

THE SPEAKING STONE

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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THE SPEAKING STONE

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. RED VEST

THE story that brought the newspapermen to the little island of Jinx in the South Pacific had nothing to do with the little man with the red vest, other, of course, than it accounted for his arriving in the plane with the reporters.

Doc Savage did not give the little man with the vest any particular notice. Doc was embarrassed by the coming of the newspapermen, because he had always gone to great lengths to avoid publicity. Therefore, Doc did not notice the small man right away.

He was an avid little man, this fellow in the red vest. He came with the others to meet Doc Savage, but he remained in the background. And although he had paper and pencil in hand, he did not ask any questions.

The small man just tucked a thumb in an armhole of his red vest and listened. He had a small, pinched, quizzical face that had not much expression, except the quizzical one. Neither did it have a normal amount of color; it seemed to have been washed with acid, the way a piece of cloth is bleached. The other newspapermen asked plenty of questions. Their inquiries were a flood.

One could have suspected that the man in the red vest was not interested in the questions. The inquiries were about an adventure in which Doc Savage had just participated, an affair in which an ocean liner had been

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taken over, crew and passengers, by some gentlemen with more greed and nerve than ability to finish what they had started. Doc Savage had become involved in the affair, and his hard, bronze hand had ended it on the side of justice, and somewhat on the spectacular side. (See Pirate Isle)

The man wearing the red vest showed interest, though, in the attitude of the newspapermen toward Doc Savage. Doc was a celebrity, a man of great accomplishments, a man of mystery. All of that was in the attitude of the newspaper writers. They were courteous to Savage. They were very polite to him. A thorough newspaperman is usually courteous only to the leaders of religious faiths and the President of the United States.

The "red vest" seemed deeply pleased by this evidence that Doc Savage was not run-of-the-mill.

The newspapermen went away, and the little man went with them.

He came back later, alone.

He stood in front of Doc Savage.

"Renny Renwick?" he asked. He spoke as if the name was hard for him, and he had put a great deal of time on saying it over and over, so that it would be very perfect.

Colonel John Renny Renwick was one of a crew of five specialized assistants which Doc Savage maintained.

"Over there," Doc Savage said, pointing. But the bronze man Doc Savage was a giant man of bronze watched the small man intently.

Renny Renwick had two identifying tags a going-to-a-funeral face and a pair of fists that could have been subdivided into a half dozen pairs of normal fists.

The little man with the vest looked at Renny, then took something out of his pocket. They did not notice the object, except that it was pale-blue and round.

The little man looked at Renny. Then he screamed. There was the quality of ripped-out lungs in his shriek.

He turned and ran.

Renny Renwick was gap-mouthed with surprise. Then he began laughing. "Holy cow!" he said. "What kind of a gag is this?"

But then the little man with the red vest fell dead!

THERE was no mark on his body. That was the first thing that they noticed. And so they thought he was not dead; that this was just more of a joke. A peculiar joke, but surely a gag. All but Doc Savage, that is. The bronze man's features were so devoid of expression that they were a little strange.

Johnny Littlejohn Johnny was William Harper Littlejohn, another of Doc Savage's five assistants, a renowned archaeologist and geologist held the small man's wrist for a while. He dropped the wrist. Bewildered, he looked up. "Doc, is he How could he be?"

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Doc Savage examined the small man. The others watched. Doc was a man of many abilities and many surprises, with the greatest of his skills being in surgery. There probably was not a great surgeon in the world who was not familiar with one or another of his developments in operative technique.

"Dead!" Doc said.

"But he just fell over," gasped William Harper Littlejohn. "I'll be superamalgamated! An uncomeatability."

Johnny had a habit of long words.

Big-fisted Renny Renwick, for whom the small man with the vest had asked, rubbed his jaw in amazement. He took an absent step or two backward as if he wanted to get away from the situation. Then something occurred to him. He went to the small dead man and bent over.

Renny picked up the object that had rolled out of the small man's fingers the object that was pale-blue and round.

"What," Johnny asked him, "is that?"

Renny stared at the thing.

"What is it?" Johnny repeated.

"A rock," Renny said thoughtfully. "Just a rock. Round and blue and not very heavy."

Johnny stepped forward. "Let's see it," he said.

"It's nothing but a rock. Guess he picked it up."

A note of excitement came into Johnny's voice. "No, he didn't," he said. "Not on this island, he didn't. That rock it's a strange "

He broke off, because Renny was suddenly looking as if the stone had bitten him. His eyes got very round. "Hey!" he muttered. "I've seen this rock before. It's Monk Mayfair's pocket piece! He's carried it for months or did."

The last, the "or did," was a natural afterthought, because Monk Mayfair, fourth member of their group, was not with them on Jinx Island. He was in South America. Monk was a chemist, and he was supposed to be in Patagonia somewhere, giving a whaling company valuable information about how to get the most out of their whales.

Johnny, the geologist, scowled at the stone. "Where'd Monk get that rock? I don't place its type. Here let me see "

Renny started violently. He did a strange thing put the stone to his ear, as if he had heard something. His face screwed into a listening grimace, then slowly emptied of color.

"Monk's voice!" he croaked. "Monk's voice in this rock! *You can hear it!*"

William Harper Littlejohn's face became a foolish grin. He couldn't stomach stuff about a rock talking. But it was not a joke and not a lie; the stark set of Renny's face told him that.

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"Voice?" Johnny said.

Renny nodded. "Monk's voice."

Johnny kept his foolish grin until the impossibility of the thing made him explode, "You must be insane!"

Renny grimaced. He spread the corners of his mouth. "Holy cow!" He sounded almost frightened.

Doc Savage swung suddenly forward and leaned close to the blue stone without touching it or taking it from Renny's hands. He listened intently, his eyes half closed.

Then the bronze man slowly straightened. His facial expression did not change to any great extent. But the others knew that he was emotionally moved when they heard a small trilling sound, a low and exotic note as strange as the call of some tiny tropical bird, as vagrant as a wind over polar ice. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and yet from nowhere, with a ventriloquial quality. It was the sound Doc Savage unconsciously made when intensely excited.

"He isn't insane," the bronze man said in a low voice.

ONE of the newspapermen who had appeared on the plane came into view then, apparently just out for a walk with nothing on his mind. But he saw the prone figure of the man with the vest.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. Then he turned and yelled at the other newsmen, "Hey, you lugs! Something's on out here!"

The newspaperman who had shouted was tall and ran to bones. He had a stony, unpleasant face, equipped with a pair of black mice for eyebrows.

The other newshawks popped up from various places.

Long Tom Roberts appeared, also. Long Tom was the remaining member of Doc Savage's five-man group of assistants. There was nothing particularly outstanding about him. Quite the contrary, he looked as if he had grown up in a particularly deep mushroom cellar. Not realizing what had happened, he stared at them, muttered, "Who's the little guy with the vest?"

Doc Savage caught his eye and made a slight negative gesture, then indicated a lifeboat drawn up on the beach. Long Tom walked to the boat.

Doc Savage then sank to a knee and quickly removed the red vest from the small dead man.

The tall newsman with the black mice for eyebrows scowled, said, "Hey, that's funny cloth that thing is made of. Let's have a look at it!"

Doc Savage seemed not to hear the fellow. He stood with the vest in his hands and wheeled.

"Here!" barked the reporter. "Let me see that!"

Doc Savage walked away, still without appearing to have heard him.

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Renny, Long Tom and Johnny stood with Doc Savage beside the lifeboat. Johnny made sputtering noises, finally got out an excited, "I'll be superamalgamated! Let's see that speaking stone!"

Doc Savage handed him the round blue rock. Johnny immediately clamped it to his ear. But nothing seemed to happen.

The bony, big-worded archaeologist and geologist looked up. "I don't hear anything. Did it really talk?"

"It really talked," Renny said.

Johnny listened to the stone for a while. Then he lowered it. He frowned. "Now, look that's too screwy! A talking stone. Don't give me that!"

Renny compressed his lips, turned slowly to Doc Savage. "What about it, Doc?"

"The stone spoke," the bronze man said.

That, as far as Johnny Littlejohn was concerned, settled the point of the stone speaking. It had spoken, if Doc said so.

"All right," Johnny said, "explain how a rock can talk, somebody?"

The bronze man did not answer. He was examining the red vest. The fabric was unusual. It did not seem to be fabric at all, but some other substance that was closely akin to a plastic.

Then, abruptly, the bronze man rolled the vest into a small package. He took off his coat and bundled the vest inside that, then handed it to Renny Renwick. "Take care of this," he said.

Puzzled, Renny asked, "You mean nobody is to look at it?"

"Right."

The newspaper reporters approached that was obviously why Doc had hastened to get the vest out of sight with a barrage of questions: What had killed Jones? What was going on? How had Jones died?

"The little man was named Jones?" Doc Savage asked.

"Yes, that was right. Or so he had said."

"What newspaper did he represent?"

"He worked for *La Pluma*, of Buenos Aires, South America," someone said.

The long string of bones with the mice for eyebrows was staring at Johnny Littlejohn. "What's the idea of holding that rock to your ear?" he asked.

Johnny tried not to look foolish and took the stone away from his ear.

THE situation on the island was this: On the island was a home and apparatus for taking plankton from the sea. This plant had been erected by a scientist for experimental purposes, and it was the cause of the trouble that had just been settled. Also on the island was a plane, the one in which the newspapermen had arrived.

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There was no other available means of transportation to or from the island.

However, anchored offshore was the small ocean-going liner *City of Tulsa*, which had been run aground during the course of the lately settled adventures, and which had been floated by a battery of tugs that had come from Tahiti and other South Sea ports.

Having refloated the liner, most of the tugs had departed, but two of them were standing by to see that nothing more went wrong. The radio apparatus of the *City of Tulsa* had been put out of commission during the adventures, but the tugs, being large seagoing craft, both had powerful radio equipment.

Doc Savage used the radio equipment of one of the tugs to dispatch a radiogram to the newspaper *La Pluma*, of Buenos Aires, asking if they employed a correspondent named Jones, who would be in the South Seas at the present time. To make sure there was no error about Jones, Doc Savage included a full description of the small man with the red vest. He mentioned the vest.

He waited for an answer.

The newspapermen, inclined to couple anything unusual with some spectacular feat by Doc Savage, were not satisfied that the little man with the red vest had simply collapsed of heart failure.

Doc Savage did not say he had died of heart failure. But the bronze man did ask a number of questions about the man's health if he had ever mentioned heart failure, fear of heart trouble, or any similar malady.

"To tell the truth," said the newspaperman he was questioning, "we did not know a lot about the little guy."

"Except Bear Cub," interposed another newsman.

"Bear Cub?" asked Doc Savage.

"That reporter from the *Melbourne Advertiser*," the newshawk explained. "The long and bony fellow, you know."

"The one with the eyebrows?"

"Yes. The black eyebrows."

"What," asked Doc Savage, "about Bear Cub?"

"Oh, he seemed to take a liking to little Jones," one of the others explained. "Shined right up to him. Gave him cigarettes and sat around talking to him. Followed him around, in fact."

The other newspaper reporter corrected, "He talked to Jones, you mean. Little Jones didn't do much talking. Bear Cub did it all."

"Yes, that's right, now that I think of it," said the other member of the press.

"Jones did not speak very good English," Doc Savage suggested.

"He spoke a funny kind of English," agreed the newspaperman. "Careful. No accent that you could place. Not a Spanish accent, anyway. Just careful talking. That was Jones."

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Doc Savage was silent a moment. "You did not know him well but Bear Cub did?"

"That's it."

Doc Savage found the man called Bear Cub. The fellow greeted them shortly, without much courtesy. His eyes were small and dark under his remarkable eyebrows. He was not a likeable personality, seemed aware of it and apparently did not care.

"Look, you can't pump me about the little guy," he said scowling, "because I never got anything out of him. Sure I hung around him. That was because I figured he was a little nut of some kind."

"You cannot tell us anything about him?"

"No."

"Where did he join your group?"

"Tahiti."

"Where did *you* join the group?"

"Tahiti."

"Had you ever met the small man before?"

Bear Cub snorted. He ignored the question. "How about letting me have a look at that red vest?" he growled.

"Why are you so interested in the vest?" Doc Savage asked.

"Why are you not letting me see it?" Bear Cub countered. "Afraid I might find out something?"

Doc Savage did not care for the man's tone. Renny Renwick had knotted his big fists several times, wanting to take a swing at Bear Cub.

Bear Cub glared at them all, then snorted violently. "I'm not bluffed by you big shots," he said. "And don't try pushing me around, or I'll cut loose and rain a bit on you."

Renny told him, "Now you're talking the kind of language I half expected out of you. Don't get too near the end of the plank, my eyebrow-heavy friend. You might get dunked."

Bear Cub said something under his breath something not complimentary and strode away. He was not afraid of them. That was obvious. And he had an extraordinary dislike for them.

Johnny Littlejohn said, "A protervitive personality."

Renny looked that up later and found out it meant something simple, like "quarrelsome fellow." Which was a big-worded way of putting a fact.

Long Tom reached them out of breath.

"Got a radio answer from that South American newspaper," he gasped.

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"Yes?"

"They don't have any correspondent named Jones, or anyone who answers the description of the small man with the vest," Long Tom explained.

LONG TOM ROBERTS and Johnny Littlejohn held a private conference that evening. They sat on the beach with long white waves crawling up and creaming on the sand at their feet, with fish jumping in the lagoon, with lights of the steamer dancing spots of gold out across the sea.

Long Tom strained sand through his fingers. "There is something mysterious behind this business," he said. "I can tell by the way Doc is acting. You can always tell when Doc gets wind of something big and probably fantastic."

Johnny grunted. "Jones had nothing in his baggage that a newspaperman would have. Apparently, he wasn't a newspaperman, at all."

Johnny was using small words. He did not often do this unless he was too preoccupied or too excited though it was not often he got too excited to think of large words.

"The red vest," said Long Tom, "is what narrows my eye. What do you make of it?"

"Unusual material."

"Not cloth. You know, I sneaked it out of Doc's coat and gave it a good looking over. I even put it on."

"Feel anything when you had it on?"

"No, of course not. But I did notice several things. First, of course, it's made of some stuff that is like plastic glass, but probably it isn't. The coloring isn't fast. It kind of rubs off on you not much, but a little."

"Renny still have that rock?"

"No. That is, he doesn't have it now. I saw Doc ask him for it just before dinner."

"You figure that rock really said anything?"

"Doc said it talked, didn't he?"

They were silent. The moon was a silver tint on the horizon. Behind them in the bushes, two tropical birds got involved in a quarrel that sounded like two hags fighting.

"Jones asked for Renny," Long Tom finally reminded. "And neither Renny nor anyone else has said what the speaking stone said to him. And this reporter guy, this Bear Cub, as they call him, is behaving strangely." Long Tom abruptly got to his feet. "You know something?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna find this Bear Cub and have a little nose-rubbing with him." Long Tom he was far more man than he looked hitched his belt. "I'll bet I get words out of him."

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"Want any help?"

"No, thanks."

LONG TOM left Johnny Littlejohn on the beach and walked into the jungle. The electrical expert was excited at the idea of getting hold of Bear Cub. It was Long Tom's conviction the thought was frequently shared by the bronze man's other associates that Doc Savage's fist was not hard enough when he dealt with fellows like Bear Cub. Long Tom liked action. He planned, frankly, to work Bear Cub over with his fists and see what he could pound out of the fellow.

Bundled in his own thoughts, Long Tom walked into the end of a gun before he realized there was such a thing about!

"Looking for me?" asked the voice behind the gun.

Long Tom exhaled a deep breath. "*You!*" he said.

The voice it was not pleasant said, "Getting a long nose, ain't you?"

"Meaning?"

"The little guy in the red vest, the rock that talked and so on."

Startled, Long Tom blurted, "You knew about the rock and what made it talk?"

The other said quietly, "This is what made it speak. Here, look." He held out a hand.

It was the oldest of fighting tricks. Get the other guy to look at something while you slug him. Long Tom fell for it. He got a vague impression of something probably a hard flexible tree root shaped like a blackjack coming around and down on his head. He knew, also, momentarily, that things were going to turn black. And very black indeed was what everything became!

Chapter II. ABOUT A STONE

DOC SAVAGE proceeded with his investigation with what seemed to be too much leisure. He dawdled, in the opinion of Renny and Johnny, who watched him with initial irritation. The bronze man browsed around without a point, it appeared; and some of the time, it was not even evident that he was after information.

Johnny and Renny became disgusted. Then, quite unexpectedly, they were ashamed of themselves. The shame came when it was apparent that Doc Savage had been sneaking up on the quail, as it were.

When the bird broke cover, it was this: Someone had made a previous attempt to murder Jones.

A newspaper reporter named Wilfair Wickard unwittingly pushed the skunk out into the air. Wilfair Wickard was a well-constructed young man with an enormous inferiority complex about his name. The first thing he told people was to call him Spike or Bill or Butch something besides Wilfair.

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"He was a queer little guy, Jones was," Wilfair said. "Come to think of it, he didn't act much like a newspaper correspondent. I didn't think much of it at the time."

Renny remarked, "I should think you would be able to recognize anyone in the same profession as yourself."

Wilfair Wickard shrugged. "It's not like it used to be. A lot of people are correspondents who have never been near a newspaper office. It works like this: You build yourself a reputation; then somebody with a chain of newspapers hires you as an expert on what you are supposed to know. You don't even have to know how to write. The poor devils in the home office whip it into readable shape for twenty-five dollars a week." Wickard grinned faintly. "Had strange dreams at night, little Jones did."

"Dreams?" Doc Savage said.

"Nightmares, maybe you'd call them," Wickard explained. "I remember the night before we left Tahiti in the plane. Jones busted into my room. It must have been three o'clock in the morning. He thanked me for sending a drink up to his room."

"Drink?"

"The strange thing," said Wilfair Wickard, "is that I hadn't sent him any drink. It was whiskey. One of those tiny bottles of it, you know the size that holds an individual serving. It was Scotch whiskey."

"Jones had it?"

"Oh, yes in his hand. He assured me that he didn't drink. He handed it to me, saying it was a shame to have it go to waste. And then he looked at me in the strangest way and said that it was poison; that it would "

Wickard's mouth remained open. His breathing and pulse seemed to stop.

"Poison!" he exploded. "Great grief! Do you suppose "

"Do you still have that bottle?"

Tightly excited, Wickard nodded. "Sure! I kept it. Tossed it into my brief case for a lift later, in case I needed one."

He wheeled, ran for the thatched shelter which the newspaper correspondents had erected for themselves. When he came back, he had the small flask.

Doc Savage spent fifteen minutes analyzing the contents of the bottle, then said, "Whoever put in the poison knew about poisons. There is enough to kill a man instantly, yet not so much that it would be noticed."

Wilfair Wickard got his lips loose enough to say, "Somebody tried to kill Jones and lay it onto me!"

DOC SAVAGE entered into a really complete examination of the body of Jones. He did this privately, in the house of the scientist who lived on Jinx Island. The newspapermen, as well as his own assistants, were excluded.

"I wonder," said Renny, "what has become of Long Tom? Haven't seen him around for some time."

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"Probably out to the steamer," Johnny suggested.

Doc Savage finished his inspection of the small man who had died so strangely, then joined Renny and Johnny.

"What was the cause, Doc?" Renny asked. "Those newspaper guys that wise guy, Bear Cub, at any rate claim that just looking at me is what scared Jones to death."

"Stratosphere sickness," Doc Savage said.

"Huh?"

"Occasionally, it is given other names. Extremely technical, some of them," Doc Savage told them quietly. "But stratosphere sickness is the best description."

"How come?"

"The small man died from being too high in the air for too long a time," Doc said.

Renny considered that. "Holy cow." He reviewed his experience with flying. "From being too high, eh? How high would you say?"

"Above twenty thousand feet."

"Over twenty thousand, eh?" Renny pondered some more. "Say, I've done a lot of flying. You and I and all of us have done a lot of it, and not a little at above twenty thousand feet. I never got anything like stratosphere sickness."

"You did it with oxygen equipment and much of it in planes equipped with pressure cabins," Doc reminded him.

Renny nodded, but he was not satisfied. He wandered over to the thatched abode of the newsmen and cornered the pilot of the plane which had brought them. The pilot was a lean young man who was rather bored. Renny asked him, "Mind telling me at what altitudes you flew between here and Tahiti?"

"We flying-fished it all the way."

"Meaning?"

"On top of the waves. More favorable breeze down there. And if you get a case of motor trouble at sea, altitude doesn't help you a hell of a lot. One wave is about as hard as another."

Renny Renwick was amazed.

"You mean," he said, "that you flew low all the time the small man with the red vest was with you?"

"Never over five thousand."

Renny went back to Doc Savage with this information. "The little guy didn't get the stratosphere sickness on that plane, it's sure. You positive that's what he had?"

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"The Chinese have an old saying that 'only fool is positive,'" Doc told him.

"Hm-m-m!"

Renny rubbed the side of his long face with an enormous hand. "I wonder if anybody besides me is puzzled by this."

"Where's Long Tom?" Johnny demanded querulously. "Funny he would go off like this. I just got in touch with the steamer, and he isn't out there."

DOC SAVAGE had never sought publicity, so Renny and Johnny were astounded when he called the newspapermen together and told them about the talking stone. This was astonishing for two reasons. First, telling news writers was the last thing natural to Doc Savage. Second, it was a goofy yarn.

The newspapermen's faces had an assortment of expressions when Doc finished. None of them believed there was a speaking stone, and all of them were too polite to say so. Perhaps "polite" was the word. Probably it wasn't. You did not doubt the words of a man of Doc Savage's reputation to that man's face.

"I detect skepticism," Doc Savage said. "It should be allayed, don't you think?"

"I think allaying it would be fine," said Bear Cub. "Then you might allay the red vest."

Doc Savage passed the reference to the vest. "The stone," he said, "should be where I concealed it in a nearby thicket."

The thicket proved to be one of thorns. It was a very good hiding place. It seemed to be impenetrable, unless one was equipped so as not to feel pain or had the skin of a rhinoceros.

Renny, Johnny and the newspapermen encountered the thorns, retreated and waited. It was night, and rather dark night for the tropics at this season. Doc went on into the thicket, somehow.

Suddenly, there was a loud uproar from the central section of the thorn thicket. The uproar was a mixture of scuffle, blows and a yell. The yell was in Doc Savage's voice, and it was not in any sense placid.

Then silence.

"Doc!" Renny bellowed.

The silence continued.

"Doc, what happened?" Renny roared.

Renny's voice was extraordinary even on normal occasions. Now, it was loud enough to cause them to turn on a searchlight aboard the steamer.

They found Doc Savage prone and motionless in the thicket, though they were well scratched by thorns when they reached him. Renny worked over him a while, and Doc opened his eyes.

"The stone," Doc said weakly. "A man."

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Renny rumbled, "Somebody got the rock?"

"Yes. Someone attacked me with a club," Doc Savage said. "He escaped."

IT was, when Renny came to think of it, the first time that anyone had taken Doc Savage by surprise sufficiently to be able to rap him over the head with a club. Not that Doc Savage was too good to be taken by surprise, but when the bronze man was ambushed, it was usually something out of the ordinary that did it. Not just a plain clubbing. But the thing seemed perfectly natural the way the bronze man told it.

Renny saw the true situation when he and Johnny were helping Doc Savage through the night to their quarters in the scientist's house.

As soon as they were away from the others, Doc Savage suddenly was not dazed. "Let me down," he said in a low voice. "And get into action. We have to watch those newspapermen."

"Eh?" Renny said. "I don't get this."

Doc Savage was patient in not answering. He waited until they were outside the campfire, which the newspapermen had built in front of their thatched domicile prior to the appearance of Doc with the speaking-stone story. Doc counted the figures about the fire. All journalists were present and accounted for.

"I don't," repeated Renny, "see the bottom in this."

"Suppose you had a dog," Doc Savage said.

"I haven't, but I can suppose."

"The dog is trying to bite somebody. It might be you. What would you do?"

"Shoot the dog, if it was practical."

"It might not be practical."

"In that case," said Renny, "I'd probably shut the cuss up somewhere."

"Suppose," said Doc Savage, "you shut him up. Then you heard a dog barking. What would you do?"

"Run like hell to see if my dog was out," Renny said.

Doc Savage nodded seriously.

"The act I put on back there in the thorn thicket," Doc said, "was the dog barking."

Renny eyed the newspapermen. "The facts run over me finally. Now we wait for one of those poison-pen boys to make a break to see about the dog he thought he had tied up."

"Something," Doc said, "like that."

"Who's the dog, in this case?"

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"Might be Long Tom Roberts," Doc Savage said.

Chapter III. LIFE INSURANCE

THE tropical night was gently balmy with the breeze off the sea. On the anchored liner, the orchestra was playing slow music that carried faintly to the island. Considering what had lately happened to the liner, it was good now to hear music from the ship.

"There," said Renny at last, "goes our man."

A figure had casually detached from the group around the fire and sauntered away. It was not at first evident who the individual was. Renny counted faces around the fire.

"Holy cow!" he muttered. "I figured it would be Bear Cub, but it isn't."

They trailed the man who had left the fire. The man walked casually for a while. Then, just as they were beginning to wonder if he was an innocent chap, out for exercise, he suddenly doubled into the brush. They could hear him making tracks, fast.

Renny growled angrily at the darkness. "Holy cow! Doc, you stand a better chance of keeping track of the guy. It's sure all three of us can't follow him."

Doc Savage said, "You two go back and keep an eye on the other newspapermen."

Renny and Johnny were disgusted, but it was obvious that trailing a man through the jungle in darkness this intense was beyond their ability. They watched Doc disappear into the blackness.

"Just what," muttered Renny, "became of the rock? Doc didn't mention that."

Johnny Littlejohn was silent a moment. "The cirulean vitrescible actually soliloquized?" he asked.

"Come again," Renny said, "with little ones."

"The stone actually spoke?"

"It sure did."

"You haven't," reminded Johnny, "said what the stone said. Would there be any significance in that."

"Plenty."

"Of what nature?"

"Jones claimed he came from South America."

"So he did."

"Monk and Ham are in South America. Monk's voice came from the stone."

THE SPEAKING STONE

"A coincidence on South America," Johnny agreed. "Is it a secret, what the stone said?"

"No secret," Renny told him. "But first, there was another coincidence. You remember what Doc said Jones seemed to have died of?"

"Stratosphere sickness."

"Monk's voice said, *'It's five miles in the sky, Doc. Come prepared,'*" Renny explained.

"Was that all the rock said?"

"It strikes me," Renny said, "that it was enough."

DOC SAVAGE followed Wilfair Wickard. The well-built young journalist so he had claimed was a woodsman of skill. He demonstrated a stealth in traveling through the jungle that gave Doc Savage considerable trouble. Once, he nearly got the bronze man, when he stopped unexpectedly and stood waiting in the darkness with a gun in his hand. Doc walked close enough to the gun that the hammer clicked back with what, to the bronze man, was an unmistakable sound. Although he could not see the gun, he knew one was there.

Doc boldly shook a bush and made the twittering noises of a tropical bird that had been disturbed. Wilfair Wickard cursed, close enough that Doc could smell a trace of alcohol on his breath.

Fooled, Wickard went on and joined Bear Cub. Bear Cub was sitting on a lava outthrust in pale moonlight, waiting.

"Who the hell," asked Bear Cub, "got that stone?"

"Didn't you?" exploded Wickard.

"Hell, no!"

"Then who did?"

They sat there in silence thinking of no answers to the question. In the bushes, a bird fluttered and made the same outcries, purely by accident, which Doc Savage had made a bit earlier. Wickard cursed and said, "That damned bird must be following me."

"Bird?"

"Oh, forget it. I'm getting jumpy, I guess."

"If you ask me, we better do more than get jumpy. We better jump!" said Bear Cub.

"I see your point," Wickard said.

"My point is Doc Savage. I never saw anybody before who impresses me the way he does. And it's funny, too. He doesn't say much, and he hasn't done anything like shaking the earth. But I just look at the guy, and maybe think of what I have heard about him, and I start feeling that well, he *could* shake the earth if he wanted to."

THE SPEAKING STONE

"That," said Wickard, "is the point I see."

"There's another point."

"Is there?"

"The one in hanging around here. Do you see any?"

"That is exactly my argument," Wickard told him. "We finally got rid of Jones. Why stick around?"

Bear Cub grunted sharply. "We didn't get rid of him. Nature took care of that for us."

Wickard swore. "Isn't that hell? We follow the guy umpteen thousand miles, trying to knock him off at every jump and not getting the job done. And nature steps in and does it for us."

"Just why," asked Bear Cub, "did you tell Savage about the poisoned bottle of liquor that Jones handed back to you."

Wickard chuckled. "That was a smoothie, wasn't it? I happened to think Savage might have searched my stuff and found the poisoned whiskey. So I told him the truth except that I left out that it was I who sent the liquor up to Jones that night in Tahiti. A real smoothie, wouldn't you say?"

"It might not be smart," said Bear Cub, "to depend on smoothies to keep us out of the clutches of this Doc Savage."

"We can get the plane."

"I would say that would be very smart," said Bear Cub. "What about the juice that makes the plane fly?"

"Tanks are full. There was aviation gasoline on the steamer, and they filled the tanks this morning."

"Enough gas to take us as far as we want to go?"

"We might have to stop once. We could manage. I know they've got radios here, but we could manage."

"Then I suggest we do manage."

"What about this cross between a tadpole, a fishing worm and a bobcat this Long Tom Roberts?"

"I imagine a knife would slip into him if you pushed it hard enough!" Bear Cub said grimly.

LONG TOM ROBERTS was gagged and spread-eagled. His agony must have been terrible. They had tied each wrist and each ankle to a separate tree with lines, so that he swung his body a yard off the ground, like a hammock. They had also gagged him with moss which they had pinned in his mouth by thrusting long thorns through his lips. There were other evidences of mistreatment.

Bear Cub gave Long Tom's posterior a gentle kick and said, "Well, it's been nice knowing you." Bear Cub took a long knife out of his clothing. "Very nice with a messy ending."

THE SPEAKING STONE

There was not much capacity for pain, or even for caring what happened to him, left in Long Tom Roberts. And certainly no capacity to move, or ability to do anything for himself. If death came, which it seemed to be doing, he would have to lie and take it.

Wilfair Wickard looked at the knife there was some moonlight that glinted on the steel and said, "Don't you have a ceremony or anything? Do you just stick him?"

Bear Cub laughed. "Better get back," he said. "Sometimes they squirt after the blade goes in."

That got the best of Wickard, and he shuddered from head to foot. He knew from the way that he felt that he was getting pale and maybe was going to faint.

Then the rock said, "*It is very high. You will find it five miles up.*"

Bear Cub did not realize at once what had happened. Then it got into his head that the rock had said something. Bear Cub seemed about to rise straight off the ground, as if something had him by the hair.

"Wicky," he said. "Did you hear that?"

"A tony voice," Wilfair Wickard said breathlessly.

Bear Cub fell on the stone. It was smooth and dark, not exactly blue, although it was hard to tell about the color. Bear Cub gripped the rock excitedly.

"Look!" he croaked. "We got one at last. We got one of the speaking stones."

Wickard looked at the rock with a more practical eye. "That isn't the stone Jones had."

"But it talked."

"It looks to me like an ordinary rock. You sure it's a talking stone?"

"Hell, you heard it, didn't you? It spoke!"

They were silent for a few moments. The orchestra had stopped playing on the steamer. There was almost no sound from roosting birds, and creaming of surf on the distant beach was a very soft noise.

Bear Cub pointed at Long Tom excitedly. "It must have fell out of his pockets when we got him. I don't see how we missed it, but it must have been on him."

"It isn't the stone Jones had."

"No," said Bear Cub. "And that means this guy must know about the speaking stones."

Wickard swore. "But everybody figured Doc Savage and his men did not know anything about them. They figured Jones was going to him for help."

"Everybody could be wrong," Bear Cub advised him. "Look here. A speaking stone. Not the one Jones had. What more do you want? Of course he knew about the speaking stones. More than that, he *had* one!"

"You think we better take him with us?"

THE SPEAKING STONE

"Best thing, don't you figure?"

"Wait a minute," Bear Cub said. He used his knife to cut Long Tom down from the four small trees. The electrical expert, when the lines were cut, fell with complete looseness. His body convulsed slightly after it hit the earth, then did not move. He said, "They think we don't know what the speaking stone is, the fools!" in a voice so low that it was startling. Thereupon he closed his eyes and continued not to move.

"Hell's bells!" barked Bear Cub. "They're wise to us. Savage and his men they must know all about the whole thing."

Wickard coughed nervously. "We've been lucky. They're playing with us."

"Lucky," Bear Cub said, "if we get off the island." He stooped, heaved Long Tom to his feet, held him. With some difficulty, he got the electrical expert across his shoulders.

"What's the idea?" asked Wickard.

"There're things this fellow may be able to tell us," Bear Cub said. "We're taking him along."

"I'll take the stone," Wickard said.

DOC SAVAGE stood there in the darkness beside a thick tangle of umbrella fern and listened to the two men stagger away with Long Tom Roberts.

Doc was surprised at the results of his practice of ventriloquism. Following Bear Cub and Wickard to the spot, he had tried the voice-out-of-a-rock stunt as a kind of desperate, last-minute measure that might get results and might not. He was no special kind of ventriloquist. He was good, but no one was good enough to actually make a rock seem to talk in pitch darkness. He had simply used a voice that was low and vaguely like the voice of Monk that had come from the genuine speaking stone, earlier.

Seeing that the deceit was getting results, he had carried it on a bit later by imitating Long Tom's voice with the statement: "They think we don't know what the speaking stone is, the fools!" That had been intended to convince the pair that Long Tom had more information than he did have. It had worked excellently.

It had worked, but it did not make much sense. These two men this Bear Cub and Wickard had followed Jones from South America, to kill him. And they had wanted to get hold of a speaking stone, as they had expressed it.

Doc Savage headed for the beach.

The seaplane in which the newspapermen had arrived was moored offshore, but in shallow water. There was no guard over it, because there had seemed no sense in having the plane guarded.

Doc Savage waded out and climbed into the plane. He fooled with the stabilizer adjustment for a while, then crawled back through the inspection port into the rear part of the fuselage. His tinkering with the bungee, or stabilizer-tab set-up, balanced the ship so that his added weight far back in the fuselage would not be noticed he hoped.

Chapter IV. THE SOUTH AMERICAN WAY

THEY murdered a man on one of the Galapagos Islands. Bear Cub shot him.

Doc Savage had a sickening feeling of responsibility for the death for, indirectly, he was probably the cause of it. He had scared Wickard and the man called Bear Cub; without the fear that he had put into them, they would not have murdered the man.

They shot the man because he was operating an aviation-gasoline barge on the island. He was probably connected with the navy of Ecuador, the country to which the islands belonged; or, at least, he had a contract to supply gasoline to such naval patrol planes that saw the necessity of stopping at the out-of-the-way and scientifically strange Galapagos.

It was a lonely job. Probably the man did not see a plane or another man a month. But he had a radio, and he could have told the world that the plane carrying Bear Cub, Wilfair Wickard and the prisoner, Long Tom Roberts Doc Savage was careful not to make himself noticed, although he was getting more than moderately hungry by now had stopped at the island. So Bear Cub shot him.

Bear Cub shot him neatly between the eyes three times. Once would have been enough. But Bear Cub liked to deal death with a flourish, and so the three shots. The man fell back in his barge and sat there with his hands out and his toes turned in. Three red ribbons crawled out of his forehead, becoming one that dripped off his chin.

Wilfair Wickard was sick.

Bear Cub laughed and laughed at him.

After Bear Cub had had his laugh, he worked on Long Tom Roberts for a while. Bear Cub wanted to know about the secret of the rock. Long Tom said he didn't know anything about any rock. Which was true.

Bear Cub brought the rock that he thought had spoken to him. He showed it to Long Tom, and, of course, it meant nothing to the electrical wizard. But, by now, Long Tom sensed that something eerie had happened, and he connected Doc Savage with whatever it was. He stalled Bear Cub. He let Bear Cub think he knew something, but was not going to tell it.

In angel, Bear Cub finally got a hammer and broke the rock. He expected to find something inside besides stone, obviously, but stone was what he found.

Finding nothing inside the stone made Bear Cub's mouth and eyes get round, then narrow. They got narrow, and he turned them on Wickard.

Wickard got white.

"Wait a minute!" he gasped. "Don't get me wrong. I didn't do nothing."

Bear Cub, with his voice like his knife, said, "You maybe didn't take the stone that spoke? Oh, no, you wouldn't do a thing like that."

Wickard's lips shook. "No, Bear Cub," he said. "No please. I didn't "

THE SPEAKING STONE

"I got a notion to cut your big intestine out, you handsome yellow pig," Bear Cub told him.

"I *didn't*, Bear Cub."

"If you're getting ready to double-cross the big boss, I ought to cut you wide open," said Bear Cub.

"I didn't!"

"What makes me mad," said Bear Cub, "is your not taking me in with you. The idea! Trying to chisel the whole thing for yourself. You cheap stinker."

"I didn't!" Wilfair Wickard was both white and hoarse.

Bear Cub gave the situation deep thought. Doc Savage sat in the back of the fuselage and hoped for the best. The best at the present moment was for the pair not to fall out. Doc was trying to let them take him to their headquarters or to their leader, or to the scene of the mystery, and whatever trouble Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks were in. He was now sure that Monk and Ham were in some kind of difficulties. If one of these men murdered the other, it might blow up the general plan. The one who did the killing might be afraid to go on; might drop the whole matter.

But Bear Cub decided he could be wrong.

He said, "If you ever decide to do any double-crossing, take me in on it." He broke open his revolver and replaced the cartridges which he had used on the poor gasoline-barge attendant. "Let's get under way."

THEY sat the plane down many hours later on a lake. They taxied to the lake shore and held a consultation.

"If the natives do come to look around what the hell!" said Bear Cub. "We can lock the plane, so what do we care? We just tie this Long Tom up where nobody can see him, and what harm can he do? We'll tie him so he can't even kick."

"Well," said Wickard doubtfully, "that may be all right. We may not be gone long. There should be some word for us at El Gorrion's. If there is, we can get back in a hurry."

"Sure."

So they tied Long Tom and left.

Doc Savage crawled out of his hiding place in the back of the plane. This was not as simple as it sounded, because he was stiff from head to foot, so stiff that each movement was an individual agony, and some of them almost an impossibility.

They had tied Long Tom in the lavatory, tied him so that he could move his eyes and not much else. Long Tom did not look as if they had fed him, and his lips where they had been pinned with the thorns were swollen and showing signs of infection. Doc had an unpleasant time digging into his puffed swollen wrists and ankles for the cords which held him.

But Long Tom was able to swear when Doc got him on the cabin floor. Doc had not been aware that Long Tom knew that much profanity. It was not loud, but it made up for any shortcomings in its guttural fierceness.

THE SPEAKING STONE

"I've seen mean ones in my time," Long Tom said, "but that Bear Cub takes the nickel-plated weasel skin."

Doc Savage looked out of the plane. He saw water that was remarkably clear and not deep and a beach that was narrow and almost black and covered with rocks that were like scabs. Above and beyond were hills furred with runty green brush. Mountains that were too beautiful for description were very, very far away.

"I'll pull his legs off if I get my hands on him," Long Tom said in the low, guttural voice that he used when he meant terrible things.

Doc Savage heaved Long Tom to his feet, worked him out of the plane. The electrical expert could not stand without aid, but his trouble seemed to be stiffness that would wear off.

The waist-deep water was utterly cold when they stepped into it, but its iced shock and the quick scramble up the harsh beach stirred up their circulation.

"I'll take his hide off in strips and show it to him," Long Tom added.

Doc Savage went back and took small parts off the plane small gadgets out of the ignition system. Without them, the plane would not run.

Then Doc turned the plane loose. He untied the anchor line, gave it a shove. The wind drifted the plane away, out on the lake.

He told Long Tom, "They may see the plane adrift and come back. We will wait here. If they come back, that will put us on their trail."

"Their trail is what I want," Long Tom muttered. "That, and Bear Cub's hide."

They sat in the bushes for a long time. The bushes had hard, scabrous bark, leaves the green of an over-boiled egg, and thorns.

"El Gorrion's was where they said, wasn't it?" asked Long Tom. "I don't think they're coming back."

"El Gorrion's was right," Doc said.

"That is Spanish for The Sparrow's." Long Tom grimaced. "I think we must be in South America. That right?"

"Probably." Doc Savage helped him to his feet. "We had best get on their trail."

He had to more than half carry Long Tom. For a while, it was unbelievably rough. Then they found a path.

"They had the idea I knew all about the speaking stone," Long Tom said. "Did you do that to them? I figured you did. And after I saw I was alive because they thought I knew about the speaking stone, and they would eventually make me tell what I knew, I didn't disillusion them."

Doc Savage told him about the deceit on Jinx Island. It sounded far-fetched when he told it, and he remarked on the fact. "It was ridiculous, but they believed it," he said. "It was also lucky that I used the trick of making a stone talk with ventriloquism. It was one of those things one of those right things that you do on the spur of the moment that later seems so fantastic that you would never have arrived at the idea by any rational process of reasoning."

THE SPEAKING STONE

"A rock talking is crazy," Long Tom said.

"Unusual, anyway."

"Doc."

"Yes."

"Where is the original speaking stone the one with Monk's voice now?"

Doc Savage seemed not to hear the question, and Long Tom did not repeat his inquiry, because he knew the small peculiarities of Doc Savage, the things that made the bronze man different from other men. There were several of these. One of them was the small trilling sound that he made unconsciously, another was the extreme attention he gave to physical and mental exercises, and one was this small trait of not hearing or seeming not to hear the things he did not wish to discuss.

"Look here, you're taking me along because you're afraid they will come back and find me," Long Tom said. "I'm in no shape to fight them off, I'll admit. But that is no reason for you burdening yourself with me. Go on and leave me."

Doc Savage said nothing.

"They may get away if you don't," Long Tom warned.

Doc Savage seemed not to hear that.

THEY found a native leading two llamas on which small brass bells tinkled. The llamas were very black. The native had a bright blanket over his shoulder, a brighter sash about his middle, and an American wrist watch strapped to his wrist.

"Buenos dias, señores," he said, looking steadily at Long Tom.

"Can you direct us to El Gorrion's?" Doc Savage asked in Spanish.

The native blinked placidly. "You do not want to go there. It is a place of sin."

Long Tom muttered, with surprising vigor, considering that he looked like a man about to die, "Any place I catch that Bear Cub will be a place of sin. And what a sin!"

Doc Savage asked the native, "What do you mean?"

"Bad!" The native looked at the ground as if he expected to see hell. "He is bad, The Sparrow is." The native's brown, round face was long and his mouth corners pulled down.

"What is this place?"

"A ranch," said the native, "which raises nothing but trouble for others."

"Where is it?"

THE SPEAKING STONE

The native looked pious. "I should not tell you."

"Where is it?" Doc's tone made the native jump a little.

The fellow pointed over one of the llamas. "Up there. Not far. Fifteen minutes' walk."

The native looked pained for a moment. Then, without another word, he whirled and grabbed up a small stick, gave his llamas a whack apiece, and went down the trail. He did not look back. He kept whacking the llamas with the stick, and one of them kicked him. After the kick, the native limped.

Doc Savage walked slowly with Long Tom. He still had to more than half carry Long Tom. They turned a sharp angle in the trail where boulders were high around them.

Suddenly, Doc Savage was off the trail. He shouldered Long Tom and ran with what, considering the time he had been without food, was amazing speed.

"Blazes!" Long Tom was astounded. "What hatches?"

"That native," Doc Savage said, "wasn't a native."

"Huh?"

"His Spanish."

"It sounded all right to me. Good. Better than mine." Long Tom was puzzled. "How did his Spanish tell you anything?"

"Textbook. Also same accent as our own. Yankee. That fellow was an American."

"Sure, now that you mention it," Long Tom said sheepishly. "That makes him worth looking into, doesn't it?"

Chapter V. OLD LADY

THE native had abandoned his llamas. He ran down the path with chin back and legs stretching.

"For the love of little sparks," Long Tom said. "He *was* pulling something."

Doc Savage carried Long Tom and they followed the native, who went with great speed and desperation to an adobe-and-rock house that probably was called a *casa*, and was elaborate enough to be setting on Sunset Boulevard, near Hollywood. Bear Cub came out of this house.

"Well, well, it's El Gorrion," said Bear Cub, "with his hair on end, as usual."

El Gorrion, the native, said rapidly, "There are two white men on the lake trail!"

Bear Cub, not at all concerned, said, "Why not? There are nine hundred and eleven odd million men, according to somebody's estimate. Two of 'em might get on the lake trail."

THE SPEAKING STONE

"One of them was hurt."

"Maybe one I hurt," said Bear Cub, who seemed inclined to overdo his humor. "I've hurt a lot in my time."

El Gorrion took a deep breath.

"One," he said, "was big and bronze. The other was thin and pale, and looked as if needles or something had been thrust through his lips."

Bear Cub seemed to rise slightly into the air and stay there. His face took various expressions, among them that of a man shot with a large bullet.

With great satisfaction, El Gorrion said, "Who has his hair on end now?"

Bear Cub hit the ground. "You fool! Don't you realize what this means?"

"Pero to entiendo bastante,

as they say down here," said El Gorrion. "I understand it pretty well."

Bear Cub grimaced. He waved his arms. He seemed without any words but curses.

El Gorrion told him, "Button your word bag, my friend. I knew who they were at once. Men like you and I know about this Doc Savage, you see. I sent them up the mountain, looking for an imaginary house."

"They'll be back!" bellowed Bear Cub.

"Yes, they will be back, no doubt."

Bear Cub grabbed a handful of his own hair. "What I want to know is how Savage followed me here!" He threw out both arms. "What're we gonna do?"

"I am not worried."

Bear Cub stared at him with purple speechlessness. El Gorrion went to a door and called. Four men appeared in answer to the summons. Three of them were strangers, and the fourth was Wilfair Wickard.

"Our bloodthirsty friend," said El Gorrion, indicating Bear Cub, "has returned to us bearing a buzzard. A man named Doc Savage is here. You have heard of Savage, I imagine."

He paused and watched them. The assortment of expressions on their faces did not seem to please him. "Now, don't get excited," he growled. "This is bad luck, but that is all. We'll get out of it."

"I don't see how we'll get out of it!" Bear Cub snapped.

El Gorrion whirled on him. "You should be useful for something besides cutting throats, you fool. Go get your plane. Fly away." He whirled on Wickard. "Go with him, you shaking jellyfish."

"Where'll we go?" Bear Cub bleated.

"Any direction but the right one," snapped El Gorrion. "Lead Savage away from here."

THE SPEAKING STONE

Bear Cub licked his lips. "Savage will turn up here. What'll you do about that?"

"He won't see me. He'll see one of the others, who will tell him you stopped here to ask for a message from a friend. We will tell him what the message was." El Gorrion pondered a moment. "The message will be for you to fly to Panama at once. Incidentally, you had better go in that direction."

Bear Cub said, "All right." His eyes narrowed. "Listen, you ain't figuring on me getting cut out of my share."

A strangely fixed expression came over El Gorrion's face and a fat black pistol appeared in his hand simultaneously. "Right at this moment, it will be a miracle if you do not get cut free from that worm you call your life," he said.

Bear Cub backed away so fast that he stumbled. "All right, all right," he gasped. "Come on, Wickard." He turned toward the lake.

Then Bear Cub emitted a bawl of horror. "My plane!" He pointed. "It's drifting across the lake."

The fixed look left El Gorrion's face, and the gun departed from his hand with the same magic by which it had come there.

"Jake, go take the boat and get his plane for him," El Gorrion said. "Our brother bucket-of-blood here, Bear Cub, probably forgot to anchor it."

Jake was a short man with dark eyes and pistol bulges on each hip. He ran toward the lake with Bear Cub and Wilfair Wickard.

DOC SAVAGE withdrew carefully from a spot behind a boulder some twenty-five feet or so distant. He retreated with great care, using a convenient ditch, and returned to Long Tom, who had been left on the hill above the elaborate house.

Long Tom said, "That El Gorrion is an American, isn't he?"

"They all seem to be Americans."

"Not that they are to be proud of," said Long Tom. "You find out anything about speaking stones?"

"No."

"Or Monk or Ham?"

"No."

Long Tom said uneasily, "Monk and Ham were here in South America the last we heard of them. That speaking stone was Monk's pocket piece, Renny said. I can't get rid of the hunch that Monk and Ham are in plenty of trouble."

Doc Savage nodded slowly, but did not speak. An outboard motor cackled down on the lake, and a raft-boat made of reeds appeared and began chasing the plane. Bear Cub and Wickard and Jake rode in the craft, Jake handling the outboard motor.

THE SPEAKING STONE

Long Tom watched Doc take half a dozen small gas grenades and three explosive ones from his clothing and place them on the ground. They were not much larger than bird eggs, but each one could be an unpleasant customer. Long Tom knew what Doc's move meant.

"You're going down there!"

Doc said, "I do not need to tell you these fellows are not cream puffs. Take no chances."

Long Tom took the grenades. "I'd give one right arm if I was able to navigate a little better."

Doc Savage went back to the house. It was more of an estate, actually. But it had been built with more lavish abandon than taste.

It was a strange sort of a place to find in an out-of-the-way spot such as this. There was no other sign of habitation near, no other boats on the lake, no smoke visible anywhere that might indicate other dwellings. And the mountains heaving up to the north and east were impressive. The mountains, Doc Savage had decided, were all of a hundred miles away, and their crests were lost in clouds. Their height must be stupendous.

Doc went first to the outbuilding which he had concluded was the stable. There were donkeys and llamas inside, several of each, in separate sections of the stable. There was a loft with loose hay, a compartment with maize carefully bundled the way it had been harvested by hand labor.

He put the animals outside, then set fire to the stable.

DOC left the stable in haste, while the flames were small, and followed his plan of getting around to the other side of the house. He waited there. The fire got farther along than he had anticipated.

Finally a man came to a door to stand and stare at Wickard, Bear Cub and Jake, out on the lake pursuing the plane, and the fire was discovered.

"Hey!" the man squalled. "Fire! The stable's on fire. The blasted donkeys will burn up!"

Someone said, "Let 'em burn. If I never ride a donkey again, it'll be too soon."

But they dashed out to the stable to see what they could do about the fire, all but El Gorrion, who did not appear. Doc Savage saw a window, found it was covered with iron bars that would have confined an elephant. He did not fool with it long. He tried a side door. It was locked, but there was no other door available. He worked on it with a gadget which he carried, and because he had studied locks and because this one was simple, it delayed him not much more than half a minute. He went into a corridor which was all stone and heavy beams, hand-hewn and formed for strength rather than beauty.

It was dark, too. Remarkably murky, considering that there was bright daylight outside. Doc moved with silence and care, feeling ahead with his left hand and holding his remaining supply of tear-gas bombs in his right hand. The supply was unpleasantly small.

When a voice came through a door, he stopped and listened to someone saying, "I never was much worried by this Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks. But they're Doc Savage's pups, and he's an old dog of another color. The same color as the fires in hell, if he doesn't like you."

THE SPEAKING STONE

There was a pause. El Gorrion was evidently looking out of a window at the flaming barn, because he continued, "I wonder how the hell that barn got afire. Say, I'd better warn the boys not to tell Savage I was the crony of Bear Cub and Wickard. Damn! I must be getting stupid. Never thought of that."

There was silence again, so much of it that Doc Savage decided to try the door. It was not locked and opened slowly and quietly to intense blackness. The room was dark.

"Ps-s-t,

El Gorrion!" Doc Savage said softly.

There was no answer.

Convinced El Gorrion had stepped out of the room, Doc Savage went quickly inside. And someone took him by the throat!

By the throat first, then by the hair, and tried industriously to get fingers into his eyes, tearing and gouging. Kicking at his shins also, so that Doc knew it was not a man; it was not a man's way of fighting. Knowing it was not a man, he took more abuse than he might otherwise, trying to find a gentle way to end the fight. There seemed to be no gentle way.

They stumbled about the floor and tripped over something and fell. Doc Savage got the idea that they had tripped over a human form on the floor that was probably unconscious.

It was evident now that the fight was unnaturally silent.

So, when the bronze man finally got his opponent flattened on the floor, and struck a match, he was somewhat prepared to discover that the limp form they had stumbled over was El Gorrion.

The one who had fought him was female, all right. Female, and if her appearance was any proof two hundred years old. A gleeful two hundred, though. There was something utterly joyful about her old face, with its wrinkles that would hold pencils. A remarkable old lady.

And remarkable also was her red vest!

Chapter VI. RED VESTS

THE old lady with her wrinkles and her red vest the same type of red vest which little Jones had worn became of secondary importance when a man with bare feet calmly walked into the room.

The bare feet of the man, and the thick stone floors that did not vibrate, accounted for the man's walking in before Doc knew he was near. The man was a quick squaller. He seemed hardly to pop in the door before it seemed as if someone had closed the switch on a siren. His voice of terror was a great one.

The man was also a quick leave-taker. Still making his frightful noise a scream that would wake the dead if anything could he whirled as if on a hinge and took off through the door.

If he had been any part Spanish or South American, his native language would have come out of him now.

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But it was American that came out. Solid Brooklyn American, with fright in every chord.

"Look out!" he howled. He inserted profanity. "Savage is here!"

The old lady with the wrinkles and the red vest had hold of one of Doc Savage's legs with both arms, so that he was wondering if he was going to have to knock her out to get loose. But when the man howled, she immediately released Doc.

She said something Doc Savage did not understand.

What she said sounded very simple. The syllables seemed childishly easy of pronunciation. The words they must have been words had an alliterative swing that was charming.

Doc Savage could speak fluently over fifty languages, had a spotty acquaintance with twice that many others and dialects, and would have been willing to bet modestly, of course that he could identify any spoken language on earth by listening to a few words of it.

This one was one he hadn't heard. It was also one he couldn't identify.

After the old lady released him, Doc got to his feet.

The bare-footed man was going through the house like a circus calliope, then out to the barn where the others were fighting the fire Doc had lighted to divert their attention.

There was some excited bellowing until the man made himself understood. Then there was silence. A lone shot banged out, and, like a goat at the head of a flock of sheep, it led more shots into existence, most of them made solid noises against the ponderous walls of the building. A few knocked glass out of windows, and the falling shattered panes were like small steel bells.

Doc Savage was not sure how many were around. He was alone, and in not too good physical condition.

So he got close to a window and bellowed, "Circle the barn, men! Cut them off! Bring up the machine guns! Use the gas on them at once!"

"Gorrion!" bawled a man. "What'll we do?"

"They got Gorrion," said the man who had done the screaming. "We better get outta here!"

Somebody said, "I'm on my way," in a bitter voice. He broke and ran toward the lake. The others followed.

DOC SAVAGE went back to the old lady with the red vest. He said, "Watch El Gorrion while I go get a friend of mine who is injured."

She stared at him. Her eyes were black fire in her old humorous face. If she understood, she gave not the slightest sign.

"Tengo que marcharme,"

Doc said, trying Spanish.

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She grimaced. She did not understand that, either, apparently.

To save time, Doc went over to El Gorrion and gave him a wallop on the jaw to induce him to remain stationary for a while.

Then, noticing a stout rawhide lariat hanging on a peg, the bronze man calmly took it and tied the old lady to one of the stout iron window bars. He tied a knot that looked simple, but which was complicated to undo; it would probably anchor her for a time. She did not seem happy about being tied, but she did nothing in the way of resistance until he arose to depart, when she gave him a kick in a vulnerable part of his anatomy. At his surprised expression, she snorted gleefully.

The bronze man went up the steep slope and found Long Tom among the rocks with his grenades.

"That fight," Long Tom said, "was as short as Bear Cub's stay in Heaven will be. You do any good?"

"Two prisoners."

"Yeah?"

"El Gorrion."

"That's good. He seemed to be some kind of boss in the outfit."

"And an old lady, an incredibly old lady, wearing a red vest," Doc added.

Long Tom's eyes came out a little and he blinked as if trying to get them back again. "Red vest, eh? You don't mean like Jones' vest?"

"Very similar."

Long Tom pondered that. "She didn't happen to have a rock that talked, I hope."

Doc Savage said that they might ask her about that. He gave Long Tom a boost to his feet. The rest and the excitement had helped Long Tom. He made most of the trip to the house without aid. He was improved sufficiently to mutter, when they passed some fat chickens in the yard, that he thought a little food would put him back in shape to navigate.

THEY entered the room where Doc Savage had left the old lady.

Long Tom stopped suddenly.

"She doesn't look so old to me," he said.

Doc Savage, staring at the girl who stood there, had an utterly weird feeling. This girl was young, early twenties. And yet she was the old lady, it seemed which was impossible, of course.

For an uncanny moment, Doc Savage thought of stones that talked, and an old lady suddenly becoming a young girl did not seem any more of an impossibility than speaking rocks.

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The girl had the family characteristics of the old lady: the same forehead contour, the same small square jaw, the same delightful pleasure around the eyes, the hilarious humor about the mouth. It was not a silly expression of humor. It was just good.

She stood very still and innocent until they entered the room, after which she took her hands away from her sides and exhibited the three small metal balls connected with a woven cord which they contained.

What she had in her hands was not exactly a bola. The balls seemed too small. But it was undoubtedly some adaptation of a bola, and she held it as if she had confidence in the thing.

(A bola is a device not as widely used by the South American gauchos, or cowboys, as is popularly supposed. It is not as widely used as the American cowboy's lasso rope, although it is more efficient and more violent. A bola has some qualities of a weapon. It consists, usually, of two or three weights joined together by a crow's-foot of thongs.)

Fascinated, the bronze man could not think of anything except: "This girl is the old lady of a few minutes ago." And yet, the idea was too fantastic to accept.

He said, "Who are you?"

She moved her hands a little, getting the bola gadget ready.

"Where is the old lady?" Doc asked.

She still did not answer, and Long Tom growled, "There's something fishy here. Either she's got words, or she hasn't."

The electrical wizard started forward. The girl threw her gimmick. She threw it, not at Long Tom, but at Doc Savage. Evidently she figured she could handle Long Tom herself. Long Tom looked as if he would be fair game for an infant.

Doc Savage got a surprise. The weights on the bola device, not larger than hen eggs, were astonishingly heavy, the thongs which connected them capable of cutting into flesh, and the skill of the girl equalled the skill of a magician with a trick he had practiced a long time.

There was a whistling report as the thing arrived, and Doc was suddenly fighting to get the thing loose from his throat before it strangled him and, incidentally, to ascertain how nearly it had come to cutting off his head.

If Doc was surprised, so was the girl. Long Tom fooled her. He was capable of fooling most people. He looked as if he were on his last legs at the best the kind of a fellow that made undertakers rub their hands together hopefully. But he had the kind of gray unhealthiness that was made of gristle and whale-bone.

Long Tom put the girl on the floor in as gentlemanly a way as he could, then sat on her.

Doc Savage finally got the gadget loose from his neck. He had an enormous respect for it.

"Watch her," he said.

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DOC began searching the house. In the first room he looked, he found the old lady. The end of the rope was tied to her and she was making faces and trying to untie it. The girl evidently had sliced the other end of the rope loose from the window bars. Doc realized then that he had forgotten, on seeing the girl, all about the rope.

The girl an afterthought was very pretty.

Doc found no other person in the house El Gorrion was on the floor of the room with Long Tom Roberts and the girl but there were things that made the search interesting.

Interesting was the store of light automatic rifles and machine guns in the place. There were gas masks. There was gas, poison gas, of homemade concoction, plainly labeled with its chemical formulation and the added information, unnecessary to anyone who knew much chemistry, that it was deadly.

There were a dozen new parachutes.

All the equipment seemed to come in dozens. A dozen pairs of skis. A dozen packs, all packed with concentrated rations. A dozen suits for high-altitude flying, equipped so that they could be chemically warmed.

Twelve outfits for whatever it was.

And Ham Brooks' sword cane was lying on a table in another room. Seeing the cane put cold, heavy lead inside Doc Savage. One of those sword canes was the last thing Ham would part with, next to his life. The sword cane was of fine Damascus steel and Ham kept the tip coated with a chemical which would produce abrupt unconsciousness. The cane itself was dark and innocent, in genteel good taste that would go with the sartorially perfect clothing which Ham invariably wore.

Doc Savage hefted the cane thoughtfully. He took it with him when he returned to Long Tom.

Long Tom lost no time in pointing at the girl and saying, "She's got a red vest. What do you know about that?"

Long Tom was a little more scratched and abused than he had been, indicating he had had more trouble with the girl. The girl herself was still humorous, but it was not a friendly kind of glee.

"Have you tried to talk to her?" Doc asked.

"Sure. No luck."

"Have you tried different languages?"

"Sure. She doesn't savvy English. She doesn't *habla Espanol*. She doesn't *gavaryoo Parooskee*. No *parler Francais*. She doesn't even *taler de Norge*."

Then Long Tom saw the cane. His lips came together, and his eyelids pulled tight. "That's bad!" he said quietly. "Where did you find it?"

"In one of the rooms," Doc Savage explained. He showed the sword cane to the girl. "Did you ever see this before? The man who owned it is a very close friend of mine, one of my associates."

The girl looked at him, smiling slightly, remaining silent.

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Long Tom said, "Finding the cane proves Monk and Ham are mixed up in this thing, whatever it is. They came down here as consulting experts about whales. The way I figure it, they must have been side-tracked into plenty of trouble, got themselves out on a limb and sent poor little Jones after us for help. Question is has Monk and Ham's limb been sawed off, yet?"

DOC SAVAGE brought in the old lady who wore the red vest. She did not resist more than enough to show him that she was averse to being pushed around.

"Does that one speak anything, either?" Long Tom asked.

"Something," Doc said.

Long Tom stared at him. "I don't get you."

"A language I could not identify."

Long Tom moistened his lips slowly. "You mean she speaks something you never heard before and can't identify? You mean she's got a language that's a new one to you?"

"Yes."

Amazed, Long Tom said, "As Renny would say Holy cow!"

Doc Savage addressed the old lady. "Do you mind," he asked, "if we examine those red vests?" He got no answer, which was what he was expecting. He went over and inspected the red vest's material thoughtfully.

Except for one thing, the feminine cut of the garment, the thing was identical with the one little Jones had worn. The same strange weave. The cloth that was cloth and yet wasn't; made of some material strange to the bronze man.

Long Tom also looked at the cloth.

"It's as if they came from another world," he said. "I never saw stuff like that."

Doc Savage looked thoughtfully at the old lady.

"You understand English," he told her. "Awhile ago, when that man yelled my name, you released me."

She looked at him with twinkling, birdlike silence.

Long Tom contemplated the girl, then the old lady. "They're mother and daughter," he said. "Or rather, probably great-great-great-grandmother and daughter. This old woman must be a hundred if she's a day."

He waited after he said that. Then he grinned. "She doesn't savvy English," he said, "or she would have had something to say about that. No woman could take that kind of a crack about her age."

The old lady walked over to Long Tom. She walked quite slowly and calmly, so that when she arrived, she took Long Tom by surprise. She kicked him. She kicked first his shin, then when he was on one leg, she kicked him behind the knee of the leg that supported him. Suddenly, he was on the floor, astonished and

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indignant. The old lady understood English, obviously.

Doc Savage went to a window and watched the surroundings. There was no sign of El Gorrion's men coming back. Out on the lake, Bear Cub and Wickard and Jake had reached the plane, and evidently were fooling with the motor, trying to get it started.

Doc turned back and began speaking to the old lady. He used English slowly and distinctly, the small simple words and the common phrases that one with not much knowledge of the language would most readily understand.

He told her the situation. He explained about the mysterious little man in the red vest, Jones, who had come to them in the South Seas and who had died of something resembling stratosphere sickness. It was hard to explain about stratosphere sickness using small words, but Long Tom thought Doc managed very creditably.

Doc told her about the speaking stone, and the two men, Bear Cub and Wilfair Wickard, who had followed little Jones in order to kill him. He explained how he had stowed away on the plane after Long Tom had been grabbed.

Net result of all this talk: Nothing.

Except that they met a newcomer, a tall young man with a pleasant face and a gun that was not pleasant, who leaned in through the window with the remark, "That was an excellent story if anyone believed it. Will you two gentlemen kindly see if you can touch the ceiling?"

DOC and Long Tom gaped at the stranger, naturally.

He said, "It is a high ceiling. But I advise you to try to reach it." He did not sound as if he were trying to be comical.

There was considerable athletic ability evident in the length of him. The smile on his face was not amiable, not from the joy of living like the smiles on the faces of the old lady and the girl. He was smiling because he was proud of himself and because he wanted to let them know that he was not afraid.

Doc said, "He might shoot, Long Tom." The bronze man put up his arms. Long Tom did likewise.

"That's fine," the young man said. He turned to the two women and spoke to them.

He spoke the strange language that was so musical and sounded so easy, yet was so completely unintelligible. The old lady answered him, and he shrugged slightly. He showed much more interest when the girl spoke. She spoke briefly.

He turned back to Doc. "Who are you?"

"My name is Savage. Clark Savage, Jr."

"Doc Savage," Long Tom supplied.

The young man sneered slightly in Long Tom's direction. "You act as if you think the name should mean something." He waved his gun slightly. "Stand still. I am going to give the gun to the girl. She will watch you.

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She understands a gun better than, or as well as, the devices she threw at you. While she watches you, I am going around to a door. I will join you in a minute."

He left the barred window after giving the gun to the girl. She held the weapon rather awkwardly, but they took no chances. An awkward grip on a gun did not make the weapon shoot any less dangerously.

The young man came in, appearing to be very proud of himself. "I am Terrence Wire," he told Doc Savage. He took the gun from the girl. "I think I have heard of you, Mr. Savage. You have something of a name. But I assure you, I am not impressed; neither am I convinced you are a paragon of virtue."

"A smarty-pants," Long Tom muttered, but the young man did not hear him.

Doc asked, "You heard all of the story I told the two women, here, just before you appeared?"

"All."

"You mean, then, that you do not believe it?"

"There might be spots of truth here and there," said Terrence Wire. "But, as a whole, I discard much of the yarn. The greater part of it." He moved his gun menacingly. "Stand still."

He came over and searched Doc Savage with inexpert, but thorough, care. His scrutiny missed nothing, not even the individual coins in the bronze man's pockets.

When he brought Jones' speaking stone out of Doc Savage's pocket, he yelled with excitement.

Chapter VII. THE UNEXPECTED TRUTH

TERRENCE WIRE knew the stone. He bleated out in amazement when he saw it.

And the two women changed, too. They jumped forward the old lady with the incredible wrinkles moved almost as quickly as the younger woman to stare at the rock. They did not say more than a few words, explosive ones in the strange, easy-sounding language which they spoke.

Long Tom Roberts, for his part, was almost equally astonished. He had supposed with no good reason, he now recollected that Doc did not have the stone; he thought that it was back with Renny and Johnny on Jinx Island. An extremely disappointed Renny and Johnny, probably, he thought without relevance. They liked excitement. They were missing some; the indications were that they would miss a lot. But the presence of the speaking stone in Doc Savage's pocket was somehow surprising.

Terrence Wire whirled on the bronze man. "Where did you get this?"

Doc Savage said patiently, "It was in the possession of Jones, the little man who came to find Renny Renwick. It is the stone which spoke with the voice of Monk Mayfair, one of my associates."

Wire chewed his lip and frowned. He did not say anything. He did, however, glance at the two women in a way that conveyed the impression that they did understand English.

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Doc added, "Perhaps you would explain the meaning of this stone."

"Meaning?" Wire scowled.

"Why it talked. And how."

Wire thought that over. He pulled his lips off his teeth slowly. "You don't expect an answer to that, do you?"

"Why not?"

"I hope you don't think I am that kind of a fool," Wire said angrily. "You're a man named Savage. So what? You have two friends who got mixed up in this thing. And I will say right here that I think they might be responsible for all the trouble. Like I say so what?"

Doc Savage and Long Tom had been holding their hands above their heads during the whole exchange. Now, as if it was tiresome, Doc lowered an arm and rubbed his nose on a cuff. At Terrence Wire's "Get 'em up!" he lifted his arms again quickly, however.

But he caught Long Tom's eye, and Long Tom realized what had happened, and nodded.

Long Tom said, "Wire, you've bit off more than you can handle this time."

Wire eyed him darkly and advised, "Don't pull anything!"

"I suppose," Long Tom told him, "you think we came here alone, the two of us. What suckers do you take us for? Not that kind, I hope."

Wire sneered but did not say anything. His eyes were uneasy.

Long Tom said, "You might take a look at the door."

Wire pointed his gun at Long Tom and said, "That is old, so very old that it is childish. You don't think I am going to look behind so you can jump me, I hope."

Doc Savage then expelled the button he had jerked off his sleeve with his teeth while pretending to scratch his nose on the sleeve toward the door. Wire was looking at Long Tom. Doc managed to do the expelling silently and with enough force that the button hit near the door, and clattered slightly.

Long Tom laughed at the psychological moment.

Wire whirled. Doc went forward, put his hands on Wire. Wire fell to the floor. There was some kicking and pounding, but not much, before Wire spread out helplessly on the floor. Doc Savage had hold of his neck and did something paralyzing to spinal-nerve centers.

The girl in the red vest said, "This . . . is . . . what . . . I . . . expected!" She said it in a slow and careful fashion, the English words strange and difficult for her.

INSTANTLY, the old lady was on her with a verbal barrage. Not in English, but in the easy, musical language which was so strange. She was berating the girl for betraying an understanding of English, it was obvious.

THE SPEAKING STONE

Having finished scolding the girl, the remarkable old lady turned to Doc Savage and said in quite understandable, but somewhat unnatural, English, "There could be a mistake."

Doc Savage kept hold of Wire and worked with the man's neck nerves until Wire no longer kicked and squawked, and lay motionless with fixed and somewhat glassy eyes but with breathing regular.

The girl said, "You are the man Monk Mayfair described to me as Doc Savage."

The name, Monk Mayfair, hit Doc Savage a visible impact. He came to his feet. "Where is Monk?"

The girl said, "In terrible trouble."

"Where?"

The old lady ripped out again in the musical language. The girl's face lost a little color. She dropped her head.

"Where is Monk?" Doc Savage asked her.

It almost seemed that the girl was not going to answer. Then she said, "I am very sorry, but her highness forbids me to say more."

Doc indicated the old lady. "Her highness?"

The girl nodded. "She is the Queen Mother of Wisdom."

"That does not exactly make sense," Doc Savage said. "Can you tell me where to find Monk Mayfair?"

"I am forbidden to speak."

"What about Ham Brooks? Do you know *him*?"

The slight change in the girl's eyes indicated she had heard of Ham Brooks, but she shook her head slightly and said, "It is said that I shall not speak."

Doc turned to the old lady. "We have come a long distance to help Monk and Ham. Naturally, any friends of theirs are our friends, and enemies of theirs are ours."

She sniffed.

"Will you tell us where we can find Monk and Ham?"

"You," she said, "will be told nothing. Not by me. Not by this foolish girl, here. She already has told too much."

"Why not?"

"It is," she said, "forbidden."

"Forbidden?"

THE SPEAKING STONE

The remarkable wrinkles in her face were amiable but determined. "You do not understand this. But there is good reason behind it. A sufficient reason. An utterly sufficient one."

The bronze man looked at her steadily. "I take it that Monk and Ham are in trouble."

She shrugged. "They are. They may not even be alive now."

"Then there is no reason," Doc said, "that is sufficient." There was heavy force in his low voice.

She was silent.

Doc, after a while, turned the pale-blue and round stone in his fingers. "This stone is one that speaks," he said. "Would you care to discuss that?"

The old lady eyed him steadily. "Young man, either you are deceiving me, or your mind is a bird with a broken wing. Stones do not speak words."

THE best that Terrence Wire had been able to do was make gurgling noises. But now, after sitting up and carefully massaging his neck and throat he did the kneading in a way that showed he had some knowledge of either medical or osteopathic principles he was able to speak coherently.

"Would you care to hear a few words of truth?" he demanded angrily.

Long Tom said, "Of truth, we could stand a book. But a lie will lose you some teeth."

Terrence Wire sneered slightly. "These two women were prisoners here. I also was a prisoner."

"None of you were prisoners when I entered the house," Doc reminded him.

"We were making a break," Wire said. "Just as you arrived, we had freed ourselves. I had overpowered a man and taken a gun from him." He pointed at El Gorrion. "That is the man I overpowered."

Doc glanced at El Gorrion, who showed few signs of regaining his senses, then studied the old lady. "Is that the truth?" he asked. "Or is an answer forbidden?"

"Truth is never forbidden," she said.

"Then what he said is the truth?"

"Yes."

"I bet," Long Tom muttered. "He acts like a boy with a dark page in his book." He scowled at Terrence Wire. "Don't you?"

For some reason or other, this made Terrence Wire exceptionally indignant. He was so angry that he hammered the floor with his palms while he shouted at them.

"Those men, that Bear Cub and Wilfair Wickard and the others, have gone to the hangar a mile south along the lake shore," he bellowed. "They have other planes there. They will take flight."

THE SPEAKING STONE

Long Tom eyed him suspiciously, demanded, "Why all the indignation?"

"Because if you are not crooks yourselves," Wire shouted, "you would be after those fellows, trying to stop them."

Long Tom snorted. "The biggest liars have loudest voices," he said. "And you sound pretty raucous to me."

Doc Savage walked over to El Gorrion. He kicked El Gorrion in the ribs, not gently. Anything but gently, in fact.

El Gorrion made a hissing sound of rage and, with his eyes open, rolled over and got to his feet. Apparently, he had been conscious for some time.

Long Tom told him, "Instead of calling you The Sparrow, they should call you what is the Spanish word for opossum?"

El Gorrion glared wordlessly.

AFTER twenty minutes of up-and-down going, over rocks that were as naked as the day they had been coughed up by a volcano, they crawled carefully to the rim of a small creek which had cut a deep gully into the lake in such a way as to form a cove. With care, and with Terrence Wire breathing warnings for caution, they looked over the edge, down at a massive natural overhang of stone. It was not a hangar in any true sense but which would serve as one, and an excellent one, if planes were picketed under the lunging mass of stone.

Two planes were there.

Around the planes were the men who had fled the house, all of them busy loading gasoline and themselves into the ships.

Long Tom touched Doc's arm, muttered, "Am I pink? This guy, Wire, was telling truth."

Doc Savage withdrew a few yards, motioning the others back.

"Think you can watch these people?" he asked.

Long Tom said grimly, "I don't know about watching them. But give me that gun, and I'll shoot anything that moves!"

Doc handed Long Tom the revolver which had earlier been in the possession of Terrence Wire.

Long Tom was suddenly uneasy. "They're a big gang down there, Doc. And they're not boy scouts."

The bronze man made no comment. He began working down toward the planes.

Creeping very close to the ships was out of the question; the rocky terrain was too bare. But he could get close to the mouth of the cove and, from there, perhaps do something.

When he was close to the cove's mouth, a man came running. The man stood on a rock, took off his coat, waved it to get attention of the plane.

THE SPEAKING STONE

"What's the holdup out there?" he shouted.

"We're checking the engines," Bear Cub bellowed back. "We figure maybe Savage did something to them."

"Do you find anything wrong?"

"Not yet."

"Get in here and take gasoline aboard," the man shouted. "We're all taking off on the expedition right away."

"What about El Gorrion?"

"We can't leave him here," shouted Bear Cub.

The man on shore waved his arms angrily.

"El Gorrion just joined us," he bellowed. "He was a prisoner. He escaped a moment ago."

Chapter VIII. THE HIGH WORLD

IT was a trick.

When the bronze man saw what it was, his first thought was: "My mind is out of gear. The thing is so obvious. And it fooled me."

It did not entirely fool him. It almost did. Because, by the time he realized that it was a trick or suspected, more properly, that it could be a trick he was high up on the rim where he had left the others, and was dashing toward them. As soon as he saw what it might be, he whipped low in the shelter of a maze of boulders.

Instantly, a man jumped up a few yards ahead and tried a wing shot at him. The man was using an automatic rifle, and it gobbled out violent thunder which cascaded through the hills in echoes.

Furthermore, Doc fell almost upon two other men who were lying there waiting. They were surprised. They had known he was there, but had been trying to keep out of sight, and his sudden dive into the exact spot where they were concealed set them aback. One of them tried to brain Doc with a rock. The other endeavored to get his rifle into action.

It would have been hard to dodge the rock. Doc twisted and got his hands up, took the rock as if it was a football someone was trying to hand him in a violent fashion. He got possession of it, and used it on the rifleman in such a way that the fellow's arm was broken.

By now, there was shouting and shooting in quantity.

The enemy had, it was obvious, discovered that Doc's party was close and that Doc was not with them. They had surmised the bronze man was probably down investigating the cove.

So a man had calmly walked out on the point and bellowed that El Gorrion had escaped. El Gorrion's

THE SPEAKING STONE

escape and this was a good guess would instantly make Doc think that Long Tom or the others might be injured, or in trouble. Certainly, they would not let El Gorrion escape if they were not injured. So Doc had been decoyed up the hill in a hurry to investigate, and into the planned ambush.

And El Gorrion did escape now!

Up on the cove rim, among the rocks where Long Tom and Terrence Wire and the two strange women in the red vests lay with El Gorrion, there was sudden movement. Long Tom tried to lead a dash to better cover. Terrence Wire grabbed Long Tom. Long Tom thought Wire was attacking him. He struck fiercely at Wire. El Gorrion got up and ran while that went on.

El Gorrion took off across the rocks as if he was a bird.

A man yelled, "Get under covet, Sparrow! We got 'em surrounded!"

"Cover, hell!" bellowed El Gorrion. "Get to the planes, you guys! Clear out of here."

"But we got 'em surrounded "

"Get to the planes," shouted El Gorrion. "Cut the argument."

There was a general exodus. Not a silent one, though. There was plenty of shooting. They retreated toward the inlet.

Down by the water, someone tried again to tell El Gorrion that Doc Savage and the others had been surrounded.

El Gorrion swore at the man. "When you got that guy Savage surrounded, all you've got is a bear by the tail." He raced toward one of the planes. "Come on. Get these things off the water."

"What about the two women?" a man shouted. "They'll give Savage the whole story"

"The two women," El Gorrion barked, "will be dead in another twenty-four hours. Savage can't get high-altitude equipment together that quick!"

UP on the rim of the bay, Long Tom Roberts pounded Terrence Wire with his fists. Wire, who seemed dumfounded by the strength left in the emaciated-looking electrical expert, was taking a beating in spite of all he could do. Doc Savage reached them and grabbed Long Tom's fist.

"This guy let that El Gorrion get away!" Long Tom snarled. "Let me loose, Doc. I'm gonna take off one of his wheels!"

Wire gasped, "I was trying to grab you myself. I didn't intend for Gorrion to get away."

Doc said, "They are trying to get away in the planes. Come on."

The power of command in the bronze man's voice brought them to their feet. They ran toward the cove. Down on the water, plane motors were roaring. They saw that the ships were moving out toward the open surface.

The two ships taxied rapidly out to the other plane, the one which Bear Cub, Wickard and Jake had been trying to get started. There must have some shouting. The words were blotted out by engine noise.

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It was plain that they concluded to tow the plane, the engines of which would not start, to a spot out of rifle range. They took no chances of a collision, however. Bear Cub, Wickard and Jake piled into the boat with the outboard motor, with a rope the other end of which was attached to the plane. They paddled furiously, hauling toward one of the planes.

"Damn them!" Terrence Wire snarled.

He whirled and dashed away. Long Tom yelled, "Hey, you, stop!" and grabbed for a rock.

Terrence Wire did not run far. He had noticed among the rocks a rifle dropped by one of El Gorrion's men. He scooped up the gun, fell across a rock and aimed carefully at the boat pulling the rope. Doc Savage called sharply, "No killing, Wire!"

Terrence Wire's lips pulled off his teeth slightly. The rifle made noise and slapped back against his shoulder.

Long Tom looked toward the lake, watched one of the men in the boat it was Jake come to his feet suddenly, then fall over and wrap both arms around a leg.

"Boy, that one wins a turkey," Long Tom said admiringly. "Get that Bear Cub, Terrence! No, wait! Let me have a shot at him!"

Terrence Wire's rifle ripped out again. Nothing happened in the boat, and he swore. He fired once more.

Bear Cub and Wilfair Wickard picked Jake up and threw him out of the boat. They plunged into the lake after him, then dragged him toward the nearest plane with running motors.

Doc Savage ran toward Wire and wrenched the rifle out of the man's hands. He was not gentle about it, but he turned instantly and began shooting.

Doc's first shot was not at the planes or the men in the water or anything in their vicinity. He fired at a floating bit of wreckage a test shot to learn where the rifle targeted.

Terrence Wire watched, mouth open, as the bronze man continued shooting. Because the bronze man did what seemed impossible under the circumstances, drove both planes away from the ship with the dead motors. He did it with half a dozen shots. The rifle was a semi-automatic one, equipped with a drum-type clip which held twenty-five cartridges.

When both planes were in the air, he handed the rifle to Long Tom. "Keep them from bombing the plane," he said. "I am going to try to reach the house before they bomb that."

Doc ran in the direction of the house.

Terrence Wire rubbed his jaw. "What was his idea? With shooting like that, he could have kept both those planes out of the air."

Long Tom said, "You don't know much about Doc, do you?"

"I have heard of him," Wire admitted. "As a matter of fact, I am just now convinced he *is* Doc Savage."

"Who'd you think he was?"

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"A ringer they were trying to run in on us to " Wire went silent, lips tightening.

"To what?" Long Tom prompted.

"To . . . well, to get information out of us."

"What kind of information?"

Terrence Wire glanced at the girl, then at the old lady, who shook her head almost imperceptibly. Wire told Long Tom, "It is forbidden."

Long Tom started to snort, then grabbed up the rifle. "Those blasted planes are going to try to bomb the plane on the water!"

DOC SAVAGE was learning how weak he had become. He was also aware of something else that he had not noticed before that this lake was at high altitude. Breathing was hard. Weakness grew in his legs. The distance to the house began to seem like miles.

He turned his head once and saw that the planes were circling warily over the lake. He could hear the rifle whack repeatedly. Once, one of the planes lurched wildly. Evidently the pilot had been nicked.

Then the planes suddenly swung away. One of them headed for the house. It was a race, now.

The plane motor was loud when he dived into the house. He lost agonized moments when he found an unexpected locked door and had to go back and try another way.

He got into the room where the equipment was stored. He was interested in the concentrated rations, the high-altitude flying suits the latter equipped with compact oxygen equipment.

He grabbed up five of the outfits.

The plane came down. Its motor grew to a great blast, then sank in volume until the roar of air around the wings of the plane was louder than the engine noise. Suddenly, the shadow of the ship was a great thing outside the window.

Then the house jumped on its foundations. The door caved in; window glass broke with jangling violence. And dust was suddenly thick. An amazing amount of dust. The roof sagged slowly and tiredly.

Doc got to a door, waited long enough to make sure the plane was a quarter of a mile away and banking to come back. He made a dash, covered a few dozen yards, and flattened among the rocks as bullets began to spatter. He remained motionless. It is very hard to spot a motionless target as small as a man from a plane.

The ship rocketed overhead. There was more shooting, none of it accurate. The men in the plane spotted a brown rock that they mistook for the bronze man and peppered it with lead. Then the plane was past.

Doc got up and ran again. Now, he kept under cover and made his way back toward the cove.

Long Tom was standing beside a large boulder, nursing the rifle stock against his cheek, his puffed lips twisted fiercely. He glanced uneasily at Doc Savage. "I must be more shaky than I figured," he said. "I'm

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afraid I nicked one of those pilots. I was just trying to put a slug through the cockpit."

"Where did you hit him?"

"In the left shoulder."

"At least," Doc said dryly, "there was nothing shaky about your eyesight."

Terrence Wire grinned slightly.

Doc Savage swam out to the plane. Long Tom and the others remained on shore.

Long Tom fired twice as Doc was climbing into the plane. The ship overhead veered away. A gunman tried some long-distance rifle fire that was not effective.

Doc hastily replaced the parts he had removed from the ignition system. Bear Cub, Wilfair Wickard and Jake had not tampered with the motors. They had not had time. But efforts made to crank the engines had exhausted rich mixture from the cylinders, or coated the plugs with fouling oil, so that they were slow in starting. Doc soon got them banging over.

As soon as the plane moved across the water, the two ships overhead veered away, heading west.

DOC taxied to shore, shouted for the others to get aboard and bring the equipment. The water was very deep inshore, and they had some difficulty.

The girl and the old lady had never been in a plane before. That was obvious. They looked scared.

Doc asked, "Where are they heading?"

Terrence Wire glanced at the old lady. She shook her head. Wire said, "I am sorry. I have given my word not to tell anything."

Without speaking, the bronze man lifted the plane into the air. "We will follow them," he said after a few minutes. "But there is not too much gasoline. Five or six hours' supply. If that is not sufficient, it may be bad."

Terrence Wire looked at his hands. He shuddered. "It is not enough," he said, "to bring us back."

Doc searched the sky for the other planes and located them. Long Tom, squinting and frowning, failed to spot the two ships ahead. He rummaged around in the cockpit and came up with a pair of binoculars. He peered through these and grunted, satisfied.

"Follow them?" Doc asked.

"Sure," Long Tom said. "I can see them through the glasses."

Doc turned the controls over to the electrical expert, and went back into the cabin. The girl looked at him as if she were ashamed of her silence. The old lady met his eye firmly, then grunted in astonishment as he took hold of her.

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"Keep your hands off me!" she said in better English than she had used before.

"This is an examination," Doc told her. "You will not be harmed."

She said something about not wanting to be examined, and something else in her own language that sounded indignant. The bronze man ignored her.

After he had finished about fifteen minutes of examination, he made the low, unconscious sound which was his expression of surprise, the note that was an exotic trilling, so small as to be hardly noticeable.

He moved toward the girl. She leaned back tightly, with her hands clasped. And then she relaxed.

"I am in the same condition," she said.

"How much longer do you think you would have lived?" Doc Savage asked.

Her eyes were frightened. She loosened her lips to say, "It is hard to be definite. We know . . . from past experience . . . about how long we can live . . . after we leave Arriba. Another day or two, perhaps."

"Arriba? That is where you come from?"

"Yes."

The old lady made a warning hiss.

Doc turned to her, said, "You cannot keep us from there. From this Arriba. It seems you would have died to preserve the secret. How soon this death would have come to you, probably you know."

She looked at him steadily until defeat came slowly to her face, and she lowered her head to hide it. "Tonight," she said. "Tonight, or tomorrow at the latest, would have been our death."

The motor noise was not loud inside the cabin, and Long Tom had his ears fanned. When Doc joined him, Long Tom said, "What was that about death?"

"You remember what killed the little man in the red vest, Jones?"

"Sure. Stratosphere sickness."

"The two women are verging on it. They have it, in fact, but it has not yet reached an acute stage. There are tests that show its presence. Tests familiar to most army and navy air-corps physicians."

Long Tom mulled it over for a while. "You mean the two women have been up in the stratosphere so high that they are going to die? Isn't there anything we can do?"

"We are doing it."

"What?"

"Going back to this Arriba."

"Arriba? That's a Spanish word for *up*, isn't it?"

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"Yes."

Long Tom suddenly hit the control wheel with his fist. "Up!" he exploded. "So we're going up! I don't get it. Up to what?"

"To Monk and Ham, I hope," Doc Savage said grimly. "And to a surprise, unless all the signs are wrong."

LONG TOM was handling the plane well enough. The excitement, or maybe it was the exercise, had cured him of his earlier physical inability. Doc Savage broke out the concentrated rations, gave Long Tom some and took some himself. The ordinarily tasteless stuff was as good as filet mignon and French fries. They had not eaten since leaving Jinx Island in the South Pacific.

Satisfied that Long Tom was handling the plane all right, Doc went back to Terrence Wire. Wire watched him come with steady eyes.

"You do not have it," Doc said.

Wire gave considerable thought to whether or not to answer. Then he said, "The stratosphere sickness? No, I do not have it."

"Why not?"

Wire smiled without humor. "The answer is as obvious as simple. I have not been to Arriba."

Doc Savage gave him a look that made the young man's mouth lose color.

"Give me a sensible answer," the bronze man said.

"I have not been to Arriba."

"That is not what I meant by a sensible answer."

Wire looked at the old lady, then away from her quickly. "Will I be believed?"

"Probably not at once. Eventually, you may be, if it is the truth."

Wire grimaced. "All right, here it is. Anyway, here is enough to explain my part and still not break my word to her." He jerked his jaw at the old lady. "I made a promise to her. I keep my promises. Don't think I don't. Maybe I'm not virtue in white britches, but I keep my promises."

Doc said, "Do not try to build your character with words. Deeds will do it the ones from now on."

Wire shrugged again.

"All right. The old lady, the girl and little Jones come from Arriba. They came first to hire El Gorrion to dispose of something for them. Don't ask me what the something is, because I'm not saying. But they came. I worked for El Gorrion, and I was just beginning to smell him as the skunk he is. Gorrion decided to double-cross these people. I did not go for it. I quit him. It was all right. We had an agreement. We bumped heads some over it; but we got together, and I walked out."

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Doc Savage put a look of skepticism on his face as Wire stopped speaking and looked at him.

Wire said hastily, "I know I was a prisoner when you got here today. I'll come to that. What I've just told you is the first part of the thing. The part that happened about a month and a half ago."

"A month and a half ago?"

"Sure. It's been going on for sometime. Like the Irishman's green snake, it started small and grew."

Doc Savage said, "You had better describe that growth."

"Sure. El Gorrion pulled his double cross. Only he did not have his usual rare good luck. He got about half outsmarted. He didn't get what he was after. He got a regular mess of trouble stirred up instead. But he still thought he could catch the rabbit."

Terrence Wire paused to stare ahead of the plane. The mountains, appearing so high and cold and formidable that they beggared description, were directly ahead of the plane. But they were still very, very far away.

He continued, "Two guys named Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks were the trouble El Gorrion stirred up. Monk and Ham were called on for help." He nodded at the old lady. "The queen, here, did the calling."

Doc said, "If she called on Monk and Ham for aid, why is she so hostile to me? Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks are my close friends. They are members of my organization."

Wire made a wry mouth.

"The queen," he said, "is disgusted with your organization. All Monk and Ham did was get into more trouble."

THE air through which the plane flew was suddenly rough for a short interval. Upward currents seized the ship and heaved it up; down currents yanked it toward the earth. Long Tom snapped on the "Fasten Your Safety Belts, Please" warning light, with which the cabin was equipped, but it was hardly necessary. The motors labored, and the ship was tail low in the sky, climbing steeply in an effort to rise as fast as the mountain foothills were lifting below.

Doc Savage said dryly, "I have been under the impression that Monk and Ham are rather efficient."

"I would say they were very efficient guys," Terrence Wire admitted. "But you see, they're up against something different. And in Arriba, efficiency is not as we know it. A guy might be very good in Podunk or Kansas City or even New York. But in Arriba, the same guy would be distinctly mongrel pup. Not so hot."

Doc said, "So Monk and Ham got into trouble."

"Up over their hair," Wire agreed. "But they did do one thing. The one thing that I'm beginning to think may save their necks and the whole of Arriba. A couple of hours ago, I'd have said nothing would save the situation. But I've seen you work a little, and now I don't know. You seem to have a touch for these things."

"Who," Doc asked, "did Monk and Ham send for help?"

"The little guy you call Jones and the two women."

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"And "

"El Gorrion caught the two women. Jones, as you call him, got away. Somehow, he learned that you were on a place called Jinx Island, in the South Seas. He set out on the long journey to get you."

"Bear Cub and Wilfair Wickard?"

"A pair of fine birds sent by El Gorrion to get little Jones in case the stratosphere sickness didn't get him first. Incidentally, which did kill Jones?"

"The stratosphere sickness," Doc explained. "You were out of the affair at that time, as you explain it. How did you get back in?"

Wire grinned. He was suddenly proud. "I cut myself a slice of it. A damned hero that's what I became. I found out the two women were being held prisoners. So I came to El Gorrion, and I said, 'My ex-brother, let them go. Turn them loose.' You can imagine what that got me. A bullet in the brisket, only I was too quick on the draw for him."

Wire paused, then grimaced. "Trouble was, I wasn't the fast company I thought I was. They caught me. Locked me up with the two women and began trying to make me tell what I already knew about " He went silent.

"About what?"

"Again, I come to the point where I can't say any more," Wire explained.

The old lady had been leaning forward, every one of her humorous wrinkles twisted with anxiety. But now, when she saw that Wire was not going to say any more, she was relieved. She sat back. She seemed suddenly happy.

Doc Savage's metallic-looking and remarkably regular features were without expression. If he was disappointed, he did not show it.

He said, "That was a complete story as far as it went."

"It won't go any further," Terrence Wire said.

Doc Savage asked, "Why your sudden reformation. Why did you come back after quitting El Gorrion's gang to help the two women?"

Wire glanced at the girl. He glanced slowly, so that Doc Savage would see his meaning. He said, "It seemed worth it to me. Even if I never get any farther than I have gotten now which is not far."

That was explanation enough. The girl was an exquisite thing. Wire was in love with her.

Chapter IX. STRANGE ARRIBA

THE sun was making long evening shadows when they crashed.

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They had put on the high–altitude suits. It was very cold in the plane, for the ship had been working in the tropics and the heating system was inadequate. They were using the chemical–heating arrangement inside the suits. They had also turned on the oxygen.

It came unexpectedly!

Doc Savage and Long Tom were in the cockpit. Because it was getting dark, one of them was keeping track of the two planes ahead while the other handled the ship. Flying the plane was a job as Long Tom expressed it for an octopus. The big ship was behaving pretty much as if it were a flivver trying to speed across a plowed field.

They had no suspicion that anything was going to happen. Nothing unpleasant, at least, from the source from which it did come.

Long Tom grunted with the labor of hauling the big ship out of an involuntary dive. He said, "*Yoicks!* Talk about a rodeo!"

Terrence Wire then came forward and leaned over their shoulders.

"What is the altitude?" Wire asked.

"Our altitude is a little over twenty–two thousand feet," Long Tom told him. "The altitude of the mountains under us is not as much less than that as I'd like. Not by a long shot."

"How much higher can we go?" Wire inquired.

"What dumfounds me," Long Tom said, "is that we've got this old freight car up this high."

Wire sounded disappointed. "You mean we can't go much higher?"

Doc Savage turned unexpectedly, asked, "How much higher is Arriba?"

Wire looked as if he wanted to answer. But he said, "The mountains are much higher, as you can see. El Gorrion has his planes equipped with special superchargers, the type used on high–altitude bombers. How are you going to follow him?"

Long Tom growled, "Didn't you hear Doc ask you a question about Arriba?"

Wire was a determined man. He said, "You won't get any information about Arriba out of me. I've told you why. I promised. It's damned little I could tell you, anyway. I've never been there."

Long Tom stared at him. He saw that it was futile to try to pry information out of Wire.

"Where," asked Long Tom, "did these mountains come from? Hell, there isn't supposed to be anything like these in South America. These are high, what I mean. We're high right now; but from what I can see ahead, I don't believe those mountains got any tops."

Then, abruptly, the cabin was full of blue–white firelight. Doc Savage heaved up, whirled. He was taken completely by surprise. He had not supposed there was anything back in the cabin with which they could fire the plane. He knew the small oxygen cylinders for the altitude suits were there, of course, and he knew how oxygen would burn.

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The old lady, the one they called the Queen Mother of Wisdom, had taken two oxygen cylinders her own and the younger girl's and had opened them, set fire to them. She managed to smash a window and hang half outside with one of them. She had secured a revolver somewhere. With it, she made holes in the fuel tanks, then fired the spouting streams of gasoline.

Suddenly bundled in flames, the plane was doomed!

AFTER that, there was action and no words. Long Tom knew what to do: he was a good pilot, but he knew his limitations. Handling a light ship or a five-passenger cabin job, even, was nothing compared to the problem of one of these big dual-motored planes. Long Tom dived out from behind the controls. Doc Savage took over. Long Tom grabbed a fire extinguisher. He told Terrence Wire, "Get parachutes!"

Wire nodded. He was white. He went back into the cabin. The old lady stood there defiantly, grinning,

Wire stared at her grin, then lost his temper. He gave her a shove, a hard one that sent her slamming down into one of the seats.

"When I've lived as long as you have, I might want to die, too," he growled. "You old battle-crate, you!"

Down was about the only way the plane could go. Doc brought it toward the stone fangs of the mountains in a sideslip that, to some extent, kept the fire from spreading. With luck, he would have been able to sideslip fast enough to suck the fire off the ship. But the blaze was too violent.

The mountain peaks offered no landing place. If it had not been for the fire, he could have glided for miles down the side of the mountains and possibly made a decent selection. Flames that rapidly bundled the ship made that impossible.

There was a canyon, wide and not deep. He sideslipped into that. Suddenly, they were out of the evening sunlight, and it was startlingly gloomy.

Firelight from the burning plane was red on the canyon sides, red and reeling in horrifying fashion as they went down.

Doc set the wing flaps full back, killed as much landing speed as possible.

There would be nothing, he saw, but a crash landing. No place was smooth enough. The snow, however, made the terrain deceptive. The snow covered everything. The stuff appeared to be yards deep.

He yelled, "Smash the windows so you will be ready to get out!"

He got the ship level. Heat was searing. There was not much smoke; the plane's movement was driving that back.

Boulders below looked like sleeping white animals under the snow. Some were as large as houses.

Doc did a good job on the landing. Good enough that he was in all ways satisfied with it. With all flying speed gone, nearly, the ship was in a perfect stall just before it touched.

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It was as if a huge tin can had been kicked. Then kicked again and again. And trampled. There was a scream, like a woman, such a horrible sound that it seemed surely to come from death. Doc Savage managed to whirl apprehensively, but it was metal that screamed, and not either of the two women. The plane began going over and over. It did this twice, slowly, losing one wing and part of the tail. The other gasoline tank was split, and the liquid flooded the craft and burned, as if it was a great Christmas package in red tissue paper.

There was no silence after the crash. The jangling and ripping of metal, its tearing and grinding, merely tapered off into the roar of the fire and the excited shouting of Terrence Wire, who was trying to get to the young woman and get her out of the fire.

It was not hard, actually, to get out of the cabin. Smashing glass out of the windows had not been necessary. The rib skeleton of one side of the fuselage had been skinned neatly this was a little inexplicable of inside and outside covering. There were a dozen places where the group could walk outside upright.

Doc went out with the others, saw they were safe. Then he plowed back into the cabin. The interior was almost full of moaning flame. He picked up as much equipment as he could and scrambled outside again. His clothing was afire in spots. He rolled in the snow.

Terrence Wire was sprawled out in the snow. He seemed to be unconscious. Long Tom was kneeling beside him. "He just seemed to pass out," Long Tom said. "Here, I'll loosen his 'chute harness."

Doc Savage went over and thrust the tube of Wire's oxygen supply back between his lips. "At this altitude," the bronze man said, "we are going to need oxygen."

The old lady said something to the girl in the musical language.

Then they both ran away.

THE old lady, considering that her age looked to be over a hundred, was remarkably agile. She knew snow. She kept to the crusted spots with remarkable judgment and shouted, as she ran, what was evidently instructions for the younger woman to follow close behind her.

Almost at once, though, the younger woman began quarreling with her. The words were in the unintelligible tongue, but the tones told that it was a quarrel.

Doc Savage and Long Tom were after them instantly. The bronze man broke through the crusted snow repeatedly, slowing him until he barely kept up with Long Tom, who half-carried his parachute.

The quarrel between the two women reached a climax. The girl stopped. She would not accompany the older woman.

Doc and Long Tom reached the girl.

She said, "She would leave you here. You would die. I will not leave you." She said it as if she was reading it from a first-grade school book.

Long Tom stopped there. His mouth was as wide as he could get it, and his lungs pumped convulsively. But he had to stop, then went down on all fours, eyes rolling. The altitude had him.

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Doc Savage went on, parachute pack banging his thighs.

The old lady looked back, triumphantly at first. Then, as she saw the bronze man keep coming, confusion was in her manner. She picked the hardest going, the most difficult climbing. The route that was hardest on the pursuer's wind.

Doc caught her. But not easily. He was feeling the altitude. There was no magic in his make-up, only careful training and regular exercise. He was glad when he got a hand on the old lady's bony shoulder. He pulled her down, sank on a rock, and let his lungs pump and his ears ring.

The old lady seemed troubled.

"I would have sent food and guides back to you," she said. "They would have led you to the lowlands. You would not have died."

Evidently, the quarrel with the girl was bothering her. Doc Savage made no comment. The fact that she talked about sending guides back indicated Arriba must be not so far away. An old lady such as she could not travel any great distance without food or shelter. She might be immune to the altitude, but she was certainly not freeze-proof.

Just how cold it was, Doc Savage began to realize. His breath was a jumping plume, the ends of his fingers were already beginning to sting.

He said, "Come on back," and the old lady followed him.

Long Tom got to his feet and shuffled back toward the flaming plane. The girl came with him.

Terrence Wire had recovered enough to sit up. But he was not happy.

"Talk about mountain sickness!" he groaned. "I've got it, and it has pups."

(In medical terminology, this is a sickness experienced by mountain climbers or dwellers in high altitudes. Principal cause is rarefaction of the air. Its symptoms are fatigue, breathing difficulty and a general helplessness, often with headache and nausea. It is similar to the debility which Doc Savage refers to repeatedly as "stratosphere sickness," although there are differences, the latter being more serious, and, unfortunately, considerably less understood by medical science.)

A roaring came out of the mountain pass, grew to dull thunder, then ebbed. One of the planes had come back. It returned again, flying lower, and the pilot evidently distinguished Doc Savage's party by the blaze. A few rifle bullets rained down. Then the plane flew away.

"Great stuff," Long Tom said. "Now, they know we're in no condition to follow them." He considered for a moment. "Come to think of it, they must have known we were following them."

"Probably they did," Wire said.

"I don't get it. Why didn't they do something?"

"Simple."

"Eh?"

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"They figured your plane could not fly high enough to get to Arriba," Wire told him. "Evidently, they knew how much gas was in our ship. They knew we couldn't get back to a point where we could find gasoline." He shrugged. "So why should they bother about us?"

"Nice guys," Long Tom said grimly. "Particularly that Bear Cub."

DOC SAVAGE approached the plane ruin and searched for objects which would be of use to them. The craft was still hot and smoking. This was far above timber line, and there was no brush of consequence; hence there was nothing to use in poking about in the embers. But the bronze man got hold of a long control wire, untempered by the fire, and succeeded in lassoing the rifle out of the coals. It was useless. He took off his parachute to work more freely.

He got together a number of large sheets of the very light alloy-skin covering of the plane. They would serve as crude toboggans with which, in place of skis, they could make better time down the mountains as far as the snow and ice extended provided they decided to go down.

It was while the bronze man was fashioning the toboggans that he managed to get Long Tom and Terrence Wire aside.

"Let the two women escape," he said.

Wire was uneasy. "I don't like the idea of the girl leaving. These mountains are no joke. Just the two women alone they might get into trouble. El Gorrion may waylay them. I'm not enthusiastic about it."

"The old lady," Doc said, "is capable. And no fool. And Arriba may be very close."

"I don't know how close Arriba is," Wire admitted. "I was thinking about that." He frowned. "How are we going to make the old lady think she's got a chance to get away?"

"Mountain sickness," Doc told him. "Pretend to be very tired. Sleepy. We will conclude we have to pitch camp before we go on."

"Uh-huh," Wire said. "That might work."

It did work, too. And it didn't. Doc Savage and the other two men pretended great fatigue which was actually no pretence on Doc's part, and certainly none by Long Tom and announced their need for rest before going on. They rigged a shelter, a tent of sorts out of the heat-blackened skin fabric of the big plane. Two tents. One for the women.

They saved their three parachutes.

It didn't work when the girl refused to escape with the old lady. She got Terrence Wire aside and told him about it.

Wire came to Doc Savage. "She's got some kind of idea that she must take care of us."

Doc said, "I am getting tired of referring to the girl as 'she' and 'her.' Does she have a name?"

"Tara," Wire explained.

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"Tara who?"

"Tara is all I ever heard."

"Tell Tara," Doc said, "to go on and escape. We will take a whack at taking care of ourselves."

Wire nodded, and got the girl aside casually enough. They had a conversation of some length, in the middle of which Terrence Wire's jaw nearly fell off. He looked as if someone had hit him with a very dirty and unpleasant rag.

He came back to Doc Savage completely crestfallen. "O. K. She will do it."

Long Tom asked him, "Then why the face as long as a string of spaghetti?"

Terrence Wire was white-lipped for a moment. "Tara told me why she wouldn't go. I thought it was because she was afraid something would happen to me. Hell, it wasn't me." He scowled at Doc Savage. "It's *you*, damn it!"

Doc Savage was embarrassed and silent until after the old lady she was actually not called "queen," Terrence Wire explained, but was called what was the equivalent of "the Queen Mother" in the strangely musical language of Arriba had escaped. Tara and the old woman eased away from camp silently. Their red vests were visible against the white snow in the moonlight the night that had come was as bright as a dull day then they were gone.

"Come on," Doc Savage said.

THEY followed the trail in the snow without much trouble. The bronze man eyed the footprints closely. The rhythm of the tracks soon changed, and he glanced at Long Tom and Terrence Wire. They were tired. Their packs, parachutes included, were heavy.

"They are running," Doc pointed out. "Their object is to exhaust us if we follow."

"That old exhibit of wrinkles," Long Tom said laboriously, "is not so dumb."

Doc told them, "I seem to be able to stand this altitude a little better. I will go ahead. You two follow."

They nodded. Terrence Wire muttered, "If I follow much farther, somebody'll have to play horse."

The bronze man went on, leaving Long Tom and Terrence Wire to slog along as best they could. Doc made as obvious a trail as possible. He was careful, however, not to overexert himself. In a thing of this kind, either of the two women had more endurance than he could muster. They were accustomed to the altitude. They had, and he was growing more and more certain of this, spent much or all of their lives at this high altitude.

The extreme height had not bothered them. Rather, they had seemed to grow comfortable as the plane climbed into the mountain heights. It was startling but possible, and physically practical. It was probably in the final analysis no more remarkable than a dweller in the polar regions becoming accustomed to conditions there, or a black savage in the African jungle becoming at home there. Transplant the naked, heat-acclimated African to the north Greenland Eskimo country, and he would think it was a hell of a place and certainly not fare well. So there was doubtless such a thing as becoming acclimated to an extreme altitude.

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The hard thing to believe was that there could be a livable spot in these high mountains.

Doc glanced about. He had never seen more fantastic loneliness, more utter bleakness and solitude. The grotesque shaping of the naked stone that thrust up out of the snow was fabulous, but there was something about the place that froze the soul. It had a little of the glittering spectacle of Switzerland, and some of the stupendous impressiveness of Tibet, but there was a cold formidability about this that transcended anything else.

Doc Savage became more and more certain that his scheme was working: that he had let the two women escape, and now he was following them to Arriba. They knew this country. They chose their trail in a way that told him that they were avoiding the impossible going that one unfamiliar with such mountains would have been bound to encounter.

There was the direct route which they took to reach a cache.

The cache was empty when Doc Savage reached it. But he could see what it had contained. Skis. Skis with wide runners, shorter than ordinary skis. Where the runners made individual tracks in the snow, they looked clumsy. But there was nothing particularly clumsy about the way the two women used them. They set out climbing, then turned into a narrow canyon which led downward sharply.

They knew this country, all right.

SUDDENLY, Doc knew that he was close to Arriba.

There was the trail. The two women were suddenly upon it. It was a well-defined trail, a thing of marvelous engineering.

The bronze man advanced a few hundred feet, began to feel a growing amazement. The trail was cut out of solid stone everywhere. At points, there were tunnels. Nowhere was the thing fully exposed to the snow. It was cleverly designed so that the snow would not block it. It reminded the bronze man of the marvelously engineered ice tunnels and mountain paths on Pilatus and the Jungfrau in Switzerland.

There was no sign that modern tools had been used in the construction. Doc paused to examine the stone. He had considerable knowledge of geology. This stone was hard, and this path had been here for many years. For generations. Centuries probably.

He went on, utterly absorbed in the growing evidence that he was approaching something amazing. Something fantastic enough to be out of another world.

He was a little too absorbed.

For suddenly, with a sudden, ripping sound, the path on which he stood folded outward! The stone was a great pivot, so expertly balanced that his weight tilted it. There was no chance to leap to safety. The design of the thing took care of that.

As if he was being dumped out of a cup, he was poured out of the path onto the sharp slope of the mountain, into snow! He rolled. Over and over. Snow filled his mouth and eyes, swept in a flying cloud around him. It was a horrible sensation, because he had been looking, a few moments before, at a sheer cliff that dropped probably a thousand feet so abruptly that a tossed rock would have fallen the whole distance. So sheer that it

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seemed to lean outward.

He went downward helplessly, tangled with his pack, jarring against the burden of equipment he was carrying.

The ledge was not much. Not quite ten feet wide. But the stakes they were as large as fence posts and taller were inserted in holes drilled along the outer edge, so that they were like a fence. The stakes literally strained the bronze man out of the avalanche of snow.

He straightened himself out, freeing his mouth, eyes and ears of snow. He still had his pack, but not much breath. He crouched there, gasping.

Involuntarily, he went back from the sheer drop that was beyond the stakes. It must have been hundreds of feet, because it was a long time before he heard the jarring dull sounds the snow made at the end of its fall. It had tumbled through space a great distance.

Fascinated by the nearness of the chasm, he made a snowball and tossed it outward. He counted seconds while it fell. Not as far as he had thought. Only about five hundred feet. But five hundred feet was a lot of drop.

"Mr. Savage!" a voice called.

It was the girl, Tara. And she was not above. She was to the right, farther along the trail. Doc searched the moonlit cliffs above.

"Where are you?" he called, not loudly, because he knew that as small a thing as the vibration of a strong voice could start an avalanche.

She waved, and he saw her, then heard her voice distinctly.

She said, "We did not set that trap. Someone else must have done it."

"Trap?"

"You were on the trail to Arriba," she told him. "There are many such traps made by the ancient people. You fell into one. An enemy would come along the trail and be dumped over the edge to be caught on the ledge you now are. The ancient warriors would look him over and, if he was an enemy, leave him there to die or send an avalanche down to sweep him to his death."

Doc Savage, who had his human moments, was about to make some comment about the old-timers being nice fellows; then he realized it would be asinine under the circumstances. He was rearranging his thoughts when the shot came.

The shot was a sudden blast. Instantly, the girl Tara cried out sharply.

The shot echoes thumped and gobbled, seeming to get louder and louder and go on and on, before they finally chased each other off down the chasm and died.

Doc called, "You hurt?"

"No," Tara called down. "But who fired?"

There was another shot then. And following it, Bear Cub's voice saying, "We'll get you, yet, sister."

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Doc Savage dived into the snow, concealing himself. He was not much ahead of a few bullets which came down, searching. Evidently, they could not see him from above, because a voice began cursing. It was El Gorrion.

"Who's got that dynamite?" El Gorrion demanded. Then: "Well, bring it here, dammit."

There was a silence, then El Gorrion's voice, loud and directed at Doc Savage. He bellowed, "Savage to hell with you, brother!" To someone else, he snarled, "Damn you, use all the dynamite you've got. We may not get another chance like this!"

Doc looked upward. There was a great deal of snow, with loose stones arranged behind carefully balanced restraining walls of other stone. A man-made avalanche, balanced and ready for use. Even a fraction of a stick of dynamite would turn the rubble loose. And hurling down the chasm slope, it would demolish a skyscraper.

Finally Doc saw, obscure against the black wall of stone, a reddish flare that was the reflected light of a match ignited to set fire to the dynamite fuse!

Chapter X. DEATH WALKING HIGH

LONG TOM ROBERTS and Terrence Wire stood in the snow and held their breath.

The ugly gobbling echoes of the shot had chased themselves into the distances of the unnaturally bright silver night. Now, there was strange silence in the uncanny mountain heights. Not complete silence, but one broken by strange murmurings that might be other echoes and yet might not.

"Did Doc have a gun?" Wire asked finally.

Long Tom had to swallow the tension out of his throat before he could answer. "I don't think so," he said. "He gave the one he had to me. Doc tries not to carry a gun; always has."

"You'd think," Wire muttered, "that he would need one. A man who makes trouble a specialty, the way he does."

"He explained it to me one time," Long Tom said. "He said that if you carry a gun, you get to depend on it. It is like a crutch. Caught without the crutch sometime, you are helpless."

Terrence Wire cleared his throat grimly. "We're crazy to stand here and talk about stuff like that. Something has happened up there."

"You able to go on now?"

"Able or not," Wire said through his teeth, "I'm going. Come on! There's a plain trail."

They could tell, as they clambered upward with their lungs starving for air, that the bronze man had made the trail more obvious so that they could follow.

They came to the cache which had held the skis. It was a small affair that at first seemed to be a natural niche

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in the stone. But Long Tom ran a hand over the interior, said, "This thing seems to have been cut out of the rock. See what you think."

Wire examined the cache. "Sure looks like it. Feels like it, I mean. Who you figure would go to the trouble of cutting something like that out of solid rock?"

Long Tom shook his head. "I don't know. There's a lot about this thing I don't know. Most of it, in fact."

They went on.

The explosion came then! There was not the slightest doubt in their minds but that it was a blast. They even saw the flash. And the ripping sound was loud enough to seem almost against their ears.

Wire said, "Dynamite!"

"How can you tell?"

"The sound. It's different from black powder, or from TNT. I used to work with it a lot. I'm a mining man, a hard-rock engineer by profession. Or did I tell you that? I guess I didn't."

They stood there, not because they were fascinated by the explosion, but because they did not have the power to go on. The fatigue of mountain sickness was overpowering. No matter how much they wanted to go on, they simply could not. It was like hypnosis. Their will power, their intense worry, could do nothing against it.

(This is one of the common effects of altitude. The author, while hunting mountain sheep at high altitude, has had members of his party, men ordinarily of great stamina and courage, simply sit down and quit, refusing to make any effort to even return to camp, when afflicted with altitude sickness. Such instances could result in death by freezing. Many deaths of men working at extreme mountain altitudes, under seemingly eerie circumstances no visible reason for collapse and death can thus be explained Kenneth Robeson.)

Long Tom finally lunged forward, gasped, "This thing is getting us! Come on!"

They came upon the trail soon after that.

Suddenly cautious, Wire said, "I got a hunch something happened to Savage. You say you have his gun."

Long Tom produced a revolver. "Not his one he collected in that fracas back there at El Gorrion's house." He got his cold-stiffened finger through the trigger guard. "Come on."

They followed the path and were as impressed as Doc Savage had been. Long Tom was completely amazed. He gaped at the elaborate, scientific engineering of the path that was so built that it could not be affected by snow.

Terrence Wire was as impressed as Long Tom, but, somehow, not as amazed. He seemed to expect something of the kind.

"You sure," Long Tom demanded, "that you have never been up here before?"

"No, no," Wire assured him. "I just knew we would find something startling, that's all. This is only a beginning."

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"Beginning, eh?" Long Tom was impressed.

Two or three minutes later, Long Tom stopped suddenly, gripped Wire's arm. "You smell anything?"

"Dynamite been exploded right around here," Wire said. "Let's take a look."

They found the rotating trap of an affair in the path. They saw its purpose, saw also by the disturbed powder snow that it had functioned recently.

Long Tom groaned. He looked over the edge. "Doc rolled down below," he said hoarsely. "You can see where there has been a ledge. They used dynamite to start an avalanche and sweep him over the cliff!"

IT was daylight before they left the spot. Long after daylight. They waited there in a kind of forlorn hope. Not in idleness, though. They ripped up their parachutes, and made the fabric and the shroud lines into a long rope. By this, Long Tom was lowered to the brink of the chasm.

On what had been the ledge, he found three of the high stakes still standing, and they were enough to tell him what the device had been. They told him also that Doc Savage was dead, because jammed against one of the poles was the sheet of airplane-skin metal which Doc Savage had been carrying for use as a toboggan.

Long Tom sat there for a long time in a spell of cold horror. His body seemed filled with a kind of death that was physical without being mental. There was no feeling, no numbness even, and little impression of cold.

His mind was wild and frightened and bounding, like a tormented ghost going into the past, into his long association with Doc Savage. He thought of a thousand small things the bronze man had done, small and human things. He did not and this struck him as vaguely peculiar at the moment recall any of the great feats, the world-hailed discoveries for which Doc Savage was responsible. It was the small things.

The small things, back in the past. The way, for instance, that all of them had, for a long time, thought Doc Savage was incapable of perpetrating a practical joke. Then the morning when Monk Mayfair, who had a pet pig named Habeas Corpus, had found another pig in his laboratory-penthouse-apartment near Wall Street. The pig had looked exactly like Monk's Habeas except that he was minus Habeas' gigantic ears and dubious tail.

Thinking someone had mangled his pet Habeas and sure it was Ham Brooks, who had always threatened to do so Monk had gone charging into the swank and eminent Tycoon Club where Ham was delivering a dignified lecture on the legal points of the income tax. Monk had made an ass out of himself, and a fool out of Ham, who got mad.

The thing had been hilariously funny at the time, a perfect practical gag under the circumstances. To their astonishment, they had discovered that Doc himself had perpetrated it, gotten as much fun out of it as any of them.

Before that, although subconsciously knowing better, they had been a little inclined to regard the bronze man as the public looked upon him, as a kind of superior combination of mental genius and physical marvel, not exactly human in all respects.

Doc Savage was admittedly a strange fellow, though. He could not be anything else in view of his upbringing. Placed in the hands of scientists at childhood for training, as he had been, and subjected to such a rigorous

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program of mental and physical development as probably no other man had undergone, in its fully rounded aspects, was understandably a factor that made him different from other men. Outwardly, at least.

And so, Long Tom sat there in dry-eyed grief for a long time. Later, he got hold of himself and worked to the lip of the chasm and peered downward. Enough daylight penetrated to show the abysmal depth of the rent and the great pile of stone and rubble and snow which had been carried down by the avalanche set loose by the dynamite.

Long Tom used a little of the precious oxygen from the storage cylinder of his high-altitude suit. With the strength it gave him, he climbed back to join Terrence Wire.

"I thought you were never coming back," Wire told him.

"I didn't feel like it," Long Tom said hollowly.

THEY worked their way along the path that became more and more a series of tunnels in the chasm wall. They went cautiously. They made both their packs into a bundle the articles which would not break and added stones for more weight. They tossed this ahead of them, letting it jar down on the path as a test.

The precaution was wise. Unexpectedly, great beams of wood, disguised so that they exactly resembled the stone, whipped out and around and would have imprisoned them crushingly against the wall had they been closer.

"Talk about wild spots," Long Tom muttered. "All of this stuff looks as if it was built hundreds of years ago."

Terrence Wire said, "It was."

"Huh?"

Wire said, "I wish I could tell you the story as much of it as I know. But I can't. I promised not to."

Displeased and irritated by the hardships they were undergoing, Long Tom snapped, "For an ex-gangster out of El Gorrion's mob, your moral sense is suddenly damned high."

Wire held his temper. "Maybe. I have reasons, as I said before. These people these Arribans attach importance to a promise. Great importance. I figure they consider it more important than life itself. From what I've seen of the Queen Mother and Tara, they must be an amazing folk."

"You might explain," said Long Tom, "why that should have such a big effect on you."

Wire eyed him sharply.

"Love," he said, "makes the wheels go around. Backward, sometimes."

"Your wheels are turning backward?"

"You seem to think so. Maybe it is a reverse for me to be honest. But you see, I got ambitions to be an Arriban."

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"To be Tara's husband, you mean?"

"You," Terrence Wire told him enthusiastically, "said it!"

LONG TOM put out a hand suddenly and yanked Terrence Wire behind an outthrust of rock. Wire growled, "Do you have to manhandle me just because I'm in love, you dried-up "

Long Tom silenced him. "*Sh-h-h!* Shut up! Look!"

Wire stared and made out a figure sauntering along the path ahead of them. The figure was unaware of their presence. Recognizing the man, Wire grunted. "The guy who thinks a life was made to take," he muttered.

"Yeah, Bear Cub himself," Long Tom agreed. "Come on. The score I've got to settle with him has a long, sharp-pointed tail."

They hurried forward, still cautious, although they did not thump the trail ahead with the sack of rocks and equipment. They had dumped the rocks out of the pack to lighten it. Now, they could see Bear Cub's footprints in the fine snow that had sifted on to the path during the night. They kept in his footprints and felt safe.

"He was on guard, evidently," Long Tom whispered. "Either that, or "

"Hump!"

Wire gasped. "We almost thought of that too late."

Bear Cub had not been on guard. He had been checking to see if the man who was posted was on duty. The fellow was suddenly in front of them, aiming with a pistol, an automatic.

He would have shot them down then, except that he had forgotten about the intense cold at this altitude. The cold had stiffened the oil in his weapon; the gun was probably over-oiled, anyway. The safety stuck. The man jabbed at it frantically with his thumb, long enough for Long Tom to reach him. Long Tom struck the man a blow that caused Terrence Wire to stare in amazement. "You killed him!"

Long Tom said, "No, blast it! But if I felt a little stronger "

He searched the victim quickly, came up with another pair of pistols, a rifle that was standing a few feet away and a gas mask. They stowed the pistols inside their clothing, close to the skin where body heat would keep them in working order.

They listened anxiously. But the whining of the wind through the mountain peaks was enough sound to cover whatever racket they had made.

Long Tom eyed the victim, said, "For two bits, I'd roll him over the edge."

"Probably be a kindness," Wire agreed. "We leave him here, and he'll maybe freeze."

Long Tom snorted. "They say freezing is the easiest death. Let's be kind to him."

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They went on, leaving the guard behind. Belying their tough announcement to let him die, they covered the fellow with what was left of their parachutes, and the sheet-metal skin of the plane which they had brought along to use for toboggans if they ever got started down the mountains again.

They stalked Bear Cub with infinite care.

Following the man was difficult. For the trail suddenly came out into the open, or rather into a great devil's playground of boulders that seemed and as they advanced they grew more sure of this the top of a pass.

Then unexpectedly they lost Bear Cub. He was nowhere to be seen. Excited and worried, they backtracked, found his trail, and followed that.

The footprints led them to a cave. There were many tracks around the cave mouth, which had undoubtedly been made the day before. But only one set, those of Bear Cub, had been made since the snow had blown during the dawn hours.

Convinced that the cave was the hide-out of the gang, and that they had a landing field for their planes nearby, Long Tom and Wire crept forward. They had, they discovered, no matches. It was ugly business, creeping into the cave. As soon as possible, they moved over against the stone side walls, out of the backlight from the door.

Long Tom was not surprised when they were set upon. His legs were seized. He had a grisly moment when he knew very well they should not have barged headlong into the cave; when he knew, too, that they were in no condition, due to the altitude sickness, to put up a fight.

He went down, got his captor by the throat. The throat was very thick, and somehow familiar. Familiar also was the small, angry voice that could have belonged to a child.

"Monk!" Long Tom gasped.

Complete silence fell.

Terrence Wire whispered, "Get away from him, Long Tom. I'll use my gun on him!"

"Nix, nix, this is Monk Mayfair," Long Tom gasped. "He's one of the fellows we came all the way from the South Seas to find."

THERE was another silence during which no one seemed to know what to say. Then Monk, in the tiny voice that sounded so ridiculous in a man with the physical characteristics of a playful ape, said, "How many of you?"

"Me and a guy named Terrence Wire."

"Him, eh?" Monk said. "Well, you two ain't enough to lick anybody. Not at this altitude. You better keep your mouths shut and hope nobody has overheard this."

During this silence, everyone strained his ears. Evidently, they had not been overheard.

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Not being overheard puzzled Long Tom until he explored around Monk's ankles with his hands and found a chain that would have held an elephant helpless. It was shackled to Monk's ankles and to a U-shaped tunnel cut in the solid stone floor.

"Where's Ham?" Long Tom asked.

"Down a ways," Monk replied, whispering. "They keep us apart. When we try to talk to each other, they come and do their best to kick out our teeth. It's their amusement."

"Is Ham all right?"

"He is not happy," Monk said, sounding slightly pleased. "They took his fancy clothes away from him and gave him an outfit of gunny sacks to wear. You know how he likes his clothes. He's mad enough to eat snakes."

Long Tom considered the situation.

"Wire," he said, "you get Monk loose. While you're doing that, I'll go down and turn Ham loose. Then we'll figure out a campaign."

Monk said, "Wire had better have teeth like a hacksaw, if he expects to get me loose. Some guy made this chain a thousand years or so ago, and he didn't know how much steel it would take to hold a man, or something."

Long Tom muttered, "You mean we can't get you loose?"

"You got any cutting torches or hacksaws?"

"No."

"Then," said Monk, "you have a problem on your hands."

Long Tom said finally, "I'll go see Ham. Maybe we can catch the guy who has the key."

Terrence Wire put in, "Go ahead. I'll take a whack at the lock."

Long Tom crept forward. He was still without light, and although his spirits were a great deal higher, the danger was no less. Too, locating Ham in the darkness would be difficult. They had stumbled on Monk by luck. Ham was supposed to be "down a ways," which might take in a lot of territory in this stygian, bat-dream darkness.

An idea occurred to Long Tom. An old gag. They had used it before.

He got two small rocks and rubbed them together. The sound was something like an animal gnawing, or a noise that Ham, if he was chained nearby in the darkness, might logically make in stirring slightly. The gritty noises of the rocks, Long Tom turned into international code dots and dashes, which all of them could read.

He got an answer from Ham almost at once.

"W-O-T-H," Ham transmitted, also with two rocks. Which was a short way of asking, "Who the hell?"

Chapter XI. MOUNTAIN FANTASIA

LONG TOM worked twenty minutes trying to free Ham Brooks, who was suffering from nothing more serious than impatience and, as Monk had said, the indignity of having to wear gunny sacks. Long Tom failed to get Ham loose. He went back to Monk and Terrence Wire.

Monk was free, sitting on the stone floor rubbing his ankles to restore the circulation.

"How'd you get him loose?" Long Tom asked Wire in astonishment.

"Remember, I told you I was an engineer?" Wire sounded a little sheepish. "I've done some work on locks in my time. Where is Ham?"

They went to Ham, and Wire busied himself with the padlock which held the lawyer Ham was the law expert in Doc Savage's group of associates chained to the stone floor.

"I've heard of you," Ham told Wire. "I don't know that you are so smart coming back here."

"How do you mean?" Wire asked.

"The Arribans," Ham told him, "figure you are in love with Tara. They are not turning any handsprings about that."

"I don't see how it is so much hide off their noses," Wire said.

"The young men," Ham pointed out, "seem to think it's a lot of hide off their noses."

"Hm-m-m!

Competition." Wire was silent.

The cave blackness was intense. A faint patch of lighter murk against the black indicated the distant mouth of the cavern by which they had entered. Long Tom thought he could distinguish in the opposite direction another trace of slate, but he was not sure.

He asked, "Is there another mouth to this hole?"

"Sure," Monk said. "It's a passage through the mountain. The front door to Arriba."

Ham snorted. "The doorstep of the place, you might say."

"Kennel," Monk corrected.

"Eh?"

"The dog house. We've been in it for weeks."

Long Tom was puzzled. "You mean they actually keep dogs here?"

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"No. I mean the figure of speech," Monk corrected him. "These Arribans decided we were a couple of incompetents, so they stuck us out here."

In a suddenly amazed voice, Long Tom asked, "Look here you don't mean the Arribans have been holding you prisoners?"

"It hasn't been my Uncle Abner," Monk said disgustedly.

"I thought El Gorrion had you."

"No," Monk said. "Say, a bunch of guys went through here a time or two during the night. There was some shooting over on the Arriba side of the tunnel. So Ham and I naturally didn't make much racket. We figured El Gorrion had come back equipped to take the place by force. Were we right?"

Terrence Wire said grimly, "You were right."

Their breathing was harsh in the cave stillness. That and the metallic gritting of the wire Terrence Wire was using in an effort to pick the ancient lock. It was a modern enough padlock, as the age of things around them went, probably not more than thirty or forty years old.

Long Tom said, "Monk."

"Yeah?"

"There was a rock."

"Huh?"

"It talked with your voice."

"Sure," Monk said. "So what?"

Long Tom was silent so long that Monk asked him, "What's the matter with you, volts and amperes?"

"I can't get rid of the feeling somebody's crazy," Long Tom told him sourly. "Rocks don't talk."

"Was this," asked Monk, "a pale-blue, round, little rock?"

"Yes."

"It talked," Monk said. "I told it what to say."

MONK MAYFAIR, who liked to be dramatic, enjoyed Long Tom's obvious bewilderment for a few seconds. Then, deliberately aggravating, he began talking, but not about the rock.

"I don't know," Monk said, "whether anybody has told you how we got here or at least got into a spot where we needed help."

Long Tom muttered, "About that rock. How "

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"These Arribans hired El Gorrion to dispose of the secret of the speaking stone for them," Monk continued. "The Arribans needed a little civilized money, and they were going to get it that way. Only El Gorrion was not the little box of honesty they thought he was. He crossed them up. All that saved them and their speaking stone was that they hadn't turned the secret over to El Gorrion. He had to get it. When he tried, they got wise to him."

Monk was silent a moment, then clutched in reflective wonder. "It was sure a wonder El Gorrion didn't get it. He told them he would have to have the thing so he could patent it. That was logical. I think they were about to put the baby in his basket when the Queen Mother got wise. She fanned him out. Rather, she tried to. Fanning out El Gorrion is like getting rid of fleas. It's hell unless you get the right powder."

Ham, still shackled to the stone floor, made a bitter noise. "We were the flea powder."

Monk grunted in agreement. "You'll never guess how we happened to get tangled in it."

Ham growled, "How *you* got in it, you homely goat."

Monk, not disturbed by the lawyer's sarcasm, said, "It was that talking rock, see. I carried it around in my pocket for weeks not knowing what it was. I figured it was just a pretty stone."

"How'd you get it?" Long Tom demanded. "In the first place, I mean."

"My reputation as a scientist." Monk chuckled. "A reliable scientist, associated with Doc Savage."

"I don't understand."

"I don't see how anybody would understand he was a scientist," Ham said. "Misunderstand, rather."

Monk grunted sourly. "They sent the rock to me with an accompanying letter. The letter contained instructions. They wanted me to take the thing apart and pass my scientific opinion on its practical qualities and its probable value to the world. The letter of instructions got lost. I only received the stone."

He paused to ask Terrence Wire if he could be of any help on Ham's padlock. Wire muttered that he could not, that it was just a matter of time and patience.

Monk repeated, "They sent the rock to me with instructions, and the messenger lost the instructions. I think, now, that El Gorrion's men stole the instructions from the messenger, but didn't get the stone. Anyway, I got the stone, thought it was a pocket piece somebody had given me, and I carried it around. To tell the truth, though, if I had been exactly sure who had sent me the stone and why, I wouldn't have carried it the way I did."

Ham said, "Your story keeps wagging its tail too much. Can't you bob it off?"

"Sure," Monk agreed. "They called on us because they'd sent me the stone. And because they had a high opinion of my ability."

"Which opinion," Ham added, "is now so low it would have to wear stilts to walk over a worm."

Terrence Wire gasped with relief. There was a snicking sound from the padlock. "Got it," Wire said.

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LONG TOM now told them that Doc Savage was dead. He had been withholding the information, figuring that once Ham and Monk were free, they would be in better condition to stand the shock.

They listened to him with a silence that was horror, and, afterward, they did not say much because there was nothing to be said. There was only death, and it was so real and close to them that it seemed to stand with skull and scythe in the very darkness about them.

After a long time, in a low, anxious voice, Terrence Wire asked, "Will this make any difference? I mean Doc Savage was coming to rescue you, and now you two are rescued. What I'm trying to say is well, you have accomplished your objective. That is I hope you haven't. Or have you?"

Monk Mayfair spoke almost instantly for himself and the others.

"We'll see it to the end," he said. "El Gorrion killed Doc Savage. Do you think we would turn back and let him get away with that?"

Sincerely, Wire said, "I did not think so."

They spread Ham out on the stone floor of the cave and worked over him, kneading his muscles and pulling his joints like osteopathic students working over a charity patient. Ham grunted and groaned and called them unpleasant names; but when they let go him, he was limber and able to walk or even run.

"From the shooting during the night," Monk said, "I think El Gorrion is tackling Arriba. We better wade right in ourselves."

Terrence Wire had one comment to make. He made it disconsolately. "Fine lot of equipment we've got to fight those birds. They came prepared, I'm telling you. They've been preparing for months."

Sunlight outside was very bright. They waited back in the cave mouth gloom until their eyes became accustomed to the glare. Long Tom and Terrence Wire did not wait patiently. They were anxious to see what this mysterious place of Arriba looked like, and all they could see through the cavern mouth was mountain sky as blue as a safety-razor blade, and doubtless filled with cold that would cut like the blade.

They moved forward.

"All right, you birds," Monk said. "Get ready for the spectacle."

IT was not what they had expected. In one respect, Arriba was more than that. It was different. They had subconsciously been looking forward, all of them, to something in the nature of a volcanic crater heated by subterranean hot springs; some such freak of nature which would explain how the Arribans got food up here. But there was nothing of the sort spread out before them.

There was, instead, a fabulous work of stone a fortress against the elements, against the bitter cold and howling blizzards.

The architecture was Incan, or pre-Incan. At least, nowhere was the type of stone arch employing a keystone used. All openings were beamed with flat slabs of obsidian mountain stone.

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In general form, Arriba was, in miniature example, a group of very black match boxes placed in a fairy rock garden. A wonder place of grotesquely shaped, sometimes beautifully gnarled and twisted mountain stone. And all was blanketed over with ice and white snow in which there was not a footprint.

"Look." Long Tom pointed. "Greenhouses."

"Something like that," Monk admitted. "They have a whiz-ding system of heating water by solar lenses. You wouldn't think, at first, that it is practical. But the sun always shines up here, and the guy who invented the thing was a wizard. It heats the whole colony, and warms their greenhouses."

Long Tom stared. They were a little higher than most of Arriba, able to look down on the roof tops. They could see that, while the walls of the buildings were stone, the roofs were of some transparent material that resembled glass.

Pointing, Long Tom asked, "Glass? They have glass here?"

Monk nodded. "A quartz product. Something like our so-called health glass that passes the invisible rays of light as well as the visible ones." The homely chemist looked at the electrician strangely. "This glass was worked out ten or fifteen centuries ago."

Long Tom frowned. "You keep talking in terms of hundreds of years. You mean this is a lost race of people or something?"

"Hermits is more like it."

"Eh?"

"This place," Monk said, "probably was one of the high cities of the Incas in the beginning. I don't know what tribe of the Incas built it, but probably it had a religious significance. They were sun worshipers. The sun does everything here. You can see how the houses are open at the roof. The sun heats the places, as I said, and does just about everything else."

They picked a route which seemed to offer the least chance of being discovered and started working their way downward.

Monk added, "These Arribans aren't pure Inca."

"How come?"

"Oh, a foreign exploring party barged onto the place a couple of hundred years or more ago. I guess the guy leading the party was some kind of an advanced thinker. He set out to stay here and take advantage of the Inca culture, add his own, avoid participating in wars, quarrels, politics, and the other mental boils of humanity, and really get something extra in the way of a human economy. He darned well succeeded, I would say."

It was bitterly cold. Not mere zero weather, but at least twenty degrees below. Monk and Ham, who had barely enough clothing to keep them alive in the cave, began to turn blue.

"I got an idea," Terrence Wire said.

"Yeah?"

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"We've got one halfway friend in there," Wire explained. "Tara. I suggest we find her, if we can, and go on from there."

Monk was very interested. "Tara your friend, eh? You know, I wouldn't mind having a few friends like that."

Chapter XII. SIEGE OF ARRIBA

THERE were two shots and a cry that might have been elation or agony. The noises came from somewhere in the remarkable array of buildings, and they were very faint.

Long Tom Roberts stopped the others.

"We're rushing right in to take the bull by the horns," he said. "I don't know if that is so smart."

"Taking him by the horns is my method," said Monk fiercely. Monk liked to fight, and he was now cold enough that he needed one badly.

"Taking him by the tail," Long Tom said, "might be better."

"Eh?"

"We might twist his tail easier than his horns. Especially if he turns out to be a big bull."

"Meaning?"

"Their two planes. Where are they?"

Monk snapped his fingers as hard as he could, which was not hard, stiff as they were with the cold. "Over beyond the place, there's a level spot. I'll bet they landed there."

There was no more comment. They turned left. Monk and Ham had a general idea of the lay of the ground. Long Tom and Terrence Wire handed them what clothing they could spare, to fend off the intense cold.

They passed close to a number of the black boxes which were the strange buildings of the strange Arriba. The stone, they saw, was shiny. It was not unlike glass. The buildings were not as large as they had seemed.

Ham suddenly went low in the snow, breathed, "There they are! Both planes! Or two planes, anyway."

"They're El Gorrion's ships," Long Tom said.

They remained flat and motionless in the snow for some time, long enough to discover that there seemed to be two armed guards near the planes.

"How'll we do this?" Wire muttered.

Monk scowled. "They're not going to let us walk up there, that's a cinch." He shivered. "A little more of this, and I'll be frozen into bullet-proof condition."

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Tara spoke quietly behind them. "Show yourselves," she said. "Then start shooting."

A wild cat jumping on their backs would not have gotten more emotional results. Long Tom spread out convulsively in the snow and clutched handfuls of the flakes. Both Ham and Terrence Wire came convulsively to their feet. Monk, who could have been shot without showing emotion, lay quite still for a while, then slowly rolled over, looked at the girl.

Monk made a remark which was classic under the circumstances. "Something nice has finally happened to us," he said.

In her so-careful English, the girl said, "Start shooting at them, please!"

There was such imperative need in her voice that Monk and the others stared at each other.

Long Tom growled, "All right! Let's not ask questions!"

He took deliberate aim with his revolver and fired. The distance was too great for a revolver shot, but Long Tom made a snarling noise when he saw that he had missed.

Instantly, the two plane guards popped out of their ships, unlimbered their rifles, and stared for the source of the shot.

"The rest of you haven't got guns," Long Tom said. "So get back. Keep under cover. I don't know what this is about, but I'll do my best with these lugs."

Tara said, "Show yourselves."

"Huh?" Long Tom stared at her. "You trying to get us shot?"

The girl seemed to search for a word that would explain what she meant.

"Decoy," she said finally.

THEY understood what it was then. Ham and Monk and Wire leaped to their feet, emitted squalls that would carry to the two guards and plunged forward. They were, however, sensible enough to dive behind boulders that would turn bullets.

The two riflemen began shooting. The brittle reports of their guns whacked off the surrounding peaks. Long Tom's revolver was a series of rending noises closer at hand. For a few minutes, the place became a miniature battlefield.

The pair of riflemen seemed extremely anxious to get away from the immediate vicinity of their plane.

"There must be dynamite or bombs or something explosive in the ships," Monk growled.

"Show yourselves!" Tara gasped.

She tried to set the example by leaping up recklessly. Monk seized her and hauled her down. They kept under cover. Ham kept peering toward the planes.

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"There he is!" Ham exploded suddenly.

"Down, you dope," Monk snarled. "Whoever it is, don't give him away!"

Long Tom, conserving his cartridges and shooting only after the most careful aiming, saw the figure also. It was so expertly disguised that he almost failed to locate it. The figure, a man, was all in white, blending with the snow, and working toward the planes.

The man in white reached one of the planes and vanished inside quickly. He was gone only a moment. Then he reappeared, went to the other ship.

Long Tom grinned. The man was taking essential parts off the planes and opening fuel cocks to the gas tanks, disabling the ships.

It was a startling feat of boldness, stealth and quick execution.

Long Tom began to have a startling premonition.

He was sure of it when the raider in white left the ships, made a successful dash for safety, and waved just before vanishing among the stones.

"Doc Savage!" he gasped incredulously.

They took to their heels then. They ran as fast as they could, which was not very fast, the altitude still having a strong effect on them. As soon as they were safe the pair of plane guards showed no disposition to chase them they stopped, lay down and fought for breath.

Doc Savage soon appeared. The bronze man looked more tired than Long Tom or the others had ever seen him look. He was somewhat battered.

Long Tom goggled at the white garment Doc was wearing, fashioned from parachute fabric.

"Blazes!" he said. "We've made a lot of stupid guesses in our time. But I seem to have made one that takes the prize."

"Meaning?" Doc Savage asked curiously.

"On that cliff. Wire and I didn't see a way you could have escaped. But you just went over the ledge with a parachute, didn't you?"

Doc nodded. "There was not much to it. It was not even necessary to jump. There was an updraft of air strong enough to yank open the 'chute and cut my speed of descent to a great degree."

Tara came quickly to the bronze man's side. "The plane will not fly?" she asked. He nodded and exhibited the small parts he had removed.

Long Tom and the others had regained their breath. They resumed the retreat.

Tara led the way toward the cluster of black buildings that was Arriba.

"I don't get this," Monk said. "What's going on?"

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Doc Savage explained the situation. He had climbed the mountainside, skirting the cliff, and managed to head off Tara and the remarkable old lady. They had joined forces. There was nothing else to be sensibly done, because El Gorrion's men had started their attack on Arriba.

"Then they are inside the place?" Monk demanded. "That shooting we heard means they're meeting resistance, as military men say?"

"Yes, they are fighting inside."

Long Tom eyed Tara approvingly. "You're being a big help to us."

She said, "It was . . . my persuasion . . . which persuaded them to call . . . on you for help . . . in the beginning."

Long Tom grinned. He liked her hesitant, extremely careful way of speaking. As a matter of fact, Long Tom found himself liking everything, now that Doc Savage was alive. Thinking Doc had been dead had been a tremendous error on his part. And like men who have made a huge mistake, his mental-escape mechanism kept trying to consider it as a great joke. A gigantic joke on himself. A more-than-a-little horrible joke.

"How," asked Long Tom, "does the Queen Mother feel about this?"

The girl winced. "I did not ask her."

THE pleasantly balmy, yet delightfully crisp, air inside the strange black block buildings was a surprise. It was as if there were ultra-efficient air conditioning. But the air was not under pressure, not charged with oxygen. It was the same rarefied air that was outside on the mountain tops. Pure and brittle, as biting as the mountain tips.

Interest in their surroundings wiped out, for the next few moments, thoughts of danger, of anything but the strange passages and rooms through which they passed. There was, first of all, the locking arrangement of the great stone door. The door itself was nearly a yard thick. There were two doors, one a few feet inside the other, both obviously air-tight. The builders seemed to have known the insulating value of dead air spaces.

Long Tom sank suddenly to a knee, ran a foot over the passage floor. It was rounded, worn by feet. As hard as that stone was, it had taken many footsteps to grind out those grooves.

They heard an explosion then. It was very muffled.

Tara said, "They . . . blast down . . . doors."

What she meant, the group soon discovered. At intervals, the passages were closed with great stone doors, none of them less than a yard thick. They moved on grooves which were arranged with a simple but effective system of counterbalanced weights.

Tara and Doc Savage seemed to have definite ideas of where they were going.

The surroundings became more impressive. The rooms were more vast, the supporting columns more massive.

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"This must be the palace end of the place," Ham decided.

"It was . . . originally . . . the abode of the highest potentates," Tara said slowly.

Ham grinned at her. She had a funny way of speaking English. She took the same care with the smallest words that she applied to the largest.

They came then to the presence of the Queen Mother, and Tara made a speech. The speech was in the remarkably musical tongue of the Arribans, and it was seriously vehement. The old lady was argumentative, worried.

IT turned out that the argument was about the red vests. The vest angle did not develop immediately.

First, at least a dozen old men were called in. They were old men, but they had the same humorous wrinkled faces as the old lady, the Queen Mother. There was no family resemblance between them, no evidence of inbreeding. But there was plenty of evidence of scientific physical culture.

Their skins were very clear, and none of their bodies were fat. They had a certain general manner of carriage, indicating that they took the same exercises in the same way. Signs of regimented physical instruction. Their skins were darkly golden. Many of them had about the same complexion as Doc Savage. They looked remarkably intelligent, as a group.

Their features were not exactly Anglo-Saxon, neither were they native. Not Incan, either. A mixture of races, rather, as if a careful blending had been carried out over the centuries. That, they later learned, was the explanation. From time to time, at long intervals, outside blood had been brought to the colony. Arriba was not out of touch with the world. Its people knew what went on outside, although great pains had been taken to keep existence of Arriba a secret.

Actually, there was perfectly modern equipment in the place. Radio apparatus, receiving only, for instance. And modern medical equipment, a well-stocked library of up-to-date literature.

The food was not confined entirely to what was produced under careful forced culture in the great greenhouses. Luxuries were brought in from the outer world. It was to get money to make such purchases that it had been decided to dispose of the speaking-stone secret.

All of that came out gradually in the course of time.

What developed immediately was that Doc and the others were given red vests.

Ham's first inclination was to laugh. Then he saw the serious expressions on the faces of Tara, the Queen Mother and the old men, who apparently were some kind of high council.

Ham straightened out his face and asked, "What is the idea?"

Tara stared at him. "Do you not . . . know the meaning . . . of the vests?"

Long Tom shook his head. "They got me. Little Jones wore one. And you and " he stared at the old men, who were also attired in the red vests "the rest of them here seem to have red vests. But if they have a meaning, it throws me."

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"They are a badge," Tara said, "of Arriba."

"Yeah?" Long Tom said, not impressed.

"For generations . . . no Arriban has been without them . . . during his or her waking hours," Tara added.

"Yeah?" repeated Long Tom, still less impressed.

He was thinking that this smacked of barbaric mumbo jumbo. And he was disgusted, because Tara and the other Arribans had been impressing him as individuals of very high intelligence.

Tara, a little angry, spoke English without her usual hesitations.

"Those vests," she said, "are bulletproof."

"Huh?" Long Tom was profoundly startled and stared at the girl's vest in amazement. He had not imagined the garment was anything of the kind.

"Also," said Tara, "the material . . . is an excellent antiseptic and germicide. Merely applying the fabric . . . to a wound . . . is the best treatment . . . you could give it."

Long Tom's mouth fell open.

"But principally," finished Tara, "you will need the vests . . . to go about Arriba safely. They will mark you . . . as accepted into Arriba."

A man, an Arriban, arrived without formality, and somewhat breathless. He said something excited.

Tara turned to Doc and the others. "El Gorrion," she explained, "wants a conference . . . to offer us terms."

Chapter XIII. THE STONE SPOKE DEATH

EL GORRION had a peculiar faculty. There was a kind of bawdy democracy in his gang, in which he was sassed, argued with and even cursed to his face. This behavior on the part of his men was not disrespect. It was not much more than a habit on their part. El Gorrion did not try to discourage it. Possibly, he was wise, because some of his associates, while trying to be insulting sometimes, came forth with an idea which was good.

El Gorrion had another faculty, necessary under the circumstances. He could put a stop to the backtalk and sass with a word or a scowl. His change of manner did the job. That, and what his men knew about him. Even the bloodthirsty Bear Cub was a lamb alongside El Gorrion when the master had red in his eye.

At the moment, El Gorrion and most, but not all, of his men were ensconced in a room in one of the square black stone structures which made up Arriba. The air-conditioning set-up had been switched off by the defenders of Arriba, so that it was very cold in the room. This did not bother them, except that it was an aggravation.

"Damn it!" said Bear Cub, his breath spurting steam, "I think you made a mistake, offering to palaver with

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them."

"Palaver?" said El Gorrion, apparently not knowing what the word meant.

"Slang for gab," Bear Cub explained. "Chin, confab, chat, talk, gossip, confabulation, and so on."

"Your mouth is too big," El Gorrion said, "for your mind. Less talk and more brain would help you."

Bear Cub snorted.

The men watched one of their companions arranging a charge of dynamite, the object of which was to blow down another of the set of remarkably heavy double doors which seemed to be the rule in the Arriban buildings. These were the next thing to steel, and there were plenty of them.

Dynamite would shatter the doors, of course, but the difficulty was that they did not have enough dynamite to carry out the amount of blasting that was beginning to seem necessary.

A man came in. He was one of the guards from the two planes, and he started to speak uneasily.

El Gorrion made a quick gesture, and produced a pencil and paper.

There followed a rather remarkable dialogue.

Remarkable because it was all written.

"Did you make sure?" wrote El Gorrion.

"Both planes are ruined," scribbled the excited guard.

"Ruined how?"

"Parts out of the ignition."

"Who did it?"

"Don't know."

"Where were you when it happened?"

The man made vague, baffled gestures with his pencil, as if he was trying to think up a good lie.

So El Gorrion hit him. Hit him in a way that did not seem very hard, but which lifted the man so that first his heels then the tips of his toes were off the floor. He fell backward straightly and stiffly. A man it was Wilfair Wickard put out a toe quickly and kept the man's head from cracking the floor.

El Gorrion blew on his knuckles.

"If he wasn't one of our two pilots," he said dryly, "I would shoot his brains out from between his ears. I really would."

No one said anything. It was no time for anyone to say anything. They all knew that.

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WHEN the Arribans appeared for the conference, El Gorrion surveyed them with contempt and some disappointment. Neither Tara nor the Queen Mother was among them, and El Gorrion could tell by looking at them that they were not important individuals in the unusual economy of Arriba.

The conferees were not leaders, and El Gorrion was not pleased. In the back of his mind, as a last resort, had been the thought of seizing the conferees as hostages. He could see that they had foreseen this and sent persons who were not important. Probably, these Arribans had been told of what might happen to them and had volunteered.

El Gorrion made a speech that was short. "*Habla V. Espanol?*" he asked.

"No, we speak English," one of the conferees said.

"All right, you guys," said El Gorrion, "I want the talking stones, as everybody calls them. I want blueprints, or drawings, or whatever you have got to show how they are made."

"And in return?"

"There won't be any return. I'll get out. I'll take my men."

"That is all you will give us?" asked one of the Arribans.

"That ain't nothing to what I'll give you if you don't come across."

The Arribans were silent for a while. "This is an ultimatum?" one said finally.

"I'm just telling you how it stands."

The Arribans held a conference. Then they told El Gorrion, "We will have to confer with the Queen Mother and our older men."

El Gorrion nodded. "Your old men had better be smart, believe me. I'll take this place to pieces if you don't come across. I can do it, too."

He hesitated a moment.

"You've got me in a hell of a spot," he added. "And a hell of a spot for yourselves. I know you got to my planes some way and fixed them so they can't fly. All right I wasn't going to use the planes to clean out this place, anyway. So that won't save your necks."

The Arribans took this without expression and departed. They were not gone long.

Only one Arriban came back. He was a young man with a strained manner.

He said, "We refuse."

Without a change of expression, El Gorrion turned to Bear Cub and asked, "Do you care to do anything about that Bear Cub?"

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Also without any facial movement, Bear Cub drew a revolver and shot the Arriban who had brought the refusal. He shot him twice and missed a third bullet which ricocheted off the floor and a wall, came back and made them dodge. The Arriban whimpered a little as he died. El Gorrion cursed the ricocheting bullet.

What came, now, seemed to puzzle El Gorrion's men.

El Gorrion said loudly, "All right, you birds. We are in the north wing of this place. There are two other wings. One in the south, one in the west."

He let that soak in.

He added, even more loudly, "The Arribans are in the west wing. I know more about this place than they think I do, and they'll be in the west wing. So we attack the west wing. We bust down these doors with dynamite the way we've been doing."

He looked around at his men.

"We head for the west wing," he repeated.

Then he made sharp gestures indicating no one was to make any comment.

From a pocket, he took a sheaf of notes which he had already prepared.

The notes, all reading the same, said:

Don't say anything. They will be using the speaking stones. They will go to the south wing thinking we believe that is where they ain't. The ventilating system delivers air to the south wing. I have located the main trunk of the ventilating ducts. We will put poison gas into it. They do not have masks.

He stared at his men and showed his teeth gleefully.

"Come on," he said in a loud, false voice. "Let's take that west wing."

Chapter XIV. THE TALKING-ROCK TRICK

LONG TOM ROBERTS looked, pop-eyed with astonishment, at a speaking stone.

"So that's what they are!" he gasped.

Monk Mayfair asked him, "Do you know anything about sonic engineering?"

"Huh?"

"The science of sound."

"I know what the words 'sonic engineering' mean," Long Tom snapped. "But what I want to know is how that blasted thing works. It ain't possible!"

THE SPEAKING STONE

Monk chuckled. "Sound," he said, "is what?"

"Noise."

"I mean scientifically."

"Vibrations."

"How do they travel through the air?"

"Wave motion!" Long Tom snapped. "What kind of first-grade lesson is this?"

"What is wave motion?"

"Huh?"

"There you are," said Monk. "People say, 'Oh, well, sound is wave motion. Electricity is stuff that goes through wires. Gravity holds you to the ground. Love makes you do goofy things.'" He snorted. "Actually, we know very little of the physics of sound."

Long Tom scowled.

"An elastic medium is necessary for transmission of sound," Monk continued. "In other words, the compressions and rarefactions caused by the vibrating body producing sound are passed on from one layer of the medium to another, and transmitted to a distant point."

"So what?"

Monk said, "Another thing I want to point out: The study of alternating mechanical motions connected with sound is very similar, analogous in many respects, to the study of alternating electrical currents. In other words, there are startling similarities."

"Now you're getting clear like mud," Long Tom said. "And don't start telling me what electricity is. I have put in a lifetime studying the stuff, and I don't thirst for more knowledge right now."

Monk grinned. "What I'm telling you is that these people found a new medium that conducts sound waves."

Long Tom was getting very impatient. "So what? Lots of things transmit sound. Water carries it. Air. Wood. Lots of things."

Monk pointed at the speaking stone. "You interested in knowing how that works, or not?"

"Go ahead," Long Tom said, "if you're trying to explain the stone."

"These people," said Monk, "found out that ordinary sound is carried on a medium similar to the medium which carries radio waves. In other words, there are two parts to every sound. One part you hear, and the other part you don't until it is converted."

The homely chemist picked up the speaking stone.

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"This thing," he said, "picks up sound where you didn't think there was any sound. In other words, it is sensitive to the ether wave of sound it isn't exactly an ether wave, but I'll call it that which are the hitherto unknown result of the vibration of bodies which produce sound. These waves travel a lot farther, a whole lot farther, than ordinary sound."

Long Tom stared at the device.

"We just listened to it," he said, "and heard it repeat every word that El Gorrion and his men said. How come? You mean it was this ether sound, as you call it, that we were listening to?"

"Right."

"How far," demanded Long Tom, "can you hear sounds with that thing?"

"Miles." Monk grinned. "Through the sides of buildings, stone walls, water, you can hear it."

THE magnitude of the thing seemed to hit Long Tom suddenly. He took a step backward, eyeing the speaking stone as if it was something that might jump and bite. He raked fingers through his hair.

"The thing is immense," he muttered. "No wonder El Gorrion is going to all this trouble!"

Doc Savage was examining the speaking stone. This one was much larger than the small, pale-blue, round rock which had been carried by unfortunate little Jones when he came to the South Seas island of Jinx.

Size of the device made its mechanism more apparent. But it was too complicated for a brief examination to disclose its secret.

There was one obvious peculiarity. There was no loudspeaker in the thing. No loudspeaker of the radio type. The conversion of sound from the inaudible wave form to the audible one was accomplished, in the final stage, by a type of quartz vibrating medium.

Doubtlessly, the quartz was a type similar to Rochelle salt, which has the property of changing its linear dimensions when subjected to electrostatic stress. In this case, it was not electrostatic stress which caused the change, but the form which these Arribans had discovered.

(The peculiar reaction of quartz and Rochelle salt to electrical currents, and conversely, to sound waves is, of course, a phenomena long known to science and widely used. The phenomena, known as piezoelectricity, was discovered by P. Curie in 1880. One of the common uses to which modern science has put the phenomena is the common crystal microphone, widely used by radio stations, in microphones for public address systems. In almost every amateur's radio station is a crystal mike which functions because of this phenomena.)

Long Tom scratched his head again.

"Why," he asked, "do the gadgets all look like stones?"

Tara herself explained that. "For the same reason," she said, "that the chassis . . . of a radio is grounded . . . as nearly as I can explain it. There are necessary insulating properties . . . in the stone it is a composition, not a stone, incidentally which encases the apparatus."

THE SPEAKING STONE

Doc Savage had said nothing. It was his habit not to enter a conversation in which the pertinent points were being brought out by others. He was impressed. He had been impressed in the beginning, back on Jinx Island, when he had first inspected the gadget. He had understood then, what it must be. What it had to be.

But there was one puzzling thing. The stone in the South Seas had spoken with Monk's voice. That was impossible. A powerful short-wave radio station would be necessary to transmit from this point to be able to reach the South Seas.

He said, "The stone Jones had spoke with Monk's voice in the South Seas. Why?"

Tara nodded. "That is . . . one of the faults of the thing. Or perhaps it is not a fault, because we can stop it. But the device has . . . what you might call . . . a feedback action within itself. The sound vibrations . . . in the ether-sound medium . . . go through a process of feedback buildup . . . until the device suddenly repeats what was last said. It is a kind of echo . . . except that it repeats itself . . . at intervals . . . for days."

"Then," put in Long Tom, "what Renny heard was this repeating echo?"

Tara nodded again. "Yes."

Terrence Wire interrupted by stepping forward. "Look, we're here in the west wing. That's where you all heard El Garrion say he thought we were. We better go to the south wing. Give us more time to figure out something."

Tara said, "Yes, we should go to the south wing."

There had been, during the time they were talking, a series of jarring and muffled blasts indicating that El Gorrion's group was working on the stone doors leading toward the west wing. The Arribans exchanged glances, and the Queen Mother, whose word obviously carried a great deal of weight, nodded and gave the word.

THEY fled toward the south wing, which was the most elaborate part of Arriba. The corridor ceilings moved upward until they gave the place the vaulted impressiveness of a cathedral. The floors were less worn, as if the place had not been used as much as the rest of Arriba.

They got away slowly from the sounds that El Gorrion's dynamite operations were making, although they could still feel the thudding vibrations through the floor. The massive construction of the place was impressive. Monk and Ham, who had spent some time in Egypt, and were familiar with the pyramids, remarked on the similarity of the construction of ancient Egypt with the people who had created Arriba.

That reminded Long Tom Roberts of something.

"Hey, this language," he said. "It has been puzzling me, and I've meant to ask somebody about it. What kind of a language is it?"

Tara answered him. "Arriban."

"Huh?"

"The perfect language."

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"I don't get you," Long Tom told her. "The language sounds astonishingly easy."

"It is. It should be. My people have spent . . . two hundred years making it the perfect universal language." She smiled at him. "You see, every race, every nationality, would find the language . . . as easy-sounding and as easy to speak . . . as you have found it. It is a language founded . . . on the muscular structure of the voice organs of the human body. All of the sounds are . . . easy sounds for those organs to make."

"I see."

"This language," Tara finished, "is like laughter. Everyone can do it."

The girl herself was smiling, and Long Tom became so intrigued with her beauty that he forgot about the wonders of the Arriban language. There were wonders, too; the stuff sounded much easier than Esperanto or any of the other attempts at a universal language.

They came into the south wing, into large, pleasant rooms that were a little blue from the gray winter light that penetrated through the quartz glass. The furniture was like the language, somewhat; anyone would consider it comfortable.

Monk and Ham, suddenly conscious of their long period of captivity and that they were exceedingly tired, sank into chairs.

Long Tom eyed them thoughtfully. He was tired himself. He touched his swollen, painful lips.

"Seem to smell something," he muttered. "Guess it's the danged medicine I smeared on my lips. Smells like roses, though."

Tara told him smilingly, "You smell the roses in our greenhouses. We raise many roses at this time of year."

"THEIR roses," said El Gorrion expansively, "will be the death of them."

He finished his hurrying around, superintending the releasing of the poison gas into the ventilating system which supplied Arriba with its warmed and filtered mountain air. The gas, contained in metal flasks similar to the small acetylene gas tanks, was being introduced into the ventilating ducts with all the haste possible.

Everyone was wearing gas masks, but they were of a type permitting conversation not loud, but of sufficient volume to enable a conversation to be conducted at a distance of several yards.

Bear Cub said, "Roses, eh? I seem to smell roses."

"It's the gas," El Gorrion explained. He chuckled, the speaking diaphragm of his gas mask making ugly clacking noises from the force of his mirth. "I knew about the roses they raise here this time of year. The gas has a slight odor that will warn you of its presence. That's about all you notice about it before you get too much of it. So I put rose perfume in the gas."

No one said anything.

He looked around at them. "Slick, eh?"

THE SPEAKING STONE

Everyone hastily nodded, or otherwise lost no time indicating applause or approval. It was one of those times when El Gorrion was all leader and had better be treated as one. All snake and a yard wide, as one of the men muttered to himself. Or he thought it was to himself, until El Gorrion glared and demanded, "What was that?" His eyes were small and ugly behind the gas-mask glass.

"I said," lied the mutterer, "that I'm danged if I see how you get such ideas, when mine are so punk."

El Gorrion felt better.

"Come on," he snarled. "The gas will have them by now. Let's go on in."

They began lighting dynamite fuses to charges which had already been laid. Two more doors went down, not without difficulty; one required a second charge.

Unexpectedly, they found that no more doors were fastened against them. That puzzled them. Then they discovered two Arribans stretched out on the floor.

"Ah," said El Gorrion. "These two guys were fastening the doors against us."

Wilfair Wickard, who had not been in the front rank of the party at any time, caught El Gorrion's arm.

"Look, maybe we'd better give that gas time to work," he said.

El Gorrion stared at him. "You're yellow enough to spit canaries. But at that, it's not a bad idea." He turned his head, said, "Take it easy, the rest of you. This gas works fast, but it won't hurt to give it some time."

They eventually halted in a large room to kill time. One of the men glanced up at the quartz-glass ceiling. It was like a dome, seen from below. There was no metal interspersed anywhere in the glass, nothing but the transparent material itself for support. It was impressive, even in a day of modern structural miracles.

"Sparrow," he said, "what we gonna do with this place, now that we've got it?"

"Lay off the Sparrow stuff," said El Gorrion. "Call me Gorrion. I never did like the Sparrow stuff."

"Sure, sure! What do we do with the place?"

El Gorrion snorted. "What do you wanta do with it? Up here on the mountain like it is. To hell with it."

The man looked around. "Such a place! We oughta do something about it."

"That speaking-stone device," El Gorrion advised him, "will make us money by the tubful. We can sell the thing. We can use it ourselves. Hell, you can see what it would do. You can tune in on any kind of secret conference."

The man who was impressed by Arriba rubbed his jaw. "Anyhow, it's a shame to let a place like this go to waste, now that everybody is dead."

Someone laughed. "It's a shame some of them Arriban gals didn't survive."

They went on, then, to see just what the gas had done.

Chapter XV. THE CLAIRVOYANT

WHEN El Gorrion saw Doc Savage lying on the stone floor in the diamond-tinted light that came through the transparent ceiling, he was pleased. He was so pleased that he emitted a yell which blew off his gas-mask mouthpiece. He recovered it hastily and adjusted it. Afraid all the gas was not yet out of the place, he did not laugh again. He was so scared, in fact, that he was a little green. There was a chance he had inhaled some of the lethal vapor.

Not for fully a minute did El Gorrion speak. By then, he was convinced he was unharmed.

He waved an arm.

"Spread out," he directed. "Here's Savage. See if you can find the others."

His men spread through adjacent rooms. Bear Cub and two others reappeared hastily, tried to convey information by waving their arms, then dashed forward.

"We got 'em all with the gas," Bear Cub reported. "That Monk and Ham are in yonder. So is Long Tom and Wire."

"That's swell," said El Gorrion. "Get in there and start searching them. We've gotta find the dope we want on those speaking stones."

He watched the two dash back into the room where they had found Monk and Ham and the others.

Then El Gorrion turned and sank to a knee and grasped Doc Savage and was in turn grasped by the bronze man.

Surprise was then a thing like a gleeful monster in the room. In the other rooms also, judging from the howling and bellowing.

Doc Savage came to his feet as he took hold of El Gorrion. Came up and over, and lifted the man bodily. El Gorrion probably was not made helpless by the bronze man's clutch, although that was not gentle. Amazement did something to paralyze him for a moment.

There were two other men in the room, and Doc managed to slam El Gorrion against them, piling one down on the floor. The other man endeavored to walk backward out of the mêlée, at the same time trying to draw his gun.

Doc released El Gorrion, then hit him flat-handed against the gas mask. El Gorrion sat down foolishly cross-legged, gagging and hacking at a mixture of gas-mask mouthpiece and teeth.

Monk was squalling somewhere. Monk liked noise with his fights. There was no pattern to his howling. He would just whoop, holler and yell for the glee of it.

Bear Cub burst out of one of the rooms, running so hard that his feet slid on the floor as if he wore skates. He skidded off for one of the doors.

THE SPEAKING STONE

Long Tom Roberts followed hot on Bear Cub's trail. Long Tom's hands were empty, a thing which Bear Cub did not seem to know. Or maybe it was the thing in Long Tom's heart that was scaring Bear Cub.

Wilfair Wickard seemed to be screaming somewhere, without reason. No one appeared to be harming him, for his noise was not interrupted. He sounded utterly scared.

Doc Savage worked on the two men who had been with El Gorrion. The bronze man was having what, for him, was a great deal of trouble. Ordinarily, odds of three to one, with surprise on his side, would not have bothered him. But he had been a long time without enough sleep, and the altitude hampered him. El Gorrion and his men must have been using oxygen shots which had kept up their strength. Their gas masks were also equipped with self-contained oxygen supply.

El Gorrion rolled on the floor, fighting his own face with both hands, trying to clear the smashed mask.

Doc reached the man trying to draw a gun, got the fellow's arm. He used a trick that did not need much strength, a drop to one knee and a twist which sent the man into the air, then down on head and shoulders! Doc then chopped expertly at the man's temple. The fellow became as slack on the floor as a sleeping dog.

The one man who was still in condition to do much came half to his feet; then, with his head twisted over his shoulder to watch Doc, he began running away. He ran straight into Tara without seeing her! Or almost into her, because she brought him down with a whack across the skull from one of the bolalike gadgets which she could use so well.

Tara did not hit the man hard enough. He crawled away, got up, tried to run. Tara threw her gadget, brought the man down.

Monk dashed into the room, which was a kind of elaborate central hall. Monk went from one door to another, popping in and out. He seemed disgusted.

"War's over, dang it," he complained.

He came to El Gorrion, who was still in misery with his teeth and the mask fragments.

"Feel fine, huh?" Monk asked him.

El Gorrion made a gargling noise.

"That's great," said Monk. "You wanta fight some more, maybe?"

El Gorrion had no comment.

"Know what happened?" Monk asked.

El Gorrion obviously didn't.

Monk told him, "Doc thought of that trick of perfuming the gas with roses. So he had Tara and these other Arribans shut off the ventilating system to this part of the place. Then we all played like we had been gassed."

Conversation appeared to be something El Gorrion didn't care for.

"Sucked you in, didn't we?" Monk inquired.

THE SPEAKING STONE

El Gorrion suddenly got up and tried to run. His objective was a revolver someone had lost on the floor. Monk hit him. Monk took his time, even blew on his knuckles first, and the blow was hard enough to make El Gorrion turn a very remarkable handspring.

"Some acrobat, ain't he?" Monk remarked amiably.

MONK had not gotten full satisfaction out of the final fight, but he did get more pleasure out of the developments that wound up the affair.

First, he found Habeas Corpus. Habeas was Monk's pet pig, and he was fat and contented. The Arribans had been taking better care of Monk's hog than they had taken of Monk. They were the Arribans were very apologetic about this, now, but Monk was satisfied. He thought a lot of his runt hog. Ham's pet chimpanzee, Chemistry, was with the pig, which did not please Monk, to hear Monk complain about it, but was very agreeable with Ham. They had been wondering what had happened to their pets.

Second development was the method Doc Savage used for disposing of El Gorrion and his men and also insure that the existence of Arriba would continue a secret.

Doc did this by drugging El Gorrion and the others, and arranging to convey them by plane to upstate New York, which would be a long trip, but worth it. In upstate New York, Doc maintained a unique criminal-curing institution which had been in existence a long time, but which was not advertised to the public because its methods were a little unorthodox.

Patients consigned to the institution were invariably criminals. They received brain operations which wiped out all memory of past. After that, they were trained, taught trades and turned loose. The treatment had a batting average of success close to a hundred percent.

Terrence Wire announced he was going to stay in Arriba. He would become an Arriban.

Tara seemed to approve of that, which disgusted Monk and Ham somewhat. When another fellow got a pretty girl, they were always disgusted.

What surprised them, though, was Doc Savage's announcement that he would remain in Arriba for a short time in order to study. The Arribans had developed many things which interested him.

The most intriguing thing of all, the bronze man explained, was the mental attitude, the philosophy of life, which they had managed to mold by so many years of isolated, and rigorously guided, life.

Monk and Ham and Long Tom were to take the prisoners to the upstate New York criminal-curing institution.

They were also to take the "speaking stone" along, and turn it over to the United States war department for what it might be worth.

"The gadget," Doc warned, "is not the world-beater that El Gorrion thought it was."

Monk stared. "Huh?"

"It will hardly function at all at sea-level air pressure," Doc told him.

THE SPEAKING STONE

Monk had known the bronze man had conducted some experiments with the speaking stones. He muttered, "That makes them kind of bust, don't it?"

"Plane detectors," Doc said.

"Huh?"

"The devices," Doc Savage explained, "might be attached to captive balloons, and run up to an altitude of about twenty thousand feet, where they might function as plane detectors."

Monk nodded. "In that case, the gimmick is worth a lot after all."

Later, they loaded the prisoners into the planes.

Long Tom was not very gentle with Bear Cub, whom he had caught and badly battered. Long Tom looked around to see if Doc was near.

"Y'know, I got half a notion to kick this devil out on one of these mountain tops after we get in the air," he muttered.

Monk rubbed his jaw. "If he'd happen to get away safe, it'd be too bad."

"Safe!" Long Tom snorted. "He ain't likely to fall up, is he?"

Monk inspected Bear Cub critically. "I don't see any wings," he admitted. "Sure, let's kick him out."

They walked away to hide their grins. Bear Cub did not seem, from the stark expression on his face, to be aware of their policy of never deliberately taking a human life.

LONG TOM'S statement about the man not being likely to fall up happened to be as full of future meaning as if Long Tom had been a clairvoyant with a most efficient crystal ball.

For example, here is a conversation between Monk and Ham which occurred within a few weeks. The scene is New York City.

PATRICIA SAVAGE, Doc's cousin, met them at headquarters. Pat was sitting in the reception room, applying adhesive tape to an extremely well-molded ankle.

"I'm sure glad to see you," she said. "What is this green stuff?"

"Fog," Monk muttered.

"Don't be funny. Fog is gray."

"All right, you can do what I'm doing guessing at what it is," Monk told her.

Patricia Savage had many of the physical characteristics of her cousin, Doc. She had his flake-gold eyes and his remarkable bronze hair, a little of the tanned bronze of his skin.

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"What is wrong with Ham?" She stared at Ham. "He doesn't look right to me."

Monk chuckled a trifle horribly. "Ham is on edge. He just saw a man fall up, and it upset him."

"Up?" Pat frowned. "You mean *up*?"

Ham whirled at Monk and yelled, "You shouldn't have told that, you silly goon! Nobody will believe us!"

Pat became completely blank. "You mean to stand there in your skin and bones and tell me you saw a man fall *up*?"

"S a fact," Monk said hollowly.

"How far up did he fall?"

"Out of sight and no telling how much farther," Monk said.

Pat contemplated them for a while. "Somebody," she said, "has been dropped on his head."

The above is an excerpt from the book-length novel, "The Man Who Fell Up," in next month's Doc Savage magazine.

THE END