop construction of the dam?" Ham bored in. "It is important that we know."

"Dam?" she queried. "I don't know of any dam."

Monk grunted in disgust. Then he began to howl. The swamp was suddenly alive with men. None of the men were swampers. They were swarthy, armored giants clad in the full steel mail of ancient warriors. They had come silently through the swamp, sprung as if at an unheard order.

Monk squalled in rage, sprayed mercy bullets from his gun. The armored battlers formed in ranks, swept relentlessly toward the group like a phalanx. Monk wished he had explosive bullets in his gun. He wished it just a bit too late. The light-shelled slugs, designed to pierce flesh shallowly, splatted harmlessly against the steel-plate armor.

When Monk realized he should have aimed for their faces, his ammo drum was empty.

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Ham danced about with his sword cane. It was hardly a match for the broadaxes with which Spain's conquerors had hacked their way across a continent.

Monk threw his gun down in disgust, leaped forward for hand-to-hand combat. He picked up one huge ruffian weighted down with half a hundred pounds of armor. Monk swung him around in the air, hurled him at his fellows. Then his fists slashed out.

Ham fenced like the master that he was. The anaesthetic-tipped sword cane found tiny cracks in sheeted mail, put several of the attackers to sleep.

But the force of numbers was too great. The pair were literally pounded down by the mailed fists and bodies of their attackers. A mailed fist slammed against Monk's rugged jaw and he went to sleep. Ham succumbed to the whanging slap of a broadsword.

THE tolling of a bell awakened Monk. At first he thought the bell was inside his head. Then he thought that was a mistake. He couldn't really be awake at all. He couldn't see anything.

Monk spread his hands out below him. He seemed to be lying on a masonry floor. The masonry was covered with the slime of ages. It didn't make any sense to him.

Then the chemist heard it: The steady clanking of heavy chains came to his ears. It wasn't distant this time. It was right below him. Monk sat erect.

"Ham," he whispered experimentally. There was no answer. His words seemed to echo back to him from masonry walls.

Monk staggered to his feet, moved cautiously about. He was in a room of solid masonry about twelve feet square. A dull mumble of voices came to him. At first he couldn't distinguish any words. Then he made out the clear tones of Ham's voice.

Ham was laughing!

"The shyster!" Monk growled. "Having himself a time while I'm cooped up!"

Monk finally found a masonry block that moved. He tugged at it. It seemed to swing on hinges. Monk forced his way through the opening into a narrow corridor. This was also of solid stone. Then Monk stiffened. The voices were plain now.

"I don't know where Doc is," Ham said lightly. "If I did, I'd tell you."

Monk's jaw dropped open. He'd said many things about Ham. But what the ensuing conversation told him, he didn't want to believe was true.

"The dirigible?" Ham asked. "Sure, it's safe. Why, it's right over "

With a roar, Monk leaped forward. That Ham would tell Doc's plans or expose the hiding place of the airship was beyond his comprehension. There was consternation in his face as he raced down a flight of narrow stairs. What he saw made him roar with rage.

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He plunged into what looked like an ancient torture room. Chains hung from the masonry ceiling. There were cuffs attached to them of the type used for the gentle torture of drawing and quartering. Men were hanged alive and their entrails carved out and shown to them. There was a rack for spread-eagling helpless victims.

Ham was spread out on it now. He stared unseeingly at Monk. Ham wasn't being tortured. A bearded giant in a suit of chain mail stood over him. The giant held a very modern hypodermic in his hand. Monk, the chemist, knew what it was. He quickly diagnosed Ham's reactions. He was answering questions under the effect of truth serum.

Monk roared a challenge, leaped across the room. Half a dozen other men swarmed upon him. They, too, were dressed in the battle garb of four centuries ago. They swung broadswords and axes.

MONK dodged them, raced to Ham. There was only one thing to do. Ham must not divulge any facts he knew. Monk swung one hairy fist, caught Ham flush on the chin. Ham was immediately unconscious.

But in that instant, the armored men seized Monk. They gabbled to each other in Spanish. Monk didn't understand any of it.

"Crawl back into the century you belong in!" he bellowed. "Lemme go or I'll tear you all apart!"

But they didn't let him go. Monk slammed out with every bit of strength he owned. There were too many of them. Slowly, they forced him to the floor. They untied Ham's unconscious form from the rack, hauled Monk to it. The bearded giant who seemed to be in charge spoke in English. It was a stilted English. Some of the words were obsolete.

"You will answer just as well, excellency," he purred. "The serum will also make you talk."

He jabbed the hypodermic deep into Monk's forearm. Then he waited several minutes and began asking questions.

"Go climb a cypress tree!" Monk snapped. "You're makin' a monkey outta yourself."

The bearded man shook his head in amazement. He didn't know that Monk had just completed a series of research tests on truth serum for Doc. In the process of his work, Monk had developed a highly preventive drug for truth serum. He had immunized himself with it for the purpose of further experiments just before he and Ham had left New York.

But suddenly Monk's eyes narrowed. Then his body went limp. His eyes glazed.

"What is it you want to know?" he asked in a small voice. "I will tell you."

Chapter XIV. PONCE DE LEON'S GOAL

THE bearded giant chuckled harshly. Triumph showed on his face. Apparently he didn't know that a subject under truth serum never volunteers information. It was unfortunate for him that he did not.

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The stall gave Ham, now recovered from both the blow and the drug, time to creep stealthily upon the leader. In the same instance Monk galvanized into action. He leaped from the rack as if strong springs propelled him. The ancients had not had time to lash him securely.

The fight that took place was the one Monk had been hoping for ever since he had arrived in Arkansas. The room was small, and no one had a chance to get away. Monks bellowing reverberated against the walls. His fists pumped in and out. Each time he smashed a face. The dental profession should have subsidized him.

Monk grunted with pride as he saw the job Ham was doing. The lawyer demonstrated an ability to use his fists in a way that even Monk found hard to believe. The big leader was the last man to go down. He tried to get away. Monk leaped at him.

He felled the big man with a blow that probably broke his jaw. But Monk tripped over another inert form as he swung. The hairy chemist yelled once and fell down a flight of stairs. Ham raced right behind him.

"Serves you right, you homely baboon!" he snapped. "Don't smack me on the jaw again."

Monk started to answer. But pounding feet above them made him think first of flight.

"This may lead us out," he said quickly. "We better get going fast."

Doc's two aides raced down two flights of stairs. Then they stopped. The reason was simple. They couldn't go any farther. A hollow clang sounded behind them. Monk whirled, began to shout. A barred grating had dropped down, closing the corridor. They stood in what seemed a blank end of the hall. Then a huge block of masonry swung slowly in from the rear. It was on the other side of the grating. Heavy machinery rumbled below them, apparently causing the huge block of stone to move.

When the machinery stopped rumbling they were in a windowless stone cubicle about six feet by six. The grating swung up into a recess in the ceiling. Dim light filtered down through the cracks in that.

Then they saw De Soto. Neither of them believed it. But there he was!

HAM thought quickly of the history books he had read in school. He remembered the glossy illustrations. This was De Soto to the life a cruel, merciless De Soto. The man was huge, commanding in appearance. His black beard fairly bristled. The eyes were black, totally without mercy.

They could see the man, but could not reach him. He spoke in medieval Spanish. Ham understood it. He had to translate it for Monk's benefit.

"I am the last descendant of De Soto," the bearded one informed them. "You have displeased me greatly by trespassing in the Castle of the Ancients. It is necessary that you die."

Ham snorted.

"Aside from that, who are you and what's your racket?" he snapped in English. If he had expected to trick the man into an answer, he was mistaken. De Soto gave no hint of understanding. His beady eyes merely flickered cruelly. A feeling grew on Ham that the stories of Spanish cruelty to the Aztecs had probably been understated.

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It seemed fantastic. But even Ham began to believe that it all must be true, that even the wildest guess of a newspaper reporter was being borne out by fact.

The man who called himself De Soto looked like De Soto. The ancient castle they were in, far in the heart of the great swamp, apparently had been here for centuries.

It was all possible, Ham conceded to himself. This man might very well be a true descendant of the original explorer. His men might be descendants of those original hardy spirits who had invaded the fastness of a new land.

It took no great stretch of the imagination to realize that they could have lived for years, even centuries, concealed in this forgotten spot, without being discovered. It was possible that the swamp men knew of them they probably did, in fact but the natives kept closed lips on anything that was not their own business. They would have said nothing.

De Soto had been standing silently, erect and proud, his cold eyes watching the faces of Monk and Ham. It seemed almost that he was reading their very thoughts, even though he did not understand their language.

"The manner of your death will please me," De Soto continued softly. "Listen!"

Monk and Ham could do nothing else but listen. The rumbling of machinery below them began again. Suddenly Monk let out a yell. The cubicle was no longer six feet by six. The masonry wall was moving!

MONK leaped to the small trap through which De Soto spoke. It slammed shut in his face. Through a tiny slit, the Spaniard purred his last, sneering word.

"None who enter the Castle of the Ancients shall return alive," he hissed. "The year is still 1542. And no one shall change it."

Then De Soto was gone. The sound of clanking chains came to the ears of Monk and Ham. But even more menacing was the steady rumble of some strange machinery. The masonry wall moved closer. Five feet was cut to three. Three feet became scarcely more than two.

"Gee!" Monk observed. "That expensive suit of yours is going to be an awful mess when this thing comes together."

Monk didn't look at Ham. He didn't want to. Monk wondered for one hopeless instant if there wasn't some way he could wedge his stocky body so that he could take the full force of the crushing wall. Ham whistled a bar of a popular tune.

"Science is losing a great opportunity for research," he said lightly. "A post mortem on you would solve the problems of evolution."

Monk turned on his side. The space between the walls was about eighteen inches.

A scraping sound above them attracted Monk's attention.

"Hsst!" a voice whispered loudly. "Don't give up. I think I can help you."

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Monk scrambled erect, looked at what was left of the ceiling. A stone slab moved aside with a scraping noise. Then a pair of hands appeared. The hands held a masonry block. The block was slightly less than eighteen inches square. If it had been any larger, it wouldn't have worked at all.

The hands held the block by the sides, dangled it between the closing walls, the walls gripped it. Chips broke off, crumbled from the block. Then the rumble of machinery below them stopped. The wedged block of masonry had stopped the walls.

"Hsst!" the voice above them said again. "I'll get a rope. Maybe we can figure a way out of this."

The sleek, efficient face of Fletcher Carter, private detective of many parts, peered down at them. Monk could see that he still wore a red carnation in the buttonhole of his well-groomed suit.

Monk went up the rope with an agility that amazed Carter. Ham explained that it was a simple matter of genealogy. Just as the bearded De Soto claimed to be a descendant of the original explorer, he said, Monk was a hand-me-down from the great apes.

The hairy chemist grunted angrily. Ham, he snapped, was not alive at all. He was merely a tailor's dummy, animated by an intricate clockwork device that was a tribute to the mechanical skill of Doc Savage.

Fletcher Carter gulped. His sleek face did not display its usual self-satisfied expression. He appeared puzzled.

"Aren't you two ever serious?" he asked.

Monk's homely face darkened. He turned ominously toward the private detective.

"Occasionally," he rapped. "This is one of the times. We owe you something for savin' us, but just the same, you got some questions to answer. How do you happen to be here?"

Monk's long arms swung suggestively. Fletcher Carter gulped uneasily, took a step back.

"I—I have a legitimate reason," he stammered. "B—but I want you to take me on trust for the moment. I am representing clients that I cannot name just yet. It all centers here. I followed you all from Chicago, but whereas you got caught, I managed to get into this castle undetected."

Monk glanced at Ham. The lawyer appeared doubtful.

"My clients' motives are honest, I am honest," Carter went on earnestly. "Please believe me. My clients, I will admit, want the flood dam relocated. They have a good reason. But since I came here, I have encountered an even better reason. An astounding one."

"Yeah?" Monk piped scornfully. "What?"

"De Soto," Carter said impressively.

The hairy chemist's anger returned at the mention of that name. He scowled fearsomely.

"Just let me get to that guy!" he raged. "I'll knock him back through ten generations, or however many it took him to spring from the old man."

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Strange fear showed on Fletcher Carter's face. Little beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. His voice dropped to a mere whisper.

"That is it!" he breathed. "That strange lapse of generations! It is the most amazing thing I ever encountered. It frightens me."

"What do you mean?" Ham asked coolly.

Then came the statement that almost made Monk laugh. Almost, but not quite. He jumped to one quick conclusion. It was a wrong one. Monk found out about that later. Fletcher Carter scarcely whispered.

"The Spaniard is not a descendant of De Soto," he said impressively. *"He is De Soto!"*

FOR a moment, there was silence. Both Monk and Ham were speechless. The statement was incredible, but the whole set-up was incredible. The clanking sound of chains came to his ears, regular, muffled, as if ghostly hosts were stalking through other corridors to surround them.

The three men stood in a low-vaulted hall of solid masonry blocks. The whole place was cunningly constructed. There were no lights. But the corridor seemed alive with a weird phosphorescence. The air was dank with a fetid odor of death and decay.

In spite of himself, Monk shuddered. There was something about the place that made anything seem believable. With an effort the hairy chemist regained his skeptical attitude.

"This guy is nuts!" he barked. "Get ready to grab him if he gets violent."

The expression on Ham's face showed that for once he was in complete agreement. Carter seemed to understand their reactions.

"Come," he whispered. "You shall see for yourself. Then, I have a request to make."

The private detective led them through the dank corridor. Moisture sweated from the masonry blocks of the walls and ceiling.

Their progress became slowed. Carter went forward in a crouch. He held his hands at his sides in a gesture of caution.

Monk was wishing fervently that Doc was present. Where the bronze man had disappeared, the chemist did not know. Evidently he had not been captured. Just as evidently he had not entered the castle, or he would have come to their aid.

Ham also thought things were becoming too involved. But there was nothing to do but trail along after Fletcher Carter, no matter how suspicious of him they might be.

Then the light grew brighter. The corridor took a sudden turn. The three men found themselves on a small balcony of medieval iron lattice work. Before them stretched a broad patiolike courtyard. It appeared to be in the center of a towering castle of Roman architecture. The courtyard was lighted by scores of flickering yellow torches. They reflected on the surrounding walls, clearly illuminated the ground around them.

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In the middle of the courtyard was a bubbling fountain. One figure was discernible near it. An ancient crone huddled by the basin of the fountain. She stared longingly at the water. A young girl beside her offered her a gourd from which to drink. The crone shook her head.

"That woman," Fletcher Carter whispered, "is the wife of De Soto. She refuses to drink. Life, she says, has been too long. She wishes to die after four hundred years on earth!"

Ham's voice was sarcastic. He'd seen theatrical settings in a courtroom that had convinced juries that black was white. Ham was not going to be taken in.

"I suppose that's the elixir of life," he sneered. "Or is it just swamp moonshine?"

Fletcher Carter's face paled. He put one finger against his lips, pleaded for caution.

"Not so loud," he whispered. "They might hear us."

Then his voice filled with awe.

"What Ponce De Leon sought in the swamps of Florida actually existed," he confided. "The legend was a true one. Only the location was wrong. The Fountain of Youth awaited its discoverer. Not in the Everglades of Florida, but in the great swamp of Arkansas!"

Chapter XV. A HEAD FALLS

THE only sound was the dim clanking of chains, and the splash of water in the fountain. Monk's mouth frankly was open. Even Ham, for once, appeared dazed.

Fletcher Carter's voice had been sincere. The very scene before them appeared to bear him out.

The Fountain of Youth! The legendary waters that brought eternal life!

Ham had imagination. He tried to discount the setting, tried to assure himself that this couldn't be so. But why couldn't it be true?

The man who called himself De Soto looked like the original Spanish explorer. His men wore similar armor, carried similar guns. The very castle in which they stood appeared to have been in existence for centuries.

And this would explain why De Soto and his men never had attempted to contact the outside world. They were keeping the secret of life for themselves.

Just as easily, it would explain the visitations of the armor-clad men, their fight to prevent the building of the flood-control dam, one that would make even this part of the swamp uninhabitable, would remove for all time the youth-giving waters.

It was staggering. It was too big to be true. Yet, Ham argued silently, other things he had thought false had been proven true. Modern science was finding more and more that ancient beliefs, once scorned, had a basis in fact.

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Why could this not be true, also? The legend of the Fountain of Youth was an old one. But could it not, also, have been based on fact?

Fletcher Carter was scarcely breathing. His eyes never left the faces of Monk and Ham. Slowly, he seemed to relax.

"Ah, I see you also are wise men," he breathed. "Only fools scoff at what they cannot understand."

Monk gulped, he nodded uneasily. Ham gave slow assent.

"Soon," Carter went on, "you will see some of the original soldiers of De Soto. You will see more proof of what lies before you. You will know that the Fountain of Youth is no idle dream."

The now-familiar sound of metal scraping on metal came from the courtyard. Monk began to make strange, inarticulate sounds. They were sounds of amazement, of disbelief. Ham's eyes widened.

Armored warriors, in parade formation, came into the courtyard. They looked neither to right nor left. Behind them came a file of Indians. Ham noticed the trappings they wore were ancient Aztec. They were chained. The warriors were young, strapping. At their head hobbled an old Indian. His flesh was creased in a thousand wrinkles. He turned and grinned, showed aged, toothless gums.

The procession halted when the aged man reached the fountain in the center. The Spaniards all dropped to one knee. Then the chant began. The chant was weird, wordless. It made Monk's reddish hair stand erect, the flesh on his neck seemed to crawl.

The chant ended suddenly. As it did, a deep-throated pipe organ somewhere in the bowels of the castle began to play. The tones were awesome, terrifying, like some forgotten black mass played by Satan in a medieval Hades.

The old man reached out palsied hands, took the gourd from the young girl by the fountain. Then he began to drink. A faint hum in the air replaced the organ music. Monk tried to yell. He found that some strange force held him rooted where he stood, made his larynx unable to function. He couldn't utter a sound. It might have been some strange gas, might have been pure hypnotic influence of the tableau before him. His little eyes protruded from his head.

The old man reached for a second gourd of water. Then he turned his back to the fountain. Slowly, he began to straighten. His eyes brightened as he did. The wrinkles of age began to fade. The old man rubbed gnarled hands up and down his body. The hands no longer shook. Ham and Monk suddenly saw before them a man strong in youth with head erect, thrown back in clear defiance.

Fletcher Carter whispered suddenly.

"I overheard the story of his return," he breathed. "The man escaped, years ago. These Aztecs are slaves to De Soto's men. But when age threatened his life, he returned to slavery so that he might live."

Monk closed his eyes. He didn't want to see any more. But he opened them quickly enough. The suddenly youthful man uttered a piercing scream. He pointed at the three men on the balcony.

The armored Spaniards whirled, roared in unison. Then they raced toward doorways, shouted orders to others to catch the three intruders.

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WITH Carter in the lead, the three raced madly through winding passageways. Occasionally, the private detective seemed confused, but he never hesitated long.

"N—now you see why the location of the dam must be changed," he panted.

"I—I got interested in this case because my clients own important mineral leases that might sometime be valuable here. But that isn't worth considering now."

Sounds of pursuit were suddenly close. Carter spun, took a new course.

"W—we hold a secret that can be of tremendous aid to humanity," he pleaded. "Cannot we bring Doc Savage here to see it and then use your influence to have the dam site changed?"

They spun around a corner without slackening speed. Ham glanced quickly at Monk. The hairy chemist's eyes blinked.

"We would have to guard our secret carefully," Carter urged. "And we must protect these people. I have heard there is another race a Mayan race, I believe, that Doc Savage found and protects. He could do the same here. These people do not realize they are breaking laws and doing harm. They are an empire unto themselves. Their claims predate even the existence of the United States."

Monk was frowning slightly. There was something screwy in Carter's argument. There seemed something screwy in the chase they were leading, also, unless he was mistaken, they were going around and around.

Monk spoke to Ham suddenly. He spoke in Mayan. Ham nodded.

"Do you agree? Will you get Doc Savage to use his influence?" he gasped.

"We will not," Monk blurted. "You're a phony "

Monk broke off suddenly. It was his turn to gasp. Carter had rounded a turn ahead of them. When they went around the corner, Carter was gone.

"You fixed it," Ham said bitterly. "I think if you played along, we would have got out of this."

"But that guy is a crook. He was leading us around and around, and tellin' us fairy stories," the hairy chemist protested plaintively.

"Maybe," Ham rasped. "But how are we going to get out now?"

Monk didn't answer. Again they could hear sounds of pursuit. The corridor they were following slanted downward. It should lead outside.

Then they halted. They halted very suddenly. Another grating had dropped down from the masonry above. It dropped squarely in their path.

Monk seized the iron bars, tried to force them. They would not budge.

"We've got to turn back! We've got to fight!" Monk roared. He did not appear particularly disappointed.

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WITHOUT hesitation, the two reversed their course. There seemed to be no hope of escape, but at least they could make a battle of it.

And it seemed evident that Fletcher Carter was a crook, was in league with the armored men of the castle. Why else had he seemingly offered them freedom if they would ask Doc's aid to balk the flood project? And why else would he vanish and leave them alone when they refused to do as he wished?

Monk suddenly smashed into a body in the darkness. The chemist bellowed out a battle cry and waded in. The other wiggled, fought back. Monk slugged.

There weren't too many men who could stand up under the type of slugging Monk dealt out. And this wasn't one of them. The man slumped to the floor with a groan. Monk grunted with pleasure. Then he got a look at his opponent.

Gerald Pettybloom, the Chicago crime reporter, looked up dazedly. There was a bandage around his head.

"Whatta story, whatta yarn!" he muttered to himself. "If I could only get out to write it!"

Then full consciousness came back to him. He recognized Ham and Monk.

"You guys are supposed to be dead!" he wailed. "Another big yarn! Another big story! But why beat me up? You guys crazy?"

"Monk always did beat up little fellows," Ham said. "He's just a bully. But, if I may ask, what are you doing here? Is this Old Home Week? Have we got to find everybody here we saw in Chicago?"

"Are you wanting to find the girl, Ham?" Monk put in slyly. Ham scowled.

Pettybloom shook his head, looked bewildered. "How I got here I don't know," he muttered. "That's another big story, I guess. The last I remember I was getting shot back in Chicago, evidently I only got creased. I came out of it once and thought I was in a plane, then somebody gave me a shot of dope, and the next I knew I was in this old castle."

"Get up. Maybe we can still get out." Ham rapped. That was a little hope. All realized it a little later. Armored men suddenly appeared in the corridor ahead of them. From some place behind, more armored men appeared.

Monk bellowed, rushed forward swinging. Ham followed. Pettybloom, weak as he was, followed.

All three stopped abruptly. A queer humming noise filled the corridor. The three were powerless to move. They were still powerless as the armored men threw loops of vines over their heads, bound them securely. Then the humming noise ceased.

"An electrical field," Ham muttered unbelievably. "A very modern electrical field. That's what held us. And that isn't ancient or medieval. It's very modern."

"Why, yes," said a voice in perfect English. "In four hundred years of life, we have managed to learn many things. English, for example, when we wish to speak it. And also how to harness many forces of nature."

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A stone slab swung back. The bearded figure of De Soto, merciless eyes hard, stepped into the corridor with them.

"It might please you to know," De Soto went on unpleasantly, "that I could have trapped you at any time. I took interest, however, in listening to you and the one who calls himself Carter. Finally, I tired of Carter. I had him taken.

"Then I wished to see if this weakling who calls himself a reporter really was one. I left him where you would find him."

"And now?" Monk blurted belligerently.

"Now you will see a man die!" De Soto snapped cruelly. "His will be an easy death. Yours, when it comes, will not be so easy. But you will live, at least until I have the man who is known as Doc Savage."

Armor-clad men seized the three bound figures, carried them rapidly along a corridor. Then they came to a large room.

Before them, lighted by the weird phosphorescence, they saw the form of Carter.

Fletcher Carter screamed. It was a scream of agony. He was spread-eagled, hands and feet bound tightly. They were tied to the rims of a torture wheel. Carter writhed in obvious pain, screamed for release from his agony.

De Soto flicked one hand in signal. Monk shuddered. A tall armored figure swung hands downward, partly obscured the body. Then Monk saw the instrument the man was wielding. It was an old-fashioned broadax. It crunched as it struck. Fletcher Carter's screams stopped abruptly. A head rolled on the concrete floor.

De Soto chuckled once more, pushed onward into another torture chamber. Monk and Ham were manacled to heavy chains bolted into the walls. De Soto pried open Gerald Pettybloom's mouth, inserted a pellet. Then he made him drink, forcing him to swallow the pill.

"You will be of use," he snarled. "That poison will be fatal within two hours."

Pettybloom winced, fell to his knees.

"W-what do you want me to do?" he stammered.

"Find Doc Savage," De Soto snapped. "He is at large somewhere in the swamp. Tell him his two aides have sent for him, that they are in danger and have made a great discovery."

The bearded man's eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

"You have but two hours to find the bronze man," he rasped. "And to bring him back here alone. If you fail, you will be dead. Even his medical skill cannot halt that poison. I alone have the antidote."

The reporter's face was bathed in sweat. He shot a haggard, helpless glance at Ham and Monk.

"I guess I gotta do it," he mumbled. "Maybe Doc will figure some way out when he gets here."

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Two of the soldiers guided Pettybloom down the corridor.

De Soto barked quick orders to others of his henchmen. Monk and Ham were suspended by their wrists from chains in the ceiling. Their feet did not touch the floor. Other chains were attached to their ankles. Those chains led to a windlass. The windlass began to turn. The chains tightened.

De Soto sneered.

"The bronze man shall watch you suffer," he said. "And to save you he will communicate with your engineer, named Renny. Even here we know he has ways of communication. You shall suffer until Renny has brought his influence to have the flood dam relocated."

He paused, flicked an imaginary speck of dirt from his beard.

"When that has been done," he added, "you shall all die so you cannot tell what you have seen."

Chapter XVI. TWO MORE FALL

THE swampland was strangely alive. The hovels, huts and shanties of the swampers seethed with a strange activity. Outside each, little knots of men huddled in angry conversation. The swamp men were mad. And they were afraid.

"This Doc Savage is the guy we gotta git!" one gaunt trapper told a group of his fellows. He paused to squirt a mouthful of tobacco juice big enough to drown a rabbit.

"Hank Hendricks is right," he said sagely. "We—uns oughtta shoot Doc on sight. Then we gotta tell the government they caint build that dam."

Another agreed with him.

"We—uns ain't afeard o' the governmint," he drawled. "But the danged Crimson Serpent is somethin' else."

A paddle splashed then in the bayou behind the shanty. The twanging drawl of Hank Hendricks came through the night.

"Yaw'll go down ter Robbins Knoll," the voice ordered. "Ah got somethin' all-fired important for we—uns ter know. Git thare by moonup."

The paddle splashed and the dugout was gone. It paused at a score of other shanties and hovels. The same instructions were repeated. The swampers scratched their heads, hauled old squirrel guns from wall pegs.

Half an hour before the moon was up, hundreds of dugouts and canoes were splashing through creeks and bayous. They were all headed toward Robbins Knoll, the only large area of high ground in several miles. The swampers muttered among themselves. Hank Hendricks was by now their acknowledged leader. They wondered what it was that Hank Hendricks had to impart to them.

Peculiarly, the swamper who wondered most about that was Hank Hendricks himself. The lank swamper cursed as he strode beneath a grove of cypress trees. He hadn't said anything to the man who told him he was

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on his way to the knoll. Hank decided he'd confront the imposter when he got there.

But Hank didn't realize quite what was in store for him. His first inkling was when a stout silk loop dropped over his neck from the spreading boughs of a huge cypress tree. It effectively choked off the outcry Hank wanted very much to make. A second loop dropped under his armpits. Then Hank Hendricks soared into the air. He found himself face to face with Doc Savage. The bronze man's face was quite without expression. Hank's was not. His expression was not pleasant.

HANK slapped out with his gnarled hands. He was a powerful man for all his gauntness. Doc Savage was gentle with the swamper. He had no desire to hurt him. That was why Hank managed to kick up such a fuss before he was finally subdued.

It was also why the little hump-backed man who crouched fifty yards away managed to hurry through the ferns and swamp grass without Doc hearing him. The little man had beady, snapping eyes. They glittered now in triumph. Those eyes had followed Doc for the last hour as the bronze man paddled near shanties and sang out in the voice of Hank Hendricks.

"Dat mug kin imitate any voice," the little man muttered. "An' he kin make himself up to look like any ginzo."

The voice was scarcely Spanish. And it wasn't ancient. In fact, it was distinctly Chicagoese, in the gangster fashion.

Its owner finally stopped in the gloom. He leaned over a small portable short-wave radio transmitter.

The form of Hank Hendricks shifted on uneasy feet before a mob of two hundred swampers. Hank stood on the flat stump of what had once been a huge cypress tree. The moon was up now, revealing him dimly.

The swampers buzzed among themselves. Hank probably had some good advice, they whispered. Or maybe he had learned something of Doc Savage and his men.

Hank Hendricks cleared his throat, flung a cud of tobacco at a squirrel.

"We-uns maybe been makin' a mistake," he began flatly. "I seen Doc Savage an' he tole me this black magic business we aire afeard of may be all a fake."

An angry muttering came from the mob. They hadn't expected this kind of thing. Catcalls came from the swampers. One man yelled, "Throw him in the bayou! He's a traitor!"

Hank Hendricks held up his hand.

"Doc Savage tole me we cain't fight the whole U.S. army," he drawled. "I guess he's right."

He coughed, leaned over slightly.

"Doc said he'd come here an' show some magic of his own," he insisted. "He'll do his best ter perfect us if we-uns'll jest have a little patience."

Suddenly there was an explosion a quarter of a mile away. A big cypress tree toppled to earth, its roots blasted by some explosion. Then the moon went behind a cloud. Faintly at first, then more loudly, angry

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voices barked in Spanish.

The mob gave a shout of fear. Through the night, down below the knoll, they saw the forms of men in armor marching. The armor clanked ominously. Swamp men appeared before them, aimed old squirrel guns at the armored soldiers. The armored men cursed, rushed at the swampers.

Then other figures appeared men in khaki, in modern fighting equipment. Machine guns rattled, raked the armored forces. A company of United States infantry charged into the line of ancients. The ancients retreated, firing their old-fashioned muskets. Then a terrific blast rent the air. A dozen cypress trees hurtled from their roots, fell upon the armored soldiers. There were cries of pain, of surrender.

Then darkness came again. The swampers yelled in fear. They were impressed. It was one thing to tell them that it was useless to fight the nation's soldiers. But an object lesson they could see went home. They might have figured that Doc had been using a sound-film projector, might have realized that the scene they had witnessed had been carefully made from spliced films Doc had in his airship laboratory. But the blast of the trees was real, not a moving picture. It had hurtled several of them to the ground.

Doc knew they were a simple, superstitious folk. Most of them had never even been inside a moving-picture theater. The bronze man had taken the simplest method he knew of driving home a point.

The swampers were excited. They allowed as how they might have been in error. Maybe they had just better go back to their homes, and forget about the whole thing. But one voice raised in dissent. It was a voice that spoke in stilted English.

"You have been tricked, swamp men," he shouted. "The man you think is Hendricks is really Doc Savage in disguise! He cares not for your welfare. Unmask the man. Then drive out the flood-dam engineers or the Crimson Serpent will get each of you!"

MOB psychology is a peculiar thing. A mob unsells itself on something in the flashing of an instant. It did that now. Nerves were highly strung. With a roar, the nearest swampers rushed to the figure on the stump.

Hank Hendricks sat down heavily. He opened his eyes dazedly.

"W-w-what all I been doin'?" he asked blankly. "W-whereat am I?"

Doc Savage had to save Hendricks then. He had not taken on the character of a swamper, as the beady-eyed gangster had thought he would. Doc's voice came from the edge of the clearing.

"The man is Hendricks," he said clearly. "But he has been under the influence of hypnosis. He is not responsible for anything he said."

Doc had to undo what little good he had been able to accomplish. If he didn't, he knew the swampers would tear the unfortunate Hendricks apart. He had other plans that might have stopped the mob. But he had no chance to use them. Two incidents intervened to change the bronze man's plans.

The first was the arrival of Gerald Pettybloom.

The crime reporter's clothing was cut and torn. He bled copiously from a dozen wounds and scratches. Gerald Pettybloom's lips were drawn into a grim white line. It was nearly two hours since he had left the

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Castle of the Ancients.

Gerald had relived a lot of life in those two hours. It was the sort of crucial moment that brings out true character in a man. Or shows he hasn't any. Gerald Pettybloom did have it.

So Gerald Pettybloom had come to a decision. He was going to tell Doc Savage everything. To hell with the consequences.

He wouldn't have found Doc at all if he hadn't happened to stumble by Robins Knoll when the bronze man called out to save Hank Hendricks.

Pettybloom stumbled into the knot of men.

"Doc Savage! Doc Savage!" he screamed. "I got to see you. You have to save your men. A lot of lives depend on what I got to tell you!"

Pettybloom weaved on his feet. The poison deadline had arrived. He convulsed. His eyes dilated strangely. Then he collapsed.

A low trilling sound welled through the night. The swamp men turned to look at one another. The sound didn't seem to come from any particular place. They wondered if it were some new menace. Their momentary doubt gave Savage the opportunity he needed. He leaped from a place of concealment behind a six-foot fern and ran smoothly to the inert form of Gerald Pettybloom.

Before the mass reflexes went into action and the mob began to roar, Doc had Gerald Pettybloom over his shoulder and out of sight.

De Soto had underestimated the medical knowledge of the bronze man. Even before he had Pettybloom on a concealed hummock of ferns, Doc Savage had identified the poison that had the unfortunate reporter in its grip. It was one that could be made only from certain rare berries found in swamps of the semi-tropics. Doc quickly whipped a hypodermic from his equipment vest. He found two tiny vials, mixed their contents together. Then he jabbed the hypodermic into the reporter's upper arm. Gerald Pettybloom still breathed faintly. Doc knew his life hung in the balance. It would be nip and tuck. And it would be some time before he would be conscious, even if he lived.

Doc swung the man over his shoulder. Pettybloom would go back to Renny and the dirigible. In the hospital bay there, he might recover. But Gerald Pettybloom did not go to Renny and the dirigible.

The reason was that Renny no longer was aboard the craft. In fact, Renny was less than two hundred yards away. And very busy.

"HOLY COW!" he roared. "If you guys have done something to Doc, I'll bust every head in sight."

The sound of Renny's huge fists smashing heads was distinct. Perhaps in the dim light he hadn't realized the number of opponents he had barged into. But he realized it after he got started.

Renny's bellows shook the treetops. But they were soon muffled. Even Renny couldn't combat the numbers he was against. He continued to shout his defiance.

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Doc Savage gently laid Gerald Pettybloom back on the bed of ferns. It was obviously necessary that he extricate Renny from the clutches of the mob.

"I'm coming, Renny!" he yelled. "I'll be there in just a second."

The crowd whirled, roared anew. Now they would have Doc and Renny both. The bronze man's voice called encouragement to the big-fisted engineer. The mob surged toward the voice, milled at the edge of the clearing.

Doc stepped quietly in from the side of the knoll and helped Renny to his feet.

Probably most of the swamp men had never even heard of ventriloquism.

The ruse didn't fool them more than half a dozen seconds. But it seemed enough. Doc and Renny raced across the ground, dived once more in the swamp.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled. "I didn't mean to make a nuisance of myself. I got worried when you guys didn't come back, parked the dirigible in the trees and started looking for you."

Doc Savage did not reply. He ran smoothly to the hummock where he had left Gerald Pettybloom. Then his flaked-gold eyes whirled strangely. The hummock was still there. But the poisoned reporter was not. His body had vanished without a trace!

Doc spoke quickly, then leaped backward.

"Look out!" he rapped. "Jump to the left."

But the warning was not quite in time. A bludgeon as thick as a man's leg smashed against Renny's skull. A broadax that weighed fifty pounds nearly caved Doc's skull in.

Whoever had taken the body of Gerald Pettybloom had known that Doc would return to look for it.

Chapter XVII. HAM PLEADS HIS CASE

LOUD voices brought Renny back to consciousness. He was tightly bound, hand and foot. Doc Savage was tied beside him. The bronze man's body was limp.

Renny raised his head and looked about.

"Holy cow!" he managed to stammer.

He was looking at an illustrated page of Spanish history. The huge medieval castle towered above them in the background. Closer at hand was a wide, sluggish moat.

Renny noticed a dam at one end of it, a spillway at the other. Doc and Renny were not alone. About half of the swamp men who had been at Robbins Knoll were there. The swamp men were silent, cowed. They shuffled uneasily, twisted battered hats in their hands. A swarthy, bearded man was speaking to them. It was the same man who had told them to turn on Hank Hendricks back on the knoll. His stilted English hissed

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through his teeth.

"You may still appease the Crimson Serpent," the bearded man intoned. "First you must hurl Doc Savage and his man into the moat of the alligator garfish."

He paused for dramatic effect.

Renny shuddered. "Those things are worse than sharks or barracuda!" he muttered.

Renny had been around the swamp long enough to become acquainted with the alligator gar. The savage, ferocious monsters abounded in the waters of the great swamp. They attained tremendous weights, some running close to two hundred pounds. Their snouts were equipped with tremendous jagged teeth like those of a crocodile. In shallow water they were always dangerous. If starved, they would attack and devour anything.

The bearded man noticed Renny's shudder. His thin lips spread over even white teeth in an evil grin. His voice rose to a shriek.

"Hurl the interlopers to their death!" he cried. "Then return to your homes. Forget what you have seen and resist the workers on the dam. Only by doing what you are told can you escape the Crimson Death and the curse of De Soto!"

The men mumbled among themselves. Then two more brave or cowardly than the others stepped forward. They rolled the tightly bound bodies of Renny and Doc into the sluggish water of the castle moat. Doc's body was still limp. The two bound forms struck the water with a splash.

THE muddy water boiled instantly. It churned. It grew red as the famished garfish plunged at the two inert forms. But Doc Savage moved. Savage teeth slashed at his arms and legs. The only thing that saved the two from instant death was the bulletproof underwear that they wore. Their hands and faces alone were unprotected.

But the bronze man kept right on moving. Doc had not been unconscious long. He had been quietly working on his bonds before the bearded man had begun to speak. His hands were free now. He leaped erect. The moat was very shallow. It had probably been deliberately made that way. The alligator gar is much more vicious in shallow water than in deep.

Doc's arm flung out. A tiny thermite-nitroglycerin bomb raced through the air. It struck the retaining dam at the upper end of the moat. The blast hurled swamp men from their feet. The bearded spokesman of the grim castle screamed in rage.

A torrent of water swept down the moat from the shattered dam. Doc held Renny with one hand. The cabled fingers of the other dug into a crevice between two masonry blocks on the wall of the moat. The fingers whitened under the terrific strain.

Water roared down the moat, crashed into the spillway at the lower end. The garfish were turned end on end. There were literally hundreds of them. They were thrown in confusion. The lower end of the moat became like a salmon trap at the height of the Columbia River run. Doc climbed up on the inside of the moat, hauled Renny with him. Both had been slashed, but not seriously.

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Doc quickly untied Renny's bonds, spoke quietly to him in Mayan. He said he was convinced now that Monk and Ham were prisoners within the castle. And that, also, the secret of this whole plot lay within it.

The two men leaped to their feet. Lights flashed from the castle. Concealment or secrecy was impossible.

Renny expected plenty of trouble. He was right. Armored men met them as they rushed through an entrance into the castle.

Broadaxes swung. Mighty, fighting swords slashed through the air. Doc flung a smoke bomb to the floor of the passageway into which they fought their way. The fumes were blinding, stifling. But the passageway was too narrow to permit them to escape or fight through. It was instantly choked with men.

Renny cried out once, then went down under an avalanche of flesh. He struck out with his bony fists, accounted for more than one armored figure.

Then the smoke cleared from the air. Renny groaned as he saw the blood-smeared bronze figure stretched out beside him. An armored guard leered brutally at the bronze man, chuckled hoarsely. He spoke in ancient Spanish. Renny didn't get much but the name of De Soto.

Then the big engineer got his first glimpse of the man who claimed to be a descendant of the great explorer, the man whom Fletcher Carter had said was the original De Soto himself!

The bearded giant was laughing. He kicked the blood-smeared figure with a polished boot, spoke in English.

"Carry him to the main torture room," he ordered. "I wish to find out how much he has learned. We must be sure that our secret of eternal life is safe from prying eyes."

RENNY groaned as one huge guard in steel breastplate and helmet carried the bronze man under one arm. The guard's armor was decorated with a black maltese cross and a skull. De Soto spoke to him.

"Tie him and leave him on the floor, Montevalle," De Soto snarled. "I will start with little wedges under his fingernails. We will continue after that with thumbscrew treatment."

Montevalle nodded his head, answered in English equally as good as De Soto's.

Other guards dragged Renny along the corridor, toward some other dungeon.

The strength that comes in desperation flowed through the veins of the big engineer. Only two guards were with him. He didn't look as though he had enough strength to fight a cat. But that proved to be an error.

Renny suddenly stumbled to his feet. The fists that had broken oaken doors for a pastime smashed out. The first guard went down without a sound. The second let out a howl. But it was a short one. Renny put him to sleep with alterations in his countenance that a plastic surgeon could scarcely repair. There was no danger of either of them talking much for a while.

Renny staggered along the corridor. He made a turn into another one. He was soon completely lost in a maze of passageways that defied even his engineer's trained sense of direction.

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Then he heard Ham's voice. What Ham was saying made Renny think that he himself had gone a little mad. He feared he had suffered a severe concussion in the fight back there.

HAM was discoursing in his most polished courtroom manner. He seemed pleading with some unseen panel of jurors.

"Gentlemen," Ham argued clearly, "my client is obviously innocent of the charge that has been brought against him. He does not deserve the fate that the prosecution has demanded."

Renny could mentally picture the dapper lawyer twirling his pince-nez on the end of a black silk ribbon. Renny shook his head. Either he was crazy, or Ham was.

"Gentlemen of the jury," Ham went on, "it should be obvious to you by this time that death is not a fitting solution for Andrew Mayfair. I beg of you, gentlemen, send this simian monstrosity to an institution, where he should have been for years."

A howl of rage came from Monk.

"You danged shyster!" he shrilled. "If I ever get out of here, I'm going to separate you into a twenty-volume edition of how not to be a lawyer."

Ham chuckled softly.

"Tut, tut, gentlemen!" he admonished. "Now you see clearly that Lieutenant Colonel Mayfair does not have sufficient intelligence to be at large. Cutting off the ears of little children is obviously the act of an unbalanced mind, gentlemen. Oh, perhaps we should say no mind at all."

Monk's roar of indignation at that was not decipherable. His affection for small children was well known by everyone who had encountered him. Ham always said children trusted Monk as they would a dog, or any other dumb animal.

Renny was charging through the corridor by the time Ham made his closing remarks to the jury. He came to a heavy paneled door. It was too tough for his fists to smash. But it yielded to his shoulder. What he saw almost made him laugh.

Ham had apparently taken on the role of the monkey. The dapper lawyer was perched on a chain that hung from the ceiling. Then Renny saw what had happened. Ham's slim wrists had slipped through the cuffs that had chained him to the ceiling. He had freed himself and was now working on the chains that held Monk's hamlike hands. But he was making the hairy chemist pay for his release with plenty of abuse.

RENNY rumbled a greeting, helped Ham free Monk. Neither seemed surprised to see him.

"What's this all about?" Renny demanded then.

Ham's face sobered. He told the big engineer what Fletcher Carter had told them and what they had seen.

Renny exploded. "D'you suppose it's on the level? Can this guy really be De Soto?" he asked.

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He remembered then the remark the bearded giant had made about the secret of eternal life being safe, told Ham about it. The lawyer shook his head, perplexed.

"History's been wrong before," he reminded Renny. "De Soto might not have died as his men reported."

A low whistle burst from Renny's lips.

"This beats anything we ever got into!" he rumbled. "It's the screwiest thing I ever saw!"

Renny had encountered too many impossibilities that were facts to be over-skeptical. But he suddenly forgot his amazement. More serious matters had to be taken care of.

"They got Doc," he rapped. "Took him to the main torture chamber."

Monk's face blanched. His jaw grew belligerent.

"Let's get goin'!" he shrilled. "What're we waitin' for?"

Ham led the way. In a niche in the corridor he found a suit of armor propped up on a stand. It was there just to be ornamental. But it gave Ham an idea; in fact, two ideas.

Ham was the only one of the three who could speak ancient Spanish.

He put on the armor.

"Now, you hairy baboon," he rasped. "I'm going to take you to the torture room!"

He kicked Monk in the seat of his pants. Monk growled indignantly. But he marched along beside Renny. Both held their hands behind them as if bound. Ham stalked in the rear.

At a turn in the corridor, they encountered another guard in armor, Ham spoke in Spanish.

"These two are wanted in the main torture room," he stated. "They are dangerous. Assist me."

The other armored guard nodded sullenly.

"O. K., buddy," he growled. "But why in hell don't you speak English? The other stuff gets my goat."

Monk doubled up with uncontrollable laughter.

HAM walked slightly to the rear, letting the other call the turns. The encounter was fortunate. For Ham hadn't the slightest idea where the main torture room was located.

A massive iron door gave onto the room they sought. They knew they had arrived when they heard De Soto's voice.

"And now, the marvelous Doc Savage," De Soto sneered. "We shall see how much punishment you can absorb before you talk."

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Ham reached out quickly to the guard who was with them. He used a trick Doc taught all his aides. Ham's fingers touched sharply on certain nerves at the base of the skull. The guard went to sleep.

Then the three men rushed into the torture room. It was unfortunate that they did so. Their arrival inside the room coincided with a scream of rage from Do Soto. The bearded giant had just wiped blood from the face of his captive. His face was livid.

The unconscious man was not Doc Savage!

"Look, Louis Montevalle!" De Soto screamed. "Savage is now in your armor. He tricked me when the smoke bomb was thick. We shall "

Then he saw Monk, Ham and Renny. And he thought he saw a lot of other things.

De Soto was quick for a big man. He leaped to a wall, pressed his fingers into the masonry. A slab dropped from under him. He shot from sight. In the same instant, stone walls dropped over every opening in the room. They were in a solid tomb, without any aperture.

A low moan at one side made Ham turn. He saw a body on a torture rack.

"Water! Water!" a cracked voice pleaded. The man turned his head.

It was Gerald Pettybloom.

THE armor of Louis Montevalle stalked solemnly through the lower corridors of the castle long before De Soto discovered the deception. The weird castle grew more eerie in the deeper passageways.

The clanking of chains could be heard plainly here. It was a regular, systematic clanking, as if a methodical ghost were performing some meticulous task. With the clanking noise there now came strange sighing accompaniment. The ghost perhaps was tired.

Then the armor of Louis Montevalle came to a wide oaken door. The suit of armor had been equipped with keys. It might have been considered queer to one who knew that Louis Montevalle did not select the correct key first. He should have known his own ring of keys.

But there were no eyes to watch him. Louis Montevalle threw the door wide open.

The sight that met his eyes was scarcely one of ghostly origin. Blue mercury lights filled a cavernous expanse with a glaring light. The clanking chains became a modern battery of printing presses. They were moving with methodical regularity.

Behind those were bins of jewels, rows of masterpieces from the painter's world.

Doc saw that. And he saw Fletcher Carter. He hadn't seen Carter's head supposedly fall, so he wasn't surprised.

Carter's sleek face was wreathed in smiles. He stood beside the largest printing press. He rubbed his hands together like a money lender who has just discovered he was overpaid.

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"Ah, Monteville," he purred. "I am pleased. Our take this month will run well over a million."

He grinned delightedly. "Come," he beckoned. "Look at this new press."

Doc Savage advanced slowly. One hand came up, reached inside the armor, felt in the equipment kit about his body. It looked as if he was scratching a cootie.

Fletcher Carter leaned over the press, partly obscuring it. Then he straightened suddenly. He cradled a Thompson machine gun in his arms.

"This will go through that cheap armor like an ice pick through cheese, Doc Savage!" he snarled wildly. "I don't want to do this, but you give me no choice."

The machine gun swung up.

Chapter XVIII. A CALL FOR HELP

DOC SAVAGE stood perfectly still. Fletcher Carter was trembling, his finger tight on the trigger.

"I see that you have recognized me," the bronze man said quietly. "But why is it necessary that you shoot?"

"Because now you know too much; you know that I am alive," Carter bleated.

Fletcher Carter no longer appeared self-sufficient. His face was haggard. Even the red carnation in his coat lapel was wilted. Death shone in his eyes. His finger jerked.

Carter had acted fast. He was slow compared with Doc Savage. One of the bronze man's hands made a quick jerk. A small pellet flashed through the air, hit the firing mechanism of the gun, even as the other tried to pull the trigger.

A howl of pain came from Carter. He hauled his finger from the trigger guard. The finger was white. It made a clicking noise as it knocked against the gun.

The finger was frozen. So was the firing mechanism of the submachine gun. Doc had thrown a small capsule of highly compressed liquid air. It had broken, expanded instantly with freezing force. It made the gun momentarily useless.

The bronze man bounded forward, reached for Fletcher Carter. But Fletcher's feet were not frozen, and Doc was handicapped by the heavy armor he had donned.

Carter ran like a startled rabbit. He found a lever in the wall and pulled it. He darted through the opening that appeared in the wall, slammed the door closed behind him, then he ran.

After a time he came to a small room. He entered and reached for a telephone. It was a small phone, of the type used for interoffice communication.

De Soto answered Carter's call. The bearded man was in an office, a peculiar kind of office. One century blended into another there. Most of the furniture was as ancient as the castle itself. Armor-clad men were

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there. But De Soto sat beside a flat-topped desk. It bore the name of a manufacturer who didn't start in business until quite a while after De Soto explored the Mississippi.

"He came down to the pressroom," Carter wailed. "I covered him with a Tommy gun, but he got away."

De Soto exploded. He barked sharp questions in English.

"Froze it. Froze it!" Carter's voice insisted. "I tell you he froze the damn gun! And my finger, too!"

De Soto subsided somewhat.

"I think he is going to try and free his friends," Carter howled.

The bearded giant in Spanish mail leaped to his feet. He barked orders in Spanish, then lapsed into English.

"Come!" he roared. "We have had enough of this bronze man. We will make certain of him this time."

De Soto swept from his office. His staff of armored warriors trailed along behind him.

The bearded giant strode rapidly down a phosphorescent lighted corridor. It led in the direction of the press room. About half way down, De Soto stopped. He looked sharply around to see if any alien eyes were upon him. He didn't see any.

De Soto opened a little panel and found a lever, pulled it. That opened a larger door into another phosphorescent lighted corridor. A few yards farther on they encountered a sharp flight of stairs. Just under the fourth stair riser, a hidden button opened a second door. That took them straight to the torture room.

De Soto opened another switch box there. It held two levers. De Soto hesitated. Then he chose the lever on the right. It opened a grill-barred window. They could see inside. There wasn't anyone in the room except Monk, Ham, Renny, and Gerald Pettybloom.

Monk squinted at the grilled opening.

"Come in and fight, you rats!" he shrilled. "We'll see if you've learned how in four hundred years!"

De Soto ignored him. He clapped the iron door shut over the grilling. He grunted.

Another guard pounded up then. He was breathless.

"The guy in Montevalle's armor is back in the pressroom!" he said. "I seen him there. I slugged him and he went down."

De Soto stared at the guard. He didn't seem to think it peculiar that a Brooklyn accent was emerging from the armor. Neither did anybody else.

"He must have gone down another passage," one of the others offered.

De Soto was in no mood for speech. His face was white with rage. Without a word, he led the way. Once more his guard trailed after him. They went to the pressroom.

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The figure in the Maltese-crossed armor was on the floor. It was trying to get up as De Soto and his retainers swept in. They all jumped on him at once. He groaned. He had about half a ton of armor, plus the men inside of it, on top of him. They were all slugging.

Then they jerked him to his feet, ripped off the helmet

The man was Fletcher Carter!

"THAT bronze man is a devil!" Carter moaned. "He found me just after I phoned you, and gave me some kind of gas. Then he must have lugged me here and put me in the armor he was wearing."

Carter was practically one hundred percent right. Doc had followed Carter without difficulty, had listened to his telephone call. Then the bronze man acted. He had seen a way to get to his aides.

Doc did not know the location of the torture room. But he knew all he had to do was trail De Soto and he could find out. He had put his armor on Carter, taken him to the pressroom, then followed the bearded man.

And it had been the bronze man who played the part of an excited guard, who had started De Soto and his guards on their futile trip to the pressroom.

Doc waited only until the group disappeared. Then he went to the switch box outside the torture room where De Soto had paused. It was the box with two levers. De Soto had pulled the one on the right. Doc pulled the one to the left.

A big masonry door began to swing open. It didn't look like a door at all. It seemed just part of the wall. Monk's high-pitched voice came to Doc's ears.

"Now, Pettybloom, you rat!" Monk shrilled. "I'm going to cut your ears off! You went out to trap Doc, didn't you? You tried to lure him in here to save your lousy hide."

Pettybloom protested that he hadn't, that he really made up his mind to tell Doc everything, even if he died. The reporter was sitting on the floor in a very undignified position. Monk held him by the hair.

Doc stepped quietly into the room.

"The reporter is telling the truth," he said softly. "He tried his best to tell all he knew."

Monk whirled around and his mouth dropped open.

"Doc!" he gasped. "How'd you get here?"

Doc Savage didn't answer Monk. He spoke rapidly for several minutes, giving new instructions to his aides.

"It is important that we capture the castle," he said. "The swamp men outside have been inflamed to a point where they may become dangerous on their own account. There may be unnecessary bloodshed if we do not act promptly."

Doc paused briefly.

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"Also," he said quietly, "if we do not act promptly it may be too late for us to act at all. They know I have found the way to the torture chamber."

Renny opened and closed his big fists. He didn't say anything. But his actions showed how much he would really like to tear into some of the ancient Spaniards who had had him hurled into the moat of alligator gars.

Ham sprang forward.

"I'll eat half a dozen of those guys!" he rapped.

Gerald Pettybloom was still weak, but he decided it was high time he did some fighting instead of just writing about it.

But Monk howled. He gave forth a battle cry that would have done credit to a Comanche. It was with difficulty that Doc kept Monk behind him as they filed down the steps and out toward the main corridor. If they encountered trouble, it would be Doc who absorbed the first shots that were fired.

They encountered plenty of trouble as they emerged into the main corridor. The trouble was equipped with modern machine guns, even if it wore obsolete armor. Doc leaped back into the niche they had left. There was another lever in a switch box there. De Sato hadn't touched it at all. Doc did and the lights went out.

But De Soto screamed instructions and they went on again. Doc moved quickly, made scattering motions with his hands.

"Holy cow!" Renny grumbled. "I'm going blind again."

"Join hands," Doc called. "Follow me. I will lead you."

"Attaboy, Doc!" Monk piped. "Blind 'em again."

Monk knew that Doc had pulled the same trick he had used earlier in the swamp. But he also knew that the chemical didn't last long. Without weapons, they would have to be out of sight before sight returned to De Soto and his men, or it would be just too bad.

THEY were out of sight. In another corridor, Doc found a hidden niche. He reached in it and took out four of his own machine pistols.

"I hid these when I first came in," he explained. "I feared that I might be captured and the weapons discovered, if I did not."

Monk's look of admiration showed how foresighted he thought that was.

The five men moved cautiously along the corridor. Many rooms opened from it. Some of them were large, some of them small. Most of them held one or another type of device for torture. Monk grunted in disgust.

"These guys must live on torture!" he rapped. "I suppose it's just an old Spanish custom."

That made Ham perk up.

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"Do you suppose this Fountain of Youth business is on the level, Doc?" he queried.

The bronze man did not answer directly.

"There are many strange things going on in this castle," he said. "I don't think we have quite scratched the surface yet."

Ham subsided. But for only an instant. An ear-splitting scream rent the air. It was the voice of Consuelo Manresa.

"O—o—o—o—ohh! You fiends! I weel not tell you how much information I have gotten to my employers." The scream choked off in agony.

Ham jumped. "That girl!" he snapped. "They're torturing her!"

Monk grumbled. "Let 'em torture," he snorted. "She's got us into enough trouble. This is probably another phony."

Doc Savage's gold-flecked eyes whirled strangely. He moved forward with smooth, even speed.

"Come," he said simply. "We are needed. Get your mercy pistol ready."

Ham danced with rage. "See, you overgrown chimpanzee?" he barked. "Doc knows she's on the level. You weren't ever right about a woman in your life!"

DOC SAVAGE gave no indication of whether he believed Consuelo Manresa to be on the level. His aides knew that, on the level or not, the bronze man would not leave a woman to suffer, if her pain was real.

"I bet she's faking," Monk squawked.

The scream came again. It was fear and terror.

"That is genuine terror," Doc said quietly. "And this time it is not on a phonograph record."

That shut Monk up. He crowded ahead, made menacing motions with his mercy pistol. He inspected it carefully.

"Got any explosive slugs, Doc?" he queried.

"No," the bronze man replied. "I had room for only one round of bullets."

If Doc had room for but one drum of slugs per gun, it would have to be mercy bullets. Otherwise, he might be unnecessarily endangering life. The bronze man would sacrifice his own before he would permit needless slaughter.

Consuelo Manresa's scream came again. This time it was very close. Another door gave onto one of the numerous torture rooms. Consuelo Manresa was in it. She was suspended by wires from the ceiling. The wires ran through pulleys and were attached to a counterweight. The counterweight was somewhat lighter than the girl.

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She was steadily dropping downward. Two feet beneath her raged a fire of some chemical composition. The heat was so great that it scorched the faces of the men coming in the door. There was no one else in the room.

"Holy cow!" Renny barked. "There's no faking about that one."

Renny was correct. There was nothing to prevent the girl from dropping into the flames. The fire pit was too wide for a man to reach her from the edges. The wires and counterweight were also beyond their grasp.

"Ham!" Doc snapped. "Jump!"

The bronze man stood at the edge of the fire pit. Ham jumped and Doc caught him by his feet. He held him like a powerful stage acrobat. A sharp pair of wire cutters snipped the strands that held her.

Her eyes were filled with thankful tears. The look she gave Ham made him turn his head.

A harsh laugh brought Doc's head around sharply. There was a clanging noise as a door swung shut. They were trapped in the torture room! Another grating noise sounded in the walls. Narrow slits showed in the masonry.

Through each slit was poked the muzzle of a submachine gun. De Soto's voice was harsh in triumph. "I thought that would work!" he snarled. "Try to get out of this one, Savage! I've got you all at once!"

Chapter XIX. DOOMED!

THERE was no place to find concealment in the room. All were under the deadly menace of the submachine guns. At a sharp order, Doc and his men dropped the mercy pistols they held.

Monk deflated. He looked angrily at the girl. Ham also looked at the girl, but his glance was sorrowful, not angry. He realized she had been used unwittingly to draw them into the snare. She was not to blame.

Pettybloom shrugged. The crime reporter had had two close brushes with death. He had decided he wouldn't be frightened any more. The girl was still dazed.

Renny's severe features were drawn.

Only Doc showed no emotion. The bronze man gazed calmly at the slot through which De Soto's voice had come. His gold-flecked eyes were flashing strangely.

"You've made a lot of trouble, Doc Savage," came Fletcher Carter's voice. "This time there is no help for it. You all must die."

"Did you really think you might fool us otherwise, might make us believe some of the scenes you had staged were true?" Doc asked quietly.

Fletcher Carter chuckled briefly. He appeared to have regained his self-assurance.

"You must admit that we did a good job," he said boastfully. His voice swelled with pride. "That Fountain of Youth stunt was my idea. I think it was a beauty."

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"Yuh mean that was a fake?" Monk rasped.

"Of course," Doc said quietly.

"But that Indian the one who became young " Monk blurted.

"He is really a quite excellent actor," De Soto put in coldly. "Had you and the one called Ham believed your eyes and accepted as fact what you saw, you might all have lived. Now it is impossible."

"I told you, Monk, you hairy monstrosity!" Ham snapped angrily. "If you'd just kept your big mouth shut, we would have gotten out of here."

Doc was apparently paying no attention. The bronze man was getting out of the armor he had worn while playing the part of a guard. His features also changed, became natural again as he quickly removed the make-up he had used.

"But what's it all about?" Monk howled. "I don't know yet. Isn't that bearded mug really a descendant of De Soto?"

"Of course not," Ham put in bitterly.

Fletcher Carter chuckled again. "Your lawyer friend is right. De Soto here is not a descendant of the original explorer. But you must admit our set-up here is good. It has served to keep the swamp dwellers fooled and frightened, as well. The show is not entirely for your benefit. It has been going on for years."

Monk sighed. "I can guess the rest of it, then. So "

"Enough," De Soto's voice crackled harshly. "The time for conversation has ceased. If we could have used you, we would. We do not want this swamp flooded. We do not intend to move. I do not think it will be necessary for us to move."

"With you out of the way and you already are considered dead no one else will ever get in here to investigate. By stirring up the swamp dwellers some more, we will make it so hot that the government will be forced to change the location of that flood-control dam."

There was a moment of silence. Doc Savage broke it. "And now?" he asked casually.

"Now you are to die!" De Soto snarled. "You are to die by the Crimson Serpent!"

SILENCE followed. Footsteps could be heard outside the ring of loopholes that covered the torture chamber. The submachine guns menacing those within did not waver.

The air seemed clammy suddenly. Ham was quite surprised to find that he was covered with perspiration. He decided that it wasn't all caused by the heat.

Monk looked hopefully at Doc. The bronze man appeared resigned to his fate. He was leaning indolently against one wall of the torture chamber. Once again he appeared to be rubbing his sides. Then his big fists went up behind his head, seemed to massage the back of his neck.

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Renny's breath came in softly. The severity of his features relaxed slightly.

"It is all my fault. I should have told you what I knew," Consuelo Manresa said suddenly. The black-haired girl appeared to have recovered somewhat, although her large, dark eyes were drawn.

"Yes?" Ham said sympathetically. Monk snorted disdainfully.

"I'm sorry I called you a gigolo," the girl told Ham pointedly. Monk snorted again. Consuelo Manresa ignored him.

"Georges Douter and I were working together," she said simply. "He was a member of the French Sûreté. I am a member of the Spanish Secret Service."

Renny grunted. Even Monk's piglike eyes widened. Ham was smiling fatuously. Gerald Pettybloom's jaws were slack. Here was the story of the ages unfolding before him, and he'd never be able to write it. Many things were becoming clear to him. They were clear to the others, also.

"Stolen goods?" Ham asked.

The girl nodded. "Many of the ancient Spanish relics you see here were stolen, stolen by unpatriotic persons who took advantage of our time of trouble. I was on the trail of them. Douter was on the trail of some of the famous paintings that have disappeared from France in recent years."

"And they are here!" Pettybloom breathed.

"Yes," the girl nodded. "They are here."

"We received a tip through a criminal caught in Paris. We came to the United States. Douter came directly here. I remained in New York. Then Douter telephoned, told me what a terrible job we were up against. He said Doc Savage had to become involved, and it was up to us to help create a mystery so that he would become involved. The Crimson Serpent helped."

Ham nodded. That explained many things, explained why the girl had been so evasive, why she had refused to answer questions.

"In some way, Douter was spotted," the girl went on. "He was seized and taken to Chicago, just as Renny was taken to Chicago. These criminals operate their own airplane service. They do not land here, but at a field not far away where they have an autogyro, then they use that to drop right down on the roof."

Renny nodded. He knew he had been taken to Chicago to try to keep Doc there. Renny's escape had balked that.

"We tried to fool the gang in Chicago. Evidently we didn't succeed. We found the gang's landing field, all right, and were on our way here. But they knew we were coming. Douter was killed." She shuddered slightly. Doc's aides said nothing. They knew how Douter had looked.

"Since then, I've been kept a prisoner, until such time as they could use me." Her voice became bitter. "And they did use me. I've got us all trapped now."

"Ah, don't worry about that," Ham tried to make his voice comforting. A look of acute disgust passed over Monk's face.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

Then the look of disgust faded. He jumped three feet.

Brr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!

A machine gun roared suddenly over their heads.

THE machine-gun bullets plowed into the pile of weapons which Doc and his aides had been forced to drop.

Monk looked at them regretfully. Now he had nothing but his fists left, and they were no match for guns.

A solid block lifted in the far wall. A heavy, barred gate stood behind it. Peering through, face merciless, was the bearded De Soto. Standing at one side was Carter.

"Strip!" De Soto barked savagely.

Monk blushed. The others also turned crimson. No one moved.

De Soto gave a sharp order. The muzzle of a machine gun turned squarely on the small form of Consuelo Manresa.

"I have had too many evidences of your trickery, Savage," he rapped. "Get out of those clothes, strip to your shorts, or the girl will be killed instantly."

Strange rumbling came from Monk. The hairy chemist still wasn't impressed by Consuelo Manresa. But that had nothing to do with the indignity of having to take off his clothes.

The five men obeyed unwillingly and slowly. Even Doc's equipment kit had to come off.

Another door opened suddenly, an armored guard slipped through, reached for the clothes.

Renny appeared coiled for a leap. He glanced at the gun pointed at Consuelo Manresa and stood still.

Ham looked at Monk, chuckled suddenly. "The man that looks like a monkey. The ape man." he gibed softly.

Monk said a lot of words. He tried to cover his hairy chest with his long arms. That just made him look more like a baboon than ever.

"I have listened to your conversation with pleasure," De Soto said sulkily. "All of you are smart, I will compliment you on that. But that is why you are here even Mr. Pettybloom. This has been our hide-out for many years. We could not afford to have anyone alive on the outside who might be too suspicious."

Pettybloom swallowed hard. The crime reporter spoke with a visible effort. "I-I'll get you to write your obituary yet," he blurted.

Doc's gold-flecked eyes had narrowed. The bronze man had resumed his indolent position against a wall of the torture chamber.

Renny watched him anxiously. The big engineer's features were drawn. Doc's hands were behind his head again. Those hands were near one of the slots in the wall from which the strange, phosphorescent light came.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

The big engineer understood what that light was. It was far from mysterious. It was merely a form of concealed neon-gas illumination. There must be electric wires near it. Evidently that was why Doc was staying in that spot.

Renny's brain worked swiftly, but the more he thought, the less he could understand. Undoubtedly, Doc could short the wires, could throw the chamber in darkness. But what good would that do!

Those watching them through the loopholes had flashlights as well as guns. In any event, they could sweep the entire chamber with a rain of bullets that would leave nothing living behind. And now not even Doc or his aides had the protection of the bullet-proof underwear they ordinarily wore.

Renny thought he understood. Doc was waiting in hope that De Soto and Carter would step inside the chamber with them. In the darkness, the guards would not fire for fear of hitting their chiefs.

The big engineer sighed. Even that would not save them, he knew. They still would have to get out of the castle. And unarmed, with killers on all sides of them, that would be impossible.

Then Renny stopped thinking. Carter was speaking, and there was deadly malice in his tones.

"Enough," the sleek man snapped. "You are reserved for the Crimson Serpent, but before then "

" we will have a show," De Soto cut in.

One of the two must have pressed a control switch. A slab of stone reared up suddenly in the center of the floor.

There was a terrific spitting and howling. A bobcat, lean and starved, eyes gleaming madly, bounded into the torture chamber.

A BOBCAT is not so large. But it is concentrated dynamite. Its claws can tear to threads the tender flesh of humans.

The bobcat landed on the floor in one gigantic leap, paused for a fraction of a second, then leaped again. It leaped directly toward Consuelo Manresa.

Ham screamed. It was probably the only time in his life that he ever felt fear. And he wasn't feeling fear for himself, even now. His lean body shot forward to get between the wild cat and the girl.

Ham was fast. Monk was faster. And Monk had no intention of seeing his dapper friend torn to shreds. One long arm shot out, caught the wild cat under the throat in midair, knocked it back.

Monk tried to leap after the cat. He was spun aside by a bronze flash. Doc Savage had gone into action.

Only a perfect athlete, with perfect timing, could have done what Doc did then. He paused, just an instant, as the cat drew powerful legs under it for another spring, then he had it from behind and by the throat.

The cat slumped to the floor. There had been a gas pellet in Doc's hand. That pellet had been saved for emergencies. The emergency had arrived. The bobcat was unconscious.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

A strange, hoarse laugh came from outside the barred door. De Soto, his eyes wild and glaring, was showing all the deep cruelty of his nature.

"Carter, you were right," he roared. "I did not think it possible. But each of these would give his life for another. And they are as good as they were touted."

Reaction held those in the torture chamber. All but Doc were weak with sudden release from the experienced peril. The girl would have fallen, if Pettybloom had not caught her. Ham looked more than mildly disappointed at that.

Pettybloom had tried to go into action also. But his speed had been slow compared to the others. The crime reporter appeared to be trying to say many things to the girl. His face was strangely white.

Fletcher Carter's face was white also. The self-assured man did not appear to relish quite the cold venom that De Soto displayed.

Deliberately, Carter opened the barred door. Renny stirred, started to move. A warning burst from a machine gun came from overhead.

Then Carter stood just inside the door. There was a strange implement in his hand.

The implement was something like a huge trap. It was large enough to fit around a human body. Right now, the trap was wide. One side of it was perfectly smooth.

The other side was filled with scores of tiny knives. The knives were set in the form of a coiled snake.

Ham gasped. The secret of the Crimson Serpent had been disclosed. It was a modified version of the old Spanish "iron maiden."

The trap would be extended about a man's body. Then the trigger would be kicked. Strong springs would drive the knives into the victim's body. The wound would remain in the form of a Crimson Serpent.

"One at a time," Carter said hoarsely, "One at a time. Call for them one at a time, De Soto. As each steps through the door, the Crimson Serpent will strike."

"The girl first!" De Soto snarled.

A deep sigh came from Ham. He glanced desperately at the waiting guns and poised for a leap. Monk's muscles already were tense. Renny, his huge fists knotted, raised one big foot. Gerald Pettybloom swung the limp body of the girl behind him.

Only Doc, back against the wall, did not appear to move.

"The girl!" roared De Soto.

It was then that all hell broke loose.

Chapter XX. SECRETS EXPOSED

A BLASTING, as from a half dozen big guns came from outside the castle. The sound penetrated loudly, even through the massive stone walls.

Coupled with the roar of the big guns came the rattle of smaller weapons, and over it all rose a high, thin-pitched screaming, as if a thousand attackers were yelling madly.

De Soto froze. Fletcher Carter stood as if paralyzed. Startling yells came from the guards at the loopholes.

Another huge explosion came. Immediately afterward, the castle rocked with earthquake force.

In the same instant, the phosphorescent lights went out! It seemed as if they had been blown out by the force of a cannon shell.

Fletcher Carter screamed.

Then the voice of De Soto rose loud and clear over the din. "Guard the walls!" he roared. "Use the weapons there. Whether it is the natives or really a National Guard force that has attacked, open fire."

"But the prisoners?" a guard yelled frantically.

The barred gate into the torture chamber slammed shut

"I'll tend to the prisoners. They will not escape alive. Do as you're told. Use those guns!"

Most of those who had been at the loopholes obeyed. One didn't. He was the same one who had detected Doc's deception with the swamp men.

Frank suspicion was in his eyes. He reached for his flashlight. Then he dropped it. Suspicion died.

Carter could be heard arguing with De Soto. An instant later came the slap of stone blocks, then the screaming howl of angry bobcats.

Where only one cat had been released in the torture chamber before, now it seemed that a half dozen were there.

Consuelo Manresa screamed. Howls of pain and terror were coming from others in the pit.

Above it all roared the hoarse, half-mad laughter of De Soto.

A wide grin split the guard's face. He would have preferred to stay, to turn on his flashlight and watch the scene he knew must be taking place beneath him. Of course, he had seen the cats work on Indians, but to see them tear a girl to pieces would really be something.

He hesitated only for a moment. Then he sighed, and reluctantly turned toward the sounds of the fighting outside. De Soto was not one to be disobeyed. Disobedience brought death, a horrible death. And De Soto had said to man the guns on the walls.

Very modern artillery was hidden on those walls. The guard felt certain that any attack would be beaten off.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

Of course, they might have to move, but they would have time to transfer the treasure the castle contained, before a new assault could be made.

Slowly at first, then more rapidly, the man raced toward the sounds of the fighting. The last thing he heard behind him was what sounded like a dying shriek. He laughed.

TWO others were laughing also. The bearded figure of De Soto stood outside the barred gate. Beside him was the more slender form of a self-assured man with a red carnation in his coat lapel.

All sound died away inside the torture chamber. The two outside turned, made their way swiftly along a corridor. Lights came on. One of the guards, on his own initiative, had evidently repaired the damage.

Outside the battle noise was dying away. Strangely, no shots had been fired from the guns on the castle walls.

Groups of puzzled, armor-clad men greeted De Soto and Carter as they reached the walls.

It was instantly apparent why.

Lights from the walls showed that several trees had been blasted down. There was a hole in one corner of the castle, but it appeared to have been caused by explosives, not by a shell.

"A trick!" De Soto shrielled loudly.

Others joined in. They were remembering now the scene Doc had put on to impress the swamp dwellers. It didn't seem possible, but he must have worked some such magic again.

"He coulda planted dynamite with time fuses!" one guard bellowed.

Others yelled assent. They didn't see just how that would explain the shouts and other noises they had heard, nor would it explain how that dynamite had gone off just when it did.

But they had to have some explanation. Their own nerves were shaken.

Suddenly Carter turned, looked intently at the big figure beside him. He shrieked loudly.

"This isn't De Soto!" he shrielled. "It is the big one they called Renny!"

Everyone was frozen for a moment. Then the bearded man turned. He fled back into the castle.

That broke the spell. Scores of armor-clad figures raced after him. Guns barked, but good shooting was impossible. There were too many pursuers, for one thing. For another, the big figure ahead was twisting and weaving, turning corners frequently.

Carter led the chase. The self-assured man appeared beside himself with rage. "Now I understand," he yelled. "I thought I heard a whisper in the torture chamber. It was Doc Savage. He told those with him to run for the dungeon, that no one would ever look for them there."

"The dungeons!" came the cry. "To the dungeons!"

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

"They must have got De Soto!" Carter yelled. "But I know Doc Savage is down. I saw him go down."

The mob swept on. Somehow, it seemed they passed Carter. Others took the lead.

A few moments later, Carter turned off in a side corridor. Only one guard noticed that. His evil, twisted features became horrible suddenly. He, alone, decided that there might be a trick within a trick.

Somehow "Carter" had not spoken just right. The guard turned, raced after the slender figure wearing a red carnation in his lapel.

The armored men no longer saw the big bearded figure ahead of them. But that made no difference. They knew where the dungeons were. They roared on down winding passageways. Dampness showed on the stone blocks beneath them.

They came to a narrow passageway. Those behind forced the leaders ahead. They crammed onward, into a series of narrow cells.

It was then the bearded man appeared again. He appeared behind them. Calmly his fingers sought, found a button. They pressed the button.

Stone blocks groaned and dropped. The only entrance to the dungeons was blocked. All the armor-clad men were trapped inside.

Doc Savage's gold-flecked eyes flickered above the false beard he had donned.

THE bronze man had known a moment of real peril might occur inside the castle. He had prepared for that moment.

Even before he started his round-up of the swamp dwellers, he had placed explosives outside the castle wall. And, he had placed duplicate sound-apparatus, to simulate the noise of an armed attack.

To operate that explosive and sound-apparatus from a distance, it had been necessary to use a radio impulse. Setting a radio robot on the machinery had been simple enough. It had been more difficult to locate electricity inside the castle to send the radio flash that would start the explosives and sound equipment.

That was why Doc had stayed near the wires of the phosphorescent lights. Working carefully, he had spliced a small radio-sending unit to those wires. He had waited until the proper moment, then started the apparent attack on the castle.

After that he had shorted the lights. Renny had gone into action. With the big engineer's assistance, De Soto and Carter had been overcome almost instantly. Then Doc and Ham had traded places with them. Doc's ventriloquism and marvelous ability to imitate voices and animals accounted for the sounds the guard had heard.

Monk, Renny, Consuelo Manresa and Gerald Pettybloom had been instructed to seek a hiding place until Doc and Ham could decoy the armored guards to the dungeon.

That was now accomplished. Doc turned, started back toward the upper level of the castle.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

It was then the screams came. There were two of those screams. They were made by different men.

The bronze man flashed upward. He knew the castle now. He wasted no time. Only seconds later, he reached the torture chamber. It was there De Soto and Carter, temporarily unconscious, had been left.

De Soto and Carter were still there. They would never leave alive.

They were lying on their backs. Across the bare chest of each crawled the gory Crimson Serpent!

At the far end of the room were two other figures. One was that of the guard. The guard had just been knocked cold. Over him stood Ham.

"H—he got here before me, Doc," said Ham, and the dapper lawyer's voice was oddly shaken. "He thought one of those two was you, and the other another of us. H—he used the Crimson Serpent on them before I could stop him."

Doc's shoulders rose and fell. But he said nothing. De Soto and Carter had been responsible for many slayings. They probably deserved to die. And again, as so often happens, Doc's foes had been slain by the very weapons they used on others.

THE round-up of all the dangerous criminals was complete. Only a few ancient, harmless Indians were found when Doc and his men searched the castle.

Pettybloom was anxious to get his story out. Doc didn't tell him of the well-equipped radio room he had found. He thought the story could wait until all details were complete.

Search of the castle completed those details.

"This undoubtedly is the storehouse of more so-called 'hot' goods than the world has ever known before," the bronze man explained. "De Soto and I imagine we will find he was at least partly Spanish must have been a very educated, if misguided, man.

"Loot has been accumulated here for years. Some of it had to be held for years before it could be sold."

The others nodded. Priceless paintings, gems of all kinds, even ransom money, had been discovered.

The printing presses explained the clanking sound that had been heard in the castle. It explained the reason the armored men had always been accompanied by a clanking sound also. They had wished to impress on the natives that the clanking sound must always be associated with danger. That would keep them away from the castle.

Counterfeit bills were being turned out on the presses. But that wasn't all. Hundreds of thousands of counterfeit lottery tickets, fake revenue stamps and labels also were being turned out. The place was capable of supplying almost everything criminals wanted.

That explained the tie-up with the Chicago gang. And it explained Fletcher Carter's part, also. Undoubtedly, he had been the contact man, the one the underworld knew. His apparent execution, a magician's easy trick, had been staged so that it would seem he was innocent. De Soto had stayed in the castle. He had had every comfort, he had servants and guards.

THE CRIMSON SERPENT

The guards, it was learned by questioning, had been chosen carefully. All had been required to speak Spanish. They had carried on their masquerade at all times, so that the swamp dwellers would believe there really was something mysterious about them.

"Holy cow! No wonder they didn't want the swamp flooded, and wanted the location of the dam changed!" Renny breathed.

"What a story. What a story," contributed Pettybloom. The reporter, however, kept his eyes on Consuelo Manresa.

Doc made his arrangements swiftly. The captured criminals would go to his upstate New York hospital, a hospital where they would undergo an operation that would blot out all memory of their past lives, would give them a chance to become honorable citizens.

Federal officers and Secret Service men of a dozen countries must be notified, so that they could remove the millions of dollars' worth of loot, see that it was restored to its rightful owners.

Renny was helping Doc in this.

Monk went to the dungeon door, asked a question that had been puzzling him. He was more puzzled when he left.

The castle, he was told, had been built long before it was ever taken over by the criminals. Swamp rumor said it had been there before the memory of the earliest settlers. It was of Spanish design. Could there have been some truth in the entire thing? Could this really have been erected by the real Do Soto and some of his men, hundreds of years before?

The hairy chemist shook his head. He didn't know.

Then Monk forgot all about his question. He rounded a dark corner and suddenly drew back.

Ahead of him, standing close together, were Ham and Consuelo Manresa. The dapper lawyer appeared trying to put his arms around the slender, dark-eyed girl.

"B—but you will let me see you later? You will let me call on you, won't you?"

Monk had never heard such pleading in Ham's voice outside a courtroom.

Consuelo Manresa's dark eyes rolled upward coquettishly, then she shook her head.

"I—I'm afraid I'd better go now," she said, shyly. "Gerald . . . Gerald might not like it. And we "

A muffled groan came from Ham.

Monk puckered his lips. It was difficult to do so and keep from laughing, but he managed it.

He strode down the corridor, whistling. He was whistling "Just a Gigolo."

THE END