

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

Table of Contents

<u>THE LAUGH OF DEATH</u>	1
<u>A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson</u>	1
<u>Chapter I. MAN IN SOLITUDE</u>	1
<u>Chapter II. A SECRET AND A VAULT</u>	5
<u>Chapter III. AFFAIR IN WASHINGTON</u>	12
<u>Chapter IV. DEATH SITTING UP</u>	15
<u>Chapter V. THE WILD GOOSE</u>	20
<u>Chapter VI. THE GOOSE HUNTER</u>	23
<u>Chapter VII. WHILE THE GOOSE FLEW</u>	28
<u>Chapter VIII. A STICKING OF PINS</u>	32
<u>Chapter IX. MARTIN</u>	37
<u>Chapter X. ASBESTOS SUIT</u>	42
<u>Chapter XI. THE UNEXPECTED</u>	46
<u>Chapter XII. THE OPERATION</u>	52
<u>Chapter XIII. MANFRED MATHIS</u>	57
<u>Chapter XIV. THE SECRET</u>	64
<u>Chapter XV. THE CREEPER</u>	67
<u>Chapter XVI. TWENTY-FOUR CARAT</u>	74
<u>Chapter XVII. THE LAUGHING MATTER</u>	80
<u>Chapter XVIII. LAST LAUGH</u>	84

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [Chapter I. MAN IN SOLITUDE](#)
- [Chapter II. A SECRET AND A VAULT](#)
- [Chapter III. AFFAIR IN WASHINGTON](#)
- [Chapter IV. DEATH SITTING UP](#)
- [Chapter V. THE WILD GOOSE](#)
- [Chapter VI. THE GOOSE HUNTER](#)
- [Chapter VII. WHILE THE GOOSE FLEW](#)
- [Chapter VIII. A STICKING OF PINS](#)
- [Chapter IX. MARTIN](#)
- [Chapter X. ASBESTOS SUIT](#)
- [Chapter XI. THE UNEXPECTED](#)
- [Chapter XII. THE OPERATION](#)
- [Chapter XIII. MANFRED MATHIS](#)
- [Chapter XIV. THE SECRET](#)
- [Chapter XV. THE CREEPER](#)
- [Chapter XVI. TWENTY-FOUR CARAT](#)
- [Chapter XVII. THE LAUGHING MATTER](#)
- [Chapter XVIII. LAST LAUGH](#)

Scanned and Proofed
by Tom Stephens

Chapter I. MAN IN SOLITUDE

Doc Savage had stepped out into the night to look at the thermometer. The mercury had sunk a little below the sixty mark. That was sixty below zero. The sky was clear and a very deep blue, almost black, and all the stars were crisp and bright. For two months, since the coming of the complete night, there had been no storm of consequence, and that was remarkable. But it had been intensely cold, terribly cold even for this spot south of the pole. All points are south of the north pole, but this one was south in the direction of Beaufort Sea, into which the Mackenzie River of Canada empties. Not far south, however.

Doc stretched his arms and clapped his hands and began to jump around in the snow.

He was, at first glance, quite naked. He was also a giant among men, larger than almost any man in height, and with a physique equally as unusual. His muscles and sinews, as he leaped and skipped and turned handsprings on the snow in the sixty-below cold of the arctic night, bunched and coiled monstrously. His obvious strength, nakedly displayed that way, was a little frightening. Men should not really have such strength. It was as if he had spent a lifetime of doing nothing except putting strength in his body. He hadn't put in a lifetime doing this, however—only part of it.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

His face was a handsome face with no prettiness—firm lips, straight nose, chin square but not jaw heavy.

The jumping around in the snow made him sweat, and this sweat gathered between his skins.

This was a literal fact, not a fantasy, for he did have two skins. One of them was his own deeply bronzed hide, and the other one, the outer one covering his body, was made of a transparent plastic in which he had dunked himself from head to toes. The plastic was a special one, and only he himself knew how he had concocted it. There was nothing else like it on earth. And yet he was not satisfied.

He was, in fact, far from satisfied, because after he had bounced around in the cold, then stood motionless until the stuff cooled off, then bounced around some more, the plastic began to crack. It would not stand the combination of cold, perspiration and flexing. Something was wrong.

He stood there in his disgust, the cold through the cracks that had opened in the plastic cutting at him like knives. It was not perfect, and he was disappointed. Everything had been going so well.

America had raw material to make the plastic in large quantities; it was harmless to the skin; it could be applied to the body with a brush, or a man could merely jump into a vat of it, and it would coat his body and harden at once; it could be removed almost instantaneously and harmlessly with another chemical application. All of this he had worked out. But now it was cracking.

The acids or salines in body perspiration might have something to do with the failure, he reflected.

The plastic had one other quality: it was almost a complete insulator against heat or cold. Soldiers in tanks and pilots in fighting planes need have no fear of fire if he could perfect the stuff. The plastic would not wear well and he knew it could never be made to wear well enough to make suits of it, hence the idea of coating the skin with it. These coatings could be renewed either on garments or on the skin. The United States fighting forces needed such a thing.

He turned and walked back to his Fortress of Solitude, intent on continuing the experiments.

HE had lately changed the outside appearance of his Fortress of Solitude, somewhat. The place, in the beginning, had been a dome affair, like an igloo, but of enormous size. Now, since the change, it was more rugged and completely resembled a chunk of ice protruding from the arctic ice pack, there not even being a sign that it actually stood on an island. The change was one he had considered necessary because of the increased number of planes flying over what had hitherto been unexplored waste.

The Fortress of Solitude was a secret from the world.

Not, in the strict sense, from the world. There were the Eskimos whom he had trained, and who had done the original construction and recently the remodeling. They lived here and took care of the place during his long periods of absence. He had trained the Eskimos and knew he could completely trust them, which was something he could say of only five other men and one woman in the civilized world.

The Eskimos were gone now. They never remained here while he was working. They took their hunting trips then.

He entered the Fortress. There were three doors for strength and insulation against the terrific outer cold. Inside, one could look up and see the stars at many points, because the dome was of a plastic material so

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

polarized that it would pass light in only one direction, a substance that was not a secret.

(The peculiar association of light and plastic materials has probably been called to the attention of almost everyone. There is, for instance, the plastic material of transparent type through rods of which light can be piped, around corners, much as water is conducted through a pipe.)

Inside, there was his equipment, the rare and complex scientific apparatus he had brought here or had created himself. Here he conducted his experiments, experiments so advanced and complicated that he had to have complete solitude.

“Conversation enriches the understanding,

But solitude is the school of genius.”

—GIBBON.

That quotation had been put before him by his father, and it was one of the first things he could remember of his father. He could not remember his mother at all except as a vague pleasure out of forgetfulness. But the quotation was like his father, who had been a genius in his way, too, and a strange man.

He had been told that his father was a queer man, but he did not accept that, although more than one of the scientists who had trained him at his father's request had obviously been convinced of the older man's queerness. Not queer and maybe not strange. Rather, a man with a grim resolve and a knowledge of what scientific training begun at childhood and continued until early manhood, with no pause and no time out, could accomplish.

At any rate the son had been made into a scientific product who was an amazing combination of physical strength, mental genius and encyclopedic knowledge.

NOT one of the five associates with whom he worked knew where he was, although they had come to realize that the times that he left them, most likely he went into seclusion in his Fortress of Solitude, the one place where he insisted on being undisturbed. Only once had his men come anywhere near it, and that was long ago. (Fortress of Solitude)

However, he kept track of them each day.

They did not know this.

There were five assistants: Monk, Ham, Long Tom, Johnny and Renny. These names were their nicknames only, and their full names together with their degrees and their accomplishments take too much time in the telling. Each was a very famous man in his field.

There was also Patricia Savage, who was Doc Savage's cousin, and who operated one of those beauty salons on Park Avenue which are robbers' roosts of the first order, although they rob only those who are actually so rich they need to be. Pat liked excitement the way a church mouse likes cheese; she gobbled it up, and she did not believe she got enough of it.

Daily reports were made in this fashion: Ham or Renny or Patricia—whoever happened to be reporting—merely took down a telephone and dialed or called an unlisted number, whereupon a mechanical

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

recording contrivance came on the wire and took down whatever the assistant had to say. That was all there was to it, for all the group knew. What they did not know was that an automatic gadget promptly, at the hours of noon and midnight, put the reports on a radio transmitter, beam type. The beam of this transmitter was aimed at Doc Savage's Fortress of Solitude in the arctic.

The secrecy surrounding the reports, as far as their getting to him was concerned, was simple psychology. He did not want his associates faking some alarming incident in order to draw him back to civilization to attend to some situation which they—not he—had decided needed his attention. He preferred to pick out his own cases, particularly now that there was the war.

Patricia Savage had only lately taken to making daily reports. It had been necessary to insist that she do this, for she scoffed at the idea that any of Doc Savage's enemies would strike at him through her, and even seemed to slyly welcome the exciting idea that they might.

The reports were most satisfactory, and they had come in regularly until the last two days.

For two days now there had been no reports from his assistants, and Doc Savage, here in his strangely unbelievable Fortress of Solitude, was disturbed.

Doc Savage glanced at the clock and saw that it was midnight. Midnight here was nothing but an hour on the clock, but it was time for the New York transmitter to come through with any reports made during the day.

This time there was a report.

There was also the sound that could have been a laughing.

Only one report came through, and Patricia Savage made it. It was not completed. Rather, the laughing completed it.

Pat sounded breathless but not terrified.

“Pat reporting,” she said—as brought to Doc Savage by the distant radio transmitter. “No reports for two days because of something that happened to me. A man in a green hat came to me. This was two days ago. The man with the green hat came to my Park Avenue place and asked to see me, and I had my secretary let him in after he insisted he was not a salesman. I was glad I did, because he told me an incredibly fantastic story. He was in a greatly worried state, and sat there twisting his green hat in his hands as he talked—”

That was all of the words Pat spoke, but it was not the last sound she made. However, the laughing came first and grew loud and inexplicable.

It was certainly not human, and it did not seem animal, so maybe “laughing” was not the word for it. It was a completely unexplainable sound, one that Doc Savage had never heard before and would not mind not hearing again. It had a macabre, chilling quality.

And yet it was not like Pat to scream because of a sound. But she did scream, and it was a sudden ripping sound that seemed to break off as if it were made of glass.

That was all from Pat, but the laughing continued for a long time, an interminably long time, at least ten minutes. Then there were voices away from the telephone receiver, one of them saying, “What the hell? Here's a telephone receiver off the hook.” Then the voice said into the telephone, “Hello! Hello! This is the police. Who are you?” The voice said that again, then complained, “Hell, whoever it was hung up.”

And that was all.

Chapter II. A SECRET AND A VAULT

IT was a hot summer afternoon when Doc Savage put his plane down on a military airport in a restricted area near New York City. The heat was bringing the soft black asphalt up from the expansion joints in the concrete runway and the tires made a *rrrrap-rap-rap* sound as he landed. Army fliers came out of the hangars to stare in amazement at his plane, which was a strictly experimental model and as strange-looking as a prehistoric pterodactyl in a rookery of modern eagles. There was an outlandish arrangement of wing flaps which would land her at forty miles an hour, then give her nearly a three-hundred-mile-an-hour speed in the air. There were other points that made her an oddity, too.

Doc Savage used the telephone at once.

He was not able to raise Monk, Ham, Long Tom, Johnny or Renny.

He did not get Pat.

The police said, "No, there hasn't been any reports of anything having happened to them."

Doc explained about the interrupted telephone call made by Patricia Savage, and the officer wanted to know from what precinct the call had been made. New York is a very large city, and a matter such as a disturbance over a telephone might be a small one which would not reach the central office. Doc said he did not know where the telephone call had been made from, and the officer said then that they would have to make a general check over the teletype and that this would take time.

Doc Savage went at once to his headquarters on the eighty-sixth floor of a prominent midtown building. He could hear the telephone ringing before he opened the door. He opened the door and entered, then stared in astonishment.

The place was a wreck. It looked as if a woodpecker had been at work.

He went to the telephone and said, "Yes?"

It was the police officer. "The telephone call you were asking about might have come from Jamaica. I think it did, because of something you mentioned about a laughing."

The officer's voice had a queer note, and Doc asked, "Is there something peculiar about the matter?"

"Yes, something strange as hell," said the officer. "The precinct station suddenly got a flock of calls from people who were hearing this laughing and who were scared stiff. So we, or, rather, the precinct, sent a prowl car around to see. And sure enough, there was a whole neighborhood so scared it was about to pop its suspenders. Everybody had heard this laughing."

"Did any of them describe this laughing?" Doc asked.

"They all described it. Everyone described it differently. It was a lot of laughing, though, to scare everybody as bad as they seemed to be scared. It was so bad that the cops in the prowl car thought somebody was pulling a gag on them. They still aren't sure."

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“What about the telephone?”

“They just reported finding the receiver off a telephone in a booth in a drugstore. They never got any description of anybody who had been using the telephone because they thought somebody had just dashed off and left the receiver hanging, because of the excitement.”

“Can you get a description of anyone who might have used the telephone?”

“Can try. Don't know, though. It's a cold trail.”

“Will you try, then call me?”

“Sure!”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you,” said the policeman, “and don't forget that you recently promised to keep the police department notified of these things you get mixed up in. For a couple of months we had a lot of trouble, and some people got suspicious of you. It got so bad we had to lock you up. I hope you haven't forgotten that.”

Doc said pleasantly that he had not forgotten, and that he would make full reports, as opportunity presented.

He hung up and began examining the holes in his office. The holes were about a quarter of an inch in diameter. It did not require more than a second look to conclude that they had been made with a drill bit—probably the work of an electric drill, and a very good one.

There seemed to be a hole in everything in headquarters that was larger than a sparrow.

Nothing else in the way of damage—though this was damage enough to many objects—had been committed. However, the big safe in the reception room had been neatly and thoroughly blown. This was not much of a feat because it was a quite elderly safe which had belonged to Doc Savage's father.

The headquarters consisted of three rooms: the smaller outer reception room in which the safe stood, a much larger library filled with scientific books, and a still greater expanse of laboratory crowded with scientific paraphernalia. Everything in the three rooms had been drilled full of holes. Doc measured some of the holes and found them all the same size. A steel bit with a diamond point had been used, because he found one that had been badly worn and tossed into a wastebasket.

THE gentleman attired in the green hat now arrived.

He arrived politely. He even telephoned in advance for an appointment, explaining, “I do wish you would see me, and I think it is to your interest to do so. It concerns a matter of something that has happened to your assistants.”

“Do come up,” Doc Savage said warmly.

Besides the green hat the man had a round barrel of a chest that was probably full of endurance, with attachments of long legs and arms, a rectangular face that was about as weak as a piece of armor steel and an affable manner. He also had a way of saying and acting everything as if he did not mean what he was saying

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

or doing, so it was almost impossible to catch him in a lie.

He held his hat in his hand and made a little speech.

“I do not wish to be asked questions,” he said. “You will doubtlessly not obey this wish. Therefore I shall ignore all questions. I want the object which was placed in the secret safe. You do not need to give me the object; you have merely to produce it. Once you have produced it and we have examined it, I will be able to tell you what has become of your friends and associates. You will then be able to act accordingly.”

Doc Savage said nothing. This seemed to surprise the man. It was placidly still in the reception room. The office was high enough above the street that the traffic noise was more like the sound of a sea than the noise of vehicles. Several pigeons were having a halfhearted quarrel on the window sill.

The man repeated part of his speech, changing it a little.

“Get the object from the secret safe and I will be able to tell you what happened to your friends. What could be more fair than that? However, if you do not do as I suggest, I am afraid you will not see your friends again. No one will see them. This is unfortunate, but true.”

Doc continued to say nothing.

“Are you deaf?” the man asked.

“Yes—to talk like you are making,” Doc said.

“I am sorry”

“Sorry about what?”

“That I cannot say more than I have said. Sorry that you do not have a higher opinion of your friends—more of a desire to save them.”

There had been no expression on Doc Savage's metallic-looking features to this point, but now there was a flicker of emotion. He thought a great deal of his aides and of Pat. He had risked his life for them so many times that he had stopped counting. And they had done—if anything, more often—the same thing for him.

But there was no secret vault.

He asked, “How much of an opinion have you of my veracity?”

“Veracity? You mean truth? If you told me something, would I believe it? Is that what you mean?”

“Yes.”

“The answer is that I would believe you.”

The telephone rang and Doc picked up the instrument. He noted that the visitor quickly put on his green hat, but showed no other emotion. “Yes?” Doc said into the telephone.

It was the police officer, and he said, “I have that information you wanted about who talked over that telephone—the one the patrolman found with the receiver off the hook. It was a girl. Five feet seven, slender,

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

nice form, tan, golden eyes, hair sort of like dark copper. The fellow who got the description noticed her hair particularly. That help you any?"

"It settles a point," Doc said.

"Don't you have a cousin, Patricia Savage, who runs a beauty place on Park Avenue, and who answers a description something like that?" asked the officer.

"Yes," Doc said.

"Anything else we can do for you?"

"Not right now."

"Holler if there is," the officer said, and hung up.

Doc Savage slowly replaced the receiver on the cradle. He seemed lost in thought. The pigeons on the window sill had stopped scrapping and were all cooing at each other like doves.

The man took off his green hat again, said, "We were discussing truth."

"Yes," Doc admitted, "we were."

"Was it some truth you intended to tell me?" asked the man.

"There is no secret vault."

"That is the truth?"

"Yes."

THE man turned his green hat so that Doc could see inside the crown. There was a metal object the size of a small woman's fist fastened in there with adhesive tape. A short string with a loop on the end dangled from this, and the man had a finger in the loop.

He made another of his speeches.

He said, "This is an old, old trick, of course. It is a hand grenade in the hat. One tug of my finger pulls the pin, and the explosion will be almost instantaneous. I pull the string if you try to stop my leaving this place."

Doc Savage examined the man's fluidly dramatic face that made everything he did or said seem a pretense, without in any way revealing what he would do or wouldn't do, actually.

"If you are familiar with grenades," Doc said quietly, "you will know that the grenade will probably kill you, but only wound me."

The other nodded.

"Are you familiar with strychnine? You would be, of course, for I understand you are a surgeon and

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

physician. Well, this grenade is well coated with a sticky paste containing concentrated strychnine. Should a fragment of this grenade penetrate your body, you would, within perhaps twenty minutes, begin with convulsions and other difficulties, death occurring within a short time.”

“Drastic!” Doc Savage said.

“I am in a drastic mood,” the man said. “You will stand still. I am leaving.”

He took slow, cautious backward steps toward the door.

Doc said, “There are other hiding places besides a secret vault.”

The man stopped. He stood there. Then, without saying anything, he continued backing to the door. He had all he wanted of the place. For the first time Doc Savage knew that he was scared, and that the man must have been driven by a great emotion to come here as he had. Whatever the emotion was—suffering, greed, revenge, hate, or what it might be—it was powerful, stronger than fear and caution.

Doc stood still and let the man go.

The elevator door slid shut behind the man. There was a sighing sound as the elevator sank. Doc Savage whirled instantly, raced into the laboratory, yanked back a concealed panel, jumped through it, ran across a hall and worked with a square pillar which looked solid, as if it supported much of the roof. There was a small private lift inside the pillar. The device was a recent installation for emergencies such as this. The bronze man jumped inside, punched buttons, and seemed to start falling, such was the descending speed of the lift.

He hit the street level and took a side door to the sidewalk. He was sitting in a cab when the man came out on the street.

The man walked away and Doc followed him in the cab. The green hat was distinctive enough so that keeping track of it was a simple matter.

Doc wondered again if it was the green hat which Pat had mentioned in her interrupted telephone report.

The man walked rapidly two blocks north, a block west, a block north, one south, one west, another south, and went into a large restaurant which had a front and a side door. He had an order of beans and milk and rye bread, the beans Boston style.

While he was eating, two other men came into the cafeteria and took the adjoining table. There was no indication that they knew the first man or that he knew them. They were two young men who were alike enough to be fraternity brothers out of the same college, if the college was pretty tough. They had coffee and rolls.

The man with the green hat left.

The other two men left.

Doc Savage entered the restaurant and made off with the glass which the man with the green hat had drunk his milk out of, and the water glasses of the other two men, having noted that both of the latter had tasted their water. No one witnessed Doc committing this thievery, and he wasted little enough time at it. He was able to get back on the trail of his quarry without trouble.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The man with the green hat, having tarried at the restaurant to satisfy himself that Doc Savage was not following him, walked three blocks straight south.

The two men came up behind him quickly. One of them hit him on the back of the head, using an object he brought out of a pocket. The blow knocked the green hat flying.

The heaviness with which the green hat hit and rolled aroused the interest of one of the footpads, and he picked it up.

“

Ye-e-e-e!” he yelled, and almost fainted.

The second man was searching the owner of the green hat. He said, “Help me do this!” angrily to the first man. They both searched.

During most of the search the man they had struck down squirmed and made mumblings, but they did not hit him again.

They seemed disgusted with the results. They looked at each other, then simultaneously shrugged and spread empty hands, palms uppermost.

“He didn't get it,” one of them said.

“There is no use standing around here until we turn to stone,” the other one said.

They sauntered away. Because it was a deserted street, their performance had not been noticed by anyone.

DOC SAVAGE, having witnessed the meeting, and having gotten a general idea of what had been said by lip-reading—at which he had put in hundreds of hours of very painstaking practice—decided to grab both the owner of the green hat and the other two men.

The other alternative was to keep tracing them and hope they would lead him to Monk, Ham and his other associates. The latter system was not very dependable.

Doc wore a bulletproof vest. He also had a helmet affair which was made of transparent plastic and was impervious to bullets that would be likely to come from any gun the footpads would be carrying in their pockets. Doc's pockets contained grenades—gas, smoke, demolition—which would serve any emergency.

So he took the bold course and rushed the men as they were parting. He was not far from them when he popped into view, and he ran swiftly.

He called, “Stop! Stand where you are! And stand still.”

He hauled out the helmet of plastic—the plastic had basic similarities with the plastic on which he had been conducting experiments in the arctic—and hauled it down over his eyes.

The two footpads whirled. They drew guns. That was to be expected.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The man who owned the green hat sat up on the sidewalk. He made a vague, meaningless gesture with both arms, as if he was trying to get hold of a dizzy world as it went past.

The two men who held their guns lifted them.

Doc stopped running, not suddenly, but slackening his pace slowly until he was at a halt, as if his interest in the men had been supplanted by a much greater interest.

The two men lowered their guns, then dropped them. They seemed to have had previous experience with the laughing.

The laughing had come, and there was nothing to show from where. But it was horrible, and not loud at first; then it was loud, suddenly and violently!

It was not a rapid thing like a giggle, but more of a fully rounded and extended thing. Each peal of it, each note of it, began to bring you up on your toes. Then it started lifting your hair. Then it made something explode inside your head!

The cycle of the thing, from its gentle beginning to its awful blood-curdling climax, was fast. There was not much more than enough time to recognize the changing cadence, volume, character and effect of the phenomenon. Then the brain went into a blackout. Rather, it went into a hell torment of agony.

The effect on the brain was like nothing Doc Savage had ever experienced. It was like a horrendous pain which flooded and drowned every other sensation and experience, drove away desire to act, cramped and paralyzed capacity to act.

Wheeling and running away from the spot was one of the hardest things Doc Savage ever had done. Not that he did not want to run; he did. Getting away from there was what every nerve in his body wanted more than anything.

He went across the sidewalk. It was almost impossible to get coordination. Every move was like pulling splinters. He reached a door, and there was glass in the door. He knew he could never manage the doorknob, although he could see it. He turned one shoulder and stumbled through the glass panel of the door.

It was the door of a bank. A small branch bank, but they would have a vault. He went straight ahead, kept going as fast as he possibly could, which was, at best, a slow walk. He got to the vault and, shoving and twisting—having as much difficulty as a half-paralyzed child would ordinarily have had—he got the heavy steel door shut behind him.

He sank down on the floor.

He was scared—so scared that it was strange! He had gone along as other men do in the matter of fear, feeling that he probably had the normal amount of reaction to fear stimuli that other men had. But now, in the grip of this fear that held him, he realized it had been years since he was really scared.

Greatest of all, probably, was his horror over what had conceivably happened to his five aides and Pat Savage.

Chapter III. AFFAIR IN WASHINGTON

THE laughing stopped, and it was quiet in the street.

It was quiet about a minute and a half—a very, very long time under the circumstances—before the first frightened man appeared in the street. He appeared in a way that was perfectly natural under the circumstances—running as if the devil's hot breath was on his neck. He wanted to get away from there.

Other terrified people came out of the buildings, and soon the street was full of confused activity. The police came, then the fire department.

In the course of the excitement a banker came out of the bank and accosted a police official, saying, "I beg pardon—"

"Don't bother me!" snapped the cop. "This crazy thing—"

"I beg pardon, but there is a man in our vault," said the banker sharply. "As nearly as we can make out, he says his name is Doc Savage."

The cop started to walk away, realized what he had been told, was shocked up onto his tiptoes, then jumped back. "Savage!" he barked. "Well, what the blazes you waiting for? Let him out of the vault!"

"There is a time lock," the other explained patiently. "Letting him out is not so simple."

"You can't let him out?"

"No, the time lock will only open at a certain hour."

The policeman rubbed his jaw. "I think we have a safe expert in one of our emergency squads," he said. "I'll call headquarters and see about it. You can hear Savage in the vault, I presume."

"Oh, yes! The vault is equipped with telephone," the banker explained. "There is good ventilation. You see, sometimes bandits lock the personnel of a bank in—"

"I know" The cop frowned. "Does Savage want out?"

"He says so. Immediately!"

"How did he get in there?"

"I don't know."

"There's a lot I don't know about this, too," the policeman complained.

THE owner of the green hat—he had the hat tucked under an arm—went away quietly and inconspicuously. He had been near enough to hear what was said but had kept in the crowd so that the two footpads who had waylaid him would not see him. He had noticed the two footpads standing near the banker and the policeman, listening to what was said.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The man watched the two footpads nervously until he lost them from sight; then he put on his green hat and began to walk very fast, almost running.

The two footpads exchanged understanding looks and also moved away. One said, "Hear what that guy from the bank said? Savage is in the vault." He rubbed both palms against his trouser legs. "Funny way for it to turn out, wasn't it?"

The other man said, "There was nothing funny about it, and there ain't going to be anything funny from now on. We came so near to getting caught by Savage that it was in no part humorous."

They left then. They walked two blocks and met a cab which obviously had been keeping track of them, because the driver asked out of a mouth corner, "Get it?"

"No."

"That ain't gonna make anybody happy," the driver said.

"Did you see what happened?"

"The big bronze guy? This Doc Savage? The one that scares everybody so bad?"

"Yes."

The cab driver laughed. "He damned near got you, didn't he?"

He was cursed for his levity and ordered to get going. He drove discreetly as to speed, but with a skill that covered ground. He was a good driver in an unobtrusive way that was almost sinister.

THE conference took place in a trailer park in New Jersey on the other side of the George Washington Bridge and north a short distance. There seemed to be six men, and they occupied three trailers. The three trailers were good ones, the class selling for above three thousand dollars, but they were not parked near each other. The conference took place in the trailer that was green.

The six men in the trailer camp and the two footpads made eight.

The taxi driver did not participate. He delivered his passengers and said, "My orders are to go back into the city and drive the streets." He touched the radio in the cab. "I get my calls on this—a little transceiver working on the shortwave band. Doesn't look it, does it?" He drove away.

The conference atmosphere was coldly efficient. There was no profanity, no drinking and no tough talk. They seated themselves, and one of the men passed cigars around.

One man, who was thin-faced and dark-eyed, neatly dapper in a gray pin-striped business suit, seemed to be in charge.

"Let's have the story," he said, "and I will pass it on to headquarters."

The two footpads told what had happened, telling it as it had occurred and much as an observer would have told it. One of them did most of the talking, but the other helped him out.

After the report, and following a period of silence in which each man seemed engaged with his own thoughts,

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

the footpad who had done the least talking made a statement.

“I don't like crossing that George Washington Bridge,” he said. “There're always cops there. And the tunnels aren't any better, because there're always cops there, too. The ferry's the same.”

“Do you think the police have your description and are looking for you?”

“No, I don't. But I don't think it is smart going back and forth across that river.”

The other man nodded. “You are right. But don't worry about it. We will not have to do it any more.”

“Savage is on Manhattan Island, and if—”

“Headquarters has moved another group to Manhattan,” the other explained. “It is established now; so we will not operate in the city ourselves from now on.”

The footpad was relieved. “How come we got sent out on this job if—”

“The other group had not yet established itself in the city.”

“Oh!”

“I just got word about the other a few minutes ago by radio.”

“I see.”

The other man got up abruptly, went to the trailer door, opened it. As soon as the door was open, the sound of an airplane came into the trailer with enough volume for all of them to notice it. The man stepped outside, looked upward for a few moments, then came back into the trailer hurriedly and turned up the volume of a small radio receiver. He listened to the receiver until a series of dots—not letters, but dots spaced in an irregular but studied pattern—came out of the loudspeaker. The sound was like the wing-buzzing of a trapped housefly.

That's our plane,” he said. “He's going to land in the field half a mile south of here. That's why we were assigned to this trailer camp; it is close to the highways and to that flying field.”

One footpad looked alarmed. “Do we have to try that Washington thing?”

“Yes.”

“Great grief!”

The second footpad also looked alarmed.

The man in the pin-striped suit said, “Charlie, Dan, Briggs, Phillips and myself will go to Washington.” He reached for his hat and an already-packed handbag. “Come on!”

Briggs and Phillips were the two footpads. They rapidly became too scared for conversation.

Chapter IV. DEATH SITTING UP

A BATTALION of cavalry out of a New Jersey training center had been part of the Washington defenses for less than a week. They were billeted in what had been a warehouse not far from the navy yard, just off M Street, in the city of Washington. The billets were comfortable enough, but the battalion had not been there long enough to get the lay of the ground. Furthermore, it was an experimental group, so it was being somewhat kicked around.

The battalion was not cavalry at all, nor even a mechanized force, although it was sufficiently motorized. It was really a battalion receiving advanced training in demolition. It was an outfit destined to be assigned the job of seeing that there was a “scorched earth” for the enemy in case of strategic retreat.

Its equipment was fast motorized transport and every conceivable gadget of destruction—explosives, drills, cutting torches—every tool necessary to destroy machinery and property.

It was taking it easy in billets when the loud-speaker arrangement that functioned from the office made a statement.

“Lieutenant Colonel Stravers from headquarters will select a squad for special duty,” the loud-speaker said. “Lieutenant Maxson, you will co-operate and assist.”

Shortly, a lean, brown, hard-jawed officer stalked into the billet. He had the silver oak leaf of a lieutenant colonel on his shoulder loops. He returned the general salute briskly, and snapped, “At ease.” Then his eyes roved and he demanded, “Lieutenant Maxson?”

Maxson presented himself. “I am Maxson, sir.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Stravers, here to get a special detail,” said the hard-jawed man. “Here are my travel papers, and a written order.”

Lieutenant Maxson examined the documents, saw that they seemed in order, and remarked, “This seems urgent.”

“It is urgent!” snapped the other. “I want a squad of about eight men. Two trucks. Cutting torches for steel. Power drills, if you have them. Thermite compound for cutting may be necessary. And some TNT. Fast!”

Lieutenant Maxson looked puzzled, but passed on the orders and got a squad and the materials together. In the back of his mind was the idea that this might be some kind of a test maneuver to see how the men would respond to the unexpected.

He learned differently when he was charging through traffic in a jeep, trailed by a multi-wheeled military transport containing the other men and the unusual equipment.

“This is an unusual job, lieutenant,” said the lieutenant colonel. “It is dangerous, and there is no time to lose.”

“Yes, sir.”

They stopped before a building in the outer business district. It was an old structure, and not as neat as it could have been.

“Lieutenant, place guards at the doors. Do not allow anyone to enter the building. Anyone who wants to leave

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

should be permitted to leave, however. There is to be as little excitement as possible.”

“Colonel, are you able to explain to—”

“Certainly, Lieutenant. I will tell you. A damned fool in the Office of Mechanical Investigation made the incredibly stupid mistake of locking up his time vault for the day with a delayed-action bomb in the vault. It is a very large bomb, a new type which will blow this whole building higher than the war debt. The time mechanism is operating, so the bomb is due to go up any time. The fool remembered what he had done, called headquarters, then left town in terror.”

The lieutenant moistened his dry lips. “I see,” he said. “Very well. We will do our best.”

THE office was on the sixth floor. The hard-jawed man with the lieutenant colonel's silver leaves strode to the door, tried it and seemed surprised. He searched through his pockets vainly.

Break down the door,” he said. “I seem to have misplaced the key.” He grimaced. “I guess I am getting nervous. Damn a nervous man!”

They smashed in the door with efficiency.

The office inside was a large one, and neat. The hard-jawed man crossed it, yanked open a pair of large double doors, disclosing the door of a substantial built-in vault.

Lieutenant Maxson said, “That is a very good vault.” He turned to his squad. “All right, men, get to work on it.”

The squad began working efficiently.

The hard-jawed man consulted his watch, and snapped, “Hurry it! In five minutes we will have to start getting everyone out of the building and out of the neighborhood.”

Lieutenant Maxson nodded. His face was tight. “How come the person who made the mistake knew at what time the mechanism was set to explode?”

“General rule. Mechanisms under examination and inspection for acceptance for manufacture for the army, as this one was, are set at the same hour so as to avoid errors.”

“I see.”

They had trouble with the vault. Cutting torches went through an outside layer of vault steel, but it developed that there was then another layer of some substance which was very tough and also contained asbestos or something similar, which made it impervious to fire.

“Blast!” ordered the hard-jawed man.

“That will damage the vault walls. This way, by only ruining the door of—”

“Blast, Lieutenant!” snapped the other. “Do you want to delay us until this building is blown up, and ourselves with it?”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

They set the explosive. The operation was good. While a few windows were broken in the neighborhood, there were not many. When they walked back into the office they found that the vault door had been split sufficiently for them to enter. Rather, for one man to enter.

“I will go in, Lieutenant,” said the hard-jawed man. “There is no sense in your submitting yourself to danger. You will take your men and retire to the street.”

“Yes, Colonel,” said the lieutenant.

But Lieutenant Maxson said it strangely and he did not follow the order. He went as far as the hall, and commanded his men to go downstairs; then he returned, walking on tiptoes to the office.

He peered furtively into the vault.

The hard-jawed man was searching the vault, but he was not searching for any bomb. There seemed to be nothing but documents inside.

The hard-jawed man spent twenty minutes hunting. He began to sweat with nervousness, and he glanced often at the mouth of the vault. Lieutenant Maxson had stepped to one side, out of view.

Finally the hard-jawed man rushed out of the vault. He was empty-handed.

Lieutenant Maxson presented the destructive end of a service pistol for inspection. “Sorry I let it go this far,” he said.

AN officer of the general staff corps conducted the preliminary examination in the matter. He heard Lieutenant Maxson's story. “What made me suspicious,” said Maxson, “was the whole thing, I think. And then, after I looked in the vault and saw there was no bomb, I knew he was an impostor.”

The examining officer wheeled on the hard-jawed man who had said he was a lieutenant colonel. “What have you to say for yourself?”

The man said a grim nothing.

An intelligence man came in. “He's a fake, all right,” he said. “Near as we can tell, the communicator line to the barracks was even tapped. His uniform and insignia, of course, have been stolen or were purchased from a civilian-supply house with faked credentials.”

The man from general staff closed his fists angrily, went over and scowled into the face of the man who had tried to trick them.

“What did you want in that vault?” he demanded.

The man kept silent.

“You wanted something!” the other snapped. “What was it?”

Silence.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“You knew how tough that vault would be to blow,” said the staff officer, “so you tricked some soldiers into doing the job for you. You look as if you had sense, and it would take brains to work out a thing like that, so you evidently knew what you were doing. You would know how dangerous it was, and what the penalty would be if you got caught.”

The man kept his silence.

The staff officer wheeled on the intelligence man. “You fellows find out who uses that office?”

The intelligence man looked uncomfortable. “No.”

“You mean you can't tell us whose safe was blown?” yelled the other.

“No.”

“Well, what was in the vault? I mean, what did this fellow find in it, which obviously wasn't what he was looking for?”

“I don't know,” said the intelligence man.

“Hell and little rabbits! Didn't you send a man to look?”

“Yes.”

“What did he find?”

“He found nothing. Everything in the vault was gone. It had been cleaned out.”

“Who did that?”

“Nobody knows.” The intelligence officer became irritated. “Why didn't you fellows have a guard put over the place at once?”

The staff man shrugged. “Listen—we've got to get information out of the prisoner,” he said. “Get hold of your commanding officer and have him assign us a physician experienced in administering truth serum. We'll give this fellow some of it, and he'll talk, all right.” The officer looked around, puzzled. “What's that noise?” he asked.

“Sounds like somebody laughing,” said the intelligence man. He was silent a moment. “Blazes! Oh, blazes!” he said in growing horror.

THE laughing—and it was not laughing, but was like sound as stupendous as a cannon cracking—seemed to begin in a distance and come closer very fast.

The intelligence man dashed for the door, slammed it shut. Apparently, it was his idea that something was coming toward them, possibly through the hall.

The hard-jawed man, the one who had tricked the army into opening the vault for him, sank to his knees. He began yelling. If his yell was words, they were not intelligible.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The staff man gaped at him.

A soldier who had been standing in the back of the room suddenly shouted—sound only, not words to his shout, also—and dashed for the door.

A sentry at the door clubbed the soldier down with a rifle, then looked at the fallen man dumbly, as if he did not understand why the soldier had run, or why he had hit him.

Somewhere, a dog began howling. It was a fast, frenzied howl. The office where the questioning was being conducted was on the ground floor of a building, and the windows were open. The dog was close, and its howling was unnerving.

The bombardment of noise rose and rose, seemingly not so much in volume as in *force*, until it was not bearable. It was like pain, awful agony, that each moment seemed to have reached a point where it could not get any worse! And yet, each pulsation was more horrendous.

The intelligence officer began to beat his palms slowly against his head. He looked as if he were going mad, as if his skull were going to explode.

And when it stopped, which it did suddenly, it was as if it had not stopped at all.

TWENTY minutes later, a medical officer came out of the room, shaking his head and wearing a stunned expression.

“What was going on in there?” he demanded. “What were they doing?”

“They caught some fake officer who tricked a squad of soldiers into blowing a vault for him,” a soldier explained. “They were questioning the man.”

“I see.”

“Are they all right?”

“One of them isn't. The others will recover.”

“That thing, that sound, killed one of them, eh?”

“No. A bullet did that!”

“Bullet?”

“Between the eyes.”

“Which one was it?” asked the soldier.

“The fellow they were questioning,” the doctor explained. He frowned. “Did they make that noise themselves?”

“What gave you that idea?”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The doctor shrugged. "I never heard anything like the thing before. I thought maybe they were using some new kind of a device to make the prisoner talk."

"I don't know who, or what, made the noise," the soldier said. "And, somehow, I don't think it was a noise."

"The first part of your statement is probably right," the doctor said. "I wouldn't know about the other."

Chapter V. THE WILD GOOSE

THE man who had shot the fake lieutenant colonel got rid of his rifle rather elaborately. First, he removed the telescopic sight, which was expensive, and which he saw no sense in throwing away. Then he drove his car—it was a small rented machine—to a drugstore and parked. He purchased a small bottle of sulphuric acid and two rubber corks.

He consigned the rifle, the barrel corked full of acid, to a canal. He knew what ballistic experts could do with rifle barrels and bullets taken from murdered men.

He drove north, then west, and stopped at a small flying field where his companions and a plane waited.

The man in the pin-striped suit said soberly, "What did you do with the rifle, Dan?"

"Put it in a canal, the bore full of sulphuric."

"Good." The other indicated the plane. "We've been waiting for you."

"How did you know about what I had to do to Charlie?" Dan asked.

The man in the pin-striped suit eyed him sharply. "Don't get too curious."

"Hell, I just wondered. Ain't a man supposed to have any curiosity?"

They climbed into the plane. The pilot had one arm and a distinctly evil appearance, which made him by far the most villainous-looking member of the group, whereas he was actually the least reprehensible.

The plane taxied across the field with its tail in the air and got over a telephone line. There was a woods beyond, with rough air above it, and the ship bounced from one thermal current to another.

Grudgingly, the man in the pin-striped suit said, "Dan, we got it by radio, if you have to know."

"Oh!" Dan said. "I wish to blazes I knew more about this thing. This is worse than the army for not knowing where you are going or what you are doing. All I know is that I had orders to follow Charlie and, if those soldiers got wise to the trick he was pulling on them, to stick around but not let myself be noticed. Then, when they got curious, to shoot him." He compressed his lips. "That's a hell of a thing. Charlie wasn't a bad guy."

"He," said the man in the pin-striped suit, "made a fizzle out of what he was doing."

Dan watched the earth below with tight, frightened intensity. "Meaning that if I make a mistake sometime the same thing might happen to me?"

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The other shrugged. "Look at it this way: You killed Charlie; if you had been caught you would have been electrocuted."

"That's different. I knew what I was doing."

"Charlie knew what he was doing, too. He got caught, and it was no different than it would have been if you had gotten caught. They would have stood Charlie before a military firing squad, and don't think they wouldn't have. You just beat the firing squad to it, that's all."

"Uh-huh," Dan said doubtfully. There were wet beads on his forehead.

THEY assembled at the trailer camp in New Jersey, across the river from New York City. They were the same group who had met there earlier, except for the man Charlie, who was dead in Washington.

Almost immediately the small radio-transceiver loud-speaker said, "Are you all there?"

"Yes," said the man in the pin-striped suit.

"Coast clear?"

"Yes."

"Post a guard," ordered the radio, "and stand by the receiving set. Don't hesitate to warn me if there is a chance of anyone overhearing."

"Right."

"Good," said the radio. "Now, send a man out to the highway. Have him walk east about a hundred yards to a large birch tree growing out of the fence row. In the ditch near the tree he will find a package. Have him bring it back. You will know what to do with the contents. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Good. And do not try to contact me by radio. We are operating these short-wave sets illegally, and too much of it is sure to get the government men down on our necks. That is all."

The man called Dan stared at the radio. Nervous perspiration had made his shirt soaking wet, and he was changing it for a dry garment. He muttered, "There's a guy who sure is not taking any of the chances."

The other snapped, "Well, he's paying out enough money that he shouldn't. Stop squawking. Suppose you go look around that birch tree."

Dan left quickly. He was in a state of mind where he welcomed physical motion. But, when he reached the highway where traffic whipped past, he experienced all the sensations of a rabbit in the vicinity of a pack of hounds. By the time he reached the birch tree he was half running.

The package was a cardboard box—flat, eighteen inches square, three inches or so thick.

He carried it back to the trailer, tore the paper off, removed a quantity of cotton padding, and the black acetate recording disk which it contained.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The man in charge of the group examined one surface of the disk, then the other. "Recorded on both sides," he said. "He must have a lot to say."

They put the disk on a portable phonograph and it said:

"Here are your orders. Doc Savage has not gotten out of that bank vault yet; but he will before long, and he will immediately start out to learn what happened to his aides and the girl. We cannot have that. He has to be put out of the way."

Dan and the others looked startled. This voice was a different one, not the one they had been hearing over the small radio. An effort had been made to disguise both voices, but they did not belong to the same individual. There was not the slightest doubt of that.

Dan blurted, "Hell, that other guy ain't the head of it! What do you know about that? He's sure covering himself—"

"Shut up!" he was ordered.

The phonographic recording continued:

"One way to get rid of Savage is to try to kill him. That is the way we will not use. It has been tried before and failed. It is what he will expect. He will be on guard against a murder attempt. So we will dispose of him with guile, which he will not be expecting and which therefore will stand a better chance of succeeding.

"Our method will be to send Savage off on a wild-goose chase. The first step has already been laid. As soon as he gets out of the vault he will hear about what has happened in Washington. He will naturally go there.

"The plan will be to arrange a logical succession of clues for him to follow. We will make them interesting enough to arouse his interest and make him sure he is on a hot trail.

"To insure his going to Washington, a tip has been telephoned to the Washington police officials that Doc Savage was responsible for the murder of Charlie Graffner. The tip was made boldly, and pains were taken to allow it to be traced.

"The man who made the call will go to a Washington airport, leaving a plain trail, but acting as if he is trying not to leave one. He will take a plane to the South; and to be sure that the plane departure is noticed, there will be a fight preceding it. The other party in the fight will be the aggressor and will be arrested, naturally. The man who is to be arrested has been hired for the part and has no idea whatever of what it is all about.

"The man on the plane to the South will continue to leave a trail by conducting himself in a conspicuous fashion. He will make all haste to South America, where he will end his trip—or the plane part of it—at Cartagena. From there he will plunge into the back-country jungle, the jungle inhabited by the Mogoloni Indians."

The speaker who had made the transcription now had trouble with his fake voice. Trying to speak in the disguised fashion caused his throat to rasp. He had a spell of coughing, and cursed twice in what was a more natural fashion.

In the faked voice, he continued:

"Doc Savage will waste days and possibly weeks in pursuing our man through the South American jungle. If

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

he does happen to catch the man after a few days, he will be no better off, because the man does not know anything that will be of value to Doc Savage. He has been merely hired for the part he is playing.”

The voice broke again and there was more coughing.

“I am telling you this,” it finished, “because it is essential to the smooth working of an organization such as this that the members have a general idea of what is going on. There is also another fact. I have noticed a growing fear of this man Doc Savage and what he may do. Therefore, I wanted you to know that measures, and rather clever measures, even if I do say so, are being taken to rid us of his menace. The measures will result in no dangerous repercussions to ourselves. So you can forget Doc Savage and whatever menace his name implies to you. I can assure you that Savage will be misled completely away from us. I can assure you this because I understand psychology, and particularly the psychology of a man such as Savage.”

There was a brief pause in which the record scratched.

“This is all,” the voice said. “All members of the organization have received copies of this recording. You may now destroy the record. Be sure you do so.”

The man called Dan got up quickly. He was a changed man; it was as if a door had been opened in his brain to let in the bright sunlight. He broke the record in small pieces, then put a frying pan on the bottled-gas trailer stove. He dropped the wax-record fragments in the pan and put it over the flame which he started. The fragments started to melt.

The man in the pin-striped business suit watched him with half a grin and half a leer. “Relieved, Dan?”

“You don't know how much,” Dan said. “I ain't kidding nobody. When anybody says this Doc Savage to me, the icicles come out of my boots.”

Chapter VI. THE GOOSE HUNTER

A HINDU YOGI in India had taught Doc Savage the art of emotional control early in life. The board of scientists who had charge of training Doc did not have much faith in Yoga as a philosophy leading to higher things. But they did know that a Yogi could school his emotions until he could undergo the most extreme pain, mental and physical, with apparent tranquillity. Young Savage had been an apt student, and of all his strangely acquired facilities, none had been better mastered or more improved with practice.

So Doc's current behavior was hardly in keeping.

He had knocked a toe out of joint in kicking the vault door in a rage. He had yanked out loose strong boxes and hurled them against the walls. He had yelled things into the telephone that connected the telephone in the vault with the exterior. He had threatened to buy the bank and fire everybody in it. He had threatened to kick certain parts of the pompous bank president's anatomy up around his ears.

None of which had gotten him out of the vault.

The bank did not want their vault ruined.

It seemed that a new vault cost thirteen-odd thousand dollars. Furthermore, what with shortages of certain types of steel and things, a new one was hardly obtainable. Destruction of the vault with cutting torches

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

would mean the bank would practically have to suspend business. So, nothing doing.

Time approached for the time clock in the natural course of events to open the vault door.

The door opened, and Doc Savage walked out. He said not a word to anyone, but strode to the street. The bank employees looked apprehensive, because all of them, by now, had been fully informed of Doc's importance, and the bank president even started after Doc with a hand outstretched hopefully. Doc climbed into a cab.

"Uptown, fast!" he growled.

As the cab rolled north he broke into an uncomfortable perspiration. He had not stalked out of the bank because of temper; he had been over that. He was ashamed of it, and hadn't been able to face the bank employees whom he had abused from within the vault.

It was hard to lose many hours while something obviously terrible had happened to his aides and Pat. But losing his temper had not helped. It never helps.

He did not go to his own headquarters or to the apartments or offices of his assistants. Instead, he ended in a small and grimy hole in a not-too-reputable office building off Times Square, where the streets are crowded twenty-four hours a day. He kept the place for emergencies, and there was nothing there but emergency equipment, part of it in the way of make-up.

An hour later he walked out of the place as a large and dumb-looking, but flashily dressed Negro gentleman.

He went back to the street near the bank where the unpleasantness had befallen him and searched. It was late for a hunt, and he found nothing that another man would have considered of value.

There were four dead pigeons on the ledge that ran around the bank building up near the roof.

There were no other pigeons in the neighborhood.

He got into an open-air cab—the type with an open window in the top—and leaned back to look upward as he rode uptown.

He rode nearly nine blocks before he saw any pigeons.

"Turn around and drive back past that bank and keep going in a straight line," he told the driver.

It was nine blocks beyond the bank before he saw more pigeons.

He bought all the late newspapers.

They contained a story to the effect that a weirdly fantastic and horrible laughing phenomena had occurred in Washington, similar to the one near the bank in New York, and also to one reported to have happened in the suburb of Jamaica.

DOC telephoned Washington.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Oh, yes—that thing,” said the army intelligence official to whom he spoke. “It was an attempt by an unidentified man to get into the vault of an office. The man was killed during that laughing, obviously to silence him before we got a chance to use truth serum on him.”

“The vault was in whose office?” Doc asked.

“That,” said the intelligence man, “is the strangest thing.”

“Strange how?”

“We have not been able to find out who occupies the office.”

Doc Savage said nothing for a while. “You are not withholding information?”

Completely earnest, the intelligence man said, “We have orders not to withhold even confidential information from you.”

“I am sorry. Thank you.”

The intelligence man said, “Wait a minute. There is another thing—a telephone tip. It was to the effect that you were connected with that laughing thing.”

“I see. Was the call traced?”

“It was.”

“Who made it?”

“A man. A man who immediately got a cab and hurried to the airport. At the airport he had a fight with the cab driver over the fare and slugged him. Then the man bought a ticket and left on a plane for Miami, Florida.”

“The plane has not had time to reach Florida,” Doc remarked.

“No. The plane is in the air with the man aboard right now. Shall we have him picked up?”

Doc Savage was silent, considering.

The intelligence man added, “We can have one of our operatives pick up the man in Miami.”

“What is the man's name?”

“Carl Cave was the name he bought the ticket under.”

“Hold it a bit,” Doc Savage said. “I will call you back.”

The bronze man's next call was long distance to the Pan-American ticket office in Miami. He got a ticket agent on the wire and identified himself.

He asked, “Do you by any chance have a ticket reservation for a man named Carl Cave?”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

A note of indignation came into the ticket agent's voice. He said, "I have personal knowledge of that guy. He called up—long distance from Washington, mind you—and reserved a seat on the plane to Trinidad, then to Cartagena, South America. Then for five minutes, and for no reason—on the long-distance telephone from Washington, mind you—he abused me. Had a grudge against the airline, I gathered."

"Thank you," Doc Savage said, and hung up.

Again he had a silent spell. Then he did something that was rare for him. He talked to himself.

"That looks just a little thick," he remarked.

He called back to the intelligence man in Washington and said, "This is Doc Savage again. About that fellow headed for Miami—just let him continue on his way, will you?"

"You want him shadowed?"

"If it can be done conveniently. But he is not to be picked up under any circumstances."

"As you wish."

ONCE again the bronze man used the telephone, this time to an agency which supplied theatrical talent.

"Some time ago, I arranged with you to obtain, and keep on tap, an actor or actors who could double for me or my associates," he said. "I need one who can double for myself."

"We have one man," the agency said.

"Does he understand that there may be danger?"

The agency clerk laughed. "Sure. He also understands the fee he is to get. He's satisfied."

"How soon can he be at this address?" Doc asked, and gave the address of the Times Square office.

The agency man said to hold the phone. He apparently used another telephone to contact the actor, then said, "In about two hours."

"Good. Get him there."

THE actor bore a rather startling resemblance to Doc Savage in body and facial contour. His coloring—hair, skin, eyes—was quite different, however, and the actor seemed uncertain about this point.

He said, "At the agency they told me that you could use skin dye, hair dye, and colored eye caps for my eyes—the kind they call invisible glasses—and make me pass."

Doc Savage nodded. He was satisfied except on one point.

He asked the actor, "Did they make it quite clear to you that this probably would be dangerous?"

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Yes.”

“Very dangerous?”

“Listen,” said the actor, demonstrating that he could do a fairly passable imitation of the bronze man's normal speaking tone, “they also told me what the salary would be. That makes it all right with me.”

“How are you up against trouble?”

“Not too hot. Not like you, anyway. But I used to be a stunt man and I'll try to get by.”

The agency was a good one, and it had been asked to make sure that the man they picked was an individual of courage and some resourcefulness.

“You want this job, then?”

The man nodded. “I am playing the supporting role in a Broadway hit,” he said. “Would I be here if I didn't want the job?”

“Good.”

“The agency gave me recordings of your voice, and I have been practicing imitating it,” the actor explained. “Now, what do I do?”

“A man using the name of Carl Cave is on a plane bound for Miami, Florida, and has purchased plane passage to Cartagena, in South America. You will follow him. He will not be hard to follow, apparently.”

“That is all I'm to know about it?”

“It is all I know, practically. But here is something that may help you: In case you lose the man, or need help, get in touch with the army intelligence in Washington—a man named Steffan—and ask for what you want. Arrangements will be made to furnish you with what assistance can be given. When you contact Steffan, tell him who you are and just what you are doing.”

“Right. What do I do after I catch this Carl Cave?”

“You do not catch him.”

“All right.”

“Another thing,” Doc said. “Do not be too inconspicuous.”

“What would you call not inconspicuous? I gather you don't mean conspicuous, exactly.”

“Not exactly. Let yourself be seen. Act as if you are being furtive, but let yourself be seen. Just do not overdo it.”

The actor seemed competent and pleased. “Sure. I hope I can do this well enough to satisfy you.” He rubbed his jaw. “I don't understand it, of course.”

“You,” Doc Savage told him, “are a man following a wild goose.”

“I see.” The actor had discernment. “You might call me a decoy.”

“We do not want to call you a dead duck,” Doc said, “so be careful.”

Chapter VII. WHILE THE GOOSE FLEW

DOC SAVAGE'S next move seemed somewhat aimless and appeared to bear no outward resemblance to the matter at hand. It certainly had no relation to rescuing his five assistants and Patricia Savage, if they were still in a condition where rescuing would do them any good.

Doc bought a country newspaper. It was in a small town two hundred miles from New York, and it was not much of a thing from an investment standpoint, judging from the rather pitiful effort of the owner to make it seem enticing.

He bought the paper sight unseen.

He made one provision: that the present owner would not publish news of the sale and would at once obtain a press-wire franchise; or, if that proved impossible, he would obtain leased-wire service from one of the big news agencies. It did not make much difference which.

Doc then bought an air-raid siren.

He had some difficulty with this because air-raid sirens were in demand and were scarce. He had to take an old-fashioned one, with which he seemed satisfied.

He loaded the siren into a truck and took it to a machine shop where he left it with instructions and fairly detailed drawings of what he wanted.

The town where Doc had bought the newspaper was named Bogueville.

He went there by train.

The ex-owner of the Bogueville *Times* was an elderly man who had sold out because he wished to retire. For some years he had been inactive in the newspaper's activities, the work having been carried on by an earnest young man named Fred Holmes. It was obvious to Doc Savage that the Bogueville *Times* meant a great deal to Fred Holmes, and also that the young man was very worried about being released by the new owner.

“With the new leased-wire service,” Fred Holmes said, “the *Times* will show a nice profit on the investment.”

From other sources Doc learned that Fred had saved money for years to buy the *Times* himself, but that his savings had been wiped out by a series of illnesses in the family. With them had gone Fred's hopes.

Doc Savage put Fred Holmes in charge of the paper and gave him a half interest in it, with option of purchasing the remainder at an arbitrated price. The half interest and the option to purchase were to be held in escrow, to become effective in one year if the *Times* was operated legitimately and at a profit.

“Now,” Doc said, “I want you to get me four hunters.”

“What kind of hunters?” asked Fred Holmes, puzzled.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“What is there to hunt around here?”

“Not much except rabbits and crows and woodchucks. Now and then, a deer, but it is out of deer season now. Same for duck and quail.”

“Find me rabbit hunters,” Doc said. “Four of them. Be sure that they can be trusted. Also, they should know the value of a dollar and not have too many of them.”

“Rabbit hunters without too many dollars are the easiest things you could find around here,” said Fred Holmes.

The young man was almost tearful with gratitude because of his deal on the newspaper.

THE truck from New York arrived that afternoon and the driver asked, “Where did you want us to take this gadget?”

The man was the proprietor of the small machine shop in the city where Doc had left his air-raid siren.

Doc asked, “How did the job turn out?”

“Fine. The siren, made over to work the way you indicated, makes a laughing sound that sure is a hell of a noise. It may not be good, but it is at least loud.”

“Good,” Doc said. “You will take it back in the hills to this spot.” He handed them a map of which he had made two copies. “Take it to the spot marked with a cross on the map. At nine o'clock tomorrow morning, or thereabouts, you will probably hear some men approaching. They will be hunters. As soon as you see or hear them, turn on the laughing siren, let it run for a few moments, then switch it off.”

“That all?”

“That is all,” Doc said.

The machine-shop man nodded, but it was a baffled nod.

THE rabbit hunters were young men who looked honest enough, although they probably were on the lazy side. One of them had a repeating shotgun, another a double-barreled one, and the remaining two carried cheap .22-caliber rifles.

Doc gave them a copy of the map which he had given the driver of the truck. He indicated the spot marked with a cross.

“There are some rabbits there which need hunting,” he said.

One of the rabbit hunters scratched his head. “What would make a rabbit need hunting?”

“This five-dollar bonus on each rabbit,” Doc said. He handed Fred Holmes a packet of five-dollar bills to be distributed to the rabbit hunters.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“And all we've got to do is hunt the rabbits around the place marked on this map?” asked a hunter.

“There is one other thing,” Doc said. “You may hear a strange laughing noise. If you do, you will at once take these pills.”

He gave them each a box containing one pill.

“Take the pill as soon as you hear the laughing,” he said “And run away from there. Come straight here and tell the editor of the *Times* what has happened—omitting one point. Do not tell anyone that you were hired to hunt rabbits there or that you knew you would hear the laughing, or that you took the pills, or that you have met me. Do you understand?”

They understood.

They went away, pleased with the bargain.

“I don't get this,” said Fred Holmes. “What are we going to do about the story when they tell it to me?”

“Put it on the news–association wire,” Doc said, “in such a dramatic way that it will be published in the city newspapers.”

HEADLINE in a New York evening paper:

STRANGE LAUGHING MYSTERY

APPEARS IN RURAL SECTION

Headline in a Washington paper:

WASHINGTON LAUGHING DEATH

IN SMALL NEW YORK TOWN

With both stories appeared identical news–association dispatches about a strange laughing which had been heard by some rabbit hunters near the little upstate New York town of Bogueville. The laughing seemed to have affected some of the hunters, because they had become dizzy and had taken flight.

In the editorial office of the Bogueville *Times*, Fred Holmes looked at Doc Savage and asked, “What made the hunters dizzy?”

“The pills I gave them,” Doc explained. “But what you want to do now is forget you know anything about the underhanded part of this.”

“I presume this is not finished,” Fred Holmes said. “Is there anything else you want me to do?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Give your assistance,” Doc Savage explained, “in checking up on the men who come to investigate the affair.”

Fred Holmes nodded. “The New York and Washington newspapers are both sending staff men out here to look into it. I already have telegrams to that effect.”

“Good,” Doc said. “It is the ones who are not newspapermen in whom we are interested.”

“Oh, I see!” said Fred Holmes. “It is a sure thing that any newspaper staff man coming out here to cover the affair will drop in here. They always drop in at the local newspaper in a small town like this.”

“And as they drop in,” Doc said, “you check on them. Wire the newspaper each man says he represents and be sure it is a legitimate newspaper. Better still, get the information by telephone and charge the calls to me.”

Doc then got on the telephone and called the army intelligence in Washington. While he was waiting for the call to be completed, he indicated to Fred Holmes that he preferred for the conversation to be private. Fred nodded and stepped outside.

To the army intelligence in Washington, Doc said, “Do not send any of your operatives to investigate this affair of a laughing in Bogueville, New York.”

He telephoned the same information to the New York and Washington police.

When Doc Savage walked past Fred Holmes on the way outside, the young man looked at Doc intently. “Tell me something.”

“What is it?”

“You bought this newspaper only so you could do what you have just done?”

“Yes.”

“You are spending a devil of a lot of money to do something that does not quite make sense.”

“I would spend every cent I have in the world to accomplish what I am trying to accomplish,” Doc Savage told him.

Doc did not explain to Fred that there was nothing he would not do in order to safely rescue his aides and his cousin, Pat.

THE man in the pin-striped suit came into the Bogueville *Times* and said he was a special staff writer named Phil Kendricks, from the Washington *Courier*, and that he wanted to get what information he could on the laughing matter before he went out in the hills to see for himself.

Fred Holmes talked to him politely and gave the same information he had given the other reporters. Then, when the man had gone, Fred got on the telephone about the fellow.

Later, he told Doc Savage, “The Washington *Courier* has a reporter named Kendricks. But Kendricks is a short, fat man with freckles. This fellow is tall and rather thin. He is an impostor.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Good,” Doc Savage said.

Doc made sure the man in the pin-striped suit was eating dinner in the Owl Café; then he retired quickly to the small hotel where he was staying.

He made himself as completely as possible into an elderly fellow with white hair, a white mustache, glasses, pale skin that was rather unhealthy looking, but not enough so as to draw attention. Overalls and blue shirt made him as inconspicuous among the rural citizens of Bogueville as a man could readily become. In this guise he followed the owner of the pin-striped suit.

The man registered at the hotel under the name of Robert Clark. This, it proved later, was his real name. It was one of the few times in recent years that he had used his real name, probably.

Robert Clark hired a car and driver, explaining that he was a newspaperman. He made a visit to the hilly section where the rabbit hunters had had their experience.

He made only a casual search, then returned to town where he dispatched a message from the telegraph office. It was then late afternoon, and the man named Robert Clark retired to his hotel room for the night.

Doc Savage resorted to breaking and entering to get the telegram which Clark had sent. He took the original message, but he left a carefully copied duplicate in its place. It was doubtful if anyone could tell that the telegraph office had been entered.

The message looked innocent, being a report about what to do with a piece of property in Noank, Connecticut, which was in dispute as to title with a person who seemed to be a relative by marriage. It was lengthy.

Doc Savage worked on it almost an hour with a pencil, found out it was a very cunning code and translated it to his satisfaction.

The message advised that investigation had shown there had actually been a laughing affair and that nothing seemed to have developed that had not appeared in the newspapers. The sender of the message would investigate further during the daylight hours of the following day, the telegram read.

Doc Savage went to the hotel and got six hours of sound, satisfied sleep.

Chapter VIII. A STICKING OF PINS

THE man in the pin-striped suit was actually named Robert Clark. Doc Savage believed him after he had said it the sixth time.

The bronze man's trust in the truth of the insistence did not stem from any faith in the Gibraltar character of the man but from the efficiency of the truth serum he was using.

He had administered the truth serum back in the hills where he had caught the man, near where the laughing episode had occurred. The truth-serum treatment was not a gentle affair because it completely unbalanced the victim, so that he was to all intents and purposes temporarily demented, without any control whatever over what he said or did. By the same token, the lack of control prevented him from withholding the truth from his statements.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The New York machinist with the laughing gadget had long since gone back to New York with his siren, which he had been instructed to store and keep for future use.

Doc caught Robert Clark—he was still attired in a pinstripe, although not the same one he had worn yesterday—shortly after eight o'clock in the morning.

Doc worked on the man all that morning, all that afternoon. They became wrecks, both of them.

The general summary of truth collected:

Someone was hiring crooks—petty and otherwise—to do something they did not understand and was paying them exorbitant fees to do so.

The organization was divided into groups, and no one group knew specifically where any of the others were located or were operating, or what duties they would be called upon to perform.

The operation under way was enormous evidently, judging from the expenses being incurred.

Whoever headed it was an organizing genius, possessed of no consideration where human life was involved.

The groups received orders by radio on a short wave length, and sometimes on phonographic recordings which they were ordered immediately to destroy. The records were always ones made with a disguised voice, and probably not the same voice was used on all occasions.

Doc Savage's five associates—Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Long Tom Roberts, Johnny Littlejohn and Renny Renwick—had been seized in a series of skillfully executed strokes.

They had been seized because it was believed, apparently, that they had been given some tremendously valuable object to guard. It was thought that they had this in their possession or knew its hiding place.

Patricia Savage had been seized for the same reason.

If any of them were now alive it was only because it was still believed that they knew the whereabouts of the object which was so in demand.

Clark did not know what the laughing was. It was connected somehow with the affair. But how, he didn't know. He wished he did know, and he had tried unsuccessfully to find out, Robert Clark insisted.

That was about all Robert Clark seemed to know, or all that could be pumped out of him under the effects of the truth serum. Except the additional point that he had been assigned to come to Bogueville and ascertain if there actually had been a laughing affair and, if so, to ascertain exactly where it had occurred and what appeared to have caused it.

Doc Savage gave him an overdose of hypnotic which would keep him helpless for nearly two days.

AN ambulance arrived in response to a telephone call from Doc Savage, and the attendants loaded Robert Clark into it and departed. The attendants said very little—although they greeted Doc warmly—until they were loaded.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Give him the usual treatment we give criminals,” Doc directed.

One of the men who had come in the ambulance said, “How about trying the new technique we discussed some time ago. Trying it on this man, I mean. I'm sure it will wipe out his memory of the past as effectively as the other one, and he should recover more quickly. If it works we should save at least a month of the time the patients usually take to convalesce before we start the course of training that teaches them a trade and to hate crime and criminal ways. That means we could graduate them from the place a month quicker.”

Doc Savage gave the thing some thought. “Try it,” he said. “But keep a close check on the man during training, and see that he is checked on after he leaves. If his memory should happen to return to any extent at all, or if he should revert to criminal tendencies, we would want to know about it.”

“Very well,” said the attendant. “I would hate for that to happen. We've put a lot of crooks you have caught through the 'college,' and not one of them has returned to his old ways. I'd hate to be responsible for the first failure.”

Doc nodded. “Be sure this man does not learn where he is being taken, or where the institution is located. If he should escape, and the public get wind of the place, it might cause us some trouble.”

“I bet it would. In a hundred years criminals will probably be given treatment like this by the law, instead of being electrocuted or sent to the penitentiary. But right now it's a little too drastic and advanced for the public to accept.”

The ambulance left with its burden.

(Somewhere in upstate New York is Doc Savage's sanitarium, known as the “college.” Here, trained surgeons perform a delicate brain operation—developed by Doc—which removes all memory of a criminal's past. He is then taught a respectable trade and returned to civil life.)

DOC SAVAGE went to the local telegraph office and composed a message:

I HAVE LEARNED WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT. NOW, YOU CAN GIVE ME A FIFTY-PERCENT CUT OR TAKE THE CONSEQUENCES.

He carefully translated this into the code and signed the name of Robert Clark. Then he dispatched the message to the same address as the one to which Clark had sent the report concerning the property in Noank, Connecticut.

The addressee of the message was Daniel Wallace, care of the Summit Trailer Park, in a small New Jersey station across the river from New York City.

The fastest local conveyance was a light plane owned by the local druggist, and Doc chartered this, reaching New York by noon the following day.

He went at once to a cheap Broadway establishment which specialized in making phonographic recordings. There was a private booth which you could enter and, by inserting a fifty-cent piece, pulling a lever and picking up a hand microphone into which you then spoke, obtain the recording. The recordings were not of high quality, but Doc was not seeking quality.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

He made half a dozen recordings, the gist of all of which was about the same.

He took these, obtained a car which he kept in an uptown garage, for use when he did not wish to go near his headquarters, and headed for New Jersey.

“Now,” he said, half aloud, “we will try sticking the first pin into this strange animal.”

PEACE surrounded the trailer camp in New Jersey. The three trailers were occupied, one of them by the pilot of the plane which had hauled the gang to and from Washington, another by the fake taxi driver who had hauled them about. These two men were sleeping, and there was a card game in progress in the third trailer. Dan, Briggs, Phillips, and two other men were playing blackjack. They were playing for big stakes.

“I’ll give you fifty dollars for the deal,” Dan told Briggs.

Briggs sneered at him. Briggs did not look like a footpad this morning. He wore a cream pongee shirt with a green necktie that had slashes of red. “Five hundred,” Briggs said, and I’ll let you smell it.”

Suddenly, there was an uproar at the office of the trailer camp. A man and a woman began screaming, “Fire! Fire!” Smoke billowed.

The card game broke up and the participants bounced out to see the fire. It was not much of a fire, and they helped put it out, shouting that there was no need to call the fire department. They obviously did not want the fire department around. The fire was some waste in a metal barrel which was standing against the office. They put it out.

By the time it was out, Doc Savage had finished examining the radio in the trailer where they had held the card game. He was interested in the dial setting on the radio, which was switched on. It was a commercially made set, and the dial settings were standard. He withdrew without being noticed.

Dan, Briggs and Phillips resumed their game with the two others. They were joined by the pilot and the taxi driver. The latter became excited at the size of the stakes.

The radio began speaking:

It said, “Is the coast clear? If it is, switch the microphone on and off twice, but do not say anything.”

The coast was clear and Dan switched the mike on and off with the little button on the handle.

The radio said: “One of you take a walk into the woods to the big oak tree straight north of the camp. Package at the foot of the oak tree. Get it.”

They cut cards to see who would go get the package. Briggs lost. He came back with the package and said, “It’s a phonograph record.”

They put the record on their portable phonograph.

It informed them: “You fellows have been very faithful, but only fools are faithful. You have also been overpaid, and you should have known it was too good to last. I am sorry to say that I no longer have need for you. And so, in order that you will not try to cut yourselves into my game, which really is quite profitable, I am turning you over to the police. They should be calling on you by now.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

They sat there stunned. Then Dan shot out of the trailer door as if catapulted. A sound smote his ears. "The cops!" he gasped. "There's their siren!"

Like a flock of quail which had been assaulted by a shotgun, they scattered. They made flying trips to the trailers, three of them. The others piled into a car. They had the motor roaring by the time the others appeared. They drove out of the camp, tires throwing the driveway gravel.

A police car was approaching, trailed at a distance of about a quarter of a mile by another police car. The first machine quickened its speed and pursued the fugitives. A cop leaned out, holding a revolver. He shot five times without effect.

Briggs dumped a keg of large-headed roofing nails out of the fleeing car, pouring them out of a rear window from which he had knocked the glass. Both police cars progressed about a hundred yards beyond the roofing nails and stopped with air hissing out of their tires.

One officer then got out and walked into the adjacent woods where he met Doc Savage.

"I hope you liked that job," he said to Doc.

"It was excellent," the bronze man assured him.

"Who would have thought they would have a keg of nails in their car. They sure ruined our tires."

"You did a good job of scaring them," Doc said. "I will take care of the damages."

"Oh, that's all right. A job like that—I didn't know how it would come off. The timing and everything. But we got going at your signal and I suppose it came out all right."

"It was perfect. You got there just as they finished playing the record I had planted," Doc said. "It was what we wanted."

"You wanted to scare them into flight, eh?"

"And shock them into the conviction that they are being double-crossed by their boss."

"What do you think they will do now?"

"Being the kind of men they are," Doc said, "they will not take it lying down. They will start out to find their boss. And knowing more about him than I do, they will stand a better chance of success. I will watch them and follow them to whomever they find."

The officer said it sounded involved to him, but there might not be any other way of doing it. At least, he certainly couldn't see any.

"Any word from your five assistants, and Miss Patricia Savage?" he asked. "Word came out over the teletype that they were missing and to keep a lookout for them."

"No word, yet," Doc said grimly.

"I hope you get some action there," the officer stated. "This thing about that laughing is blowing up bigger and bigger, like a balloon, and it's about time somebody stuck a pin in it."

“The incident a few minutes ago,” Doc said, “was the first pin-sticking.”

Chapter IX. MARTIN

THE idea of putting a small radio transmitter in a moving vehicle and keeping it in operation, then using a radio direction-finder to trace the vehicle, was not new. But it was an idea that, like a punch in the nose, was effective when it fitted the occasion.

Because Doc used the device often, he had developed a special type of transmitter for the purpose—one which worked on a wave length not reached by any convenient receiver, and on a frequency which furthermore made the signal inaudible on anything but a specially constructed companion receiver for the transmitter. The transmitter was not much larger than a kitchen match box, including batteries, but it was unquestionably effective within an area of fifty miles or so.

Doc spent an hour and a half trailing the radio which he had planted in the car in which the gang had fled. He had planted the radio before he fired the trash barrel, which had drawn them out of the trailer so that he could search it.

He lay on a river bank.

A houseboat was tied to two tree stumps and he watched it. To his right, leading to the river bank, was a set of tire tracks, presumably made by the machine which the men had driven.

Two men came from the houseboat, one with a shovel, the other with a rake. They raked over the tire tracks.

“Hell, that was a perfectly good car,” one complained.

“Sure, with four bullet holes in it. And, besides, the police had a damned good description of it. This is the best thing we could have done with it.”

Doc began taking off his outer clothing. The two men finished concealing the evidence that they had driven the car into the river. They went back to the houseboat.

Doc crawled over and slid into the water. There was a matting of brush; it overhung the banks. The river—actually a creek—led into the Hudson. Still and green, the water bore floating leaves and bark, and waterbugs skittered across the surface. A frog watched the bronze man with large, staring eyes.

He put a chrome spring clip on his nostrils, closing them. Between his teeth he put a small gadget, the size of a five-cent condensed milk tin, to which was attached a rubber bag similar to a toy balloon, but of thicker rubber.

He sank beneath the surface. Breathing with the device was not exactly easy, but it was possible. There was enough oxygen in the contrivance to take care of nearly half an hour of continuous submersion.

He came up beside the houseboat. Because it was daylight, he did not take a chance on climbing aboard.

He did heave up, grasp the rail, and locate the door to the house part of the boat. He moved down the hull a few yards, came up again, and discovered he could hear voices. They were not loud enough to be fully understandable.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

He tossed a twisted, empty cigarette package in through the door. He waited, holding his breath. There was nothing to show that anyone had noticed the package fall.

The wire attached to the package, while amply strong, was too fine to be noticed. And there was nothing suspicious about a discarded cigarette package.

The tiny microphone in the package, and the amplifier to which it was attached, would do far better than his unaided ear.

(The sensitivity of modern microphones and amplifiers is, everything considered, remarkable. They have been developed to an efficiency far exceeding, in many respects, the mechanism of the human ear, and approaching that of many animals which can hear sounds not audible to humans.—The Author.)

GLASSES and ice clinked. They seemed to be having a get-acquainted drink, because Phillips was talking to another man, a stranger. "The last time I heard of Benny the Basket," he said, "he had taken a tumble for some dame, and then he joined up with the navy. I didn't get the connection, but Benny seemed to think the navy was the thing."

"Funny way for Benny to wind up," the other man said. "He ran alky for Legs Diamond's old crowd, he told me. Like I said, I met Benny at Dannemora. Great guy, Benny. Funny, him going straight."

Briggs took the floor.

He said, "Here's the situation. I'll make it short. You guys are working for the same boss we are working for. We don't know who he is. We knew you were working for him because Phillips, here, had contacted you at this spot to tell you where to grab the girl, Patricia Savage."

He paused. He was not a good speaker and he was angry. So enraged that he had trouble being coherent.

"We looked you up. Maybe you wonder why?" he continued. "I'll tell you. First, one of our guys, named Robert Clark, has cut loose and he's demanding a half cut in this thing. Clark was sent out in the sticks to investigate a newspaper story that there had been a laughing in a hick town named Bogueville. We don't know what Clark learned. But we got a telegram, to be relayed to the boss by radio, from Clark. It demanded a half cut."

He paused again. This time he cursed the man named Robert Clark. He cursed him thoroughly and profanely, calling for all kinds of vile, foul things to happen to Clark.

"The dirty so-and-so," he finished. "Whatever Clark found out it was big. I know Clark. He wouldn't bust loose and demand a half cut unless the thing was so big that it made him lose his senses. And that would be *big*."

He swore feelingly.

"The rat didn't let us in on what he had found," he added angrily.

A man said thoughtfully, "That didn't bring you birds up here, did it?"

"No, it didn't," Briggs said.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Phillips announced, "The boss tried to turn us in to the police."

A startled silence. A man swore. "You're crazy!"

"You saw the bullet holes in our car, didn't you? Cop lead. We got one of those damned phonograph records, and it told us we would be turned in. And, sure enough, no more than we finished it, the cops came."

"What was the reason?"

"The reason was damned simple."

"Yeah?"

"We were no longer useful. And he was afraid we would try to cut in on his game."

"Like Robert Clark done?"

"Yeah."

"The way Clark acted must have given him the idea," a man suggested.

"Maybe," Briggs agreed.

"I knew that Clark slightly," said one of the men. "I never took him to be a double-crosser like that, but you can't tell about them quiet ones."

A bottle clicked against a glass. Someone struck a match, then said, "Have one?" Someone else said, "Thanks, don't care if I do."

A voice—it was the voice that had more authority than any of the others—demanded, "All right, what's cooking?"

Briggs cleared his throat. He tried to sound important.

"We came here," he said, "to form an organization and cut ourselves in on this thing. Not for any fifty per cent, either. For the whole thing."

"You want us to join you?" asked the authoritative voice.

"That's it," Briggs said.

THE next hour was divided into three phases. Skepticism. Interest. Decision. Following the decision to turn on their chief, they discussed the matter of a leader. This discussion turned into a dogfight.

Briggs came out second fiddle. He was no match for the owner of the authoritative voice, either in argument or wits. He wound up second in command, and he wasn't satisfied.

The new leader was named Calvin. That seemed to be all. Calvin.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“This is a dangerous thing,” Calvin reminded them. “We turn on our goose—the hell with your golden eggs, we say—we want the goose itself. That may be all right. It’ll be fine if it works. But we don’t know what the goose is. Don’t forget that.”

“We thought we could start looking for it,” Briggs muttered.

“Where?”

“What kind of ideas have you fellows got?”

Calvin laughed. “Hell, so that’s why you came to us. You didn’t know which way to turn yourselves.”

Alarmed, Briggs demanded, “Haven’t you got any leads?”

“Yeah, one,” Calvin told him. “Man by the name of Martin.”

“Martin? Martin who?”

“Henry Famous Martin is his full name.”

“What about him?”

“I don’t know too much about him,” the man named Calvin said. “But he’s involved in this. I know, because the boss had me go to the Martin place and pick up some clothes and the mail.”

“Clothes and mail, eh?” Briggs leered. “That looks like the big shot might be Martin, huh?”

“Martin is somebody, anyhow.”

“Well, what’re we waiting for?”

Doc Savage gave the thin wires a yank and brought the phony cigarette package over the side. He caught it and stowed it carefully in its waterproof bag. The thing had cost a hundred and fifty dollars, and there were only a few men who knew how to make them. He went under the surface again and swam away. His “lung” device did not work so well; there was water in it or something.

He was dressed by the time the men left the houseboat. There were nine of them. In that deserted woodland they looked like an army.

Doc retreated hastily to his car, got in and drove up the road. He found a lane and pulled out of sight behind some trees, or partly out of sight. Then he cut a sapling and stuck it in the ground in front of his car to finish hiding it.

After a while they passed, two machines loaded with them, and he followed. Doc wished that he had a radio transmitter planted in their car.

HENRY FAMOUS MARTIN lived on an estate that somewhat resembled Mount Vernon, although there were not as many outbuildings. The place looked as dignified as an old lady with fifteen million dollars.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Doc Savage drove on past the estate—the other two cars had turned in—and parked his machine at the first place he could find where it would be out of sight. He hurried back to watch.

He was satisfied with the situation. He had frightened the men into turning rebels. It would be a civil war that would not exactly grease the wheels of the plot.

If these men caught Martin, and Martin proved to be the head of the thing, he would have to take Martin away from them. Then he would make Martin tell where his five aides and Pat were hidden.

He watched the men proceed. They were scared. They scattered like a raiding squad of soldiers, surrounded the house, and began sneaking up on the place. They crawled on their stomachs and kept behind bushes and rocks. They had arranged a system of signals by imitating the whistle of a bobwhite. Two of them sounded like very strange bobwhites.

When they got very close to the house they stopped and waited. Nothing happened. Evidently one of them had agreed to go to the door. It must have been Briggs. But Briggs seemed to have lost his taste for the job.

Someone called Briggs a lot of violent names.

“Get up and do your job,” this person said.

Briggs materialized from a bush. He did not look happy, even from where Doc could see him.

The air was heavy with the heat of the late afternoon. There were a few clouds, and in them a plane was droning, but it was far away.

The house stood on a hill, and there was plenty of shrubbery. Breeze moved the leaves on the shrubs gently. The bobwhite whistling had attracted a genuine bobwhite which had perched in a tall tree and was calling out insultingly.

Below the house, not quite a mile away, in the direction of the distant foothills, there was a village. It looked white and neat and geometrically precise in the afternoon sunlight.

Briggs approached the door, but did not reach it, because the laughing started.

It was a more sudden thing this time than it had been the other time Doc heard it. One moment there was rural peace, and the next the thing was in the air, terrific, bringing helplessness and agony.

Briggs knew what the laughing was. That was obvious.

He spun and ran wildly.

The other men likewise got up and ran. They ran as if wolves were after them.

Doc Savage suddenly wished he had done this a little differently. He wished he had grabbed all of them, or even one or two, and made them tell what the laughing was. Robert Clark had not known what it was, but these men knew. Or some of them knew. Those who didn't know might be running just because the others were running.

He began to get very sick.

Chapter X. ASBESTOS SUIT

THE unconsciousness was strange. Doc Savage was reviving. After he had revived he realized he had lost his senses for a while. But not until then did he know it.

It was much later in the evening, after dark.

Noise, fire, smoke, and running men surrounded him. Doc could see that the running men were policemen and firemen. Most of them were firemen. He managed to sit erect. From head to foot, every nerve in his body felt raw and tingling, as if he'd had a breakdown. He felt generally demoralized.

The Martin mansion was in flames. The right wing was burning hardest, with flames licking the roof. Fire hoses were pouring long gray streams of water, and firemen were rushing around breaking windows with axes, the way they always do.

Doc got to his feet and stumbled forward. He passed a man prone on the ground, then turned and came back and looked at him. The man was dead. He was Briggs.

Doc went on toward the firemen. Some policemen were bending over two bodies, the bodies being Phillips and another member of the gang.

A policeman pointed at a knife sticking in Phillips's back and said, "Same knife probably used on all of them." He looked sick. "This is worse than the war." The other policemen did not seem affected.

Doc reached a fire engine which was pumping water from a small pond. A fire-department official stood there giving orders in a loud but calm voice. He turned, saw Doc Savage, and was very surprised.

"I'll be darned," he said. "You are the last man I expected to see around here, Mr. Savage."

Doc was astonished. This man was Earl Shelton. Once upon a time he had been a notorious crook under another name. He was one of the "graduates" of Doc Savage's criminal curing institution in upstate New York—the place where memory of the past was wiped out, and the men then retrained. Now, Shelton, like all the graduates, knew nothing about his own past.

"How long has it been burning?" Doc asked.

"Half an hour, maybe," Shelton said. "I'm fire chief in the village. Someone turned in the alarm. There's been a wholesale job of murdering done here, too."

A man came out of the burning house. He walked through the very flames. He looked like a devil coming out of Hades, although the devil might have a little different coloring. This man was a dirty, singed gray.

"Asbestos suit," said Fire Chief Shelton. "I sent him in to see if anybody was trapped, or if there were any more bodies in there."

Doc Savage summoned all of his energy. He could not remember ever having felt more demoralized. It was certainly no ordinary fainting spell that he'd had.

He asked, "Have you another of those asbestos suits?"

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Yes. Two of them.”

“Get me in one,” Doc said. “Quick!”

“You're not going in there?” Shelton gasped.

THE fire was hottest in the right wing of the house, so that must be where it had started. Doc Savage worked into the heat of the fire. He carried a powerful flashlight—there must have been a half dozen cells in the battery barrel—equipped with a yellow lens. It gave a light the color of the fog lights on automobiles, but it was not too effective in the smoke. The asbestos suit also was not as comfortable as it could have been—either that or the heat from the flames was terrific.

Doc worked fast and tried to get down into the basement as soon as possible. The house was not an old one, so he reasoned that steel beams had been used to support the first floor, and these would not burn out.

The trouble was that the fire seemed to be doing most of the damage down in the basement.

It was too hot, he discovered, even for the asbestos suit. He could not get near the flaming basement under the right wing.

He did discover, however, that part of the basement had been barricaded by a thick concrete wall.

In this wall he found a huge steel door. A vault door. It was glowing red in spots from the heat.

He retreated, left the burning house, and found the fire chief. He stripped off the asbestos suit hurriedly, and handed the fire chief a wide-mouthed bottle from which he first hurriedly emptied all the liquid it contained.

“Get me a sample of the smoke coming out of that west wing,” he said.

“Smoke?” Shelton said. “I'll be damned!” He went away with the bottle.

When he came back the bottle was corked. He handed it to Doc Savage. “Doesn't look like there's much smoke in there now,” he said. “You put smoke in a bottle, and after a while it just settles in a film on the glass and there ain't any smoke any more.”

“This will do,” Doc told him.

“I think I see why you wanted it. A man can analyze smoke and tell what stuff was burned to make it. Isn't that the way it works?”

“Sometimes,” Doc said. “But not always. As soon as that west wing cools down I want you to get in there and photograph every bit of it carefully. Do not be sparing with the pictures—make plenty of them. Get a good photographer to do it. I also want you to take samples of the ashes every few inches and put them in bottles. In other words, get pictures or samples of everything that is left. Bottle them in clean bottles which have not been previously used. Do not get second-hand bottles for the job. Get new ones. Buy several crates of new milk bottles. And label everything.”

The fire chief nodded. “All right. Will you get an O. K. from the State police for that? They have found six bodies so far, and they are going to want to know what I am doing.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Doc said he would.

He found the officer who seemed in charge of the case, and explained what he wanted.

The police officer had a thick body, wide bright eyes, a mouth that looked as if it was holding back something.

“So you are mixed up in this,” he said. He extended a hand. “How are you?”

Doc took the hand and suddenly found himself seized in a steel grip. Another officer grabbed his other arm. Handcuffs jangled with a noise like chains as they tried to manacle Doc. He was startled, suspecting that the men were not really policemen. He shouted for Earl Shelton, the fire chief.

It was in the middle of the excitement that Doc Savage first noticed the girl. She heard the commotion and ran toward them. She did not run like a person who was curious. There was an avid, almost wild personal interest in her manner.

She stood on the outskirts and listened.

HAVING fastened handcuffs on Doc's wrists, the State police officer said, “Brother, there has been six murders here, and if you think smooth talk will do you any good you're nuts!”

Shelton came galloping up. “Mack! Have you gone crazy! This man is Doc Savage.”

“I know who he is,” Mack said. “I know what six murders are, too.”

“But to arrest—”

“He's not arrested!” Mack snapped. “He's just held for questioning. And don't start telling me how to run my business, fireball.”

Shelton was not awed. “You're making a mistake, Mack.”

“Listen, my men found his car down the road. The car is full of gadgets, and they don't look to me like stuff that an honest man would be carrying. I don't know what some of them are. But it's not equipment you and I would have in our cars.”

“Naturally not!” Shelton snapped. “This man is Savage, and his profession is—”

“I know what his profession is.”

“He holds a high honorary commission in the New York State police—”

“He could be the commander in chief of all the armies,” Mack snapped. “What's that got to do with these six murders?”

Shelton tried to think of something to say. Rage got the best of him. “You fool!” he exploded.

“Listen here—”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“You incompetent idiot!” Shelton yelled. “You’re so dumb they had to break you down from captain to patrolman—” He frowned. “Wait a minute! You’re only a patrolman! What the devil are you doing in charge here?”

Mack’s neck got thick and red. “I am the only trooper here with executive experience—”

“You knothed, you aren’t even in charge!” Shelton snapped. “Release this man Savage, and—”

Mack drew his service revolver. “I’ll release nobody. And one more bleat out of you and I’ll throw you in the can with him!”

The listening girl clamped hands to her lips, began backing away.

Doc Savage had listened in silence because he was learning more about Mack by listening. He saw there was no use arguing. It might wind up in violence. He took a deep breath and held it. Then he worked an elbow against his side until he had released and broken the little containers of anaesthetic gas under his coat.

He held his breath because the stuff had to be inhaled to be effective. It was instantaneously effective, faster than any other anaesthetic known. But on being mixed with the air for a period of a minute it lost its potency. It was ideal for his purpose.

Mack, Shelton, and four other men piled down, unconscious. Instantly, there was an uproar. Doc Savage stepped back after deciding it would not be wise to search for the key to the handcuffs which held him. He moved to the outskirts of the group which rapidly gathered, and then sidled away. He stepped into a clump of bushes, moved fast, and got to cover without attracting attention.

The furtive girl was nowhere to be seen when he looked back.

A POLICEMAN was guarding Doc’s car. The bronze man walked boldly—he had picked the handcuff locks in the brush, not a difficult job with the little gadget which he carried for that and similar purposes—and spoke to the officer.

“I am taking the car,” Doc said. “Mack is up at the house, and he told me to send you up there.”

The officer accepted the bronze man’s tone of casual confidence and stepped back.

The road was not wide, too narrow for turning, and Doc pulled ahead into the lane that led to the Martin mansion and grounds, where he got the machine pointed the other way. He drove slowly past the officer who had been guarding the car and on down the hill. He slipped the machine out of gear and let it coast. It made very little noise.

The railroad that served the village passed below an overhead bridge which carried the macadam road. The whistling of a train in the distance gave Doc an idea.

He parked the car near the bridge, pulling into some shrubs in a clumsy and hasty-looking attempt to conceal the machine. He sprang out on the soft earth shoulder and he scuffed his feet in it so that the stuff clung to his shoes. He tramped a little of it off on his way to the bridge, scraped more of it off on the bridge railing, and finally made a pair of plain footprints on top of the bridge rail.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

While he was standing there on the bridge rail, the train came through. It was a passenger, not going particularly fast, for it had to slow down for the village. The engineer saw him standing there high on the bridge rail and, leaning out of his cab, said something that was evidently profanity. He certainly thought the bronze man was a suicide preparing to jump in front of the train.

Doc got off the rail quickly so that the engineer would not know whether he had jumped down on the roof of the train.

He left his car there and went back toward the Martin estate. A column of dark smoke, rising from the ruins of the great house, stood in the shape of a great club in the sky.

THE furtive girl came along the path beside the road, walking rapidly, only her eyes moving. A police car stopped, offered her a lift, but she refused, shaking her head firmly. The police car went on.

Doc Savage, materializing silently beside her, said, "Find out what you were after?"

She jumped, choked off a half-formed scream. Her eyes on him were wide, astonished.

"They . . . they think you jumped on a train!" she gasped.

He indicated the hill with the club of smoke above it. "What happened up there?"

She hesitated. "The fire chief, Shelton someone called him, and the policeman called Mack had a fight. That was after Mack awakened—they both awakened, I mean, from whatever you did to them."

"Who won?"

"The State trooper, Mack, was knocked out. It was over arresting you."

Doc went back to the original subject. "Did you find out what you went there to find out?"

She said, "Will you come with me? I want to show you something."

He nodded. They walked along the road. Doc was cautious, stepping into shrubbery on two occasions to let cars pass. Then the girl turned right up a hidden road to a small, parked coupé.

The car, Doc noticed, carried a physician's insignia. Suddenly, the girl was showing him the end of a small revolver. "I think Dr. Hiram Walker would like to talk to you," she said.

Chapter XI. THE UNEXPECTED

SHE was a not overly long girl with blue eyes and the most determined manner. Her features were that of a pretty girl, but her hair was outstanding, being of a very black hue, so intense that you found yourself going back continually to look at it again.

Her gun was also out of the ordinary, being a very large caliber for so small a frame. The rounded waiting noses of the bullets were visible in the stubby cylinder.

She unlocked the baggage compartment in the back.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“It will hold you,” she said. “Get in.”

Doc got in. She seemed to want to take him somewhere and not have the police find him. That was all right.

She locked the door. He lay still. After a while the coupé went into motion.

If the police caught him he would have to talk fast to get himself out of the predicament. Stupidity on Mack's part had gotten him into the jam. “Stupidity” might not be the word, though; Mack had been demoted lately, and he was probably overzealous to get his rating back. But any explanation to the police would take time. Several hours, probably.

Doc was in no mood to waste any more time. It seemed years since he had started hunting for his five aides and Pat. He was getting nowhere, it seemed to him.

The coupé traveled fast over rough roads and made things uncomfortable for Doc. A wrench kept bouncing around and getting under him. He tried putting the wrench in several places: under a leg, in a pocket, wedged between his body and the side of the baggage compartment, but it kept bouncing out again.

Then the car stopped and the compartment was unlocked.

“Get out,” the girl said, “and ride beside me.”

They were in a park. Doc looked around. It was a park in Westchester County.

He climbed into the car and the girl took the wheel. She drove with her right hand, which was nearest him, and kept the pistol in her left hand on her lap.

Doc said, “Are we going to this Dr. Hiram Walker?”

“Yes.”

“Would it make any difference if I said I did not know him?” Doc asked.

“No difference,” she said. “And will you please not talk to me. You won't learn anything from me.”

The bronze man leaned back. He asked, “Did you notice what happened to Mack and Shelton and the others back there?”

She nodded. “They fainted, apparently. At least they revived a few minutes later, and seemed none the worse. You did it to them, of course.”

“It was gas.”

“Yes? I didn't see you release it.”

“It was in a container under my right arm,” Doc told her quietly. “There is an identical container under my left arm right now. I have worked the catch loose and have merely to press slightly with my elbow to release the gas again.”

She stared at him. Not a muscle in her face moved. The car started to go off the road, and Doc reached up and straightened the wheel.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“That would be a lot of trouble,” he said. “You had better just let me have that gun.”

He gave her time to think it over. Then he reached across and took the gun. She did not resist.

THEY drove in silence for a while. Then she asked, “Is that gas actually there?”

“Yes, it is,” Doc said.

“I didn't think you were bluffing,” she told him. “I've heard that you generally do what you say.”

“Who told you that?”

“Dr. Walker,” she said. “He told me about you a long time ago. And besides, I heard him mention you often—your surgical skill, that is. He has watched you operate a number of times. You know—the way doctors sit up in a glass booth and watch another doctor operate.”

“Who is Dr. Hiram Walker?”

“My employer. He's also my uncle.”

Doc Savage studied her. Then he asked, “Where is his office?”

She gave him an address. It was in the high-priced residential district off Park Avenue.

Puzzled, Doc asked, “Why talk to me so freely now—when just a minute ago you were holding a gun on me?”

She looked at him. “Why not? I would have had to give you the information anyway. I want you to help Dr. Walker.”

“Help him?”

“Yes. Something is terribly wrong. He needs your help.”

“In what way?”

“He's worried. He has been like that for three days, and it is getting worse. He did not sleep at all last night, he told me. I would call his condition a state of terror.”

“Because of what?”

“He wouldn't tell me,” she said. “He sent me to get Mr. Martin—Henry Famous Martin—and bring him to the office. Dr. Walker said he wanted to talk the situation over with Martin before he did anything.”

“What did Dr. Walker mean by doing that?”

She watched traffic, handling the car carefully. Her lips were tight. “He wants to go to the police, I think.”

“You believe Dr. Walker knows something he should tell to the police, but he wanted to talk it over with this Martin before going to them?”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

She nodded. "That's the way it looks to me."

"Did you find Martin?"

She shook her head quickly. "It's obvious, isn't it? No, I did not find Martin. I tried to telephone from the village and got no answer. Then I inquired around the village and found out that Martin had been absent for some time. No one had seen him. He was not at home and he had not told anyone he was going away."

"What about the servants at the big house?"

"There were none. At least, none at the house. They had all been given a vacation. I talked to the butler and the chauffeur in the village. They said Mr. Martin had telephoned them and told them to take a month off, with pay." She looked at the bronze man uneasily. "They said Mr. Martin's voice sounded strange."

"Was there any possibility," Doc asked, "that it was not Martin who told them to go away?"

"It was Martin. They were sure."

"When did you get to the house?"

"After it was in flames. I was in the village when the alarm came in about the fire. I came right out."

Doc Savage moved the pistol enough that her attention was drawn to it. "Why all the gunplay, if you are just a secretary?"

The gaze she gave him was earnest and level. "Dr. Walker is also my uncle. He has helped me. I am an orphan, and if it was not for Dr. Walker I would have grown up in the orphans' home where they put me."

"Oh, I see."

"I would do a great deal for Dr. Walker," she said quietly.

Doc Savage said nothing more. After a while she drove the car off the express highway and they moved in narrow streets among tall residential apartment buildings.

"Do you know of any possible connection between Dr. Walker and Henry Famous Martin?" he inquired.

The girl nodded. "Mr. Martin was a patient of Dr. Walker's."

She stopped the car before a building made of rabbit-gray stone and Herford red brick, large and imposing, after the style of the section. The period exterior of the building did not quite succeed in concealing the fact that the apartments inside were very modernistic. A doorman in a uniform more elaborate than an admiral's, clicked his heels and said that he would take care of their car.

"I am Vivian Walker," the girl said. "The doctor's office is in this building."

DOC SAVAGE held his breath as he squeezed his left arm against his side. There was a slight crunching noise as the anaesthetic gas in the container was released.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Vivian Walker, starting to get out of the car, clutched helplessly at the door handle. Then she slid down on the running board and Doc caught her and kept her from falling.

The doorman had retreated to open the apartment–house door for them. He did not notice, fortunately, what had happened until there was time for the gas to mix with the air and nullify itself. Then he dashed up.

“She has fainted,” Doc said, “it would appear.”

He lifted the girl back in the seat on the far side.

“Get in and sit with her,” he ordered. “There is no sense in carrying her into the lobby and attracting a crowd. She is in no immediate danger. I am a friend of hers. I will call Dr. Walker.”

When Doc went into the building the girl was leaning back in the car seat as if she were dozing. The doorman, sitting at her side, kept his eye on her.

A brass plate on the door said:

DR. H. WALKER, M. D.

SUITE 204

Doc Savage used the stairway and went up quietly. He climbed to the second floor, located Suite 204 without going into the hall, and then he went on up to the third floor.

He pressed the doorbell of Suite 304, directly above Dr. Walker's apartment.

To the maid who opened the door he said, “Making an inspection of the building.” He flashed his billfold which contained an impressive–looking commission on the city police force, then pushed inside.

He opened a window above the apartment occupied by Dr. Walker.

The gadget he now used, his pocket periscope, was hardly long enough for this purpose. It was, when he carried it in a pocket, no bigger than a fountain pen, but it could telescope out to a length of several feet. The man who made it for him—a specialist who had been chased out of Germany by the Nazis years ago—was one of the most skilled of living grinders of optical lenses. The thing offered a remarkable field of view for its size.

There was no one in the first room into which he looked.

In the second room, at a desk, sat an elderly, capable–looking man with a surgeon's reflecting mirror fastened to his forehead. The man was sitting very still with both hands resting on the desk. Across from him sat a lean brown man holding a pistol aimed directly at the others head.

Doc examined another room. He got the shock of his life. It was hard to believe what he saw.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett “Monk” Mayfair, one of his aides, was the last man he expected to see sitting unconcernedly in the room!

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

MONK'S unconcern was an obvious affair, but not warranted under the circumstances. He was being guarded with guns.

There were three hard-looking men holding the guns. They also wore gas masks and, judging from the bulk of their clothing, had on some kind of bulletproof vests. Their guns were modern automatics. One of them carried—he held it across his knees—a light machine gun of the type used by parachute troopers.

They had apparently been there some time because one held a bottle on the arm of his chair, and there were glasses on the table. An ashtray on the table was heaped full.

The maid said, "I beg pardon, sir, but I do not understand what kind of a building inspection you are making."

"Never mind," Doc said. "It is about over."

The maid said, "I would say it was, too."

Doc whirled. The maid—the voice—was not a woman, but a man, a young man in a dress. The voice had told him that. And so it was not completely a surprise when he saw that the "maid" held a gun.

The gun went *bang!* loudly. There were no preliminaries. The bullet, hitting Doc on the left side, not quite over the heart, turned him half around. The chain mesh undergarment he wore would stop a bullet, but it would not absorb the shock. It was like being kicked by a horse.

Doc recovered and lunged forward. The "maid" tried to run backward and shoot at the same time, but immediately stumbled. Doc bent down, grabbed a corner of the big rug and yanked. Furniture upset noisily. The "maid" sprawled suddenly on the floor and rolled over still trying to use the gun.

Doc, to avoid being shot in the throat next time, seized a chair. He used it like a club, bringing it down hard on the gun arm of the "maid." Chair and bones both broke.

The "maid"—apparently feeling no shock from the smashed arm as yet—yelled, "He's here! Quick! Savage—in here!"

They had rented this apartment as a hiding place to cover the one below, of course.

There were four of them. There might have been more, but only four appeared. They were armed.

Doc had brought a grenade out of a pocket. He hurled it at the floor. It exploded, not loudly, and made smoke—a lot of smoke.

Beyond the smoke one of them snarled, "He's got us! We weren't prepared for him!"

"Keep Muley from talking," said another voice, a calm one, considering the circumstances. "Here, I'll do it."

A gun exploded.

The "maid" made a hard-to-describe sound and died.

Then glass broke with the mushy noise that bottles make when they are full of liquid. The men ran away. Doc Savage let them go. He had several hideous moments while he got out his "lung" gadget, which doubled as a gas mask, and put it on. He was afraid the gas might be dichlorethyl sulphide or some other form of vesicant

which would affect him through the skin pores. It wasn't, but it was not pleasant, either. It was ordinary diphenyl-chlorasine, or tear gas. Doc sank flat on the floor and worked frantically getting the transparent hood, which he carried for such emergencies, over his head. But somehow a hole had been ripped in the hood, and he had to hold the aperture shut while he worked out of the apartment and down to 204.

Chapter XII. THE OPERATION

DR. WALKER'S apartment was empty of everyone but a single dead body, the body being Dr. Walker himself. He still sat in the chair at his desk, but he had been shot neatly through the physician's viewing mirror which was still tied around his forehead. The office smelled of burned powder. Doc Savage stood there thinking half irrelevantly that he had not heard the shot at all—they must have used a silencer, or fired at exactly the same moment with one of the shots discharged in the apartment upstairs.

Doc came to himself and leaped to a window.

Directly below him the doorman was lying motionless on the sidewalk. In his uniform he looked like a gaudy toy dropped there.

In the middle of the block, going away fast, was a sedan. Two men clung to the outside of the car, one on either side. Both were looking backward. As soon as they saw Doc they raised their arms. Fire and smoke belched from their fists. A window broke above Doc and glass fragments fell past him, glittering like big snowflakes.

The fleeing car rounded a corner at the end of the block and threw one of the gunmen off the running board. He rolled head over heels, not bending his body, but turning a remarkable series of near handsprings, and finally collapsing like a loose bundle against a parked car into which he had crashed. They stopped their machine, piled out, got him by the heels and wrists and tossed him back into the car. Suddenly, after they were gone, the street was quiet again as if nothing had happened. But windows were going up in all of the buildings and people were looking out and asking what was the matter.

Doc had drawn back inside but heard another voice which made him put his head out of the window again. "Get me out of here," said the voice plaintively. Doc knew the voice. It could be none other than that of Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair. Monk's normal voice was a small thing, made for an eleven-year-old boy, except when he was excited, and then he would bellow like the bulls of Bashan.

"A good strong rope might do it," Monk added.

He was on the marquee—a big affair of steel and wood and ornate colored glass that projected like an awning in front of the apartment house entrance.

The doorman on the sidewalk began to move his arms and legs like an overturned turtle, but he still could not get up.

Monk couldn't get up either. His ankles had been bound.

Doc asked, "Can you hold on to a blanket if I lower it?"

Monk said, "Sure. But I'd like it a whole lot better if it was one of their necks."

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The blanket which Doc Savage lowered was a thick, strong one out of Dr. Walker's consulting room. Monk grabbed hold of it and was hauled up to the window in safety. There had not been much question about Monk's ability to hang to the blanket. Monk was constructed along the lines of a prehistoric cave dweller; he could grasp a horseshoe in his two hands and open and close it without an excessive amount of grunting.

Monk hopped to a surgeons case, broke it open with an elbow, took out a scalpel and slashed his ankles free. He jumped once into the air like an Apache, then dashed into the other room.

He looked at Dr. Walker, sitting dead.

“So they did that,” he said. He wheeled. He looked—it was one of the first times Doc had ever seen the emotion in Monk—scared. “We gotta get out of here. They framed me for this.”

DOC SAVAGE said, “Go down to the coupé in front of the building. There is a girl in it. Wait there for me—and keep the girl there.”

Monk ran out.

Doc yanked open filing cases. Dr. Walker's filing system was one of the standard set-ups used by physicians, so a fast search was not difficult.

He grabbed the “M” file, all of it, and took it along. He reached the street.

Monk, waiting in the car, said, “You're turning into a good picker,” indicating the girl.

That, from Monk, was high praise. He was a picker himself.

“She's Vivian Walker,” Doc said.

“Oh! Secretary—niece of the poor devil dead upstairs,” Monk said. “I heard them talking about her. They were going to kill her, too.” He scowled blackly. “The devils! Imagine framing me for killing a girl.”

Doc said, “It is doubtful if anyone would ever believe you would kill a girl this pretty.”

Monk snorted. “Not everyone knows me.”

The doorman was leaning against the wall of the apartment building. He was feeling every inch of his head as if trying to find a hole in it.

Doc put the car in motion. The three of them in the front seat made it crowded.

“We will have to find another car,” he said. “The police will have a description of this.”

“Good idea,” Monk said. “They framed me for that killing up there by—”

Doc said, “Go back to the beginning with the story.”

Monk rolled down the window. They could hear the siren of a police car, and somebody shouting to someone else to stop them, to follow them, that there went the criminals—meaning Doc, Monk, and Vivian Walker.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Sure,” Monk said. “It began—what day is this?”

“Tuesday.”

“Well, it began a week ago last Saturday,” Monk said. “It started when six gorillas—and I mean they were gorillas, too—walked up on me while I was trying to persuade a chorus girl that everything Ham Brooks had told her about me was a danged lie. These guys were slick. They told me Ham Brooks had been in an accident around the corner and he wanted to see me. I told them sure, if he was going to kick off I would like to be there and watch it. I was a little hot at Ham on account of the lies he had told this girl about me. You know what he done—pulled my old one on me, the one about the wife and thirteen children! Only he made it four children, and this girl believed it. Anyway, as soon as we got around the corner out came a bunch of guns, and then they made me get into a car. I tried a little gentle remonstrance, so they hit me over the head with a paving brick or something.”

Doc could imagine what Monk's gentle remonstrance had been like.

Monk continued, “It seems we were supposed to have a secret vault. There was something in it they wanted. They had searched our headquarters and weren't satisfied when they couldn't find any vault. So they started asking me where this secret vault was, and wanting me to open it.”

“What was supposed to be in the vault?”

“That,” Monk said, “they were very careful not to tell me.”

VIVIAN WALKER awakened. The anaesthetic gas had kept her under a little longer than was usual. She came out of it clear-eyed with almost instant comprehension of her surroundings. There was not even nervousness.

She glanced about at the traffic, and said, “We aren't at my uncle's office—what happened?”

Doc Savage did not want a hysterically screaming young woman on his hands. He removed a metal case from his pockets, and examined the contents, selecting a capsule.

“Take this,” he directed.

She took the capsule suspiciously. “What is it?”

“A strong hypnotic,” he said. “It won't knock you out, but it will protect your mind against mental shock just as a general or local anaesthetic protects your body against the physical shock of an operation.”

“Oh!” She hesitated. Then she gulped the capsule.

Doc drove in silence for the next five minutes. Whenever they waited for a traffic light to go green he rifled through the “M” file of case cards he had taken from the murdered Dr. Walker's office.

He found a card headed: *Martin, Henry Famous*. Age 56, height 5 ft. 11 in., color white, hair gray, eyes blue.

He ran his eyes on down the card and shortly made—although there was no visible indication that he was making it—the small, strange trilling sound that was his special peculiarity in moments of mental excitement.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The trilling, a tiny thing in the coupé, was as completely exotic to the surroundings as a sound could be.

The trilling was gone in a moment. Doc shuffled the cards together, the Martin card on top, and placed them on his lap.

There had been time for the hypnotic to take effect on Vivian Walker.

“Monk, go ahead with your story.”

Monk said, “There's some monotony in it. The monotony was after they caught me. They kept trying to make me tell them where the secret vault was, but I couldn't tell them anything because there isn't any secret vault. I invented imaginary secret vaults for them a time or two, locating them where I figured the police might catch them if they went to look. They weren't any too happy about that. That was all that happened for several days. Monotonous, as I said.”

“No doubt,” Doc said dryly.

When you knew Monk, you could imagine about how monotonous it had been. Monk always did the loudest bragging about the most trivial things, whereas when he took great pains to toss off something as being casual, even tiresome, something hardly worth mentioning, the chances were that it had been hair-raising. Judging from the looks of his fingernails, and a remarkable profusion of bruises, he had been tortured, and then some.

Monk added, “They've got Ham, Long Tom, Johnny, Renny and Patricia. I think they caught them the same way they did me—when they weren't expecting it. Pat got away, but they caught her again.”

Doc said, “Bring the thing up to date.”

“Well, you got back to town, and it seems you wouldn't tell them where there was any secret vault, either,” Monk said. “So they have decided to work on you, put you in a spot where you've got to talk terms with them.” Monk jerked his head back in the direction of Dr. Walker's office. “That is what that was back there.”

“I thought they were framing you?” Doc said.

“They were. They got a gun out of my lab and used it to kill Dr. Walker. They made me put my fingerprints all over the office, as if I was searching it.”

In a shocked, still voice, Vivian Walker asked, “My uncle—is dead?”

“Murdered a few minutes ago,” Doc said.

He knew that the hypnotic had taken effect on her; there was no need of coating the information with gentleness. She would feel a much greater shock later on than she would feel now, but by then she would be able to stand it.

She lost color, however, and closed her eyes. It seemed a long time, a minute, anyway, before she said so low that they could hardly hear, “Go on. I want to know about it.”

MONK MAYFAIR said, “I wasn't the cause of Dr. Walker being killed. They were going to kill him anyway.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The idea was to shut him up because of something he knew. Whatever he knew he was about to tell it to the police, and they were aware of it.”

Vivian nodded slowly. “I knew there was something terribly wrong—something he knew.”

“The idea of the whole murder, as they finally worked it out,” Monk continued, “was to kill two birds with one stone. First, get Dr. Walker out of the way and they were going to do that anyway.”

Doc added, “And second, to frame you and see that the police arrested you. That would put me in the position of having to do what they wanted to get them to clear you?”

“That's it,” Monk said. “They claimed they had a way of clearing me of the crime if you came across. You'd have to tell them where the secret vault was and open it for them.”

Doc said, “It would be hard to clear you without implicating themselves.”

“Sure, I thought of that,” Monk said. “My idea is that they wanted to scare you, Doc. I figure they were going to frame me and maybe one of the others, then inform you of what they had done, and threaten to kill the rest of us unless you came across with what they wanted.”

“Perhaps,” the bronze man admitted. “What were all of you doing sitting around in Dr. Walker's office, waiting?”

The car turned north. A tall white building appeared down the street. It was like some ancient temple, standing great and impressively among the somewhat grubby-looking buildings which surrounded it.

“We were sitting there,” Monk said, “waiting for an order to go ahead. Their chief was to contact them. But when you came bursting in they decided the heck with any more waiting, so they went ahead with their plans.”

Doc asked, “Any idea who this leader is?”

“No. Not even a guess.”

“Do the men know?”

“Some of them may. If they do they're not telling. The guy covers up cleverly. Uses radio, phonograph recordings, and such stuff. Sort of goofy, but effective.”

“Do you,” Doc asked, “have any suspicion of what should be in this secret vault they're so sure we have?”

“Something that was given you for safekeeping.”

“Safekeeping?”

Monk said, “They know a great deal about you. They know that you've made a lot of discoveries in the way of scientific gadgets, stuff you didn't want to patent, and that you've hidden them away somewhere. They figured you had put this one with the others. They wanted to know where.”

“Do you know what this thing is?”

“Not the slightest idea.”

“What connection has it with the laughing?”

“Laughing?” Monk looked completely puzzled. “What laughing? I haven't heard anything about any laughing.”

Doc Savage stopped the car in front of the great building which looked white and majestic in the sun. At close range it was a modern skyscraper.

“What's this?” Monk demanded.

“The hospital where Dr. Walker operated on Henry Famous Martin,” the bronze man explained.

Startled, Monk asked, “Where did you find that out?”

Doc indicated the pile of case cards he had taken from Dr. Walker's office.

Chapter XIII. MANFRED MATHIS

BEFORE they left the car, Monk Mayfair examined the case card of Henry Famous Martin. He frowned at it.

“This is worse than one of my chemical formulas,” he complained.

Doc Savage explained the notations, which were in the involved terminology of medicine. “It merely means that Henry Famous Martin suffered from an internal tumor,” Doc said. “It was not particularly dangerous, but they felt an operation was best now before it had a chance to develop. When Martin's physical condition had been built up until he was equal to the shock, he was operated upon.”

Monk eyed the case card. “That was about three weeks ago, wasn't it?”

“Yes.”

“That,” Monk said, “was about when this started.”

“How do you know?”

“I heard one of them say something about knowing that was when it began.”

They entered the hospital. Monk and Vivian Walker remained in the comfortable waiting room. Doc Savage contacted the hospital management, proceeded to get the information he was after.

“May I talk to the head nurse at the operation,” Doc requested.

“Miss Streeting,” said the supervisor. “I will call her.”

Miss Streeting was thin as a rail—she could have stood twenty pounds more weight on her lanky frame, but she was a smart woman.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Yes, there was something funny about that operation,” she said. “At least, it was strange—something I never saw before.”

“What?”

“During the course of the operation, Dr. Walker sent everyone out of the operating room but the anaesthetist.”

“All the nurses, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Who handed him the instruments?”

“He took care of that himself. The operation was practically over when this happened.”

“Was it an operation before an audience? Were there interns and students in the observation balcony?”

“Oh, no. This was not an unusual surgical case. And Dr. Walker always preferred to work without an audience.”

“You do not know,” Doc asked, “why Dr. Walker sent everyone away except the anaesthetist?”

“I have no idea.”

“The anaesthetist was the only one who remained?”

“Yes. The anaesthetist *had* to remain, of course.”

“Was the anaesthetist man or woman?”

“Male.”

“His name?”

“His name is Manfred Mathis.”

“Could I talk to him?”

“He resigned.”

“When?”

“The day of the Martin operation.”

“Before, Doc asked, “or after the operation?”

“He handed in his resignation right afterward.”

THE hospital had the home address of Manfred Mathis, the anaesthetist who had functioned in the Martin

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

operation. Doc Savage rode to the address in a cab, feeling it unsafe to use the girl's coupé any longer, for by now her car would have been identified as having been at the scene of the Dr. Walker killing.

Manfred Mathis had checked out of his lodgings three weeks previously—the day after the Martin operation.

“It was such a sudden move, too,” his landlady said regretfully. “He had lived here for over two years. He was a good tenant, although sometimes he was a slow payer. He used to like to eat his meals with me and, when my niece visited us, he would go out on picnics with us.”

Doc Savage asked thoughtfully, “On any of those picnics, did you happen to take a camera along?”

“Why, yes. My niece did.”

“If you have a snapshot of Manfred Mathis,” Doc said, “we would appreciate a look at it.”

“I’ll see,” she said. She fluttered around for a while, pecking at a couple of photograph albums. “Here,” she said. “Will this one do? I always said it wasn’t a very good shot of me.”

It was very good of Manfred Mathis, though.

Doc showed it to Monk and Vivian. “Every see this fellow before?”

They shook their heads. “How about you?” Monk asked.

“You remember,” Doc said, “my telling you that a man turned up in headquarters the minute I came back to the city to see what had happened to you fellows?”

“The polite fellow in the green hat—the one who said that if you opened the secret vault for him, you would be able to save us?”

“That is the one.”

“He was Manfred Mathis, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” Vivian said, “the anaesthetist at the Martin operation is certainly mixed up in this.”

They took another cab. It was getting late in the day and suddenly the sky was full of thunder and lightning. Then the rain came down. The cab rolled along slowly, snarled in traffic, with the uproar of the storm all around them.

Monk eyed Doc Savage. “Does this thing make sense to you, Doc?” He frowned. “The operation and what happened during it, I mean?”

“Yes.”

Monk pondered, scratched his head, and then scowled. “Do you mind shedding a little light on my ignorance?”

“Anaesthetic,” Doc said, “makes people drunk. There is an involved explanation of the scientific reason for

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

this, but drunk is the word for it.”

Monk nodded. “I’ve heard of ether jags.”

“Martin, under the influence of anaesthetic during the operation, must have started talking. What he said probably alarmed Dr. Walker—alarmed him to such an extent that he sent the nurses out of the room. But he could not send the anaesthetist out, because to do that would have been very dangerous for the patient. It was too big a chance for him to take. So both Dr. Walker and the anaesthetist heard what Martin said while he was under the effects of the anaesthetic.”

Monk struck a knee. “And Dr. Walker was killed because of what he heard! Could be!” Monk turned to the girl. “What do you think?”

“It sounds logical,” she said. “My uncle—Dr. Walker—began acting strangely right after the Martin operation, I recall now.”

Monk thought for a moment, then lost his elation.

“But where do we go from here?” he asked grimly.

Doc Savage directed the cab driver into a waterfront street. They pulled across rough pavement bridged with a forest of steel that supported an elevated express highway. Then suddenly they were on a small, modernistic wharf. Paintwork glistened wetly in the rain and there was a glitter of masts and spars and mahogany and brass.

“The uptown yacht harbor!” Monk exclaimed. “What’s the idea?”

Out at the end of the dock was the ramp where private seaplanes were kept, and the hangars which housed them.

The cab stopped with a jolt.

“MONK,” the bronze man said, “do you still have that friend at the press association?”

“You mean Gates? Sure.”

“Get him on the telephone,” Doc said. “Ask him to put a force of men to work looking through the file of carbon copies of news dispatches received during the last three weeks. Tell him to call in some editors who would like a little overtime—we will pay them.”

“What do you want them to hunt for?”

“Anything,” Doc said, “that might have a bearing on the mystery of the laughing.”

Monk frowned. “This is going to cost dough. Wouldn’t it be quicker to look through the back files of the newspapers for the past three weeks?”

“No. Millions of words come over the press–association wires which never see print. The item we want may not have gone into the papers.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Monk asked no more questions. He slid out of the car and walked rapidly to the dockmaster's office, making the mental reservation that he hoped the police had not yet spread a general alarm for his arrest. They would, of course, find his fingerprints that had been planted in the office of murdered Dr. Walker. He was not molested, however. And he was fortunate enough to find his friend, Gates, the press-association editor, just going off duty.

He talked to Gates for five minutes, went back to the cab and said, "It's all set. I told Gates we would telephone him for a report on it later."

Doc nodded. "We are using Renny Renwick's private amphibian plane. It can take off from either land or water."

"Where we going?" asked the surprised Monk.

"Washington."

THE rainstorm and the wind had made the river surface rough with small waves. The plane pounded on the waves in a way that was alarming, but they reached the air safely. Doc handled the controls, pulled the plane up over the bridge and then high above the skyscrapers. The cabin was full of deafening noise from the big motor.

Monk put his lips against the ear of Vivian Walker and asked, "How is it you are coming along with us?"

"Is that strange?" she asked.

Monk nodded at Doc's back. "He generally doesn't like women around in one of these things."

"I told him," Vivian said, "that I probably knew enough about this so that my life was in danger. He must agree." She sat with hands clasped in her lap and nibbled her lower lip doubtfully. "Do you suppose he knows—has he formed an opinion of what this is all about? He acts as if he was working on a plan."

"Doc? I think he knows what it is by now."

"Why doesn't he tell us?"

"Probably," Monk said, "because he can't prove it yet."

"Would that make a difference?"

"You bet it would. You would think that, as soon as he knows what is going on, he would spring his theory. But he doesn't. I've never known him to do that. You go along and you may get the idea he's hopelessly confused and licked. And then—wham! There it is. He polishes it off."

"I'm going to ask him," Vivian said. She went forward, spoke to the bronze man. At first he seemed not to hear her, then, after she touched his shoulder and got his attention, he seemed to try to hear her, but finally shook his head as if he was unable to understand. The girl rejoined Monk.

"Well?" Monk asked.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“He couldn't seem to hear me,” Vivian said. “I guess the motors are making too much noise.”

Monk grinned. “I've had him do that to me, too. When he gets that kind of a question, his hearing always fails!”

THEY did not land at the regular Washington airport but came down at a small public airport a few miles outside the city. They walked to a filling station on the highway nearby. Doc said, “Monk, telephone your friend at the press association and see what he has dug up.”

Monk spent ten minutes on the telephone.

A cab came cruising past from a trip out in the country and Doc Savage leaped out and flagged it. The driver seemed glad to get a fare back to the city.

All three of them rode in the back seat. It had not rained in Washington. The sky was bright with summer.

Monk said, “Gates dug up something.”

“What was it?”

“Bank robbery in Mexico. Not the State of New Mexico—old Mexico. Town north of Mexico City. A big bank there was robbed. Lot of dough taken. There was a report of a strange laughing noise, and a lot of people frightened and unconscious.”

“When was this in relation to the time of the operation on Martin?”

“Three days afterward.”

“And a large amount of money was taken in the robbery?”

“Yes.”

The cab was whisking through the outskirts of Washington. “That's fine,” Doc said. “You can telephone your friend Gates and tell him he can call off his search.”

Monk was astonished. “That item was all you wanted?”

“That item,” Doc said, “is enough.”

IN downtown Washington, they dismissed the cab and entered a restaurant. Monk was a little puzzled. They had not eaten for some time; but with Doc Savage, usually, food was grabbed on the fly. This habit of Doc's had always puzzled Monk because irregularity of meals was said by physicians to be something you should avoid. Doc certainly followed all the rules on everything else, but not on food.

They ordered steaks and all the trimmings. Then Doc went to the cashier, changed a bill for a fistful of quarters, and put in a long-distance telephone call to Earl Shelton, the fire chief in the village near where the Henry Famous Martin house had burned.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Hello, Shelton,” Doc said. “Did you get into the ruins of the Martin house after they cooled and collect the specimens I requested?”

“Yes, I did,” Shelton said. “And I went further than that. I hope I did right. We have one of the best analytical chemists in the country right here in our town, and I turned some of the stuff over to him to analyze. I figured an analysis was what you wanted and I would save you the time.”

Doc was pleased. Earl Shelton was one of the typical graduates of his criminal-curing “college” in up-state New York. Shelton was a bright fellow, able to think for himself. The best of it was that he was not an extraordinary case. One would never have dreamed that he had once been a rather dumb and thoroughly vicious criminal.

“Good,” the bronze man said. “Do you have a list of what you found in the ruins?”

“Yes.”

“Read it, please.”

Shelton said, “Mercury and bromine, which are liquids. Oxygen, hydrogen, chlorine, fluorine, argon, helium, krypton and xenon, which are gases. Then there are osmium, palladium, praseodymium.” Shelton had trouble with the pronunciation and had to spell them out. “Strontium, tantalum, thalium, yttrium, zirconium—”

“That is enough,” Doc interrupted.

Shelton sighed relief. “Good thing. There is a list here as long as your arm.”

“You say your chemist is good?”

“The best. Name is Jon Senmutz.”

Doc had heard of Senmutz. He was good. Doc asked, “Where did most of these elements come from?”

“Right wing of the house.”

“Where the fire started?”

“Yes.”

Doc Savage was thoughtful for a moment. “Shelton, did you know Martin very well?”

“I knew him. Socially, I guess you would call it. He was a fire fan. I don't think there has been a fire here in the village since I've been here that he did not attend. Nice fellow, seemed to me.”

“Have many visitors?”

“Very few. He was a recluse. A little queer, I've heard. For instance he wouldn't even let his own servants enter the basement of the right wing of the house. That's where the fire began, you know.”

“What was his business?” Doc asked.

“He was retired,” Shelton replied. “I heard that he made a fortune out of a new process for making vitamins,

then he retired.”

“Martin was an experimenter, then?”

“I guess so. But when you make a fortune out of it I don't know whether you are still an experimenter.”

“Thank you, Shelton,” Doc said.

Shelton said, “My chemist thinks there was a laboratory under the right wing of that house. A very, very complete scientific laboratory. He says he can't think of any place a stock of metals like that would be kept, except in a scientific laboratory stockroom.”

Chapter XIV. THE SECRET

GROVES, the official of army intelligence to whom Doc Savage spoke, was courteous and also a little embarrassed.

He did not say anything about arresting them, which surprised Monk. The trouble which they had had with the police a time or two during the past few months had bothered Monk more than he had admitted. Doc Savage, in his strange and unorthodox profession of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers in the far corners of the earth, did many things that were not in the book. The police, if they wanted to be technical, could make a lot of trouble. They had always coöperated, however.

“Groves,” Doc Savage said, “I talked to you earlier over the telephone and you assured me you did not know who occupied the office which the army was tricked into burglarizing.”

Groves eyed his own fingernails uncomfortably.

“You mean where the vault was blown, and that laughing attack occurred during which the man who had pulled the trick was shot?”

“Yes. That office.”

“I'm sorry about that,” Groves said. “But I could hardly give out any information like that over the telephone.”

“Then you do know who occupied the office?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Blumbeck.”

Doc Savage shook his head. “I never heard of Blumbeck.”

“Not many have,” said Groves. Then the military intelligence man's face turned grim. “Considering that under the right circumstances, he could be the most important man in the country.”

What is his job?”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

The military intelligence man hesitated, then glanced at Monk and Vivian Walker. Monk got the idea. He got up and took Vivian's arm. "We'll be downstairs," he said. They went out.

"His job," said Groves, "is to receive, test and pass on new inventions for the war department."

Doc said, "There is a regular inventor's council for that job."

"Sure, for the regular stuff. But Blumbeck handles the extraordinary inventions. Stuff so hush-hush that no possible word of it must leak out. As a matter of fact, only three other men and I know of Blumbeck's work and his importance."

Two small birds, not sparrows, but songbirds of some kind, got into a squabble on the window sill. Out in the sky, high and beyond, other birds made of steel and alloy were thundering along in tight formation.

"The vault in his office?"

"Where he kept the hush-hush stuff he was testing," the military-intelligence man explained.

"Were any of the inventions in the vault at the time of the robbery?"

"No."

"What became of them?"

"We suppose that Blumbeck had taken them out."

Doc asked, "Why do you say *supposed*?"

"

Because," said Groves, "we don't know what Blumbeck did with them."

"Why not ask him?"

"Can't. He's vanished."

"Blumbeck has disappeared?" Doc asked.

"That's right. Don't ask me about it, because we really don't know what happened to him." Groves leaned forward suddenly and confided, "Matter of fact, that is why we are not asking *you* too many questions. We want you to find Blumbeck and we think you can do it. We have advised the New York police to lay off you. We will even keep you out of jail. But you must find Blumbeck."

Doc Savage was grateful. He said, "If you could just find my four assistants and Pat Savage, who are missing, it would be wonderful."

"There's more to it than that. There's these murders. And that business of the laughing."

Doc nodded. He changed the subject. "Do you know a man named Henry Famous Martin?"

"By sight is all. He used to come in to see Blumbeck. I understand Martin had a tumor operation about a

month ago. We haven't seen him since.”

“Martin,” asked Doc Savage, “used to come to see Blumbeck?”

“Often.”

“Business?”

“Nobody,” said the intelligence officer, “came to see Blumbeck except on business. Blumbeck is a queer duck. Earnest about his work. Had a brother killed in Pearl Harbor, and another one in Bataan. He takes war seriously.”

“Were these visits Martin made over a period of time?”

“Yes, a few months. Martin has an apartment here in Washington, I understand. He was around often.”

TWENTY minutes later, Monk Mayfair was looking up at an apartment hotel and saying, “Experimenting must pay a profit, if Martin could afford to stay at a place like that.” He went inside to ask some questions. Coming out again with the information he was after, he said, “All right, Martin still has his apartment here. The clerk says a friend of Mr. Martin's has been using the place. He's up there now.”

Monk paused and acted like a man who had lit a firecracker and was waiting for it to explode.

“The guest up there is Blumbeck,” he said.

Doc Savage made no comment for a few moments, then made briefly the small trilling sound that was his rare manifestation in moments of mental excitement.

“That is unexpected,” he said dryly.

“Ninth floor,” Monk said to the elevator operator.

Doc Savage shook his head. “Eighth floor,” he said.

On the eighth floor, he indicated that Monk and the girl were to follow him quietly and be ready for trouble.

Climbing the stairs to the ninth floor, he was not molested and he saw nothing alarming. He had brought along the microphone–amplifier gadget which he had used before to eavesdrop on the houseboat. He applied the microphone to the door of Martin's suite and listened.

Monk began talking with his fingers. He had become adept at this deaf–and–dumb dialect, following an occasion when it had saved his life. “Anybody in there?” he demanded.

Doc nodded.

A moment later he knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” a voice asked.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Visitors for Mr. Martin,” Doc said.

The voice inside said promptly, “He isn't here.”

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes seemed to freeze. Without drawing back or otherwise seeming to prepare himself for the effort, he hit the door with shoulder and arm. Results were explosive, for the door split loose at hinges and lock.

Doc followed the wreckage in, hands out before him to check a fall.

The man in the room had been struck by the falling door. Knocked off balance, he reeled back. There was a gun in his hand, but he seemed momentarily too stunned to use it.

Doc went half down but came to his feet fast. The other man stopped trying to get his balance back. He came up with the muzzle of his gun and tried to aim. He was a methodical man. Another might have tried a snapshot without aiming, but he endeavored to shoot straight. He was falling as he did so. And when he saw his shot was going to miss he tried to roll over on the floor.

All of the phenagling let Doc get hold of him before the gun could explode. That changed it. The man on the floor did some high-powered gasping, very pained gasping. He lost his gun. He got a whack alongside the jaw that turned him completely over. It did not seem to faze him.

He sat up.

“Really,” he said, “you should have given me time to ask you to put your hands up, or something.”

Monk stared at him in amazement. “Brother, don't your jaw even hurt from that smack?”

“Or you might have told me who you were,” said the man on the floor.

A baffling thought occurred to Monk. He pointed at the man. “Is this the guy in the little green hat who called on you at the very beginning of this matter?”

“Yes,” Doc admitted.

“He's Manfred Mathis, then—the anaesthetist?”

Doc said, “If we can believe our information.”

“I'm actually Ellis Blumbeck,” explained the man on the floor.

Chapter XV. THE CREEPER

“

BLUMBECK?” Monk said, and managed to get a load of skepticism in the one word.

The one-time wearer of the green hat—grenade secretly inclosed in headgear—pointed a square jaw at the telephone. The jaw had some aspects of the thing the highway departments put on the front of tractors to push

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

snow off the roads.

“Telephone military intelligence and ask them to identify me,” he said.

Monk glanced at Doc Savage. The bronze man nodded slightly. “We’ll do just that!” Monk said. He picked up the telephone, talked into it, then turned to say, “Who’ll I ask for?”

“Any of the three men who know who I am. Groves will do.”

Monk talked for a while, turned again. “Groves isn’t there. This is a guy named Keller.”

“He knows me.”

The man got up from the floor and took the telephone. “Hello, Keller,” he said. “How is Mary and the kid? How are you coming on that Kirksville, Missouri, matter? I want you to tell these men who I am.”

He handed the telephone to Monk. Monk listened. He put down the instrument, apparently disappointed.

“Guy says he”—Monk indicated their captive—“is named Blumbeck, and he is *the* Blumbeck we are interested in.”

If Doc Savage was surprised, pleased, disappointed—if he felt any emotion at all—he did not show it. He said to the prisoner, “We want a complete story of what goes on.”

The other scowled. “Do you think you’ll get it?”

“I think so.” There were deep things in Doc’s voice that made the other jump slightly. “Four of my friends and aides are in danger, to say nothing of a young lady named Patricia Savage, who happens to be my only living relative.”

The other man swallowed. There was not as much steel in his jaw now. “Oh,” he said. “I see.”

“Do you know us?” Doc asked.

“I’m afraid I have heard enough of you to believe you might not be happy if I was silent.”

“Take it from me,” Monk told him, “you’re the one who wouldn’t be happy.”

THE man who had proved himself to be Mr. Ellis Blumbeck could tell a thoroughly complete story.

“The inventor, Henry Famous Martin, was working on a war device,” he stated in his story. “He found out somebody was trying to steal it. He came to me and went through the motions of giving me the blueprints of his invention.”

Doc Savage interrupted, “Wait a minute—why go through such motions?”

“Martin pretended to give me the blueprints because he wanted to fool the people who were trying to steal his invention.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Who were the thieves?”

“Would-be thieves, you mean. Or would-be at that time, I should say. Martin didn't know who they were.”

“Do *you* know?”

“No.”

“Did the gesture of the blueprint fool them?”

“Hell, no, it didn't,” the other said. “They just took after both of us. They figured one or the other of us had it. They have grabbed poor Martin. We can't find him anywhere.”

There was nothing on Doc Savage's face to show belief or disbelief. “Can you account for my five friends and Pat being seized?”

“Sure. I gave them the impression I was taking the blueprint to you for safekeeping.”

“Why?”

“Listen, these—these thieves as you call them—are bad babies. I figured to myself: Why not throw the monkey on your back?”

“And that is the whole story behind our troubles?” Doc inquired.

“Yes.”

Monk Mayfair snorted feelingly. “It's got holes you could drive a truck through! You're lying, brother!”

The other looked indignant. “Show me a hole!”

“We have identified you as Manfred Mathis, an anaesthetist who gave Martin gas at his operation for a tumor.”

The erstwhile wearer of the green hat snorted angrily.

“Sure, I was the anaesthetist,” he snapped. “Why not? That was my profession for years. I was going everywhere with Henry Famous Martin. Watching, see. Bodyguard for him. We had to be on the lookout for the thieves.”

“Why,” asked Doc, “did you give the anaesthetic at the operation?”

“You're a surgeon. You know how patients sometimes talk under an anaesthetic. What would you do? Here is a secret worth millions of lives and Martin might have blabbed it to some guy who would have done the wrong thing about it. I gave him the anaesthetic myself. We sent all the nurses out of the operating room when he started to mumble.”

“What about Dr. Walker?”

“I could trust him. He knew all about it. He kept his mouth shut.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

“Why was Dr. Walker killed, then?”

“I don't know why in the hell they shot him,” snapped the other.

“Where have you been the last twenty–four hours?”

“Right here.” The other man grimaced and made a surprising confession. “I was scared.”

“Why didn't you telephone and let military intelligence know where you were?”

“Believe it or not, I was afraid,” the man explained, looking extremely uncomfortable.

Monk picked up the quiz with, “One thing more.”

“Yes?”

“Is this laughing connected with Martin's invention?”

“I don't know a damned thing about the laughing,” said the owner of the green hat.

“I do,” Monk said.

“What?”

“I know it ain't a laughing matter,” said Monk.

WHILE the man with the steel in his jaw was still scowling—he did not seem to approve of Monk's humor—Doc Savage turned to Monk and said, “If Mr. Blumbeck is in danger it is up to us to do something about it.”

“Sure,” said Monk, who did not like Mr. Blumbeck.

Doc asked Blumbeck, “You think your enemies may actually have this place watched?”

“It is possible.”

Doc seemed startled. He strode to the window, stood there looking out at the Washington scene, and began humming to himself. Singing a little song. Or, rather, it was a kind of wordless, preoccupied, unintelligible sound.

Monk Mayfair tried not to show surprise. Doc was not humming. He was speaking Mayan, the ancient vernacular spoken by the high civilization of Central America which was in existence a thousand years before anyone heard of Columbus. So far as Monk knew, Doc's group were the only ones in the so-called civilized world who spoke it.

Doc said in singsong Mayan, “I am going to tell you to look around the building. Don't do it. Call me on the telephone. You are to say that you are Blumbeck and that you want to talk to me.”

Monk was astonished, but not too astonished to use his head. He coughed and sneezed and grunted, and

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

managed to make a question in Mayan out of it. "Why should I have to tell a lie like that?"

"So I will not have to tell one," Doc said in Mayan.

The bronze man then turned from the window, stopped his humming and suggested, "Monk, you had better go downstairs and have a look around. See if anyone is watching the place."

Monk nodded and went out.

Monk handled it very nicely. So well that Doc Savage was taken completely by surprise.

The other man had gone to the window and was standing there, looking down into the street. "There is your man, Mayfair," he said. "Across the street. He has taken his coat off, has an armload of newspapers, and is pretending to sell them. He looks like a newsboy. But he'd better be careful. This gang probably knows him by sight, and—"

The telephone rang.

Doc Savage nearly answered it himself but he remembered in time and told the other, "You had better get it."

The man picked up the instrument and spoke into it. "For you," he said.

The voice on the telephone was one Doc had never heard before. It came out of the instrument loud and clear. Everyone in the room could hear it.

It said, "Mr. Savage? This is Blumbeck. They told me at military intelligence that you were at Martin's apartment. I want to see you. I've got the blueprints of the invention that all this fuss is about. It's getting too hot for me to handle. Come and see me. I'm at Wabash three-seven-nine-six."

"Good," Doc Savage said.

Sudden terror came into the voice, although the speaker fought to be calm. "I mean," he said, "that I'm at one-three-five West W Street."

"All right," Doc said. "I will be right out."

The telephone conversation ended then. Doc Savage hung up the receiver slowly. He knew that every word over the wire, or almost every word, had been heard by both Vivian Walker and the other man.

DOC SAVAGE lunged back to the window, threw it up, and caught Monk's attention. He beckoned. The homely chemist tossed his newspapers in a street waste can and entered the hotel. He came into the room acting innocent.

"Didn't see any sign of anybody watching the place," he said. "So if they're on the job they're pretty slick."

Monk flourished a newspaper which he had stuffed inside his coat. "Look here." He indicated the newspaper. "Did you know you were supposed to be in South America, Doc?"

Doc Savage looked at the item. It said that a man identified as Doc Savage, the American scientist and

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

adventurer, had been set upon by two footpads in a Cartagena, Colombia, café. He had put the two assailants in the hospital.

“That must be the double I hired,” Doc explained. “Probably the fellow he was trailing hired another man to help him and they both tried to capture him. I will cable the double that his job is finished.”

“What was his job?” Monk asked.

“To furnish a distraction,” Doc explained. “He served his purpose, too. The gang would have been more careful if they had not believed I was headed south on a wild-goose chase.”

The man who had identified himself as Blumbeck stared in astonishment. So did Vivian Walker. Blumbeck said, “Are you going to stand here all day? That fake who just called you! Aren't you going to do anything about that?”

Doc Savage said nothing for a few seconds. Monk stared at the bronze man suddenly, for Monk was hearing the small trilling sound that was Doc Savage's habit in his moments of mental excitement. Monk wondered what it meant now. Trouble for somebody, he'd bet.

Doc Savage spoke to all of them. “This thing is getting tense,” he said. “It probably would not be wise to keep secrets.”

“Secrets?” Blumbeck said. “What do you mean, secrets?”

Doc said, “The thing everybody is hunting. It is well hidden. It is in my plane at the airport.”

“Your plane at the airport!” Blumbeck yelled.

Monk jumped almost a foot.

“Doc!” Monk bellowed. “You mean to tell me you got the master blueprint! How'd you get it out of—”

Doc said, “No time to explain it now. It is in the plane.”

“Somebody might find it!” Monk roared.

“It is well hidden in the plane. Under the fabric of one of the wings.”

Blumbeck yelled, “So you fellows *did* receive the master blueprint! Why didn't you tell me this before?”

Monk said virtuously, “I wasn't telling anybody. I knew the thing was dangerous. As long as nobody but me knew where it was I wasn't going to tell anyone a word about it. And I wasn't going to talk. But if Doc got it—how on earth did you find it, Doc?”

The bronze man was silent. He was embarrassed. As a matter of fact he had told one of the few lies of his lifetime. He had always been very strict about the truth, so strict that it was, of course, often ridiculous. It was one of his characteristics.

“It's in your plane!” Blumbeck bellowed at Doc. “Let's get it. You go and get it. I want to know that it is safe!”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Doc Savage paid no attention to him.

Doc turned to Monk, changed to Mayan, asked, “Monk, who made that telephone call for you a moment ago?”

In Mayan, Monk answered, “It was the manager of the hotel. He knows your reputation and I talked him into it in a minute.”

Doc Savage changed back to English.

“Monk, stay here and guard Mr. Blumbeck,” he said. “Miss Walker, you come with me. We are going to investigate this fake Blumbeck.”

Blumbeck was agitated. “I overheard that telephone call! You're walking into a trap! Nobody knows I was here. They're trying to suck you in! Get the master print first!”

“Obviously it was a trick,” Doc Savage said.

Monk looked extremely innocent. “What happened?”

Blumbeck said, “A fake Blumbeck called Savage, said he wanted to see him, and gave Savage an address.”

Doc was at the door. “Come,” he told the girl. She hurried beside him to the elevator but said nothing as they descended. When they started across the lobby he touched her arm, halting her.

She was astonished. “Aren't you leaving?”

“Not right now,” he said. He leaned over the desk and said to the clerk, “The manager, please.” The clerk indicated a desk behind a railing. A smooth-haired, middle-aged man sat at the desk. “Mr. Lee,” the clerk said.

THE manager seemed to know Doc Savage by sight and he had an attack of stage fright. “Mr. Savage,” he said, “your associate, Mr. Mayfair is—”

Doc said, “You made a slip, didn't you?”

The other flushed. “Yes,” he said.

“When you said Wabash three-seven-nine-six, it was a slip?”

“I—yes.”

“That is the telephone of the place where Mr. Blumbeck is actually hiding out?”

The hotel manager acted as if there was a fire under his chair. “I'm not supposed to answer that,” he said uncomfortably.

“You mean not tell anyone where Blumbeck is hiding?”

“Yes.”

“But, by error, you gave me the telephone number of Blumbeck, instead of the address my friend, Monk, told you to give me?”

“I’m—sorry. Yes, that’s what happened.”

Doc nodded.

He asked, “Blumbeck is not staying here at the hotel?”

“Oh, no. Certainly not.” The manager squirmed. “I hope I did not do any harm with that slip of the tongue.”

“That will depend on how fast certain people are on their feet,” Doc told him.

Doc wheeled, gripped Miss Walker’s arm, and ran her out into the lobby almost as if she was a wheelbarrow. He pushed her down into a chair. “Watch the elevators and stairs,” he said.

He rushed away from the girl before she could ask questions. He made an elevator, the doors of which were just closing, took the control from the startled operator and sent the cage direct to the floor of the Martin apartment. He ran down the hall and saw that the door of the apartment was open. He went in.

Monk was lying on the floor.

There was no sign of the owner of the green hat in the apartment. There were some evidences of a struggle.

Monk squirmed and made a faint noise. In another minute or two he would have been dead.

Chapter XVI. TWENTY-FOUR CARAT

IT was horrible, because Monk nearly died anyway. The weapon was some kind of a wire, but a wire made like a saw blade, with all the teeth pointing backward, so that the loop in one end would only slip one direction. It was a sinister thing, because it was not a device built for some innocent purpose and adapted to this one. It was instead a contrivance especially constructed to garrote a man.

The steel wire, while flexible, was very tough. Too tough for fingers to do anything with it, and every effort to work with the slide device only seemed to make it tighter. It already was buried deep in the flesh of Monk’s throat.

In the midst of his struggle with the thing around Monk’s throat, Doc Savage heard a noise downstairs. It was really a series of loud, violent sounds. It came from the lobby, or somewhere thereabouts.

Doc finally realized he had been fighting the garrote with his fingers when he had a better tool in his pocket. It was a small gadget which could be converted into a powerful clipping device. He got it out.

Another of the strange steel wires was around Monk’s ankles, so that he could not move.

Suddenly, from downstairs, there came a shot.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Doc quickly cut through the cable. It flew away from Monk's muscle–convulsed neck like the mainspring out of a watch.

Only the one shot had come from downstairs.

“Ahr–r–r–r!” Monk said, loudly and violently, with terrible force.

“How did he get you?” Doc asked.

In the street, a woman screamed.

“I was too dumb for this one,” Monk said. “I thought he really was Blumbeck.”

The woman shrieked again in the street. It sounded as if she was screaming, “Mr. Savage! Mr. Savage!”

“How did you know he wasn't Blumbeck?” Monk asked.

“He gave himself away.”

It was Vivian Walker screaming in the street. They could tell that now.

“How?” asked Monk.

Doc ran to the window. “How did he know Dr. Walker was *shot* in New York?” Down in the street a man was dragging a girl to a car. “It hadn't been in the Washington newspapers yet. The man said he hadn't telephoned from this apartment.”

The girl who was being dragged was Vivian Walker.

Monk got up. His face looked horribly like a sack full of purple blood. “But he telephoned military intelligence, or I did. And the man there identified him for us.” Monk's face was not pleasant.

“Help!” shrieked the girl in the street.

“Have you got a gun?” Doc asked Monk grimly. Doc never carried a gun. He wished he had one now.

“No,” Monk said. “Was the phone tapped?”

“If I had a gun I could stop this.” Doc withdrew from the window. “He's got Vivian—as a hostage, I guess. Yes, the phone was tapped, all right, and a henchman was sitting in to take any calls from here.”

Doc backed half across the room and picked up the telephone. He tore it loose from its wires and picked off the dangling wires as if they were strings.

He went back and threw the telephone at the man below. It was a wonderful throw. Washington with the half–dollar coin at the Delaware did no better. The phone hit the man. It knocked him against the car door and he lay there, stunned. The girl grabbed his hair and tried to pound his head against the car door to knock him unconscious. She failed. The man came to himself and grabbed her. He threw her in the car and then got in and drove off.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

DOC SAVAGE had already headed for the elevators. Monk loped after him, not exactly traveling a straight line. They had luck; there was an elevator cage discharging on that floor. They piled in and sent it down.

Monk had been watching at the window while Doc threw the telephone. He said, "She has nerve, hasn't she?"

They hit the lobby and dashed outside. A cab stood there with motor running. The shot, or the screaming, perhaps, had driven the chauffeur into flight. He was not in sight. They jumped into the cab.

"That's one thing I can say for her," Monk declared. "She wasn't scared."

The taxi started. Monk grabbed his hat. He clenched his teeth to keep his heart from flying out of his mouth. In sixty seconds Monk was nervous. So nervous that he was white all over. He had seen Doc Savage drive like this before, but it was always in a specially built car.

They drove that way for perhaps three minutes.

They did not see a sign of the machine they were chasing.

Doc wheeled right a couple of blocks down. He piled Monk up against the windshield when he stopped the machine.

They were in front of a newspaper office.

"Find a cross-indexed telephone directory!" Doc shouted. "Newspapers usually have them."

A cross-indexed directory was one in which you could find the address of a given telephone if you had the number. In other words, the numbers were listed in numerical order and next to them were the names.

They got the directory. "What do we look up?" Monk demanded.

"Wabash three-seven-nine-six."

"What's that?"

"That's the address where the real Blumbeck is. The hotel manager let it slip."

Monk was astounded. "You mean the hotel manager I got to fake the call knows where the real Blumbeck is?"

"Yes."

"That," Monk said, "is the first time I ever ran into a coincidence like that."

Doc Savage found what he wanted. "Here it is." He popped the directory shut. "Come on. Out on Florida Avenue."

They came into Florida off K Street in a screaming right turn that left the smell of rubber behind them. Doc kept a hand on the horn button. He seemed to have thrown caution and stealth to the winds. Their lives, too, Monk reflected. Monk was white-faced and as shaken as he had ever become in one automobile ride.

"What number on Florida Avenue?" Monk asked. Monk thought it a very brave act, under the circumstances, to ask that.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Doc told him what number.

“That's six blocks ahead,” Monk said. “Hadn't you better start slowing down?”

Doc took his hand off the horn button. He did not slow down, however.

The house came into view. It was one of the eyesore houses which, scattered over an otherwise beautiful city, make the place so startling. It was large and yellow and looked as if it had been built with an ax and painted with a brush dipped in mud.

Doc slowed the car down.

Three shots rang out and the car shook as if it had been hit by a large sledge hammer. Two of the bullets came through, the other spending itself on a steel car part.

“I'm not bulletproof today,” Monk said. He burst out of the moving car and fell flat behind a curbing. The curb was not quite high enough to protect a certain part of his anatomy necessary for sitting purposes. Too late he realized this. “Help!” he howled apprehensively. “Do something!”

Doc turned the car toward the house. The machine leaped over the high curb like a bucking bronco.

Two noises like sledges made holes in the windshield. Doc fell sidewise, knocking the door open and getting down so the motor would partly protect him.

He also yanked on the emergency brake. The latter act was nicely judged, because the car hit the house with only a moderate impact.

Lying beside the car and sheltered by it, Doc pitched a small grenade at the window. There was a great roar and then smoke, flying glass and more noise. He waded through it, right through where the window had been.

A marksman shot at him and then fled.

Some kind of a fight seemed to start in the back of the house.

Doc shouted in Mayan, “Monk, cover the back door!”

He made for the side of the house where the fighting was getting more tumultuous. There was no shooting there but, judging from the sounds, everything else.

Nearby, a man—it must have been some citizen of the neighborhood—was demanding what was going on. He was making his demands in a loud, angry voice. He sounded as if he was across the street. He was probably intoxicated.

Doc Savage opened the door of the room where they were fighting. There were six participants in the battle. The defensive side consisted of only one: a small, stocky, red-faced man holding a large kitchen chair. He was chasing the others with the chair.

The defender had apparently caught one man. The victim had hold of a kitchen-table leg, was very carefully trying to climb the table leg high enough to get to his feet. Part of his scalp hung down over one eye.

The aggressors had guns, but they were not trying to use them on the man with the chair.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Doc Savage looked carefully at the man who was trying to climb the chair leg. He recognized him as the fellow who had lately been claiming to be Blumbeck.

While Doc Savage was standing there wondering what he could do about the situation—he was out of grenades, anaesthetic gas and other helps—the man with the chair solved the problem. He sprang nimbly backward, shoved Doc aside and got through the door. He slammed the door.

“Watch out,” he warned. “They’ll shoot anybody but me.”

That was what Doc had been thinking. They would know by now that he wore a bulletproof vest, and would shoot at his head.

The men on the other side of the door fled out the back way.

DOC SAVAGE followed them immediately. The small, stocky, red-faced man followed, scooping up his chair as he passed through the kitchen. They got outside in time to see Monk get kicked in the stomach.

Monk liked to charge into his fights. He was late getting into this one, having encountered, as he explained it later, someone’s rope clothesline—it was broad daylight; he could not understand why he had not seen it—and practically beheading himself.

With no caution and plenty of rage he came around the house corner. His snorting and yelling could have been heard a quarter of a mile away. At that he took the foes by surprise, plunging headlong into their midst. One of them had the presence of mind to get a foot up, and Monk impaled himself on this. The foot owner was knocked head over heels. Monk fell flat on his back, as if dead.

The other men—they had the fake Blumbeck with them—dashed to an automobile, a sedan, and all of them managed to wedge into it.

Doc said to the man with the chair, “We have a car in front. Come on.”

“You are going to chase them?” demanded the other. He still had his chair.

“Yes,” Doc told him. “They have four of my aides, my cousin, and Martin.” Doc scooped Monk off the ground. “You can come if you want, or stay.” Monk was as limp as a dead man.

The man said, “I’ll see it through.”

They reached the taxicab. Doc dumped Monk in the back, and said, “Get in there and try to bring him to.” He piled behind the wheel.

The bullets which had hit it had not hurt the motor. Doc backed the cab into the street.

The shouting, intoxicated citizen who had been doing the yelling stood on the opposite sidewalk. As the cab backed toward him he turned to run, but fell over a red scooter which a child had left on the sidewalk.

Monk, looking like a dead man, made faint and hideous noises.

“What’s the matter with him?” asked the small, wide man.” Stomach kick,” Doc said. “Try artificial

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

respiration.”

The drunk picked up the scooter and threw it at them. It smashed the side window and sent a shower of glass over Monk and the stocky man.

Doc put the car into motion down the street. Split seconds seemed like ages. He hoped they would be in time.

The stocky man started slapping Monk's face to bring him to.

Doc hurled the cab around a corner. “Hold on,” he said.

Monk opened his eyes and sat up, seemingly having effected an instantaneous recovery from the jolting of the cab. “Darling, you didn't need to throw the fish bowl,” he said.

The cab took the corner and made a sound like a piece of canvas being ripped. “I think your friend is delirious,” shouted the man in the back seat.

“Keep him as quiet as you can, Blumbeck,” Doc called.

He could see the sedan. It was far ahead, but traveling too fast to turn any corners.

“You know my name?” bellowed the small, wide man.

Monk said, “But I told you, dear—Josephine doesn't mean a thing to me.”

Doc pressed the gas feed and horn button as far down as they would go.

“Who's Josephine?” asked Blumbeck.

“One I hadn't heard of,” Doc said. “You are Blumbeck, are you not?”

The cab, miraculously, was gaining on the other car. The speedometer was past ninety, which accounted for some of the miracle.

“Hadn't we better get a doctor for your friend?” yelled the man in the back. “Yes, I'm Blumbeck. How the hell did those birds find me?”

“The manager of Martins hotel made a slip of the tongue, and the information got out,” explained Doc.

Blumbeck said, “Oh. Jess let it out, did he? That's too bad. He'll feel awful about it.”

The cab hit a streetcar-track crossing. For an incredible distance it traveled with all four wheels in the air. It seemed certain to swap ends. But when it hit, it hit smoothly and going faster, if anything:

“But Josephine,” Monk said. “You're the only one in my life. You're twenty-four carat to me.”

“He thinks we're Josephine,” Blumbeck said. “He *is* in a bad way.”

Doc saw the car ahead slow and take a corner.

He said, “They had a girl. Vivian Walker. What did they do with her?”

“Sent her ahead in another car,” Blumbeck said. “Or that's what I think.”

Doc Savage slackened speed and made a wide, careful, arching turn around the corner which the other car had gone. The other car was nowhere in sight.

“They turned off into one of these side streets!” Blumbeck yelled. “Watch out for— What the devil are you doing?”

Doc Savage was driving straight on, getting every ounce of speed out of the cab.

“What's the idea—where you going?” Blumbeck shouted.

“The airport,” Doc Savage said. “Hang on.”

Chapter XVII. THE LAUGHING MATTER

BLUMBECK was an emphatic fellow. He threatened to yell for help, beat Doc's brains out and jump out of the car. He kept that up until he was told why the airport was the next logical step.

“Oh, you told the fake Blumbeck the master blueprints are in your plane,” he said. Then he was alarmed. “*Are they?*”

“No,” Doc told him.

“Then where they are—I mean, where are they?”

Doc Savage turned around and slapped Monk twice briskly. The speedometer was close to a hundred. “Great grief, watch your driving!” Blumbeck cried.

Monk looked at Doc foolishly. “Where are the blueprints?” Doc asked him.

“Where I put them,” Monk said, suddenly sane.

“Where is that?” Doc asked. “What did you do with them?”

“I gave them to Josephine,” Monk explained.

Blumbeck groaned. “Holy smoke, he's still hysterical!”

Monk glared at Blumbeck. “What's the matter with this guy?” he demanded. “I gave the blueprints to Josephine.”

Blumbeck screamed in anguish. “Gave them to a girl!” He grabbed his hair. “Oh, why did I ever call on such idiots for help?”

“Brother,” yelled Monk, “we didn't ask you to call on us. You sent us the blasted blueprints on your own hook.” Monk was indignant.

On the street directly ahead, a truck suddenly pulled out to pass the car ahead. Doc drove between them. If

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

there had been an extra coat of paint on the cab apparently they wouldn't have made it.

“I'm ruined,” said Blumbeck.

Monk said, “Josephine is my new girl friend.”

“I thought she might be the Queen of Sheba,” Blumbeck snarled.

“She works for the Manhattan National Bank,” Monk explained. “Josephine presides over the safety–deposit–box department. It's the strongest safety–deposit vault in the world. Unless the Manhattan National has been robbed, the blueprints are still there.”

Blumbeck fell back in the seat. He was weak. “I can't stand much of this,” he said. He began to laugh hysterically.

DOC SAVAGE straightened the car out on the trunk highway that led to the airport where he had left his large plane. Or, rather, the private ship belonging to Renny Renwick, one of the captured associates of the Doc Savage group.

Blumbeck got control of himself, said, “This invention is a wonder. Martin worked on it for years—got the idea way back during the first war.”

He was silent a moment, then swore. “When the Germans took that fort in Belgium and there was all the mystery about it, they talked of a secret nerve gas. Martin thought they had something like his invention.

“And then, when they used screaming bombs later on,” continued Blumbeck, “Martin had another scare: he was sure they had his secret itself. But they didn't. No country has it. It's one of the greatest things yet. It'll win this war.”

Doc asked, “Martin invented it?”

“Yes.”

“It is a bomb?”

“That's right. Not a bomb that explodes, though. It makes that laughing noise, only it isn't a laughing, of course. It's a combination of sonic and short electrical waves that affect the nerves.”

Monk, who liked to have things made clear, interrupted, “Wait a minute! This laughing gadget is a bomb? It affects the nerves? You mean that this Martin connected up the scientific fact that nerve pulses in the human body are believed to be electrical in nature—”

“And worked out a sonic–electrical wave that disrupts the human nerve currents,” Blumbeck told him, “the way a strong magnet disrupts an electrical current in a coil.”

Monk frowned. “Maybe there's some logic in it. You take even a small electrical current on the body—don't need much amperage if you've got the voltage—and it will make you feel like the devil while you're being shocked.”

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Monk became excited. "That's the way that laughing affects you, at that."

"The laughing is just the audible part of the device," Blumbeck said. "Martin claimed he could eliminate the laughing part, but I told him to leave it in. It helps terrify the enemy soldiers."

The car wheeled into the airport. Renny's big plane, the one in which Doc and Monk and Vivian Walker had come from New York, had been wheeled to the gas pit to the right of the public hangar and was being refueled.

There was no sign of excitement around the craft.

"We're in time," Monk said.

Doc drove past the plane into the hangar and stopped the taxi there. "Close the hangar doors," he said. "We want this cab out of sight." While the airport attendants carried out his order they ran toward Renny's plane.

"Renny has a compartment for engineering equipment in the cabin," Doc said. "We can hide there."

Blumbeck became excited. "You think they'll try to escape with the plane and search it later? Sure they will! That's what they'll do! They'll be afraid to hang around here!"

THE compartment where Doc, Monk and Blumbeck concealed themselves was small and, after they had closed the hatch, very dark. It was not in the rear of the plane, but directly in the center, under the floor. There was not much more than three feet of headroom. It was like the bilge in a small boat. Renny had built the plane, or had had it built, particularly to carry oil seismographing equipment, including a portable drilling outfit which put down the holes for the shots that actuated the seismograph "jugs." The special construction accounted for the compartment under the cabin floor, or what appeared to be the normal cabin floor.

The airport attendants went away, having had it explained to them very hurriedly that an attempt might soon be made to steal the ship, and they were to let it succeed, without giving away the scheme.

Doc, Monk, and Blumbeck settled themselves.

Doc said, in a low voice, "It would take months, probably, to get in production."

"You mean on Martin's laughing bomb?"

"Yes."

Blumbeck laughed. "The thing is in production now"

"What?" Doc was astonished.

"Secretly," Blumbeck said. "Very secretly. The different parts are being made in various places, and no factory knows exactly what it is making."

"You mean the manufacture of the device was split up for secrecy?"

"Yes. That is the idea. Various parts of the blueprints have been sent to different plants for construction of the

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

parts. A watch company in Connecticut is making one part, a radio plant in Iowa is making another, a tinware outfit in Ohio another. The parts are to be assembled after they are all shipped together. That's why, up until now, there is only one master blueprint."

"Just one master print?"

"Sure. You'd call it a master, I guess. Anyway, it's the only complete blueprint showing where all these parts go."

"

Pss-s-t!" Monk said. "Do I hear them coming?"

They listened. A plane was operating above the airport at the moment, and its sound blotted out other smaller noises. After a few seconds Monk decided he was mistaken.

"If there was so much secrecy," Monk said, "how did this mess get started?"

Blumbeck cursed feelingly.

"When the inventor of the thing, Martin, was operated on," he said.

"He talked under the anaesthetic?"

"Oh, so you found that out. Yes, that's what happened."

"And the anaesthetist, Manfred Mathis, overheard what Martin said."

"Right. Martin talked about the invention under the anaesthetic."

Monk snorted loudly. "Then Manfred Mathis, alias the man in the green hat, alias the fake Blumbeck, is the man who wears the bells in this?"

"Yes, damn him," said Blumbeck feelingly.

Monk thought it over. "He's got a big gang working for him. They get well paid. Mathis was just an anaesthetist. Where would he get that kind of dough?"

"Damned if I know," said Blumbeck. "It's been puzzling me."

Doc Savage said, "And Mathis proceeded to rob Martin of sample bombs?"

"Yes," said Blumbeck. "He got several. But he didn't get the plans for them."

Much puzzled, Monk said, "I would think if he got the bombs, he could look at them and see how they are made. He wouldn't need the master blueprint."

The plane above was gone. It was remarkably still around the airport.

"Not this bomb," Blumbeck said. "It's like the new army bombsight. You can't take it apart. It flies all to pieces when you try. Burns itself up. Some of the parts are chemicals which are solid when under exposure to

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

gas of certain types, but burst into flame under any other condition. Oh, Martin worked that out wonderfully. The man is a genius.”

“Oh, then Mathis had to have the master blueprint?”

“Right. He grabbed Martin when he got the bombs. But Martin wouldn't talk. Under the influence of the anaesthetic, Martin had said that I had the master blueprint. So Mathis tried to get me. I got scared and gave the blueprint to you fellows to keep. I don't mind telling you I was plenty scared. Then Mathis began grabbing your friends to make you tell where the blueprint was hidden.”

Monk said, “That still doesn't explain where Mathis got the money for all this.”

“Have you forgotten the bank robbery in Mexico, a few days after the Martin operation, in which a laughing bomb was used?” Doc Savage asked.

“Oh, oh,” Monk said. “Mathis rushed off to Mexico with one of the sample bombs, robbed a bank and got enough money to hire a gang to help him. Say! That invention is valuable all right. It's worth a fortune.”

“That's right,” Doc said. “Whichever side has it in the war is going to win. And if some thieves get hold of it they can use it for robbing banks or even the treasury. This Mathis is a greedy person. Too greedy.”

Blumbeck said, “So that's what happened!”

Doc said, “I do hope we will be able to help Ham, Long Tom, Johnny, Renny, Pat and Martin.”

Monk said, “I hear something.”

This was a terrific understatement.

Because it was the laughing again.

Chapter XVIII. LAST LAUGH

WHEN Doc Savage came out of the frightening, nerve-shattering unconsciousness which the laughing bomb had caused, he was somewhat confused. He was at first convinced that this time the bomb had had a permanent effect on him. Particularly on his hearing. There was a roaring in his ears. Also on his sense of balance, for he was shaking all over. Thinking that, and greatly disturbed, he tried to get to his feet, with the result that he almost brained himself on the low ceiling of the baggage compartment.

He was still in the plane and the plane was in flight.

Feeling about, he located Monk and Blumbeck. He became worried lest one of them betray their whereabouts when he revived, as Doc had almost done. He would have to watch them.

Which one to watch was a problem. He suspected that Monk, for all his bravado, was rather exhausted by his long captivity and torture and would therefore be unconscious longer. So he watched Blumbeck, which proved a good guess.

Blumbeck, after he realized where he was, lay still. Doc watched Monk, and kept the homely chemist quiet

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

while he was coming out of it.

Blumbeck found Doc's ear and whispered, "How many of those laughing bombs have they used, counting this last one?"

Doc gave the matter some thought. "One in Mexico, one on Pat Savage, one on me in New York, one on the military intelligence in Washington, one at Martin's home so they could burn the place before I found the laboratory, and that one a few minutes ago. That makes six."

"They stole nine of them," Blumbeck said. "I heard them saying they had ruined two trying to open them. That means they have only one left."

"One would be enough," Monk said soulfully.

"How long ago was a few minutes ago?" Blumbeck whispered. "How long have we been in the air? Where are we?"

Doc Savage was working on the skin metal of the plane with the sharp point of his lock-picking gadget. It was not an effective tool, and the skin was thick. He finally put his eyes to a small hole.

"What do you see?" Blumbeck asked.

"Water," Doc told him. "Dark-brown water."

"Dark brown?"

"That would be Albemarle Sound," Doc told him.

"A perfect hide-out," Blumbeck whispered. "I've hunted ducks on Albemarle Sound. There's hundreds of square miles of water only a few inches deep, plenty of swamp and islands."

The plane droned along in level flight. It plunged into clouds, thick clouds that made it dark in the plane. The motors made the whooping sound that plane motors make in clouds.

Then, suddenly, the engines eased down.

Doc glued an eye to his hole and kept it there a minute.

"All right," he said. "Now we take them."

Monk growled, "It's about time!" He hurled open the cargo hatch.

"Hasn't anybody got a gun for me?" Blumbeck yelled nervously.

THE hatch was quite large, ample for two men to come out of it together. This Doc Savage and Monk did. The noise of the plane engines, and the vibration, helped them avoid discovery. They fell upon their foes.

All the men in the cabin were lined up along one battery of windows, looking downward. There were no seats in the cabin and they were standing, except for two of them who were up forward, and these were sitting.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Monk took the standees. He used the bowling-ball principle that if he could get one down that one would knock others over. He was about eighty-percent correct. In a moment he was the kernel of a tangle of arms and legs and noise.

Doc took the two forward men. One of these was Manfred Mathis.

He hit Mathis first, or tried to, because the man was the most dangerous. It was his brain behind all this. Doc tried to break his jaw with an uppercut. He missed completely.

It was awe-inspiring how quickly Mathis dodged him. The man had boxed. He fell back, his hands clawing his pocket for a gun.

The second man in the seat already had a gun out. Doc hit him and knocked him senseless with the one blow. Mathis immediately grabbed the unconscious man and hauled him down as a shield.

Doc reached under, managed to get hold of Mathis's gun. It was in Mathis's pocket. Mathis also had hold of it. They struggled in hard silence. Mathis was incredibly strong.

The pilot's compartment was closed off from the rest of the cabin, airline fashion. Suddenly the door to it flew open. A man stumbled out, holding a half-peeled apple and an open pocketknife.

The man immediately tried to put the pocketknife into Doc's back. It hit the chain-mesh undergarment Doc was wearing, and made a gritty, ripping sound. The man tried again and got the blade into Doc's neck. The steel felt very hot. Doc held Mathis's gun with one hand and held the other man's hand and the knife with his other hand. All three of them strained.

Blumbeck had not come up from under the floor. He was yelling, "Give me a gun! Give me a gun!"

Monk kicked a man completely out of the pile, upward, so that the man hit the plane cabin ceiling. Then Monk came out of the pile, holding the hand of a man who had a gun. They stumbled around on the floor, fighting over the gun which began exploding dangerously in the cabin.

Doc got the knife out of his neck. The wound was not deep.

The gun Monk was fighting over exploded four times at last.

Doc hit the knifeman a blow that changed the character of the man's whole lower face.

Blumbeck came out of the place under the floor, howling in terror.

Mathis rolled clear of Doc. Mathis wore a seat parachute pack.

One of Monk's opponents straightened himself. He had a knife. This was no pocketknife. It had a blade so remarkably long that it was hard to explain where he could have been carrying it. It was almost a sword.

Monk did three or four things very violently, and finally ended with the long knife in his possession. "I'm gonna cut your heads off," Monk told his foes.

Mathis raced for the cabin door. Monk watched him come but made no effort to stop him. Mathis gained the door, struggled to open it. He was not more than a long arm reach from Monk, who could have stopped him easily. Monk made no effort to stop him. He did reach out and thrust the long knife to the hilt into Mathis's

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

parachute pack.

Mathis, knowing nothing of the knife in the 'chute pack, jumped gleefully out into space.

“GIMME a gun!” bellowed Blumbeck. He found a gun that someone had dropped and seized it. He menaced everybody. “Get your hands up!” he screamed. “I’m dying! I’ll kill you all!”

Blumbeck had been shot in the foot while he had loitered under the floor.

Doc watched everyone, including Monk, put up their hands. Doc then turned and went into the pilot's compartment, in which he found one frightened man and Vivian Walker.

“You all right?” Doc asked.

“I’m scared to death,” she said.

“Don't faint.”

“I’m too scared for that.”

Doc caught sight of a green metal case under the pilot's feet. The box said *Fishing Tackle* in yellow letters on the side, but it was too large to be carrying fishing tackle. Doc dragged the box out into the aisle.

“This one of the bombs?” he asked.

The pilot did not answer. Doc reached out with terrific force and violence and tore the parachute harness off the flier. “How would you like to get thrown out?” he asked. “Is this a bomb?”

“Yes,” screamed the pilot. He had been too scared to answer the first time it was now evident. “It's the only one they've got left.”

Doc went back into the cabin with the green tin box.

Monk was looking out of the window. He drew back and grinned at Doc.

“He made quite a splash,” Monk said.

“Who?”

“Mathis. For some reason or other his parachute didn't open.”

Blumbeck yelled, “No wonder! You stuck a knife in the parachute!”

“I don't remember doing that,” Monk said innocently.

DOC SAVAGE looked downward at the boat. It was a houseboat somewhat larger than the one anchored in a creek near the Hudson River, to which he had trailed a part of the gang earlier in the affair. This one looked

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

old and dirty, even from the great height at which they were flying.

Doc said, “Blumbeck, do you know how to use one of these bombs?”

“I’m shot in the foot. I think the bullet tore my big toe off,” Blumbeck complained. “You just set it and throw it overboard.”

“How did they use them on the ground?”

“There’s a time attachment you can set.”

“I’ll go tell the pilot to fly over the boat,” Monk said.

Monk was looking worried. He had caused Manfred Mathis to jump to his death. It was a richly deserved death, the way Monk figured it. But Doc Savage had an unflinching rule against taking the life of a man. Monk had evaded the rule a time or two before. This time he was suffering remorse, afraid he wasn’t going to get away with it. “I’ll tell the pilot,” he said.

“Tell him to stay high,” Blumbeck warned. “The bomb takes effect for several hundred feet.”

Doc Savage took the laughing bomb out of its case. The compactness of the thing surprised him.

It did not look in the least like a bomb. It consisted of four cylindrical containers for the apparatus, connected with what looked like a plastic membrane in which was embedded small bright–yellow wires.

Blumbeck had been exploring his foot. “I’m only nicked,” he said.

“You should have been shot in your fat stern,” Monk said indignantly. “What did you mean, waiting down there while we did all the fighting?”

“I didn’t have a gun!” Blumbeck said angrily. “And I’m not used to this kind of thing. I haven’t been so scared since lightning struck a tree I was chopping down.”

Doc Savage found a lever on the bomb. “Is this what you set it with?” he asked.

“Yes, pull the lever out. It comes out,” Blumbeck said.

Doc pulled the lever out, then hurriedly tossed the bomb through the window. The device was equipped with a long tail designed to make it fall straight. It fell toward the boat.

The plane flew level for a while. Then they heard the laughing. It did not last long. Not more than a span of twenty or thirty seconds. But it was very disagreeable and made them feel weak and ill. The plane wobbled slightly, and kept going.

“I hope that gives us the last laugh,” Monk said with deep feeling.

DOC SAVAGE wheeled, walked to the pilot’s compartment and reached inside. He hauled out the flier who was pale and perspiring. Doc climbed into the seat the man had vacated.

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

There was extremely shallow water around the houseboat. The houseboat, like most craft of its kind, did not need much water. But the important thing was that the water was clear of stumps and sand bars over an area large enough to land the plane. Doc sent the ship downward.

Vivian Walker looked at him. "Is everything under control?"

"It depends on conditions on the boat," Doc told her.

She managed to smile hopefully, which was very good under the circumstances.

Doc put the plane down hard and fast, then cut the engines. The big ship slowly bogged down in the water, then stopped. It was not fifty feet from the houseboat. The wave from the plane hull swung out and slapped the houseboat hull. No sign of life came from the houseboat.

Monk slammed the plane door open and sprang overboard. The water was not over two feet deep, but he went almost to his neck in the mud. He extricated himself and crawled—swam to the houseboat.

"Maybe that isn't where the prisoners are being held!" yelled Blumbeck. He looked as scared as he claimed he was.

They watched Monk reach up to the low houseboat rail, and climb aboard. He was so covered with mud that he looked as if he was made out of the stuff.

He dived inside, came out again.

"I was right about that laugh," he called to them.

"They are all there?" asked Doc.

"Everybody," Monk said. "They are all safe. There were three men guarding them."

"Good," Doc Savage said.

Blumbeck waved his gun gleefully. "That winds it up! That fixes everything. Martin is there? You're sure of that?"

Monk called back, "Is Martin a little shrunken runt with a big head and no hair on it?"

"About sixty years old?" Blumbeck demanded,

"That's him. He's here. He's all right. So are Ham Brooks, Johnny Littlejohn, Renny Renwick, Long Tom Roberts—they are all here. All alive, too. Pat is here, and already conscious."

Blumbeck laughed. "That's fine! That's wonderful!" He pounded his left hand against his hip in delight. "We've got the whole gang! All the sample bombs are gone! We've got the master blueprint safe—" Anxiety and horror suddenly came over his face. He howled at Monk, "Are you sure that girl has the blueprint in the vault? Are you *sure*? You can't trust a woman."

"You start doubting my Josephine," Monk yelled at him, "and I'll come over there and run you back under the floor of that plane!"

THE LAUGH OF DEATH

Renny Renwick disappeared on a Tuesday, and he was gone for seven days. Then he came back. But he would not explain where he had been, or what he had done. But they could see that something terrible had happened to him. He began to act strangely.

“Give him truth serum,” Doc Savage said. “We have got to find out what happened to him.”

So they gave Renny truth serum.

Renny, under the influence of the truth serum, muttered, “Poor old Columbus was such a nice guy. He was a promoter, of course, and always in debt, and dodging his creditors all the time. . . . But that was no excuse for me murdering Columbus.”

“You murdered Columbus!” Monk bellowed.

Renny nodded. “Poison,” he mumbled.

Monk was aghast. “Renny has gone crazy,” he said.

But Doc Savage was very serious as he shook his head. “I think he is perfectly sane and telling the truth,” Doc said.

Read the rest of this unexpected mystery, *They Died Twice*, in the next issue of this magazine.

THE END