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THE 3/6 ADVENTURES OF DOC SAVAGE BY KENNETH ROBESON 18

THE SARGASSO OGRE

DOC SAVAGE



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A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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To the world at large, Doc Savage is a strange, mysterious figure of glistening bronze skin and golden eyes. To his amazing co-adventurers — the five greatest brains ever assembled in one group — he is a man of superhuman strength and protean genius, whose life is dedicated to the destruction of evildoers. To his fans he is the greatest adventure hero of all time, whose fantastic exploits are unequaled for hair-raising thrills, breathtaking escapes and bloodcurdling excitement.

THE SARGASSO OGRE

A ruthless attempt on the life of one of Doc's crew thrusts the Man of Bronze and his incomparable companions into a chilling new adventure. From the ancient skull-lined catacombs of Alexandria to a fantastic sea of floating primitive life where they unravel the centuries old mystery of the Sargasso, Doc Savage and his men once more pursue the perverse agents of evil!

Chapter I

THE “SINGAS” SONG

AN American man of letters once said that, if a man built a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to his door.

Pasha Bey was like that. His output was not mousetraps, but it was the best of its kind. Being modern, Pasha Bey had become president of a vast organization which specialized in his product. The fame of Pasha Bey was great. From all of Egypt, men beat a path to his door, which was likely to be anywhere in Alexandria. They came to buy his product, of course.

Pasha Bey's product was murder!

Just now, Pasha Bey was about to close a deal. He was easing up a dark street just off the Place Mehemet Ali, the center of the life of Alexandria

Pasha Bey was a large bag of bones. He wore a flowing burnoose. The burnoose was more flowing than the usual one, so as to conceal the fact that two long-bladed singas were in sheaths strapped to Pasha Bey's bony, naked upper arms.

He also carried two modern, silenced American sixshooters, one on either hip. A silk cord, excellent for strangling purposes, was fastened inside the burnoose with a single thread; so it could be wrenched free quickly.

Pasha Bey always went well heeled with tools of his trade.

He turned, stepping silently, into an entry. This place was like a dark

tunnel. Some thirty feet deep, it terminated in a heavy wooden door. A small, barred hole pierced the door.

"Ya intal," he called softly through the bars.

"What?" growled a harsh Yankee voice from the other side of the grille.

"Holloa there!" said Pasha Bey, putting his call into English. "By the life of your father, your servant is here. He awaits your command."

"Are you ready to pull the croak?" asked the unseen man.

"Na'am, aywa!" murmured Pasha Bey.

"Speak English. you bony camel!"

"Yes. I am ready!"

The man backed of the door did not waste time. He shoved a hand through the bars. The hand was gloved. It held a folded paper.

"Give this note to the guy. It's a bait to make him go with you without suspecting anything. I don't care where you do the job, or how you do it. But pick a good spot."

"Trust your servant."

"O. K. Now, beat it!"

"Four thousand piastres," Pasha Bey reminded gently.

"You'll get your pay when the job is done!" growled the hidden man.

"Half; now," suggested Pasha Bey, who knew it was sometimes

difficult to collect from those who wanted murder done.

There was silence while the unseen man thought it over. Then the gloved hand again appeared. It held a hundred dollar bill-the approximate equivalent of two thousand piastres. At current exchange, a piastre was worth about a nickel.

Pasha Bey stowed the money in his burnoose. "I will come here for the other half-and to tell you the man is dead."

"Are you sure you've got his name down pat-Major Thomas J. Roberts? Long Tom Roberts."

"I know."

"O. K. You may see a big, bronze-looking guy around. Steer clear of him."

"Very well."

"Vamose!"

With a meekness that belied his profession, Pasha Bey eased out of the gloomy tunnel. He was pondering if, upon his return, he might not be able to slip his silken strangling cord through those bars and around the neck of the man who had hired him. The fellow might have more of those big bills. It was good, this American money.

NOT very many minutes later, Pasha Bey appeared in the lobby of the Hotel Londoner. This hostelry was one of the swankiest in Alexandria, and it catered largely to English speaking foreigners.

The lobby held the usual quota of guests and loafers. Some of the latter were Pasha Bey's associates, members of the particular murderer's guild of which he was dictator.

In the United States, Pasha Bey would have been called the big shot of a mob; in Egypt, he was the head of a guild.

He sauntered over and joined one of his men.

"You have a word for me?" he questioned.

"The man — Long Tom Roberts — is in his room," advised the other. "But he has company. From the hallway, I listened and heard voices."

"How many voices?"

"Long Tom Roberts's and one other."

"A visitor, by Allah!" Pasha Bey folded his arms while he thought. His bony face was benevolent. He looked like a harmless old man in need of a square meal.

"I will go up and pray that my ears may tell me the visitor has gone," he said at last, and shuffled for the stairs.

At the foot of the staircase, Pasha Bey had a strange experience. He encountered a bronze giant of an American. He took a single look at this herculean figure-and shivered.

That was unusual. Pasha Bey had not, in a goodly number of years, seen anything fearsome enough to give him qualms. He was a hardened rogue, afraid of nothing. That is, he feared nothing until he saw the bronze man. One look at the big, metallic American scared Pasha Bey. There was something terrible about the giant Yankee.

Pasha Bey turned to watch the bronze man across the lobby. He was not alone in his staring; almost every one else was doing the same thing. Alexandria was a city of strange men, but never had it seen

such a personage as this.

The American was huge, yet so perfectly proportioned that his great size was apparent only when he was near other men to whose stature he might be compared. They seemed to shrink to pygmies alongside him. Tendons like big metal bands enwrapped the bronze man's hands and neck, giving a hint of the tremendous strength which must be harbored in his mighty body.

But it was the eyes that got Pasha Bey. They were weird orbs, like glittering pools of flake gold. In one casual glance, they seemed to turn Pasha Bey's unholy soul inside out, see all its evil, and promise full punishment. The effect was most unnerving.

Pasha Bey had heard of this man of metal-had heard much of him. So had all of Alexandria, for that matter.

The man was Doc Savage. He had appeared in Egypt under circumstances that were cyclonic. Cables had carried news of the event across the Atlantic; airplanes had rushed pictures of his arrival to newspapers in London, Paris, Berlin, and elsewhere.

For Doc Savage had come, with five strange men who were his aids, flying the Zeppelin-type airship, Aeromunde, which had vanished mysteriously many years ago. It was all very fantastic, this arrival of Doc Savage and his helpers.

Rumor had it that evil men had stolen the dirigible and used it for years to carry slaves to a lost oasis in the trackless deserts, where there was a great diamond mine, and that Doc Savage had rescued the slaves and punished their masters.

PASHA BEY had probed into those rumors, especially after he heard something about several packing cases filled with diamonds. But he

had learned precious little. No one was telling the location of the fabulous lost oasis of the diamonds. The Aeromunde had been restored to the government which formerly owned the ship.

Doc Savage — talk in the drinking places said — had given to each of the rescued slaves a round fortune, and was keeping the diamonds. But the gems themselves were only rumors, for all the headway Pasha Bey had made at locating them.

The names of Doc Savage's aids had even evaded Pasha Bey's adroit angling for information.

He would have been very shocked to learn that "Long Tom" Roberts was one of those five. Had he known this, he would have thought long and soberly before undertaking to murder the man for four thousand piastres. Doc Savage and his comrades were a bad crowd to monkey with.

They were reported to be a terror to evildoers. It was said they made a life work out of helping those who needed help, and punishing those who deserved it. Doc Savage and the five aids traveled to the ends of the earth to hunt trouble.

Unluckily for him, Pasha Bey did not know the connection between Long Tom and Doc Savage. So he shuffled upstairs in search of Long Tom's room.

He found the door in a brightly decorated hall. Composing a look of bland meekness on his bony features, he rippled knuckles on the panel, after making sure he heard no voices inside.

"Who is it?"

"A messenger for Major Thomas J. Roberts, the electrical engineer."

“Be right with you!”

The man who soon opened the door was rather undersized, pale of hair and eyes, and somewhat pale of complexion. In fact, he did not look at all robust. He did, however, have a very alert manner.

This fellow, Pasha Bey reflected, would surely be an easy one to murder. The thought did not show on his face, however. He extended the note his employer had handed through the barred door.

Long Tom read it.

MY DEAR ROBERTS: I have heard a great deal about your ability as an electrical expert, and of your accomplishments in the field of atomic research.

You may not have heard of me, my name not being widely known. But believe I have perfected a device for killing harmful insects with atomic streams. My understanding is that you have experimented along the same lines.

I certainly wish that you would visit me and inspect my apparatus. If you would be kind enough to do so, the bearer of this note will guide you to my laboratory.

LELAND SMITH.

Long Tom showed pronounced interest. It was true that he had never heard of Leland Smith. But he had himself perfected a device for killing insects. The thing would be a boon to farmers, and Long Tom expected to make a fortune out of it. If some other inventor was likely to cut in on the profits, Long Tom wanted to know about it.

“I’ll go with you,” he told Pasha Bey.

HURRIEDLY, Long Tom turned for his hat. A half-packed suitcase stood on a chair. It bore a fresh label, addressed to a stateroom on the steamer Cameronic. This was ample evidence that Long Tom expected to sail on the Camerionic, which was scheduled to depart shortly after midnight.

Long Tom placed the note on the table. At the foot of it, he wrote:

Doc — I've gone to look into this.

"So my friends will know what became of me," he told Pasha Bey. "Let's go."

Pasha Bey would much rather that the note not be left behind. It was a clue for the Alexandria police, who were unpleasantly efficient. But he dared not object, and arouse suspicion.

They went down to the lobby. Spying one of his men, Pasha Bey thought he saw a way of removing the note from the scene.

"Ten thousand pardons, master," he apologized profusely to Long Tom. "I see an old friend. I would like very much to talk to him for a moment."

"Sure! Go ahead."

Pasha Bey sidled over to his hireling, a man called Homar.

"Listen closely, oh stupid one!" he muttered. "This fool of a white man left a note on the table in his room. The ways of the police are beyond understanding, and it might be unfortunate for us if they found the note. Go get it."

"Yes, oh wise one," agreed Homar.

“When you have the missive, come to the spot in the catacombs where we are to kill this white man. He is small and pale, and should be easy killing. But it is just as well to have plenty of help on hand. He who said too many cooks spoil a broth told a lie.”

“Yes, oh great one,” replied Homar.

Pasha Bey now returned to Long Tom and salaamed politely.

“My friend was very glad to see me,” he lied. “And by the life of your father, I am grateful to you for letting me talk with him.”

“That’s all right,” said Long Tom impatiently. “Let’s hurry along. Our gang is sailing on the Camerionic, a little after midnight.”

They stepped to the street. A neat, moderately expensive closed automobile stood at the curb.

“Our conveyance, my master,” murmured Pasha Bey, neglecting to add that the car was stolen, and that the driver was one of the most accomplished murderers in Alexandria, probably second only to Pasha Bey himself.

They entered. The car rolled along the narrow streets, the booq hooting loudly to clear the hodgepodge of humanity out of the way.

Long Tom settled back luxuriously on the cushions, entirely unaware that he was riding to a death trap.

Chapter II

CAVES OF BONES

IN the Hotel Londoner, Homar hurried to get the note from Long Tom's room. as he had been hidden to do. In Egyptian, Homar's name meant "donkey." The fact that he seemed always half asleep had earned him the cognomen. He was neither slow-moving nor stupid, however. He was a sharp fiend, or he would not have been in Pasha Bey's crew.

He had very little difficulty picking the lock of Long Tom's room. Entering, he seized the note. He drew a kabrit from a pocket, with the idea of burning the paper. Then, on second thought, he put the match away and stuffed the missive inside his burnoose. Pasha Bey might find use for it, for there was such a thing as blackmail in Egypt.

He turned to depart.

The door had opened and closed while Homar was getting the paper, but he had not been aware of this. The thing had happened with great silence.

Nor did Homar, upon leaving the room, notice that the window at the end of the corridor was open. He scuttled down the stairs, anxious to join Pasha Bey in the killing.

A moment after Homar vanished, the giant bronze form of Doc Savage appeared in the open window. He had been outside, hanging to the ledge by his fingers. Furthermore, it was he who had opened and shut the door of Lang Tom's room so silently. Doc had come upstairs in time to witness the undeniably suspicious act of

Homar in picking the door lock.

He followed Homar. Doc knew all the signs. Trouble was once more seeking out him and his men, as it had a habit of doing. He was intent on finding out what it could be this time.

Homar engaged a ramshackle cab near the hotel. Doc got into another, commanding his driver to trail the first machine.

They progressed to the region of the city where stood Pompey's Pillar, in the highest part of Alexandria.

The red granite shaft of Pompey's Pillar, exquisitely polished, glistened faintly in the moonlight. From there, the course led southwest.

Homar dismissed his hack.

The pilot of Doc Savage's vehicle drove on at a soft order from the rear. Several score qasabs he traveled, then suddenly discovered a gold fifty-piastres coin on the cushions beside him. He looked around. Much to his astonishment, his fare was gone.

Doc Savage had quitted the cab some distance back, silent as a phantom for all his great size. He lurked in the shadow of a heap of ancient masonry, watching Homar's alert progress.

Doc had a fair knowledge of this section of Alexandria, just as he had, stored in his retentive memory, what amounted to a map of every large city on the globe. This was part of an amazing course of training which Doc had administered to himself — a training to fit himself for this strange life work of helping those in need of help, and punishing those who deserved it.

This part of Alexandria held the ancient catacombs — vast underground caverns, possibly dating back to the day of Cleopatra — which held the bones of Egyptians long dead. Parts of the catacombs had been seen by no living man, Doc knew.

Homar moved to a ramshackle stone hut. Doc haunted him like a bronze ghost

A gritty rasp came from within the stone hut. Doc glanced in. Using a flashlight, Homar was tilting a slab of rock from the floor. He dropped into the cavity, closing the stone plate after him.

A FLASHLIGHT came out of Doc Savage's clothing. It cast a beam like a glowing white-hot wire, the thin luminance switching back and forth over the hut floor.

A drop or two of wet crimson glistened in the ray. Near the trapdoor edge was a group of slightly larger smears. Five! Red finger prints!

Bending low, Doc explained them.

Into the sour murk of the hut there abruptly came a strange, exotic sound. It was a low, trilling, mellow note, which might have been the sound of some weird bird of the jungle, or a wind filtering through the piled stone of the ancient ruins around about. Although melodious, it had no tune. It had an uncanny quality, for it seemed to come from no particular spot.

It was part of Doc Savage, this sound — a small, unconscious thing which he did in moments of stress.

The bloody finger prints were from Long Tom's right hand! Doc had seen the prints of his five men countless times, and could recognize them instantly.

He grasped the stone lid. It had rasped under Homar's clutch, but it lifted noiselessly under Doc's hand — so silently, that it almost seemed the bronze man had a supernatural power to command quiet.

Cold, damp steps led down; then came a black, low tunnel. Dust of ages lay on the floor. The sound of Homar's footsteps thumped like the beat of a water-filled drum.

Doc whipped forward without noise, showing no light, sensitive hands feeling out the way. The walls were rough. In spots, there were hard, crusted deposits formed by water seepage through the centuries.

They came to a spot where the ancient corridor branched three ways. Homar took the one to the right. He seemed to know where he was going.

The character of the walls abruptly changed, becoming solid instead of jointed masonry. The passages were hewn out of natural rock.

Doc drew a small case from a pocket. This held a peculiar powder. At frequent intervals, he dropped a pinch on the tunnel floor.

Homar's footbeats led on interminably. Shuffle and thud! Shuffle and thud! The noises had a dull, deathlike quality. The air was dusty. It was like breathing within a trunk which had been long closed.

Again and again, the passages branched. And every few yards, Doc left a bit of his powder on the floor. His actions might have seemed a bit puzzling. The stuff gave off no odor, no phosphorescent glow.

The tunnel widened, forming a series of long rooms. Doc's hands, along the walls, encountered what felt vaguely like rounded stones. These were arched entirely to the ceiling. He knew what they were.

Human skulls! The walls were lined with them.

Farther on, there were many casket-shaped niches cut in the rock, and in these were stacked arm and leg bones, spinal columns, ribs. It was a macabre, hideous place. Compared to these catacombs, a walk through a graveyard at midnight was no more awesome than a stroll through a town park.

Doc Savage went forward without flinching or shivering. If he experienced any of the feelings which would have gripped another man, he did not show it. Doc had remarkable powers of concentration. He avoided the ghostly, spine-chilling effects of his surroundings simply by putting his attention on following the man ahead, and keeping it there.

Homar was carrying his flashlight at his side.

Deeper and deeper into the maze, they penetrated. They descended steps. The catacombs seemed to be cut several stories deep. Countless thousands were the dead who had been buried here, for the city had been founded in the third century.

In some passages the stone had caved in, closing them, probably forever. Three times, Homar opened stone doors. Doc, a silent specter at his heels, kept leaving small deposits of his powder.

They came finally to their destination.

SEVERAL brightly glowing flashlights marked the spot. Men were squatting crosslegged, or standing about a sprawled form. The latter was Long Tom.

The right side of Long Tom's face was a sticky red smear from a cut on his scalp, evidently the result of a blow which had knocked him

senseless. His dazed manner showed that he had just revived.

A large heap of bones shrouded in a white burnoose, Pasha Bey was hunkered in front of Long Tom. In the professional murderer's gaunt claw was a book of ordinary travelers' checks. These comprised Long Tom's traveling funds, and they totaled more than a thousand dollars.

"By the left eye of Allah, himself, I swear it!" Pasha Bey was murmuring. "If you will sign these travelers' checks, I will let you go free and guide you out of this devil's den of bones!"

It was apparent Long Tom was still alive only because of Pasha Bey's greed. Long Tom had signed each of the checks when buying them, as was customary. They could be cashed only when he signed them a second time in the space which was provided. Pasha Bey no doubt had a way of getting the money for them, once they were complete with both signatures.

Long Tom scowled. "No! You can't kid me!"

"By both eyes of Allah, I swear that I — "

"I know a liar when I see one! You can swear by all of Allah, and I wouldn't believe a word!"

Pasha Bey slipped one of his razor-sharp singes from an arm sheath. In the fitful glare of the flashlights, he presented a sinister figure. He might have been an assembly of bones taken from the surrounding catacomb walls, stained brown, animated with life, and covered with a white burnoose.

"Wallah!" he snarled. "You will have but one more chance to sign these paper slips!"

Long Tom slowly propped himself to a sitting position. His wrists and ankles were tightly bound. His pale face was even whiter than usual, and grimly composed. He was wise enough to know he was very near death, whether he signed the travelers' checks or not.

His roped feet suddenly drove out. He had decided to take a desperate chance. The awkward kick sent Pasha Bey spinning head over heels. The singa flew up, clinked on the ceiling, and all but speared Long Tom as it dropped at his back near his bound hands.

Sliding his bound wrists over the blade, cutting the ropes with one slice, Long Tom grasped the big knife. He chopped desperately at the bonds on his feet.

Howling, Pasha Bey's men rushed forward. Nearly every brown paw clutched a foot or more of glinting steel. They crouched low to the floor. They were like evil, tobacco colored mice in white sheets.

The next instant, they were even more like mice. Mice with a gigantic bronze cat in their midst!

Two blows popped. Each broke bones, crushed flesh. The two men who had been hit fell without knowing what had happened-knocked out.

The form of Long Tom was wrenched bodily from under the descending knives.

The thing happened with such blinding speed that even Long Tom did not get a glimpse of his rescuer before he was out of danger. But he knew who it was, the moment he felt the clutch which jerked him to safety. Only one man possessed such strength and agility — Doc Savage!

ONE of Pasha Bey's men goggled as Doc appeared before him—a mighty genie of bronze. He yelled, struck with his singa! His yell became an agonized squawl as his wrist was trapped in midair. Came a jerk such as the would-be killer had never felt before. He sailed to one side like a tossed bundle, struck the wall, and bounced back to lie so dazed he could not move.

Knifemen charged the bronze giant, only to have him seemingly vanish before their eyes, so quickly did he whip out of the flashlight luminance.

Two fellows in the rear dropped, knocked stiff as toppling logs, before they knew Doc had attacked again from that point.

This was too much. It bordered on the supernatural. It was hard to believe flesh and blood could move so swiftly.

“Wallah!” wailed a man. “He is a ruh! A spirit!”

Maybe the others thought that, too. Or maybe it was that they had no stomach for a real fight. Ten-to-one odds in a dark alley was their style.

They fled. plunging headlong through the catacomb passages, their flash beams darting like terrified things. One man, less agile, bringing up the rear, screeched as fingers like steel bands trapped his neck. A tap on the temple reduced the fellow to senselessness.

The rest could not run much faster, but that did not keep them from trying to do so.

Far ahead was a bounding flashlight glow. This was Pasha Bey, the master murderer. And master of discretion, too! He knew when flight was wise. He had taken a big head start on the others.

He knew, now. that Long Tom was one of Doc Savage's group of five aids. At least, he had guessed it. And between jumps. he was cursing the man who had hired him to murder Long Tom.

That man would pay for not mentioning the fact that Long Tom was one of Doc Savage's crew. He would pay dearly! And that, as soon as Pasha Bey could hurry to the darkened street off the Place Mehemet Ali for a meeting.

The fleeing murder gang passed through one of the stone doors. The hindermost fellow wrenched the heavy rock slab shut. It was swung on great iron hinges, and there was a massive iron bar. He slid the bar.

"Wallah!" he howled. "By the life of my father, we are safe! The bronze man and the one we sought to kill will never escape! There is no other way out of that place!"

The whole gang kept on at full speed, however.

Chapter III

THE “CAMERONIC” PERIL

DOC SAVAGE reached the huge block of stone that was the door. He exerted a tentative shove. The rock only groaned. It was as solid as the entrance of a bank vault. Turning, he strode back to join his friend.

Long Tom had cut himself loose, and was stumbling about, gathering up knives which had been dropped in the retreat. He picked up his travelers' checks, patted them lovingly, and pocketed them.

“Those things,” he said dryly, “are all that kept me alive until you could get here.”

“Was it robbery?” Doc asked him.

Long Tom ran fingers through his thin blond hair. “I don't think so, Doc. Of course, they delayed slipping a knife into me in hopes I would sign those travelers' checks. But I don't think robbery was at the bottom of the trouble. I had only a few dollars in change. The checks were worthless unless countersigned.”

“This is rather mystifying.”

“You said it! I can't imagine why they picked on me.”

“Unless they were hired!”

“Yes. I thought of that. But who would hire them? And why? We have no enemies in Alexandria. Or I haven't, at least.”

Speaking rapidly, Doc explained how he had gotten on the trail by observing the man removing the note from Long Tom's hotel room.

"That note was a bait, of course," Long Tom grunted.

At this point, there sounded a faint scuffle in the near-by darkness. Doc raced his flashlight beam to the spot the sound had come from.

It was the man who had been stunned by being flung against the wall. He was seeking to flee.

With two long leaps, Doc collared him. He turned his light on the fellow's face.

It was Homar. His brown features were convulsing with terror.

"This is the lad who got the letter out of your room," Doc told Long Tom. "We'll just see if he still has it."

Homar was so frightened he remained perfectly docile, and, trembling greatly, let himself be searched. Doc's mighty bronze form had been frightsome in the fight; at close range, it was even more productive of terror.

Doc found the note. He studied it.

"The name signed at the bottom — Leland Smith — is false," he said. "The writing is somewhat stilted, exactly like the rest of the message. A man usually scrawls his signature in a more free, practiced fashion than the rest of his writing. The author of the missive was a big man and a strong one, as denoted by his forceful strokes. He was a fellow of fair education, as shown by the correct spelling and the fact that he mentioned that atomic business. That seems to be all the note tells us at present. There are no finger prints."

Long Tom frowned thoughtfully at the cowering Homar.

"I wonder what he can tell us?"

Homar shivered and whined: "Ma atka!limsh el loghah el In ge liz."

He had stated in Egyptian that he did not speak English.

"You are lying!" Doc said ominously. "Otherwise, how did you know we were wondering what you could tell us?"

"Wallah!" Homar gasped, then added in fair English: "I know nothing! I am an innocent man, who has always been good to his mother."

Long Tom snorted loudly.

DOC SAVAGE now began ominous preparations. He selected from Long Tom's collection the knife which had the brightest blade. He polished this on his sleeve; then advanced.

Homar screamed, shrank back, and dashed his fists madly at Doc. But he was swiftly pinned and held helpless. He found the gleaming knife blade suspended before his eyes.

"Keep your light on the blade," Doc directed Long Tom.

Before Homar's distended orbs, the length of steel became a glittering sliver. It twirled slowly, monotonously. Homar's eyes held it in a sort of fixed terror. He thought, no doubt, that the blade would at any instant plunge into his heart. He did not dream what Doc was actually doing.

Except for Homar's breathing, silence enwrapped the awesome catacomb interior. Seconds trickled away and became minutes. The knife spun interminably, fluttering white-hot in the flash glare.

Homar watched it, fascinated.

So softly that at first it was unnoticed, Doc's weird trilling sound came into being. It rose and fell, mellow and unending, possessing no tune.

Homar's eyes became more protuberant. He was rapidly being hypnotized.

"Talk to the flashing knife," Doc commanded him softly. "Tell it why you sought to kill my friend!"

Homar's throat pumped a few times. At last, words came out.

"We are paid money, oh knife. We were to get four thousand piastres for the death of Long Tom Roberts."

"Who hired you? The knife wishes to learn that."

"I do not know. It was a man who met our chief, Pasha Bey. The man did not show his face."

"Tell the knife — were you to meet this man a gain?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Homar had been speaking in Arabic, a tongue which Doc Savage could handle fluently, just as he could speak countless other languages.

"The meeting was to be in a street near the Place Mehemet Ah," mumbled Homar. "Pasha Bey was to report to that spot."

"Name the street and describe the place. We wish to go there."

Homar complied.

Doc Savage now cast the knife aside, and, by slapping Homar sharply and calling to him, broke the hypnotic spell.

"Come on," he told Long Tom. "We'll let this fellow go, little as he deserves his freedom. We'll have to make it snappy, or we'll miss the Cameronic when she sails shortly after midnight."

LEAVING Homar behind, still too dazed to walk or talk coherently, they hurried along the catacomb passage, and came to the door of stone.

"Good night!" Long Tom groaned. "We're stuck! We have nothing but knives to attack that thing! It'll take days to chip a hole through!"

Then he glanced at Doc, and brightened somewhat. The big bronze man usually had a way out of jams like this.

Doc had thrust two fingers far back in his mouth. They came out, bearing two molars. These were extras which Doc always wore. They held two different chemical mixtures.

Mingling the chemicals, Doc hastily stuffed them in a crack in the huge stone door.

"Get back!" he rapped, and rushed Long Tom away from the Vicinity.

Whur-r-oom!

An explosion shuddered the stone floor under their feet. Dust gushed in choking clouds. The shock cascaded bones off the catacomb shelves, and caused skulls to carom across the floor like baseballs.

Doc's two chemicals, after being mixed together, had become a powerful explosive, self-detonating.

They felt their way forward through the dust, and found the door little more than a heap of broken rock.

Long Tom advanced, once more uneasy. He saw that the catacombs were a trackless labyrinth. Suppose they should get lost in the grisly passages?

But a miracle seemed to have occurred. Ahead of them, marking the way to the exit, was a procession of glowing spots. These might have been red-hot coals! As a matter of fact, they were the chemical powder which Doc had sprinkled along his incoming path. This powder, although it possessed no glow at first, became phosphorescent after a short exposure to damp air.

They came out by the route Doc had entered-through the stone hut.

Doc set out at a run, explaining: "We should be able to find a cab over beyond Pompey's Pillar."

Long Tom made no reply-he needed all his breath to maintain the pace Doc was setting.

They found no cab. But they did locate a conveyance-a pudgy tourist and his driver, who consented to take them to the Place Mehemet Ali. The car started out slowly.

Doc showed the tourist's driver a fat American bank note.

"Imshi bil 'agal!" he requested. "Go more quickly!"

The driver needed no more urging. Indeed, they had to remind him

repeatedly that he could not take right-angle turns at forty miles an hour.

IN the darkened street off the Place Mehemet Ali, three innocent-looking gentlemen in burnouses shuffled slowly forward. They kept their hands out of sight, and their faces well enveloped. This was to hide numerous scrapes and bruises acquired in mad flight through the catacomb passages.

Pasha Bey had not come directly to this gloomy thorough-fare. He had stopped en route to take council with himself. As a result, he had decided only two of his best murderess should accompany him to the rendezvous with the man who had hired them.

"Wallah!" Pasha Bey muttered. "You understand what we are to do?"

"We understand, oh great one!"

"This man who hired us did a very evil thing when he failed to tell us we were to dispose of one of Doc Savage's friends. For that, he must pay."

"Aye, master!" the other two agreed heartily. "He shall pay!"

"With his life!"

"Aye! With his life, he shall pay! And with his money, if he has any on his person!"

Pasha Bey kneaded his bony knuckles. "I have been thinking, oh brethren, of those diamonds which this Doc Savage is said to possess."

"The diamonds may be only drinking-place talk."

They might not be, too. Wallah! It would be very nice to dip our hands in chests of the bright gems.”

“To whence does this talk of yours lead, oh master?”

“To this: I shall converse with this man who hired us, before I slip my garrote cord over his evil neck. It may be that he knows something of the diamonds.”

“A thought worthy of Allah, himself! With Doc Savage entombed in the catacombs, we might easily get the bright stones.”

The speaker would have been no little shocked to know that, at this instant, Doc Savage and Long Tom were watching him from a corner near the Place Mehemet Ali.

He would have been more shocked had he seen Doc and Long Tom whip forward silently the instant Pasha Bey and his companions entered the darkened tunnel where the meeting was to take place. Without showing themselves, Doc and Long Tom were lurking outside the passage in time to hear all that was said.

Pasha Bey pressed his skinny face to the barred hole in the door and called softly.

“Well?” growled the voice of the man who had hired them.

“Your humble servant begs to report a failure. We failed to kill Long Tom!”

This, as far as Pasha Bey was concerned, was an untruth. He thought Doc and Long Tom were fast in the catacombs, where they would eventually starve to death.

“What?” roared the man behind the barred door. “You fell down on the

job?"

"It was not our fault," Pasha Bey murmured meekly. "You, oh master, should have told us Long Tom Roberts was a friend of this man of mystery and power — Doc Savage. Then we could have prepared more carefully."

"Savage gummed the works, did he?"

"Aye. He thwarted our plans."

The man back of the bars cursed violently for some moments. To the listening Pasha Bey — and to Doc Savage and Long Tom, concealed in the murky street — a notable fact was disclosed by the man's swearing. The fellow's coarse voice was disguised in tone. Probably the slangy way of talking was assumed, also.

The unseen man had actually a powerful, ringing voice, and was capable of speaking good English.

"YOU'VE got to get Doc Savage's friend, Long Tom!" the man snarled, when his profanity was expended. "Or you can get one of the other four who belong to his crew! Any one will do!"

"It is very difficult — this thing you ask us to do," Pasha Bey temporized. "Four thousand piastres is not enough payment."

"I'll put up more jack for the job."

Pasha Bey now got around to the thing he was angling for. "It might be that our ends would best be served if we were to go into partnership," he suggested.

"What d'you mean, you bony camel?"

"I mean, oh master, that we would be glad to help you get the diamonds for a very small share of the stones."

An explosive curse blasted through the bars.

"I'm not after any diamonds! I don't know anything about the gems, except the talk that's been going around this stinkin' burg. I ain't after ice!"

"You do not speak with a forked tongue?" Pasha Bey muttered suspiciously. He thought he detected a falsehood.

"I'm not lying!"

"Then why, oh master, did you want Long Tom Roberts slain?"

"Doc Savage and his five pals have booked passage on the Cameronic, sailing tonight!" the unseen man said, after hesitating momentarily. "I don't want them to go on the Cameronic, savvy! I've got reasons of my own for not wantin' them on the tub. I thought, if I got Long Tom Roberts killed, Doc Savage would stay behind to investigate the murder. Him and his crowd wouldn't be on the boat."

To say this filled Pasha Bey with rage was putting it mildly. He had been used as a tool to draw Doc Savage's wrath and make the bronze man miss the Cameronic?! Shades of Allah!

"Wallah!" he hissed.

Whipping the silk garrote cord from inside his burnoose, he swung it through the bars. His hand was experienced. He snared the neck of the man inside. By flinging his bony frame backward, he wrenched the terrible cord tight.

A single, startled bleat came from the trapped man. It ended sudden when the cord snugged, as if his head had been cut off.

Pasha Bey leered from ear to ear. He had his prey—the man would soon strangle.

Came the surprise! The door whipped open. Men piled through — men who had been with the fellow the garrote cord had trapped. Knives flashed! Pistols slammed thunder!

The dark tunnel became a bawling bedlam! Screams, blows, wails, all came at once!

It was over as swiftly as it started. Pasha Bey and his two men were slain with a dispatch as abrupt as any murder they had ever committed themselves.

The barred door slammed behind the retreating killers, while Pasha Bey and his two helpers still thrashed about, spouting their life fluid upon the dank stone floor.

DOC SAVAGE and Long Tom glided into the gloom-filled tunnel. They had held back from the fight, practicing a policy of letting dog eat dog. But they had not expected the slayers to flee so swiftly.

The door was big and stanch, and there was no sign of a latch on the outside. The bars were thick.

Doc splashed his flash beam on the three bodies. It was a grisly sight, for scarlet was rapidly spreading a wet sheet over the floor. Each of the trio had been stabbed.

“Whew!” Long Tom breathed. “Pasha Bey was a bad one, but he was a babe in arms compared to the crowd he went up against! Those

fellows had killed men before! It takes practice to do a job like this!"

Pasha Bey had, it appeared, closed with one of his assailants. His clutching hand had seized upon a belt. In falling, he had torn this from his attacker. His bony claw still held it.

Doc picked up the belt and inspected it. The thing was perhaps three inches wide, and made of soft leather. Upon the leather was sewed, side by side, more than a score of circular, braided insignia. Each of these bore an embroidered name.

Doc glanced over some of the names.

Sea Sylph, Henryetta, U. S. S. Voyager, Queen Neptune, Gotham Beile, Axteila Marie.

Saying nothing, Doc slipped the strange belt in a pocket. He grasped the iron bars. These had no doubt been put there by the original builder to defy the strength of any man. They were very substantial.

The stout iron groaned under the terrific strength of Doc's bronze, corded hands. It was something fabulous, this muscular power Doc had developed in himself. Opening horseshoes and bending half-dollar coins — feats of professional strong men — he could accomplish easily.

With a ripping of wood, one bar came out. Then another. With the two, he struck and pried, tearing off planks in an effort to reach the lock.

Up toward the Place Mehemet Ali, excited yelling denoted the approach of bulis zabtieh. The shots and screams had drawn the policemen.

Doc got the door open. He whipped through, hands empty except for his flashlight. Doc Savage never used a gun in his fighting.

Long Tom trod his heels.

They ran down a corridor which smelled of samak and tobacco smoke. Another door barred their way. It was locked, but less substantial.

Doc struck a blow with his unprotected fist, a blow only alloy-hard tendons could withstand. The panel caved like a banana crate.

They found only more passages, empty rooms, silence — and open doors which gave upon another street. There was no one in sight.

“They got away!” Long Tom grumbled.

“They did,” Doc agreed, “and we had best follow their example. Otherwise, the police are liable to hold us for questioning, and cause us to miss the Cameronic.”

They ran silently along the handiest street, speedily leaving the vicinity of the Place Mehemet Ali.

Chapter IV

THE WHITE-WHISKERED MAN

DOC SAVAGE and Long Tom reached the Hotel Londoner without incident. Consulting his watch, Doc found it would be two hours until the Cameronic sailed.

In that two hours, several things happened. The incidents were such that they gave grave hint of trouble ahead.

"Confound it!" said Long Tom, grinning widely. "I was in hopes we would have a nice, restful sea voyage to New York."

Long Tom's grin gave the lie to his complaint. There was nothing Long Tom — or Doc's other four aids, for that matter — liked better than the excitement that came out of their association with Doc. They took to danger like bees to honey. And there was always danger around Doc, it seemed. That, together with the pleasure of associating with one of the most remarkable of living men, was the attraction which drew them to the man of bronze.

"I wonder, Long Tom, if you have drawn the same conclusions about this thing that I have?" Doc asked dryly.

"You mean about what must be behind it?"

"Exactly."

Long Tom popped shirts and socks into his traveling bag.

"This guy who was trying to get me killed didn't want our gang on the Cameronic," he grunted. "Maybe I flatter myself, but I'll bet he didn't

want us aboard because he was afraid we'd be on hand to throw a monkey wrench in some plan — some devilish scheme that involves the Cameronic!"

Doc nodded. "My own suspicions are along that line."

Long Tom finished his packing. "What about our four pals, Renny, Monk, Ham, and Johnny?"

The four men named were the other members of Doc's group of five aids. Each, in his way, was an unusual personage. Just as Long Tom was an electrical wizard of no mean note, so were these others men of fame in the fields of engineering, chemistry, the law, and geology.

"They are to meet us on the ship," Doc explained.

Doc now produced the strange belt which the dead Pasha Bey had clutched. He examined it further.

Long Tom came over and also bent a scrutiny on the unusual object.

"Sylph, Henryetta, U. S. S. Voyager, Queen Neptune," he read some of the embroidered names aloud. "Say — those sound like the names of boats!"

"Right," Doc agreed. "Moreover, the circular, braided insignia, which bears each name, is in reality a tab such as is worn on the peak of a ship officer's cap."

"Any of the names familiar?"

Doc did not reply immediately. But weird little lights seemed to come and go in his golden eyes.

"I'll answer that later — after I confirm a suspicion!" he said slowly.

Long Tom did not push for an answer. He knew he would not get it. But Doc's manner had told him this belt, with its score or more of insignia from the uniform caps of ship officers, had an important meaning.

For some reason hard to define, the belt dangling from Doc's muscular hand impressed Long Tom as being a thing of sinister portent.

They completed their packing, gathered up their baggage, paid their bill, and got in a taxi in front of the hotel.

JUST before the cab departed, Long Tom bought a late copy of one of the Alexandria newspapers which was printed in English. One look at the headlines, and he let out a surprised squawk.

"Hey! What d'you make of this newspaper item?"

Doc took the paper, and as their hack rolled down the narrow streets, read the item which had startled Long Tom.

BANK CLERK FOUND SLAIN

John Mack O'Minner, clerk in the Alexandria branch of the American Bank, was found dead on the outskirts of the city early tonight. His body bore marks which indicated he had been tortured before being slain.

The clerk had apparently been dead at least a day.

On the face of it, this bit of news was not unusual. Murders were no more infrequent in Alexandria than in other large cities.

But the dead clerk had been employed by the American Bank. And

that bank was handling the transfer of Doc's hoard of diamonds — gems to a fabulous value. The bank had put the stones, under heavy guard, aboard the Cameronic for shipment to New York.

"I see the whole thing!" Long Tom barked excitedly. "That bank clerk was kidnaped and tortured until he told where the diamonds were! Then he was slain! And the gang who killed him set about keeping us off the Cameronic, so they would have a free hand to get the stones!"

Doc, saying nothing, took the strange belt of cap insignias from his pocket and studied it thoughtfully.

Down at the water front, they encountered the hubbub which always accompanies the sailing of a passenger liner. Hucksters howled themselves hoarse peddling nut meats, dates, and carved knicknacks for tourist souvenirs. Porters dashed about. Policemen yelled.

Their taxi rooted noisily through the uproar. They alighted near the pier entrance. Doc gave his bags to a Cameronic flunky to be taken immediately to the suite he had engaged.

Some delay followed while he and Long Tom settled matters about their passports. They had entered Egypt without these necessities, having flown the lost dirigible there at the conclusion of their last great adventure in the lost oasis.

The papers which the American consul had supplied to Doc and his men were finally passed upon, however. They went aboard, being plentifully elbowed en route by excited tourists. The screaming din of peddlers trying to make a last sale, was deafening.

A neat modernistic elevator lifted them to the top deck, which held their cabins. The Cameronic was a new craft. They turned down the

corridor which led to their quarters.

They had not taken a dozen steps when a volley of yells crackled through the passage! Blows whacked! A man screeched in terrible pain!

Three thin brown men dived out of a door down the corridor. They were half naked, their burnouses torn off. One streamed crimson from a gash in his arm.

After the latter man, pursuing him closely, appeared a slender, dapperly dressed gentleman. This fellow's clothing was sartorial perfection. He was in the heat of action, yet his attire was as unruffled as if he had been presiding at a banquet.

He flourished a thin-bladed sword cane. It was obviously this which had opened the gash in the fleeing one's arm.

This man was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, better known as "Ham." He was one of the cleverest lawyers Harvard had ever matriculated. And he was one of Doc Savage's five aids.

Close on Ham's heels came probably the homeliest man ever to set foot on the Cameronic. He weighed close to two hundred and sixty pounds, and he had the physique of a gorilla. His arms were inches longer than his legs. His hide was furred with a growth of coarse, red bristles. His rather pleasant, unlovely features, bore numerous ancient scars — thin, gray lines, as if a chicken with chalk feet had paraded on his face.

"Monk!"

No other nickname would have fitted him. As Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, he was conceded to be among the

greatest of modern chemists. He, too, was one of Doc Savage's five men.

Monk and Ham pursued the three fleeing brown villains.

THE swarthy trio veered into a cross-ship passage which led out on deck. They never hesitated, but cleared the rail with wild leaps. The splashes, as they hit the water far below, came in such near succession as to be a single loud swish of a sound.

Doc and Long Tom arrived at the rail close behind Ham and Monk.

"What was the trouble?" Long Tom demanded.

"Those three rats tried to nab Doc's baggage!" the big, hairy Monk explained, in a voice surprisingly mild for one of such bulk.

Ham snapped his sword cane like a short whip. The blade twanged and sent a spray of scarlet drops over the rail.

"We happened to be in your suite, Doc, looking the place over, when these fellows came in," he declared. "The baggage had just arrived."

"I sent it in only a moment ago," Doc explained.

He cast his flash beam downward. It disclosed the three marauders swimming briskly away.

Monk grasped the rail. "I've got a notion to go after them sheiks!"

"Let them go," Doc suggested. "It is my guess that we would find they were merely hired thieves."

Monk pulled thoughtfully at a gristle tuft of an ear. "Have you any idea what is back of it, Doc?"

Don made no reply, but Long Tom grinned widely.

“The belt!” Long Tom grunted. “I’ll bet they were after it!”

“What belt?” chorused Ham and Monk.

Long Tom explained about the adventure in the catacombs, and described what had happened in the street off the Place Mehemet Ali, where they had found, in Pasha Bey’s clutch, the strange belt of cap insignias

THEY returned to Doc’s suite, where Ham secured the sheath portion of his sword cane. When the blade was cased, it became an innocent black walking stick. Ham was never seen without this article.

There was some speculation over the significance of the belt, as well as guesses at the nature of the trouble which was undoubtedly brewing.

Monk blew thoughtfully upon his bristle-covered fists.

“I think I’ll prowl around the decks and see if there’s anything suspicious going on,” he said mildly.

“I wouldn’t,” Ham suggested with biting dryness.

“Why not?”

“There’s no need of frightening the passengers off the boat before we sail!” Ham retorted, and squinted wryly at Monk’s homely features.

This unkind cut was typical of Ham. He was always riding Monk. He missed no chances for a crack at Monk’s expense. It had been thus for years, since an incident in the Great War had given Ham his

nickname.

As a joke, Ham had taught Monk some French words which were highly insulting, telling him they were exactly what one should say to flatter a French general. Monk had used them — and landed in the guardhouse. But soon after his release, the dapper Brigadier General Brooks had been hailed up on a charge of stealing hams. Somebody had planted the evidence. Ham had never been able to prove it was Monk's work, and the thing still irked him.

Monk, however, was far from helpless under Ham's sharp tongue. He had many methods of goading Ham, from imitating Ham's snappy attire, to impersonating a pig grunting and squealing. This last always threw Ham into a rage.

Monk now twisted his simian features into a frightsome grimace, preparatory to emitting a piggy squeal.

"We'd better lock up our other two friends," Doc suggested, to head off a verbal battle which might last for hours. "Where are they?"

"Down keeping an eye on the strong room, where our diamonds are stored," Monk said, with a regretful scowl at Ham.

THEY descended to a middle deck. This held the purser's office, a grilled inclosure not unlike a bank teller's cage. The back of this cage was a wall of thick steel, pierced by a heavy metal door fitted with combination locks — the ship's safe.

Passengers milled about in front of the purser's cage, checking valuables and transacting other business. Mingling with the crowd were several uniformed, heavily armed men. These were guards from the Alexandria branch of the American Bank. They were present to watch Doc's diamonds. They would remain until the Cameronic

sailed.

The diamonds reposed in the vault. An even half dozen cases held the stones. The gem hoard was of fabulous value. There were so many of the stones that the diamond market would have declined, had they all been offered for sale at Once. Doc intended to dispose of them, a few at a time.

The money from the gems was to be expended on hospitals and other philanthropic projects which Doc Savage conducted.

Two men occupied chairs in unobtrusive corners of the room gacing the purser's cage. At sight of Doc's group, they arose and came forward.

The first man was nearly as tall as Doc, and almost as heavy as Monk. He was a giant. Yet he had a pair of hands so huge that they seemed to dwarf the rest of him. Half a dozen people in the crowd stared at the size of those hands, as if doubting their eyes.

This man was Colonel John Renwick, a personage known in a number of nations for his accomplishments as an engineer. Rennv" was also noted for a disquieting habit of amusing himself by knocking panels cut of doors with those big fists.

The second fellow was tall, gaunt. He looked half starved. His clothes hung upon his frame as if it were a structure of hard sticks. He wore glasses. The left lens of these spectacles was very thick. It was actually a powerful magnifying glass.

William Harper Littlejohn had lost the use of his left eye in the Great War. 'Johnny' needed a magnifying glass in his profession of archaeologist and geologist, so he carried it in his spectacles for convenience.

“Seen anything suspicious?” Doc asked the pair.

“Nope!” Renny had a voice which gave the impression that a lion had jumped roaring out of its den. “Not very — that is!”

“What do you mean — not very?”

“A man came in and hung around a while ago,” Johnny put in, his extremely clear manner of speaking giving a clew to the fact that he had once headed the natural science research department of a famous American university.

“We both saw this chap,” he continued. “He was very large — as big as Renny. He had a flowing white beard.”

“He looked like Santa Claus,” Renny rumbled a chuckle.

“But that was not what got us interested in him.” Removing his spectacles with the magnifying left lens, Johnny polished them briskly. “This white-whiskered gentleman stood and stared at the vault for some time. Just why he did that, we could not understand. We did not see him leave any valuables with the purser to be put in the vault.”

Maybe he was just sizing up the safe to see if it was secure enough to hold his bank roll!” snorted Monk.

Johnny shrugged his bony shoulders, then adjusted his glasses. “Maybe. But it struck me that there was something peculiar in his manner!”

DOC SAVAGE and his five friends continued to loiter in the vicinity of the vault. They were taking no chances. The sum their diamonds represented was great enough to purchase outright some smaller European countries. It was conceivable that thieves might make a

bold raid upon the Cameronic, strong room.

Nothing of the sort happened. however. The large gentleman with the white whiskers did not appear. Amid much shouting and blaring of native musicians, the gangplank was hauled back.

Whistles tooted, and the brilliantly lighted pier began slowly to recede, seeming to draw after it a stretch of oily, trash-speckled harbor water.

Doc Savage, accompanied by Long Tom, repaired to the radio room. Doc wrote out a message, consulting the strange belt of cap insignias as he did so.

"What's the idea?" Long Tom asked. Doc let him read the radiogram.

CHIEF INSPECTOR

SCOTLAND YARD LONDON

CAN YOU FURNISH ME INFORMATION PRESENT
WHEREABOUTS FOLLOWING SHIPS STOP SEA SYLPH STOP
HENRYETTA STOP U S S VOYAGER STOP QUEEN NEPTUNE
STOP GOTHAM BELLE STOP AXTELLA MARIE STOP RADIO ME
CARE OF LINER CAMERONIC

DOC SAVAGE

Long Tom scraped thoughtfully in his thin hair. "You think that getting in touch with the ships named on the belt will cast a light on this mystery?"

"I believe Scotland Yard's answer to this radiogram will throw light on something a good deal more horrible than these present difficulties of ours," Doc replied quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“I have heard of most of those ships — heard something which suggests a very unpleasant possibility. We will know more about it when we get Scotland Yard’s reply.”

Long Tom would have liked to probe for more definite information, but knew it would be futile. Doc was not in the habit of giving voice to idle theories. When he had proved his suspicions to be facts, word would be forthcoming.

They went out on deck, after filing the wireless message for immediate transmission.

The lights of Alexandria receded rapidly in the warm night. Monk and the others joined Doc. Together, they stood at the rail and conversed, speculating on whether or not their troubles had been left behind.

The Cameronic rapidly quieted, for the passengers — mostly tourists — had spent a strenuous day sight-seeing, and were quick to retire. The liner plowed silently through the night. Somehow, it had the aspect of a shiny, new coffin fitted with lights.

The tomblike atmosphere, enwrapping a ship so new and so elaborate, lent the impression that they were starting a voyage of death.

Not until the light on the Cape of Figs, at Alexandria harbor, was a winking white eye in the distance, did Doc and his men retire for the night.

Chapter V

THE SCALP BELT

AN hour before dawn. Doc Savage arose and, attired in a bathing suit, went up to the sun deck for his daily routine of exercise. The deck was deserted at this early hour.

In a remote spot in the forest of elevators and funnels, Doc began his usual ritual.

These exercises were the explanation of Doc's amazing physical and mental powers. They lasted a full two hours. Every second of that time he was working out at full speed. He had done this sort of thing daily from childhood.

He made his muscles tug, one against the other, until all of his mighty bronze body glistened under a film of perspiration. He juggled a number of more than a dozen figures in his head, multiplying, dividing, extracting square and cube roots. This intricate mental arithmetic sharpened his ability to concentrate.

He employed an apparatus which created sound waves of frequencies above and below those audible to the normal ear. Thanks to his lifetime of practice, Doc was able to hear many of these sounds. His hearing was unbelievably keen.

He named numerous odors contained in a case of small vials. He read pages of Braille print — the system of upraised dots which is the writing of the blind. This sharpened his sense of touch.

He had many other parts in his routine exercises calculated to

develop his every faculty. He went through the whole thing at top speed, and each portion of the ritual was so strenuous that five minutes of it would have prostrated a man unused to that sort of thing.

Finishing his ritual, Doc moved toward his cabin. Rounding a large ventilator, he halted abruptly.

Before him was another man, also taking exercises. The fellow was unaware of Doc's presence.

Doc watched, greatly interested.

The stranger was balancing expertly on his hands and raising and lowering himself. This was no mean feat, but he was doing it easily. And he did it innumerable times.

He had a regulation exerciser of spring cables. Five such cables were all an ordinary man could handle. Yet there were more than fifteen strands on this apparatus. After working out with that a while, the man turned a score or more of handsprings, flinging himself high into the air.

The stranger was big, and undoubtedly strong.

He had a great, flowing white beard! This was what made his performance so remarkable. He looked like an acrobatic Santa Claus.

Doc Savage's strange golden eyes showed no expression. But he knew this must be the personage who had acted suspiciously in the vicinity of the ship's strong room, the night before.

"Good morning," he said suddenly.

Had a cannon exploded, the effect would not have been more

remarkable. The white-whiskered man whirled like a startled rabbit. One look at Doc, and he shot in a flying leap for the rail. He plummeted over the edge.

No little taken with surprise, Doc ran to the rail. He expected to see the gentleman of the Santa Claus beard sprawled, perhaps with a broken leg, on the deck below.

But only the snowy beard lay on the deck!

The whiskers were false, and had jarred off, the adhesive used to hold them in place probably having been softened by perspiration.

The stranger himself had vanished into the ship.

DOC SAVAGE dropped down to the deck and got the false beard. It was no cheap theatrical adornment, but carefully constructed. The name of the maker was stamped inside, together with his business address.

The false beard had been made in Alexandria.

Doc carried the thing along as he headed for the swimming pool, and placed it in plain view on the pool edge while he took a dip. He remained in the water for some time, practicing various strokes. Once he sank beneath the surface and stayed an astounding length of time — several minutes. This was a trick he had learned from masters of diving — the pearl gatherers of the South Seas.

He returned at length to his quarters, carrying the beard, Just inside the door, he stopped, staring at his quarters.

For twenty seconds — perhaps thirty — his mellow, weird trilling sound permeated the parlor-bedroom-bath suite which he was

occupying. An eerie, exotic song without tune, the melody rose and fell. And all the while, his flake-gold eyes roved.

The place had been ransacked. A thorough job. The searcher had made no effort to conceal his handiwork.

Doc stepped quickly into each of the rooms. Only one thing was gone — the curious belt of cap insignias.

Doc showed no fluttering of excitement. But he told his men about it at breakfast. Told them also of the strong man who had lost his false white beard.

“Well, what d’you know about that!” Renny thumped explosively. “It looks like we weren’t mistaken when we thought that fellow was acting suspiciously around the strong room!”

Long Tom eyed Doc curiously.

“How come you didn’t take particular pains to hide the belt. Doc?”

“Why should I? We examined it to our satisfaction. And I remember the names of all the ships that were on it.”

“Maybe the dang thing was proof of something!”

“It was. It’s my guess that we’ll find that out when Scotland Yard answers our radiogram sometime this morning.”

“Would you recognize the strong man without his whiskers?” Johnny queried.

“Probably. But he seems to be clever at disguises. He might don another.”

The rest of the meal was consumed in silence, except for a minor explosion from Ham, who claimed Monk purposefully squirted grapefruit juice on the immaculate suit the lawyer was wearing.

During this outburst, alarmed waiters hovered about, thinking of a certainty that there was going to be a fight, if not a murder.

"Now we'll do some investigating in connection with that decoy note sent to Long Tom," Doc declared.

"Huh!" grunted Renny. "Did the fellow who got the belt miss that?"

"He missed it by about half the length of the ship," Doc replied, and showed where he had been carrying the message, inclosed in a waterproof, flat box, secured under his bathing suit with a strip of adhesive tape.

Renny popped his big fists together, causing a sound not unlike concrete blocks colliding.

"Dang a mystery! I'd like to get my hands on that now whiskerless Santa Claus!"

Johnny squinted through his peculiar spectacles. "Do you want to bet that it was not the unwhiskered Santa Claus who searched Doc's suite?"

Renny gave a loud snort. "Some of these days you're gonna offer to bet on something that ain't a sure thing!"

It was a habit of Johnny's, this offering to wager — but he never suggested a bet where there was a chance of losing.

THE Cameronic purser had in his possession a register which had been signed by all the passengers upon boarding ship. Doc

consulted this while the others peered over his shoulder.

"What a mess of frog tracks!" grunted Monk, eyeing the scrawled names.

"You've got a lot to talk about!" Ham choked mirthfully, indicating Monk's signature with the tip of his sword cane.

Even Johnny, who had learned to read ancient hieroglyphics as a part of his training in archaeology, could not have translated the convulsive splatter of pen marks which Monk had put down for his name.

"Here we are!" Doc said abruptly.

His companions bent close. But not until he pointed out certain handwriting similarities, could they tell that a name he was indicating had been written by the same hand which penned the decoy note that had so nearly led Long Tom to his death.

They read the name: Jacob Black Bruze.

"Hm-m-m!" growled Long Tom. "So a bird named Bruze sent me that note!"

"Does somebody want to bet Bruze is not the guy who killed Pasha Bey and his two helpers?" Johnny queried hopefully.

Nobody did.

"Let's pay this gentleman a visit!" Long Tom grunted. "He's got Cabin 17 on B deck, this record says."

They lost no time in getting to B deck.

Doc tapped imperatively on No.17.

No answer! The door was unlocked, a test showed. They entered.

The berth was rumpled, indicating it had been occupied during the night.

Long Tom glanced under the berth, into the wardrobe, and jerked out dressing-stand drawers.

“Not a speck of clothing or other stuff here!” he rapped. “The fellow must have deserted this stateroom!”

Producing a small cannister of gray powder, Doc sprinkled the doorknob, the light-switch, the shiny edge of the berth. Then he used the magnifying left lens of Johnny’s spectacles to hunt finger prints. He found none.

“Wiped off! You’re right, Long Tom — the bird has flown the coop!”

In the corridor. Doc stopped the steward who attended this section of staterooms.

“What did the man in No. 17 look like?”

“A very large fellow, with a long white beard — “

“That’s enough!”

Long Tom glowered angrily up and down the passage.

“The guy got the jitters when he saw you looking at him, Doc! He thought you were getting ready to put the jinx on him! He’s took to cover!”

"It's a cinch he hasn't left the boat!" Renny boomed. "We can hunt for him!"

"And we're going to do exactly that!" Doc declared.

THE cooperation of the Cameronic skipper would be a convenience in the search. So Doc visited that worthy.

Captain Ned Stanhope, his name was. He was a little old grandma of a man. His hands were roped with blue veins, and shook at intervals from some nervous affliction. He looked less like a doughty sea captain than any of that species Doc had ever seen.

Captain Stanhope did have the whopping voice of a windjammer master, however. He was very affable.

"Sure, an' I've heard of you an' your crew!" he rumbled amiably at Doc. "Go right ahead with your search. I'll order my mates to give you their cooperation."

"Thank you, captain," said Doc.

The search got under way. The hunt would, it was certain, take more than one day. The Cameronic was a liner of fair size, and the passages within her hold were innumerable.

Other than Doc, only Renny and Johnny had glimpsed the white-bearded man. This restricted the speed of the search.

Two hours later, a radio messenger came paging Doc's name. He bore the answer to the Scotland Yard radiogram. The men clustered to read the missive.

SHIPS YOU NAME ARE ALL VESSELS LOST AT SEA DURING
LAST FIFTEEN YEARS OR SO STOP IN EACH CASE NOTHING

KNOWN OF FATE OF SHIP STOP THEY SIMPLY VANISHED IN
ATLANTIC OCEAN

CHIEF INSPECTOR

SCOTLAND YARD

“Holy cow!” Renny rumbled. “The insignia on the belt were from the uniform caps of the officers of lost ships!”

Doc nodded slowly. “That’s what I was afraid of. My memory suggested that the names were of lost vessels. What I wanted to confirm was the fact that they all disappeared in the same ocean — the Atlantic.”

“That belt!” Ham made thoughtful stabbing gestures with his sword cane. “The thing strikes me as being something like a — scalp belt!”

“A scalp belt of ships!” Monk grunted, his feud with the dapper lawyer temporarily forgotten.

Ham stopped manipulating his sword cane and stared at Doc.

“Say — it may be that this thing is a lot bigger than simply a matter of somebody being after our diamonds!”

“I won’t be surprised!”

Ham blinked. “Does that mean you’ve got an idea what we’re headed for?”

“Not at all,” Doc assured him honestly

The scrutiny of passengers and crew on the Cameronic went ahead with much more vigor. In the back of his mind, each man harbored the

same thought. That scalp belt of dead ships! Could it mean that some strange, grisly fate had overtaken each of the vanished boats? And could the Cameronic be destined for a like end?

As the search progressed through the day, they remarked on one fact.

“Have you noticed what a bunch of mugs are booked in the first-class cabins?” Monk grunted.

“I’ll say!” agreed Long Tom. “First-class passengers are usually prosperous business men and their families. But not these eggs! There’s thirty or forty who look like they had been jerked out of some penitentiary!”

Although the rough character of these individuals in first-class accommodations was noteworthy, there was nothing about their presence to arouse suspicion.

Night came. Doc and his friends had not found the mysterious strong man who had worn the white beard.

A surprise awaited them when they visited their cabins to dress for dinner.

It was the scalp belt. The thing lay on the floor of Doc sitting room, where it had evidently been tossed through porthole.

Doc picked it up, and inspected the array of cap insignias. The other men crowded close.

“Holy cow!” Renny exploded his pet ejaculation. “Do you see what I do?”

The rest showed astonishment in various ways. Long Tom scraped

fingers in his pale hair; Johnny took off his peculiar glasses; Monk made a frightful face; Ham absently unsheathed a few inches of his sword cane.

It was unpleasant, this thing they had discovered. There was something horrible about it. Something cold and chilling as if death had unexpectedly walked in their midst.

The Cameronic had been added to the scalp belt!

Bright and new, sewed in place, a bit more carelessly than the others, was the cap insignia of a Cameronic officer. It had been added while the belt was in the hands of whoever had taken it, then returned it.

"This beats me!" Long Tom grunted. "Why was it returned to us — as a hint?"

"A warning, more likely," Doc decided. "Our enemy — enemies — is trying to get our goat. Too, the act smacks bravado. Our opponents want to show us they're not afraid of us."

"But why take the belt, then return it?"

"Probably they learned of the message from Scotland Yard."

This latter possibility became an evident fact, when consultation with the radio operator on duty during the day revealed that his file of message carbon copies had been ransacked. This had happened, he believed, when he had stepped out of his office for a moment to smoke a cigarette.

Further inquiry disclosed that Captain Ned Stanhope had lost his dress-uniform cap.

"Scrub my scuppers, if I can figure what happened to that cap!" complained the Cameronic skipper in expressive seafaring lingo.

Doc Savage did not tell him his head gear must have been lifted to get a decoration for the strange belt.

Neglecting the evening meal, Doc and his five men continued their search. To facilitate things for the three who had not seen the white-bearded strong man Bruze — if that was real name — Doc made a pencil sketch of the fellow, emphasizing predominant features.

"Bruze is probably his name," Doc explained. "That signature was written freely upon the purser's record, as if the man had enscribed it often."

The night hunt proved as barren as the one during the day.

Shortly after ten o'clock, there came a new development. A sailor shouted an excited alarm.

"One of the lifeboats is gone!" he yelled.

The boat, it appeared, had been lowered away silently. Whoever had done this had greased the ropes thoroughly beforehand. It was little short of astounding that the thing could have been accomplished without discovery. But the boat was gone.

"This guy Bruze got scared and cleared out!" Monk chortled.

Doc was not so optimistic. "I hope you're right, Monk. The only way we can be certain is to wait and see what happens. It looks like our search is useless. A man as clever as Bruze could easily evade us on a ship this size, especially if he has donned a disguise."

Chapter VI

SEA TROUBLE

WHEN successive days passed without another suspicious event, Monk's surmise that Bruze had fled the Cameronic in a lifeboat seemed correct.

The liner passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, with the famous mountain of rock frowning majestically off one rail.

A day out of Gibraltar, the Cameronic ran into soupy weather-fog, clouds, and sporadic rain. Radio reports were that such gloomy conditions were predominant over most of the Atlantic, and would continue for some time, possibly as long as a week.

The night after they ran into the rain and fog, Doc Savage found out, beyond a shadow of doubt, that Bruze had not been left behind. The discovery came about in a fashion that promised violent death.

Doc and his men were at a late cabaret entertainment held for the passengers in the main dining room. Broadway theatrical performers, paying for Mediterranean cruises by entertaining the steamship passengers, furnished the talent.

There was a young lady dancer, very comely, at whom Monk had been casting admiring eyes. He had not as yet spoken to her, however.

"One look at that thing you call a face will ruin the trip for her," Ham had assured Monk unkindly, when he saw how the wind was blowing.

Monk had about decided to take a chance on that.

Doc and his crowd had a ringside table. Behind them many passengers — tardy arrivals — were standing, and crowding each other to get a better view of the young woman dancer, who was nothing if not accomplished.

No one noticed a rather hard-looking individual quit the assemblage and amble out of the dining room, pretending to be casual about it. Another, also a vicious character, did the same thing. Then another! Soon nearly a dozen had departed.

These were all men who were occupying the costliest cabins. They gathered in one of these high-priced staterooms. Others were also present. Fully fifty, altogether!

A grim, hawk-faced giant occupied a chair in the center of the cabin. The night was warm, made sticky by the rain, and he wore no shirt. His torso was enormously muscled. He had a set of biceps which were only a little smaller than footballs.

He sat in a sort of fierce silence until every one was present.

“Savage and his gang are watching the cabaret!” growled the last fellow to enter. ‘There ain’t no danger of ‘em eavesdroppin’ on us!”

The evil-looking man in the chair shifted about impatiently.

The big muscles seemed to crawl like slithering animals under his skin.

“To-nlght we start workin’.” he said abruptly. ‘We’ll follow our usual plan — the same scheme we’ve worked on the other ships. Only, we’ll add a bit to it. The first thing we’ll do is get rid of Doc Savage and his outfit!”

The other men — they crowded every available inch of floor space — looked like a cold wind had blown upon them.

“That won’t be so easy, Bruze!” one muttered.

The overmuscled man sneered at him. ‘Afraid?’

The one who had muttered did not answer.

“Don’t you guys get worried.” Bruze held up his right arm and flexed the muscles. The limb seemed to acquire additional ligaments — it became unbelievably huge and hard.

“This Doc Savage may be a strong man, but he can’t handle me!” Bruze growled, obviously proud of the display. “I can tear ‘em to pieces with my bare hands!”

The others shifted uneasily. If they held any doubts, it would not have been wise to voice them. They swabbed their tongues over dry lips and kept silent.

Bruze tapped his muscle-bloated arm. “But I won’t use this!” He transferred the tapping to his forehead. “I’ll use this! And I’ll lay you it’s as good as anything Doc Savage has got!”

Again, no one voiced skepticism. Bruze was a supreme egotist. To dispute his word was to invite a taste of his terrible strength and the murderous torture his huge hands could inflict.

The big man’s shirt lay on a table. He picked it up, disclosing a cluster of six glass bottles which the garment had covered. These held a rather colorless liquid.

He distributed them among six men.

"You cents know what to do!" he growled. "One bottle for Doc Savage and each of his five pals!"

The six nodded nervously.

"After those bottles'5 do her work. we go ahead with our usual plan!" Bruze continued. "Do you all savvy what you're to do?"

To a man, they bobbed an affirmative.

"You ought to!" their monster leader leered. "You've done the same thing on other ships often enough! Now, get the blazes out of here! Vamose!"

The stateroom rapidly emptied its unsavory brood.

When the last man had departed. Bruze arose, exercised his vast limbs briefly. then stepped to a large wardrobe trunk. He ensconced himself inside and pulled the two halves of the trunk together.

It was a cramped hiding place. but it had protected him from stewards who might have reported his presence to Doc Savage. Bruze had evaded Doc's actual search by shifting from one end of the liner to the other while disguised as a grease-smeared engineer.

Air entered the trunk through cunningly concealed apertures. Very faintly, the jangling of an orchestra in the cabaret reached him.

DOWN in the cabaret. all the performers had appeared on the floor for the grand finale. The entertainment was over a moment later.

Doc and his men moved to the upper deck in a compact group and turned toward their staterooms, which were situated close together.

Monk stretched a cavernous mouth in a yawn. "It looks like this voyage is going to be quiet, after all."

He was soon to find out just how mistaken he was.

Separating, they entered their respective quarters.

Moving without haste, Doc slipped out of his dinner coat and unfastened his black vest. He noted nothing out of the ordinary about the room.

A vacuum jug held ice water. Doc poured out a glassful, sipped it, and found it a bit too cold. His vast knowledge of the human physique had taught him it was unnecessary, if not unwise, to shock the system by drinking excessively cold water.

He flung the glass of Chill liquid into the washbowl. A sizzling swish! Foul brownish Vapor puffed from the bowl! It spread with ugly speed, filling all the room.

Long before the hideous cloud reached the spot where he had stood, Doc was outside. He had recognized the danger instantly. A plug must have been shoved down the washbowl drain, and some chemical poured atop it — a chemical which produced a poisonous vapor when mixed with water!

In the corridor, he slammed the door. Scarcely pausing, he flung to Monk's cabin, which was nearest. The door was locked. A single blow of mighty knuckles caved it inward!

Monk was sprawled, a contorted heap, on the floor.

Holding his breath, Doc dived inside. His powerful bronze hands lifted Monk's bulk easily, bore it into the hall, and out of range of the

deadly vapor.

Doc grasped Monk's wrist, feeling for a pulse. And as he felt, a strange, cold fixedness of expression came upon his face. The metal of his mighty body seemed to freeze in a wintry blast of horror.

Monk was dead!

TRAVELING with a speed that all but defied the eye, Doc whipped to Ham's cabin. He broke down the door, entered holding his breath — and carried out the slack body of the lawyer.

Ham was also dead!

Rapidly, Doc tried the other three staterooms. Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny had escape& the fate of the other two, not having as yet gotten around to washing up for the night.

"Move the bodies out of range of the Vapor!" Doc rapped. The three survivors complied, their faces set in slightly inhuman masks. Monk — Ham! They could not quite believe the pair were dead. They looked about blankly for Doc, only to discover the big bronze man was nowhere about.

Doc, holding his breath against the diabolic gas, had reentered his suite. Wrenching open a bag, he secured what he wanted — tools of the two trades with which, of all others, he was most skilled.

He was back at the side of his three companions in an incredibly short interval.

Doc's three men stared dully as the bronze giant went to work. Then, slowly, as they looked on, something resembling normalcy came back into their eyes. They leaned forward tensely, hardly breathing.

And a sort of incredulous hope came upon their faces.

There on the corridor floor, under the none-too-bright ship lights, they were witnessing one of the miracles of modern surgical skill.

The hearts of both Monk and Ham had stopped. Respiration had ceased. To all appearances, they were lifeless.

The thing Doc Savage was doing had been accomplished before by other great surgeons. But probably never under such conditions! To the three watchers, who knew but little of such things, what happened smacked of the touch of a supernatural being.

For Doc Savage, introducing adrenalin and other stimulants with a long hypodermic needle, which actually reached the hearts of the two men, caused the pulse to start once more. With a respiratory pump he cleared the residue of the poisonous vapor out of their lungs, and got breathing under way.

An hour, he worked! Two! three!

It was a great moment when Monk and Ham, now transplanted to berths, opened their eyes. Twenty minutes later, they were able to exchange faint scowls.

Their eyes sought Doc's mighty bronze form. They were not yet able to talk coherently. But their gaze conveyed their thoughts — their knowledge that they once more owed their lives to this amazing man of metal who could accomplish miracles.

Doc had saved them from peril on other occasions; he had often snatched them from the brink of death. But this time he had gone farther, into the depths of the black beyond itself, to bring them back.

DOC remained with the two victims through the remainder of the night, except for a few minutes spent getting rid of the deadly chemical in the staterooms where it had not yet been vaporized. This he accomplished simply by pouring water on the stuff, while holding his breath, and letting it dissipate through a porthole.

Several times he administered additional restoratives to Monk and Ham. Their heart action was still weak, and they were two very ill men. It was evident, however, that they were going to recover. This knowledge moved everybody to cheerfulness.

"How does it feel to be dead?" Renny boomed at Ham.

"Yeah!" Long Tom grinned. "What'd you see in the hereafter?"

Ham smiled faintly. "Were we really dead?"

"I'll tell a man!"

At the moment, Monk's homely features bore a film of perspiration.

"I knew it!" Ham croaked cheerfully. "It was just like I always thought it would be!"

"What're you talkin' about?" Long Tom asked, puzzled. "When I was dead," Ham explained, "I saw a big green guy with horns, a spike tail, and a pitchfork. It was the devil, sure enough! He went tearing past me. And a minute later, I saw him chasing Monk!"

"You're a liar!" Monk squawked.

"Liar — nothing! You're still sweating from the race!"

Everybody laughed. They were back to normal, these two. The old feud was on again.

It was decided that Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny should stand guard over the two invalids. They armed themselves with compact little machine guns which were Doc's own invention.

These weapons resembled slightly oversize automatics fitted with curled magazines. They were capable of a firing speed which exceeded even modern airplane machine guns. In operation, their roar was like the note of a monster bull fiddle.

Doc and his men had a fired policy against taking human life, even in the most heated combat. Their enemies, however, had a recurrent habit of coming to an untimely end in traps which they themselves set for Doc's group.

At the moment there was a grim look on the faces of Renny and the others. It was not unlikely that their rule against taking life might go by the boards, should Bruze attack this stateroom.

Doc quitted the cabin. He vouchsafed no word about where he was going; his men did not ask. They knew he was embarking on a lone-handed killer hunt

It was the hour of dawn. But there was no sunlight. The sky was piled full of slate clouds. These hung so low that they seemed to scrape the funnels of the Cameronic. And they leaked rain which washed the decks steadily.

THE night had produced other hideous developments. The first hint of this came to Doc when he heard two stewards talking excitedly.

"The operator went nuts!"

"Yeah! He must have!"

“Sure, he did! Two of the first-class passengers saw part of it! They heard the racket and ran into the radio room. The crazy operator was smashing the apparatus!”

“Had he already killed his partner?”

“That’s what the two passengers said. Then the crazy guy shot himself through the brain!”

Doc faded away from the vicinity. A few seconds later, he appeared in the radio room.

The place was large. Around the walls were cabinets and panels for apparatus. Large switchboards bracketed to the floor bore other mechanism. The wireless installation on the Cameronic consisted of four complete transmitting and receiving sets — two short wave and two long wave. At least two operators were on duty at all times.

The place was now a shambles. Every item of apparatus was smashed beyond repair. A fire ax had apparently been used in the job. Switch arms and hacked wire littered the floor.

Over everything was spread a snow of broken glass fragments from the numerous vacuum tubes.

One radio operator reposed in a corner. The fire ax had cleaved his head. Flaky glass hung to his clothing.

The second operator lay in the center of the wrecked room. He had been shot, obviously with a revolver on the floor near by.

The Cameronic’s physician was present. He pointed to the radio man who had died by bullet. “This fellow killed the other, wrecked the place, then slew himself.”

Doc's flake-gold eyes roved around the room.

"I think not," he said softly.

The ship's medico bristled. "Ridiculous! Two first-class passengers saw it happen!"

Doc glanced again at the wireless operator who was supposed to have destroyed the apparatus and then shot himself. To the bronze man's discerning eye, it was plain that nothing of the sort had happened. The radio man had not even been in the room while the mechanism was being wrecked!

Particles of glass from the vacuum tubes littered everything else, but there was none on the clothing of the fellow who had been shot. Had he broken the apparatus, some pieces of glass would certainly have clung to his garments.

"Where are the two first-class passengers who saw it happen?" Doc asked grimly.

The medico blinked the lids of his eyes owlishly. This bronze man had irked him at first; now, his presence was a bit frightening.

"They're around somewhere." The physician peered about "There they are. That's them!"

He pointed at two men. They wore snappy sport clothes, although it was a rainy day. Their ties and shirts were a bit loud for good taste. They had hard eyes, a pugnacious manner.

"Whatcha wavin' a hand at us for?" one growled.

Doc went over. His movements were effortless, pantherish. His big

metallic form seemed to glide.

“You saw this?”

“What’s it to you?”

“You saw it?”

The pair made snarly mouths. Their shoulders hunched truculently. But their eyes roved in an uneasy way.

“Phooey on you!” one muttered.

Doc’s stare ranged their clothing.

“How did those fine pieces of glass get on your garments?” Their eyes popped. They wet their lips, swallowed, wet their lips again.

Doc knew the signs. They were thinking up a lie.

“We rushed in while the radio guy was bustin’ up his outfit,” one sneered. “We tried to stop ‘im. The glass must’ve got on us then.”

DOC SAVAGE moved — moved so swiftly that there was only a blur of bronze. The two hard-looking men squawked in surprise. They stumbled back, bewildered, not understanding. For Doc had done nothing but touch each lightly upon the face.

“Slap us, will yer!” one gritted.

He spaded a hand under his flashy coat. His companion did the same.

Then a bewildering thing happened. Both men seemed to go to sleep on their feet. They fell heavily.

Two guns which they had partly drawn went bouncing across the deck.

The Cameronic medico howled: "What's the matter? What'd you do?"

Doc did not clarify the mystery.

A metallic giant in the rain, he made for the bridge. The water strung down out of the heavens like oyster soup. Wind stirred it about in little whirls.

Doc wore no hat, and the rain seemed to strike him without wetting. His bronze hair, smooth and straight as a carefully sculptured skullcap, had the aspect of being impervious to moisture.

Captain Ned Stanhope of the Cameronic occupied quarters directly below the bridge. His chief officers also had cabins there.

The skipper was not on the bridge. Doc tapped knuckles on the door of his office.

"Who is it?" The voice was Captain Stanhope's; but it was a voice weirdly changed. Gone was the whooping roar of an old-time seafarer. The tone was whining, forced.

"Doc Savage."

A long minute passed. "What d'you want?"

For answer, Doc opened the door and went in.

Captain Stanhope screamed: "Get out! What the blazes d'you mean by walkin' in uninvited?"

More than ever like a little old grandma, the skipper hunched in a swivel chair before his desk. His eyes held a strange glare. His nervous trembling was bothering him more than usual. A black revolver lay on the desk at his elbow.

The cabin light — artificial illumination was necessary because of the besmudged skies — played with eerie effect in Doc's golden eyes.

"What is wrong, Captain?"

"Nothing! Damn you, what does it look like was wrong?" This was a very different Captain Stanhope from the affable old man with whom Doc had previously dealt. "What d'you want? Tell me! Then get out!"

"It's about the radio operators — "

"I know all about them! You can't tell me anything! Get out of here!"

"You know they were murdered?"

Captain Stanhope's large eyes rolled. "You're crazy!"

"Both operators were killed by — "

Captain Stanhope interrupted with a shrill whine. He grabbed his black gun off the desk, pointed it at Doc, and cocked it.

"Clear out!" he snarled. "I don't want to hear your talk! You're a damn trouble maker! You asked to search my ship, and I let you! I should've known then you were nuts! Blast my timbers! You ain't gonna turn my ship upside down!"

"Captain Stanhope — "

"Shut up! Get out!" The revolver darted menacingly. Saying nothing more, Doc left the skipper's cabin.

DOC SAVAGE advised his men of the new developments, finishing with a flat statement. "The two in sport clothes killed the operators and ruined the radio apparatus, of course."

Renny rattled his enormous fists together. "But what's got into the skipper?"

"He seems to have decided he doesn't like us." Doc's voice, if it had changed expression at all, was a bit more dry.

"Is he in with this Bruze?"

Doc's reply was slow. "That — remains to be seen."

Leaving his men in the cabin, Doc prowled a bit. He made several discoveries which added to the tenseness of the situation.

First, the baggage room had been raided during the night. All trunks and suitcases had been ripped open, the contents scattered.

A portable radio transmitter and receiver carried in Doc's luggage had been ruined beyond repair. So had two compasses.

A visit to the workshop maintained aboard the Cameronic disclosed a foray had also been made there. All insulated wire, spare vacuum tubes for the radio sets — anything which could be used to construct a wireless outfit — had been ruined or thrown overboard.

The Cameronic physician encountered Doc. He had moved the two unconscious men in sport attire to their cabins. He wanted Doc to explain what was wrong with them — what made them sleep so deeply.

Doc did not enlighten the medico.

"I'll visit them and bring them out of it," he said instead. "Then we'll see what they can tell us."

But the pair were gone from their cabins. Suspecting what had happened, Doc went out on the rain-washed decks. There he found the evidence — marks where bodies had been dragged to the rail and flung overboard.

Callous murder! The two had been under the influence of a drug, administered by a tiny hypodermic needle held in Doc's hand when he had slapped them lightly. He had intended to revive them and make them talk.

Bruze must have fathomed his intent and disposed of the pair.

Doc returned to his friends.

Hours dragged. Nothing untoward happened. When meal-time came, they consumed concentrated rations from their own baggage — stuff they were sure was not poisoned.

Life on the Cameronic was apparently going on as usual. Passengers walked the deck, some laughing and some complaining about the drizzly weather. The orchestra played, mechanical horse races were held, and that night there was a dance.

The foghorn hooted at monotonous intervals, a hoarse voice in the abyss of rain and fog and cloud.

Like a monster lost in the soupy fastness of another sphere, the Cameronic plowed ahead.

Chapter VII

THE DEVIL'S BREW

SEVEN days! Seven years, it seemed! Seven ages in a fantastic world where there was only a dark, sinister sea and clouds and rain.

Not once did the clear blue sky appear. Nor did anything happen, although time and again during the interminable hours did Doc Savage prowls the decks and lounges, inviting trouble.

Monk and Ham were on their feet, somewhat shaky, but otherwise as good as new.

"I never saw such weather!" Monk grumbled.

Ham wiped moisture off the blade of his sword cane. "If you ask me, it was time we was getting to New York!"

"The ship has been traveling at reduced speed," Renny reminded.

Monk snorted. "We may not have been going toward New York! Seven days! No telling where we are!"

Doc entered the discussion quietly. "I think we've waited about long enough, brothers. I'm going to have another try at the captain. He hasn't shown himself on deck for the last week."

He went forward. At Captain Stanhope's cabin, he was met with profanity, orders to mind his own business — and a pointed gun.

Doc did nothing violent. The situation did not call for that just yet. Captain Stanhope was acting strangely, but he was within his rights

in refusing to discuss matters with a passenger. Too, since the slaying of the radio operators and the destruction of the wireless apparatus, nothing untoward had occurred.

But for seven days, the Cameronic had been sailing blind — and not telling what direction!

Doc sought for some of Captain Stanhope's officers. He had done that before, but had been strangely unable to locate them.

He consulted a steward and learned the Cameronic mates were keeping very close to their quarters, just as the skipper had been doing.

"They even have their meals brought forward."

Going to the cabin of the first mate, Doc tapped on the door. It was opened enough to let a stubby automatic snout protrude.

"Clear out!" snarled the mate. "We've got orders from Captain Stanhope to plug you if you pull anything funny! And we're not to talk to you!"

Doc temporized, but the door was slammed in his face.

He went away with an impression that the mate had been a badly scared man — a man frightened into acting as he had done.

"There's something devilish about this," Doc told his five friends. "The skipper and his officers seem to be terrorized. I think it's time we looked into the thing."

The others agreed. They fell to discussing the best procedure.

And while they talked, the sun suddenly appeared. Its warm rays

slanted through the porthole like something brilliant and strange.

Discussion stopped. Doc rapped orders. Within a few moments, they were on deck, equipped with hastily made contraptions which would serve as sextants. They took celestial sightings; they consulted their watches; they performed intricate mathematical calculations.

The result was startling!

"Holy cow!" Renny muttered. "We're thousands of miles from where we should be!"

"Just where are we?" demanded Ham, who had not secured satisfactory readings from his makeshift instrument.

"I'll have to figure it more closely," Renny replied. "But you can bet on one thing: we're just about as far from New York as we could be!"

Doc tossed his own instrument aside, announcing: "Brothers, this ship has been off her course the whole seven days!"

MONK emitted an ominous rumble. "I'm in favor of starting something! Maybe a little action will touch off the fireworks, so we can tell what this is all about!"

Doc nodded. "Discovery that we're off our course thousands of miles changes things. Captain Stanhope is no longer entitled to run this ship."

Monk grinned. "Meanin' that we're going to take it over?"

"Exactly that!"

There was no more argument or discussion. A tight, grim group, Doc and his men went forward. They expected trouble, and were

prepared for it.

The trouble was not long coming. Weather tarpaulins were up on the bridge of the Cameronic. A knife blade furtively opened a rip in one of these. A rifle barrel appeared.

Doc's alert eyes discerned the weapon. What followed took only snap parts of a second. Doc swept the compact little machine gun from Monk's furry paw. It stuttered — twelve reports, perhaps! They were so swift that no ear could have counted them, or hardly have distinguished them one from the other.

Behind the weather cloth, a man jumped up like a toy on a string. He screamed, whirled around and around, dervish fashion, and pawed at a mutilated arm. Then he ran for cover.

Passengers jumped up from deck chairs, or ran from within the superstructure, to stare. They had not recognized the roar of the super-firer as shots; the sound had been but a deafening moan.

Doc and his men charged.

On the bridge, two men ran into view with automatic pistols. But before they could fire, Doc's compact weapon racketed again. The pair seemed to melt down as lead tore at their legs.

Doc was refraining deliberately from killing; his men would do likewise.

Returning Monk's rapid-firer, Doc veered into the superstructure. He rounded a corner and sped down the passage which led to Captain Stanhope's quarters. His bronze hands held no weapon.

A hard-faced man popped out of a door, two dark, ugly automatics

held at waist level. The guns coughed like angry steel animals! Bullets chopped hardwood splinters from the corridor paneling, broke a steward's annunciator board, and collapsed the bulbs in a light fixture.

The slugs passed over Doc's head, for he had flattened low. Only inches above the carpet, he hit the gunman's legs.

The fellow tilted over. A chopping blow, expertly delivered, plunged him into oblivion before he slammed to the floor.

Doc ran on, reached Captain Stanhope's cabin, and tried the door. He had the foresight to stand far to one side while doing so, which was fortunate. For lead, snapping holes in the hardwood. stormed through a spot his body would ordinarily have occupied!

Pandemonium was spreading on the Cameronic. Men passengers were yelling; women shrieking! Up on the bridge, men howled, cursed! Pistols rattled; rifles spat more violently! And every once in a while, like a frightsome music over the whole, the amazing little machine guns in the hands of Doc's friends emitted ear-splitting bull-fiddle hoots.

BULLETS abruptly ceased eating at the door of Captain Stanhope's cabin. Out of the room came sounds of scuffling, faint cries, and gasps that were louder than cries.

Doc's fist levered like a bronze sledge. The door opened inward under the blow, leaving the lock behind.

Two men struggled in the center of the skipper's office. Their animated figures clarified the mystery of Captain Stanhope's surly behavior during the last seven days.

The Cameronic's commander had been acting a part at the point of a gun! He had turned upon his captor — was now fighting the man. He was using a clubbed pistol, evidently an empty weapon which he had been forced to use to threaten Doc.

Doc lunged in. He was a bit too late. Captain Stanhope, little old grandma that he was, had not the strength to match his opponent.

The latter twisted his gun into the skipper's chest, and pulled the trigger.

The roaring explosion caused the gun to jump backward from the skipper's chest as if it were a scared thing! The bullet tunneled through Captain Stanhope's heart, went on, and parted his spine. He was instantly dead — dead beyond even Doc Savage's miraculous ability to restore life.

The killer sought to turn his gun on Doc, but didn't succeed. It was doubtful if he even saw the fist which hit him. But his ugly jaw suddenly skewered over and under one ear.

The blow turned him entirely around. His arms jerked foolishly, his gun hanging by the trigger guard to one of his fingers. He crashed to the floor with a jar which upset an inkwell on the desk, and caused a pencil to roll to the carpet.

There was no one else in the commander's quarters.

Doc spun out into the corridor and up a private companion which gave to the enclosed portion of the bridge, more properly the wheelhouse.

At the top, two men stabbed at him with knives. But they

might as well have tried to spear an enraged bumble bee with toothpicks.

Doc's tendon-wrapped hand darted at one wrist, caught it, and twisted. Crunching, the arm acquired a grotesque shape and began to flop like a string in a wind, as the owner bounded about screaming.

The second knifeman slashed desperately, felt a pain in his hand, stared! His eyes came out like seeds as he saw the bronze fingers that had trapped his blade-gripping fist. The next instant, he was screeching and trying to pull eight inches of steel out of his own leg.

To his grave, that man carried an insane impression that he had stabbed himself. The blade had been shoved into his leg so swiftly that his sluggish reflexes had failed to tell him how it had happened.

A stocky fiend with a gun came flying, traveling backward, into the wheelhouse. He was already senseless. knocked so by Renny's great fists. He banged headlong into the upright frame which held the gyro-steering apparatus.

Renny followed him in. Doc's other four aids appeared in quick succession.

Monk, grinning fiercely. one hand over a knife slash on his homely face, said: "We've got the fort!"

"How many did you account for?" Doc rapped.

"Five or six!"

"And I got four! Any sign of Bruze?"

"Not a hair!"

"Then our work is far from done! It stands to reason he's aboard! We'd better get him while we're warmed up!"

The gyro steersman was taking care of the wheel, so no one was needed on deck for the time being.

They dived for the companion which led below.

Bullets streamed up at them to the accompaniment of a clamor that sounded like many ball bearings shaken in a box. A submachine gun this time! Either Bruze, or some of his henchmen!

The gunman had been nervous. and had fired at mere glimpse of Doc, giving the big bronze man a chance to twist out of range.

Growling angrily, Renny pointed his compact rapid-firer at the bridge floor. Using the bullet stream like a saw, clipping in fresh drums of cartridges as they emptied, he opened a hole in the stout planking.

Doc went down it, while his companions spread in a flanking movement.

The room into which he dropped was the cabin office of the first mate. The latter individual sprawled across his berth, stringing scarlet from a smashed nose, and with more red fluid soaking a patch of his scalp. He was breathing noisily.

The sight told Doc what he had already guessed — that the chief officers as well as unfortunate Captain Stanhope had been terrorized by gunmen for the past seven days. Obviously, the mate's captor had knocked him out before fleeing.

The door was locked. Doc drove it down with a sharp kick. He

expected to find the machine gunner in the passage, but was disappointed. The man had fled, together with such of his comrades as had been guarding the other Cameronic officers.

A companionway leading deeper into the innards of the liner — a short-cut route to the engine rooms — seemed the most likely course for them to have taken.

Men were beating at near-by cabin doors, yelling. They were the other ship officers!

Doc released them.

"The devils!" choked the second mate. "They've had guns on us for the last week! Followed us everywhere we went, threatening to kill us if we made a break! There's forty or so of 'em!"

"It was Captain Stanhope's fault!" snarled another. "The damned old woman was afraid some of us would get killed if we made a break! He advised us to take the safe course, and do as we were told! The old ninny!"

"Captain Stanhope is dead," Doc said.

A startled look came over the man who had berated the unfortunate skipper. He fumbled absently at his own throat.

"I — didn't — know," he mumbled, suddenly ashamed of his outburst

Doc's five aids came up, bolting in vain for further fighting. Down the companion which led, eventually, to the engine room, Doc started. The others clattered the steps at his back.

"Look!" Doc pointed.

Wet scarlet drops were scattered at intervals on the companion tread.

“They went this way! One of them is wounded. Maybe more!”

Doc and his men followed the red trail. It led along corridors, down staircases, through more passages — nearing the stern and the engine room.

Unexpectedly, a colossal, unseen fist seemed to strike them.

It spanked them back. It crowded in their eardrums until they almost burst.

An explosion! Thumping and rumbling, it traveled over the Cameronic from stem to stern! Searing hot air, scalding steam. The stench of cordite, gushed past them with hurricane force!

They reeled upon their feet. then dived forward. Ten feet brought them to the engine room. That was why the blast had seemed so tremendous — the engine compartment was very near.

They looked in. The instant they did so, they knew the engines were disabled.

DOC pushed forward, breasting waves of steam which felt hot enough to wash the bronze skin off his body.

All about him men shrieked in agony, or fought each other to get out of the heat-seared hell. Doc ignored them; they were too many to carry to safety before that flood of scalding water from the boilers rose high enough to melt the flesh from a man's legs.

He concentrated on finding certain valves and getting them shut. He soon accomplished the task. Then, working along the arched cavern

of the boiler room, he closed the oil burners.

Several engineers, who had retained their presence of mind, gave assistance.

A marvelously short time — four or five minutes — saw danger of fire and bursting boilers eliminated. The powerful ventilators rapidly sucked the steam from the chambers of the engine rooms.

For all the force of the explosion, and all the yelling and screaming and fighting, it developed that no one had been killed. Several engineers, however, were seriously burned. But alert medical attention should pull them through.

Of Bruze and his men there was no sign. The problem of coping with them was temporarily sidetracked, anyway.

Doc and his men examined the engines. Turbines — reduction gears — all were smashed beyond repair. At least four charges of explosive had been placed, all timed to detonate at the same instant.

“What worries me — did the blast open the hull plates?” Renny muttered.

An examination disclosed the hull to be intact, although three or four bulkheads had been blown out.

“It’s plumb lucky the Cameronic is a new ship!” Renny declared.

During the next few minutes they gave all attention to attending to the wounded. Emergency kits were brought into use. The more seriously hurt were carried to the upper-deck lounge, which was converted into a temporary hospital.

Doc was setting a broken arm for a husky oiler when Monk came rushing in.

“Say — we’ve been too busy to take a look at the sea! C’mon out! I wanta show you somethin’!”

Doc completed the setting of the arm; then followed Monk out on the upper deck.

“Blast it — look.” Monk leveled a furry arm at the sea.

Or was it a sea! Certainly, the flat waste which stretched to the horizon had none of the aspects of an ordinary ocean. It looked more like a vast, dead prairie of strange, sapphire hue. Here and there weird, whitish spots lent a mottled appearance.

There were no waves. Instead, the expanse seemed to bend with the swell, not unlike a flexible mirror.

The Cameronic still moved, for the engines had not been stopped long. In her wake was a short lane of intense indigo. Farther back, this wake was slowly filling with the jaundiced substance which colored the sea in all directions.

Monk felt vacantly of the cut on his face. “Blazes, Doc! What kind of a place is this?”

LEANING over the rail, Doc studied the water below. The yellowish hue, he saw, was caused by a remarkable species of weed. Weeds which floated in countless profusion!

Long and stringy, the bilious stalks bore berries, not unlike ordinary gooseberr~es. Air cells which supported the weed resembled small bladders.

The mottled appearance of the fantastic sea came from patches of the weed which had seemingly died. A macabre, dying waste it was! And it stretched interminably into the distance.

Intent study of the monster weed bed — for it was nothing less than that — showed the existence of a fair number of primitive life forms.

Little, short-tailed crabs were most plentiful, probably because they were of a yolky hue, blotched over with white — a color scheme which blended nicely with their surroundings.

There were also species of small fish, mollusks, gastropods, shrimp, and pipe fish. Most remarkable of all were the strangely formed little sea horses.

Doc borrowed a pair of powerful binoculars from a passenger, that he might study the life forms more closely.

Renny and the others appeared. They looked around blankly, uneasily. The blazing heat of the sun, the lifelessness of the sea, gave the region a moribund air.

“Holy cow!” Renny snorted. “What is this place — the Sargasso Sea?”

“It would seem so,” Doc told him.

Renny frowned. “But I’ve been on ships that sailed through the Sargasso Sea! Right through the thing! And we never encountered any weed beds as thick as this!

Doc considered for a time, his bronze features inscrutable.

“Over a period of some two thousand years the Sargasso Sea has

been a mystery and a menace," he said slowly. "Strange and incredible stories have been told of it. It is just possible, brothers, that those wild tales have a basis in fact!"

Renny seemed doubtful. "But expeditions have visited the place and reported that, although the weeds were there, they were not so extremely thick."

"Expeditions could have missed the true Sargasso!" Doc pointed out. "According to the legends, the place is a great weed bed to which derelict ships are carried, to be entrapped and float through the ages. The actual location of the Sargasso might vary from time to time, as the weed bed is moved by the ocean current."

Monk emitted a humorless chuckle and pointed at the strange sapphire sea. "Is this the Sargasso Sea, or isn't it?"

"Do you want to bet it isn't?" questioned the bony Johnny, who never wagered unless it was on a sure thing.

Chapter VIII

DERELICT

A SINGLE shot whacked in the depths of the liner, and its echoes cascaded through the corridors and lounges like satanic mirth.

"That was near the stern!" said Ham.

They ran for the sound, and met a steward who was reeling about, digging splinters out of his face. He had, it developed, thrust his head down a hatch, only to be shot at.

Bruze and his gang had barricaded themselves in the rear portion of the Cameronic.

"You fellows hang back!" Doc directed his men, and went forward alone.

"Bruze!" he hailed, when near the temporary fortress.

"Well?" a hoarse voice came thumping back.

"We're going to give you birds a chance to throw down your weapons and come out!"

This got a resounding horse laugh. "You are, huh? Well, we was just figurin' on givin' you the same chance!"

"You'd better be sure you're not biting off more than you can chew!"

"Yeah? We've done a pretty good job of chewing the bites we've taken so far, haven't we?"

"That's one way of looking at it!" Doc was using care not to show enough of himself to offer a target.

"We're givin' you two hours to turn the ship over to us!" Bruze called fiercely.

"What will you do with the boat after you get it?"

"Plenty! You'll find that out!"

Doc did not doubt the truth of the statement. "You fellows are after the diamonds?" he questioned.

"Sure! And three million in gold bullion in the strong room! You didn't know the bullion was aboard, did ya?"

"I didn't have a captured bank clerk to torture for the information!"

Bruze squawled a curse. "So you found out about the clerk, huh?"

Doc neglected to mention that he had held only suspicions, until Bruze's words virtually admitted the murder of the Alexandria employee of the American Bank branch.

"Is that the way you always work?" he inquired. "I mean — do you usually capture a bank clerk and torture him until you learn what outgoing liner is carrying the most money?"

Bruze laughed nastily. "So you've guessed this ain't the first ship we've bagged?"

"You as much as told me when you left that scalp belt in my cabin with the name of the Cameronic added."

Bruze's ugly laughter turned to profanity. "No more talkin'! Ten minutes of the two hours you've got to surrender in are already gone!"

"You don't think we're saps enough to give up, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know! We've got about a dozen sailors and passengers back here! We'll croak 'em if you hold out!"

This was the first information Doc had that Bruze was holding hostages. He retreated and made hasty inquiries. Confusion and terror was still rampant among the passengers. Securing any sort of facts in the bedlam was difficult. But at length the truth was evident.

Bruze was holding at least a dozen prisoners!

DOC went into council with his five aids.

"We'd better face the truth," he informed them. "Bruze will no doubt kill his hostages, just as he says he will. He's entirely merciless."

"You're tellin' us!" Monk muttered, thinking of his own visit into the domain of death.

"We've got to spring something on him," Doc continued. "Something which will show him that murdering his captives will not save him."

"Gas would do the trick — only we haven't got any!" Monk grunted. Then he looked hopefully at Doc. "Unless you have some?"

Doc shook his head. "The only thing I have is the stuff we use in hypodermic needles to produce unconsciousness. Unfortunately, we had no chance to stock up on our usual emergency supplies before we got into this mess."

Descending to the engine room, Doc secured a length of straight

brass tubing which was nearly three feet long, and approximately a quarter of an inch in diameter. It had been part of a gauge tube.

He gave this to Renny and Monk, and explained what he wanted done.

Grinning widely, the pair of giants departed to perform their assigned tasks.

The wild confusion among the passengers was increasing instead of abating. White-faced tourists, looking over the rail at the dead, hideous expanse of weed-filled sea, became even more pallid.

Every individual who had the slightest information on the Sargasso Sea was broadcasting it at the top of his voice. Every book on the subject had already been taken from the library.

Several women had gone into hysterics, and were being treated with the wounded in the lounge. The Cameronic physician had found four other medicos on the passenger list, and these gentlemen had been pressed into service. They were probably the coolest of the lot.

Not all of the passengers had lost their control, however. Many stood in groups, talking calmly or seeking to quiet those who had fears.

The most troublesome persons were panicky souls, forty or fifty in number, who had the idea the Cameronic was going to sink as a result of the blast which had ruined the engines. They were insisting on taking to the lifeboats.

Lastly, there were a few persons who could not get it through their heads that the whole thing was not a joke — some fantastic entertainment put on by the Cameronic personnel.

"It's a swell show!" insisted one of these gentlemen. "The best I ever saw! And I've been on plenty of cruises. Why, it beats the show they usually put on when a ship crosses the equator! It beats it all hollow!"

Some one offered to take the gentleman down and show him the ruined engines, and see if he thought that was a joke. And how about the scalded engineers?

Since it was evident that the Cameronic officers, dazed by the loss of their skipper, were going to have trouble keeping things under control, Doc Savage called a meeting on the forward sun deck. Nearly every one, except the physicians and the injured, attended.

Doc told them, in a powerful but unexcited voice, which carried to every individual, exactly what had happened.

"The situation is certainly not a joke!" he informed them. "But neither is it something to get panicky over. The ship is not sinking, nor is it likely to do so."

His remarkable voice, his ability to put over facts distinctly and without exaggeration, had produced a strong effect upon the crowd. Those in Lear were calmed to a marked degree.

"The men barricaded in the stern are heartless killers," Doc continued. "They are as likely as not to shoot any one they catch sight of! For that reason, it is advisable that everybody remain up here for the next few hours — or until we take care of the gang in the stern."

"Are we actually in the Sargasso Sea?" demanded a man.

"You are!"

MONK and Renny were waiting when Doc left the crowd. They

carried a small tin sirup pail, which was well wrapped with wire and fitted with a fuse, which Monk had fashioned out of a string soaked in gasoline and wrapped with paper.

This thing resembled a bomb, but the carelessness with which Monk handled it showed that it held no explosive.

Renny carried a large glass bottle containing a colorless liquid. The fact that he took a drink from the bottle before they moved aft demonstrated the liquid was merely water.

Monk also had the tube of brass. He turned this over to Doc.

“You understand how we’re to work it?” Doc questioned.

“You bet!”

They separated, Monk and Renny remaining together, but Doc taking a devious course of his own.

Monk and Renny reached a spot near the fortified Bruze and his crew.

Monk flung the bottle. It landed near a door in the superstructure behind which their enemies lurked. Glass burst and water sprayed the deck.

“Hey!” Bruze’s coarse voice boomed. “What’s goin’ on here?”

A moment later, Renny touched a match to the gasoline-saturated string which comprised the makeshift fuse on the fake bomb. He threw the thing. It skittered along the deck, and stopped directly in front of the door. The fuse blazed brightly

“A bomb!” Bruze squawled. “Throw it overboard, somebody, before it

explodes!"

A tough-looking man bounded out of the door, grasped the imitation bomb, and heaved it over the rail. Then he whirled for the door.

He never reached it. A great drowsiness seemed to seize him. He reeled, then slouched down on the deck. He chanced to land directly in the water from the broken bottle.

Bruze raved profanely. He started to jump out of the door to rescue his man. Machine guns, moaning in the fists of Monk and Renny, drove him back.

It was three or four minutes before Bruze ceased raving, and his men stopped a wild barrage of bullets launched in hopes of reaching Monk and Renny.

Then Doc's strong voice pealed: "Bruze!"

"Yeah?"

"You saw what happened to your man?"

"Yeah! You got him with some kind of damn gas from that bottle!"

"All right! We'll use the same stuff on you birds if you don't come to terms. We were just testing it out!"

To this, Bruze returned only an uneasy silence.

A FEW seconds after this, Doc and his two men were together. Monk and Renny were grinning.

"It worked like a charm!" Monk chuckled.

Doc nodded, hefting the long brass tube. It was not gas which had overcome Bruze's comrade; Doc had simply winged him with a dart blown from the tube — a dart tipped with the drug which produced the sleeping unconsciousness.

"Bruze is going to do some tall thinking," Renny declared grimly. "He thinks we've got a supply of gas, thanks to that trick."

That Bruze had engaged in some serious thought was evident before long.

"Savage!" he called.

"Well?" Doc demanded, making his expressive voice coldly arrogant.

"Maybe we can make terms!"

"I doubt it! You see, we've got you just where we want you!"

The coarseness in Bruze's voice did not entirely hide a strain of stark fear.

"Listen!" he called; "give us some lifeboats and turn the diamonds over to us, and we'll leave the ship!"

Monk took it on himself to answer that suggestion. "Don't make us laugh!"

The next three or four minutes were marked by some animated discussion in the stern. None of the words were audible, but from the nature of the voices, it seemed that most of Bruze's men were insisting they make the best terms possible.

"Just give us the lifeboats and plenty of food and water, and we'll leave!" Bruze shouted finally.

Monk winked. "We'd better take 'im up!" he whispered.

"You will leave the prisoners behind!" Doc yelled. "Better still, you'll turn them loose at once!"

This provoked another conflagration among Bruze's cutthroats.

"Lower the boats and load 'em!" yelled Bruze. "We'll have the captives drag the painters back to where we can get hold of 'em! Then we'll let them go, unharmed!"

This was done. The various manipulations occupied almost an hour.

The most remarkable occurrence was when the captives were pulling the lifeboats, lowered from amidships, along the rail to the stern. There were an even dozen in the group. Yet it took every ounce of strength all twelve could muster to budge the boats through the weed!

"You can't tell me this stuff wouldn't trap a ship and hold it forever!" Ham muttered. "A liner with the power of this one might be able to go through, but think of what would happen to a slow freighter or a sailing vessel!"

To all appearances, Bruze went through with his part of the bargain in honest fashion. The captives were permitted to reach safety, much to their relief.

Bruze and his gang boarded the lifeboats — three of them — in the shelter of the after deck.

"What I'm wondering is how they're going to get away through the weeds." Ham pondered. "Fifty men couldn't row a boat a hundred yards a day through the stuff!"

HAM soon got his answer.

The three lifeboats appeared unexpectedly — so far behind the stern that they were out of pistol range.

Bruze's followers were standing erect, poling the craft ahead. They had lashed crosspieces to the ends of the long oars. With these they shoved against the weeds.

Doc seized a pair of strong binoculars, adjusted them, and stared.

"They have a sort of mechanical cutter rigged on the bow of each boat, and others along the rail!" he declared.

Ham was bewildered. "But where'd they get the cutters?"

"They must have brought them aboard in their baggage in Alexandria."

Monk grimaced with all his homely face. "Doggone if they didn't plan this thing mighty thoroughly!"

There now came a development which showed Bruze had not lived up to his part of the bargain as honestly as he had pretended.

A worm of black smoke wriggled out of the stern of the liner. It swelled into a snake, then a flaming monster.

"Fire!" The cry ran from stem to stern of the Cameronic.

Members of the crew and passengers poured along the decks, carrying extinguishers, buckets of water, and blankets with which to beat the flames.

A fire hose was unlimbered. Luckily, the fire pumps were operated by

electricity from a storage-battery source, which had not been damaged by the engine-destroying explosion.

Bruze had soaked much woodwork with fuel oil, and piled furniture and fixtures in great heaps. But the flames were finally controlled and extinguished.

The volunteer firemen, tired and bedraggled, lined the rails for a breath of fresh air.

Renny scowled at the three distant lifeboats, and mopped perspiration.

"The double-crossers!" he gritted. "Lettin' 'em get away was too good for 'em!"

An impish expression came into Monk's little eyes. "Oh, I don't know! They haven't got a monopoly on doublecrossin'!"

"What d'you mean, you missin' link?"

Monk chuckled. "It was me who filled the water kegs in their boats!"

"So what?"

"I filled 'em with nice salty sea water!"

Chapter IX

SEA OF THE DEAD

THE men fell to watching the distant lifeboats. Use of binoculars disclosed that Bruze and his followers had ceased employing their oars as poles. The small craft were at rest, just out of range of a high-powered rifle.

The glasses separated Bruze's distinctive figure from the others. Standing erect, he was waving his arms, conveying orders to his gang. Soon they began raising sailcloth awnings as a protection from the sun.

"Making themselves comfortable." Ham tapped the rail thoughtfully with his sword cane. "I can't understand this. They have no chance of reaching land! The nearest shore is many hundreds of miles away! They can't retake the Cameronic. What are they going to do out there in those little boats? Why are they settling down to wait?"

Ham was summarizing these puzzling questions largely to hear himself talk; he knew as well as the others that no answer was at hand.

There was an unnerving quality in the flat, slothful, dying expanse of the sea around about — a quality which made a man want to talk to himself for company. Too, there was sinister portent in the way the three lifeboats had come to rest a little beyond bullet range.

They were like birds of carrion, hovering within sight of the helpless hulk of the Cameronic as if waiting for it to die.

This unwholesome atmosphere was dispelled somewhat by a group of passengers who came striding along the deck. These individuals were substantial and quiet-mannered — just the sort of men who would be leaders in their communities.

They walked with a grimly purposeful air. That they had something important on their minds was perfectly evident.

“Bet they’ve held a convention, and voted us the cause of all this trouble!” Ham muttered.

The delegation arrived in front of Doc. Their manner was formal, their faces serious.

“Mr. Savage!” said the spokesman. “The passengers and crew have held a meeting. We did some voting. The results were perfectly satisfactory to the officers of the Cameronic. We wish you to take charge, to serve as dictator for the duration of our present difficulties.”

The grace with which Doc accepted this honor would have done credit to a President of the United States making his inauguration speech. He stated that there seemed to be no immediate danger, and gave other facts calculated to allay fear.

“There is a goodly supply of food aboard,” he explained. “And from the quantity of marine life in the weed beds, it is likely that edible fish are to be found. We may be able to put the weeds themselves through chemical processes and obtain some form of food. As for water, we can easily rig a distilling apparatus to secure the fresh product.”

His statements resulted in a noticeable slackening of tension.

Well aware of the cheering effects of music, Doc put the Cameronic orchestra to work. Then he pushed a search for any of Bruze's men who might have been left behind. He hoped to find some of the fellows who had been wounded or knocked unconscious during the fight at the bridge.

The hunt drew a blank, however. During the excitement following the engine-room explosion, Bruze had evidently collected all his followers.

"That is too bad!" Ham grumbled. "If we had one of the gang, we could darn well start him talking, and find out what is in store for us."

MONOTONOUS days followed. Such developments as occurred did nothing to slacken the feeling of dread which gnawed at every one.

Sightings at stars during successive nights showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Cameronic was drifting at a fair rate. The course seemed to be somewhat in the form of a swiftly narrowing circle.

"We are being carried toward the center of the Sargasso Sea," was Doc's conclusion.

"You mean that the Sargasso itself is nothing more or less than the vortex of a gigantic ocean whirlpool?" Renny questioned.

"That's the idea. It is the center of what is known as the

Atlantic whirl, an imaginary point to which the ocean currents carry all floating objects."

"I wonder where this weed comes from?" muttered Long Tom, examining a stalk of the stuff which he had fished aboard with a wire

hook on a line.

"That," Doc told him, "is one of the unsolved mysteries. The sargassum weed, as it is called, is presumably torn from distant tropical coasts — South America, or possibly Africa — and brought here by the ocean currents. But, so far as I know, this has not been definitely proved. Certain it is, however, that the weed is carried here, supported by the little air cells on its stalks, to float and die."

Long Tom flung the weed away, as if it were something hideous. "Ugh! I'd call this place the floating cesspool of the Atlantic!"

"Others have called it that, too!"

It required unending effort to fight off the depressing effects of the jaundiced, ghostly surroundings. For it was as though they were adrift in the realm of death. The size of the stately Cameronic seemed to shrink on the listless tundra of dappled ochre.

Doc kept the orchestra going most of the time. At his suggestion, only the liveliest tunes were rendered. He himself devised new arrangements when the old pieces grew stale, showing in the process that he possessed a knowledge of music as remarkable as his learning along other lines.

There were frequent boxing and wrestling matches. Doc instituted a regular military drill, from which no one but the injured engineers were excluded. In fact, he gave no one time to sit down and think, for with thought would come fear that there was never to be escape from this domain of death.

The sun beat down remorselessly, except for one occasion, when there was a rainstorm.

This shower supplied Bruze and his gang with drinking water, much to the disgust of Monk, who had hoped the brine he had put in the lifeboat water kegs would eventually bring their enemies to terms

The continued presence of the three small boats, just out of bullet range, was itself disquieting. They were like a trio of vultures.

Doc and Renny, both supremely expert mechanics, contrived cutters for the weeds. Instead of fitting them to the regular lifeboats, they constructed lighter craft, remindful of racing shells.

To these thin hulls, they rigged manually operated paddle-wheel contraptions, the wheels being equipped with spokelike poles which dipped into the weeds for propulsion. The cutters were geared, sicklewise, to operate from the paddle-wheel device.

When the job was done, they had several speedy craft, capable of carrying from one to a dozen persons.

In order to try these out, they set forth and chased Bruze and his crew several miles. A number of shots were exchanged, but no casualties resulted.

That night, Bruze retaliated by moving in and taking long-distance rifle shots, making it dangerous for any one to be on deck.

Doc and his friends put a stop to that by casting out of engine parts a reasonably efficient muzzle-loading cannon.

The days dragged into weeks. Never, it seemed, was their plight going to change. But it did. And the change was not exactly pleasant.

THE hysterical screaming of a woman passenger awakened Doc one sun-gloried morning. He lost no time getting out on deck.

Off the starboard bow was an object so utterly hideous that it was easy to understand why the lady passenger had shrieked at sight of it. The Cameronic had drifted near the thing during the night, which had been somewhat hazy.

The feminine wails drew other passengers. They flocked to the rails in pajamas and dressing robes. More than one face paled after a first look; more than one breakfast was ruined.

The thing they were viewing resembled a litter of careless-stacked, gray, odious bones, festooned over with layers of vile-hued creepers. It lay there like something throttled and half devoured by the foul green growth which covered it.

Once it had been a ship. A stately, four-masted clipper! The toppled masts and spars were the gray things which had the aspect of clean-picked bones.

"The creepers have sprouted from the hold!" a man muttered. "There must have been a cargo of seeds aboard."

Renny appeared at Doc's side. Uneasiness pulled heavily at the big-fisted fellow's solemn features.

"Holy cow!" he breathed. "That's a nice thing to look at before breakfast! I can't help thinking but maybe the Cameronic will turn into something like that!"

"Want to work up an appetite?" Doc inquired dryly.

"You mean by rowing over and having a look? Sure!"

One of the light shells fitted with weed cutters and paddle-propelling device was lowered. Doc and his men got aboard. As they

approached the derelict clipper, the hulk became even more like an opened grave mound, vine-covered.

Nor was the sinister air dispelled when they went aboard. The bulwarks and rails were decaying, coated with a repulsive gray mold. The decking planks gave soggily under their feet. The creepers, pale and unhealthy things, draped like ravenous, starved fingers, as if greedy to feed upon the new life which had come aboard.

"Danged if I care about this kind of exploring!" Monk grumbled, flattening suddenly on all fours as the deck threatened to cave in under his great weight.

The ship had obviously been disabled in a storm. The cargo had been grain, seeds, and empty barrels, it appeared. The vessel was very low in the water, kept afloat only by her wooden construction and the buoyant nature of her load.

There was nothing to show how many years the derelict had been in this weird domain of dead ships. Nor was there anything to hint at the fate of her crew. Certainly, there seemed to be no human remains aboard.

The plates which had borne the name had rotted away until the lettering was indistinguishable. But, on a molded card which had been protected somewhat by glass in the wheelhouse, they found a name.

SEA SYLPH.

"That name was on the scalp belt!" Renny ejaculated.

In the skipper's cabin, a small, cheap safe gaped open. It was apparent that some explosive had been used upon it.

SOMBER and thoughtful, Doc's outfit returned to the Cameronic. Discovery that the name of the derelict was upon the scalp belt — the same belt which also bore the name of the Cameronic — had given them distasteful food for thought. They could not help comparing the possible fate of the liner with the lot of the derelict.

Nor did the fact that they had found no signs of human death aboard the moldering Sea Sylph add to their cheer. What had happened to the crew of the weed-trapped clipper?

Gaining the deck of the Cameronic, they found much uneasiness. The cause was not Bruze's three lifeboats, which still lurked like a scavenger trio just out of range of Doc's improvised cannon; the explanation lay in what could be seen off the port bows.

A smoky haze had enwrapped the weed-matted sea at dawn, but this was now lifting. It disclosed an amazing spectacle.

The Cameronic had drifted almost to the center of the Sargasso Sea during the night! They had reached the spot told of in story and legend!

Ships were before them. An amazing fleet! They seemed to date from all ages. Some were comparatively spic and span, craft which had been here only a matter of weeks or months. Others were older. Centuries older, if their strange construction was a guide.

Many of the craft floated high in the water. More were half-hull deep. Not a few were water-logged and practically submerged — little more than mounds in the repellent, yellow weed. Some were canted on their sides. Here and there, one had capsized completely.

Monk started counting, but speedily gave it up. The number of the derelicts was bewildering. Their masts were like a naked jungle on

the horizon.

The hulks had been brought together by the push of ocean currents from all sides. Nor was the strange forest composed of ships alone. There was everything that would float — sticks, planks, hatches, logs, bottles, metal barrels, and wooden barrels! Every conceivable kind of trash!

The stark amazement created by this weird sight did a great deal to abate the uneasiness of those aboard the Cameronic. Maneuvering deftly, Doc managed to induce something of a carnival spirit into the affair.

Stewards served breakfast on deck; the orchestra made the loudest possible harmony.

It was Johnny, on watch far up on a mast, who called news of the next development.

“Bruze and his gang have come to life!”

Every one rushed to points from which Bruze’s three lifeboats could be viewed. The trio of small craft were being poled directly for the clustered derelicts.

They were soon lost to sight, slinking like ghouls into the graveyard of lost ships.

Chapter X

DEATH'S REALM

BRUZE did not appear again that day, although binoculars were kept trained upon the massed derelicts toward which the Cameronic was slowly being carried by the ocean current whirl.

Two or three times, watchers on the liner thought they saw movement among the clustered wrecks, but at no time were they certain.

The rail of the Cameronic was crowded throughout the afternoon. Name plates on many of the hulks could be deciphered. Frequently, the name of a ship would draw forth excited comment from some one who recalled the history of that craft.

Four vessels were sighted, the names of which were represented on the strange scalp belt. These discoveries engendered anything but jubilation in the minds of Doc's men. It brought home a fact which each man knew they must face. The Cameronic was destined never to leave the Sargasso Sea!

Whether those aboard her would get away was something else again. More and more, speculation of Doc and his men turned to what had happened to the occupants of the other ships on the scalp belt.

Shortly after darkness fell like a dank, black blanket, Doc decided to get his own answer to that mystery.

He took no one into his confidence, but eased into a one-man, weedcutting hull, and left the liner. This was Doc's custom — to

vanish silently when he intended to make some foray of his own which might involve danger.

The shell hissed forward like a knife under the bronze man's powerful turning of the spoke-fitted paddle wheel. The spokes were equipped with a hinged arrangement which allowed them to flop downward after leaving the water, thus throwing off the entangling sargassum.

The air was oppressive. It had the musty tang of a cellar. Obnoxious to breathe at first, it was not unpleasant after a time.

The moonlight was brilliant, almost unnaturally so. In the lunar splendor, the massed derelicts presented a sight even more fantastic than that afforded by day.

Doc circled widely. A certain amount of noise, coming from the weed sickles and the paddles, was unavoidable. So he progressed cautiously.

The wrecks were not jammed as closely together as it had seemed from a distance. A few rubbed rail to rail. But many floated some yards from the nearest neighbor.

Frequently, Doc's craft nudged timbers, boxes, or other flotsam. At such times, he was forced to back up and go around. This was no mean job. The sickles were not equipped to operate in reverse. Nor did the paddle spokes, because of the hinged device, turn backward.

He was wangling a way around a huge hatch when a weird, unearthly sound thrummed against his ears.

Bong, bong-bong!

The notes came lunging hollowly across the yellowed, dying sea, and

ascended back from the hulls of derelicts in echoes which swallowed themselves. Again and again, the noise came, the bongings irregularly spaced.

Minute after minute, Doc listened. The metallic quality in the spectral gonging told him what it was. Signals! Someone was beating a message upon a giant Oriental gong.

The sounds died away after a time. The forest of dead ships seemed to acquire an eerie, whispering life. An occasional dull splash sounded. Once in a while, there came low rattlings, scrapings, and squeakings.

It took Doc quite an interval to decide human beings were moving through the ship graveyard, converging upon the spot from whence the gong notes had emanated.

The bronze man worked forward warily, intent on being an uninvited visitor at the gathering place.

THE derelicts grew more crowded in numbers, and the going consequently more difficult. In spots, the wreckage was clotted in great drifts.

Working under the stern of a half sunken, rust-cankered old tramp steamer, Doc stood erect in his light shell. He balanced expertly, then leaped. His powerful hands clutched the low rail.

He ran lightly, the moon furnishing plenty of light. At the bows, he dropped to a log, sprang from that to an overturned lifeboat, thence onward over more jetsam.

Only his incredible agility made such progress possible. He kept his footing on logs that bobbed and rolled, selecting with a precision

which seemed uncanny the driftage which would support him.

Once, however, he slipped in. The moments which followed were horrible. The weeds seemed to grasp and cling like living tendrils; every movement caused them to bundle him around and around.

Writhing free, Doc was filled with a new respect for this grisly, moribund place. Not only would the weeds trap a ship, but they would trap a man, so densely were they packed.

Light abruptly appeared ahead! A reddish glow cast on the forest of masts and drooping halyards! This luminance appeared and disappeared at irregular intervals.

Doc quickened his progress, wondering if the glow was some kind of a signal. He soon came upon a strange sight.

Two ancient, stout steel barges had been secured together. Around the edges of these had been lashed great timbers, which served both as added buoyancy for the barges, and as fenders to ward off any other derelict which the ocean current might shove against the barges.

A circular steel inclosure had been erected upon the barges. This resembled nothing so much as the pill-box gun turret on an ancient monitor gunboat. It was, however, larger than any turret

A conical steel tower projected from the center. This was perforated with loopholes. Like apertures were also plentiful in the turret itself.

Doc realized the whole thing was an efficient fortress. No doubt it was erected on the barges for good reason. Some of these dead ships must sink from time to time; hence the decision against using one of them for a headquarters.

And headquarters it must be! Men were arriving. A door, opening to admit them, flung the red blaze of light which had attracted Doc.

Doc eased forward.

An instant later, he hit bad luck. His foresight and cleverness usually guarded against incidents such as the one which now occurred.

There must have been a sensitive alarm system rigged around the fortress. Perhaps it worked from wires, perhaps from sensitive sound detectors.

Whatever it was, a full dozen searchlights suddenly blazed from the turret.

Doc, in the lee of a log, was plainly revealed.

Machine guns opened a nasty yammering from the barge fort!

WITH a move as swift as he could manage, Doc whipped over the log, gaining shelter. But he could feel the stout, water-heavy timber trembling as slugs chugged into it.

Doc fished a knife out of a sheath in his soaked clothing. He had stropped it to a razor keenness against such a contingency as this.

Wielding the blade, and keeping as low in the water as he could, he slashed through the weeds in retreat.

The fortress door opened with a gush of maroon light. Men poured out. It was as if an ant hill had been opened. They were bearded, vile-looking fellows. And each was burdened with weapons.

Bullets scooped sheets of spray out of the water about Doc. He sank,

striving desperately to reach the stern of a ramshackle schooner — the handiest vessel.

He kept his eyes open under the water. Amid the web of yellow weeds, he saw magical comet streaks of bubbles appear — rifle lead driving beneath the surface!

The entwining weeds impeded him. At times he seemed to stand still. His lungs, tremendous as they were, pumped with the effort. This was no ordinary battle he was fighting; a man of normal powers would have been helpless.

He reached the schooner hulk, and hauled himself behind it, slugs spanking the hull timbers.

Over the cackle of firearms, Bruze was bellowing frenzied commands.

“Here’s our chance! That’s the guy who’s been givin’ us so damn much trouble! Nab ‘im!”

Splashing, cursing, and the chug of feet on flotsam, showed the men were charging the schooner.

Doc hauled atop a decaying life raft. That gave him his start. A flying leap, another, and he was traveling rapidly. A vault put him upon a deck house, blown from some sailing vessel in a gale, no doubt.

“Get a move on!” Bruze shrieked. “Half of you spread out and cut ‘im off from gettin’ back to the Cameronic!”

Doc dropped off the floating deck house, cut his way twenty feet through the weeds, and reached more buoyant timbers, bounding quickly ahead.

Close behind him came Bruze's men, the Sargasso killers! Had Doc been a few degrees less powerful and agile, they would have caught him speedily. For they knew this weird near-island of derelicts, knew how to get through them most

speedily. Doc had to plan his course as he ran, a great handicap.

As it was, he held his own; but not much more. On occasions, he got some distance in the lead. Then the necessity of taking to the weed-curved water would slow him.

Doc was seeking a large ship, one aboard which he could play something in the nature of a frightful game of hide and seek with his pursuers. He was a master at that sort of thing. He could seek them out, one or a few at a time, and overpower them until they gave up in terror and fled.

The desired haven materialized in the shape of a monster of steel which reared up before him. A warship! It showed signs of having been swept by shell fire, but floated quite high in the water.

There were no dangling hawsers or chains visible in the moonlight. That did not bother Doc. He worked close to the hull. A silk line with a grapple hook attached — an article he always carried — came out of his clothing.

He tossed the hook, and it caught, held. He went up the silk cord, mighty hands gripping it with ease, and over the rail! He ducked into the shadow of an overturned anti-aircraft gun mount.

A surprising thing happened when his enemies came close. They stopped as if the man-of-war was something poisonous.

"Damn the luck!" Bruze howled, "Did he go aboard that boat?"

“Yeah!”

“That settles it, then!”

Astounded no little, Doc watched his pursuers fade away in the night.

THAT there was something aboard the battleship which Bruze and his gang feared was evident.

Doc's golden eyes roved alertly. He saw only upset guns, a fallen fighting top, and numerous jagged rents in the thick armor plate, where shells had exploded. How this monster war vessel happened to be here was self-evident. The craft had been in a hot fight, no doubt during the Great War, and had been abandoned by her crew. Or perhaps the enemy had taken the crew off, leaving the huge craft to drift.

There was no movement, no sign of life.

It would have been comparatively easy to slide overside and depart; certainly, it would have called for less nerve. But Doc decided to investigate.

He went forward, a bronze shadow mingling with the rust and battleship gray of Ills surroundings. The deck underfoot was comparatively free of obstruction. Too, there was an air of life about the giant craft — this sensation probably coming from the absence of the musty odor which had characterized the other wrecks.

Once he heard a sound which brought him up rigid, and held him that way for a long time. The noise was not repeated. It had been hard to define — low sort of whimpering note.

Doc entered a forest of deck machinery. Shadow enwrapped him.

The darkness was warm with an animal-warm quality.

Came a faint, rasping scrape ahead of him! He halted. And suddenly a weird, hairy thing was upon him in the darkness!

Instinctively, he twisted aside. But furry, sticklike arms clutched his neck, held it. Tiny claws dug in.

Doc's hands whipped up, grasping. They inclosed a pulsing form about twice the thickness of his wrists. It felt like a gigantic forearm.

The thing emitted a piercing screech! The sound was piping, babylike — and deafening!

The atmosphere of horror enwrapping the wilderness of lost ships was responsible for Doc's first impression that some great, fantastic monster had seized him. A second later, he knew what it was — nothing more unearthly than a fair-sized monkey!

THE little animal was only scared. Doc disentangled it gently from his neck. His fingers, brushing through the fur of the animal, encountered a collar. He explored this with interest. Then he brought out his flashlight, which was, fortunately, waterproof, and spiked the thin beam upon the collar.

It was a ribbon, gaudy and rather new!

S-s-wish!

Doc forgot both monkey and ribbon collar, and ducked. Whatever had made the swishing sound passed over his head.

S-s-wish! That one came from the opposite direction.

S-s-wish! From every side!

It was impossible to dodge them all. One caught him! A second! They were loops of wire, thin and flexible. They trapped his head — an arm — the other arm. They inclosed him in a tough web.

Doc spun on his heels, wrenching at the wires. They had been expertly cast. Enwrapping Ills muscular hand in one line, he gave it a hard jerk.

A sharp cry pealed out!

An avalanche of forms struck Doc. Clutching hands gripped at his arms, his neck. They were puny, these hands, compared to the bronze man's vast strength. By striking about, he could no doubt have escaped.

But he made no effort to do so. These were women! The sharp cry had told him that.

Chapter XI

SARGASSO PRISONERS

DOC was bundled in wire until he resembled a metallic mummy. While that was going on, he kept his great muscles tense — relaxing them would give him play in which to wriggle free. This was just in case the women might have violent designs.

The tying proceeded in darkness. Several times low words were spoken, always in feminine tones. A rather pleasant voice was giving most of the orders.

The remarkable part of this was that the commands were issued in a half dozen languages. Doc, who was an unexcelled linguist himself, had to admire the fluency with which the pleasant-voiced woman handled the tongues. Her followers seemed to be made up of many nationalities.

Not once was the bass tone of a man heard.

The little monkey scampered about, squeaking, in the murk.

“Come Nero!” the leader of the women called gently to the animal on one occasion.

“Bueno!” said a feminine voice in Spanish — the speaker seemingly satisfied Doc was secure. “He is tied tightly!”

“Very well,” replied her chief in the same tongue. “Were you watching closely enough to be sure this was the only one who came aboard?”

“Si, si! He was alone. The others were pursuing him, it seemed.”

“That might have been a trick, senorita. We will redouble the guard for the rest of the night.”

Doc unbunched his mighty muscles. Testing the wire bonds, he learned there was slack enough to escape. He had often practiced liberating himself after being tied. It was an accomplishment of convenience.

Several pairs of soft feminine hands laid hold of him.

“Pesado!” gasped out the Spanish woman. “Heavy! He is very heavy!”

They hauled Doc, his feet dragging, into the battleship. The air here was vastly different than outdoors. A faint perfume dispelled the musty tang. Too, there was thick carpet underfoot.

Some one lighted a gasoline lantern. It shed a brilliant glare.

Doc glanced about. To all appearance, he had been captured by a crew of Amazons. There was not a man in sight.

The women were of all ages, races, and varying degrees of beauty. Several of them were pretty enough to be considered entirely entrancing. All were strangely clad, with no two ensembles alike.

The most striking of the lot was their leader — she who spoke so many languages.

She was a redhead. In height, she would have topped Doc’s shoulder a bit. Her eyes were a dreamy South Seas blue; her nose was small, with a suspicion of snubness; her lips were an inviting bow. Altogether, her features could hardly have been improved upon.

She wore an amazing costume — a loose, brocaded, Russian style blouse, drawn at the waist with a belt fashioned of parallel lines of gold coins. From this dangled a slender, jeweled sword which Doc was certain dated back at least four centuries. There was also an efficient, spike-nosed, very modern automatic pistol.

Her small feet were shod in strange boots of soft leather, which extended several inches above her ankles. She wore trousers of some silken fabric, which terminated shortly above her knees.

The monkey — Nero — which had jumped Doc, perched on her shoulder. The animal was alert, intelligent looking.

She was an exotic — and attractive — figure, this queen of the Amazons.

DOC was not doing all the staring. He was being subjected to a thorough inspection.

The women showed some astonishment at the nature of their captive. From their expressions, it would seem they had expected an individual of much different appearance.

Doc's powerful form, the regularity of his features, made a strong impression. Anger had been on more than one feminine face when the lights came on. This emotion rapidly vanished. This was not hard to understand. It was not the first time members of the supposedly gentler sex had experienced a marked attraction to Doc.

"American?" asked the red-haired leader.

"Check," Doc agreed.

She seemed puzzled. "What nationality is that?"

Evidently she did not have a supply of American slang. "I'm American," Doc agreed.

She favored him with what she tried to make a grim look. "I would advise you not to try joking with me!"

"I wasn't," Doc explained politely.

The flame-headed young lady seemed undecided.

"I am Kina la Forge!" she said at length.

"And I am Clark Savage, Jr."

She shrugged. "I have never heard of you."

"Nor I of you."

This was apparently quite a surprise. She fingered the jeweled hilt of her sword absently.

"You are either lying, or you have not been in the Sargasso for long."

"The latter explanation is correct."

"Why was the Sargasso Ogre and his men pursuing you?"

"You mean Bruze?"

"That is one of his names — the right one. I believe."

Doc saw no reason for holding back the information. These young women were patently no friends of Bruze. At mention of his name, more than one expression of loathing had crossed a feminine countenance.

"It started in Alexandria, Egypt," he began, and told the whole story.

They heard him through without interruption. They did not express particular surprise. It seemed to be what they were expecting.

"You of the Cameronic have been lucky!" said Kina la Forge, and shuddered until her red hair tousled itself. "The Sargasso Ogre and his men usually have the ships captured and looted before they get this far!"

"How long has Bruze been working this thing?" Doc asked curiously.

"About six years."

DOC decided to try an experiment. He nodded at the wires securing him, and suggested: "Why not turn me loose."

The mass of red hair shook. "No!"

Doc assumed a pained expression — he was an excellent actor when he chose to be. "Why not?"

"Your story may be the truth," Kina la Forge told him firmly "It sounds truthful. But we can take no chances. The Sargasso Ogre has tried on other occasions to get his men aboard by having them pretend to be fugitives. Once, he succeeded."

She took hold of her lower lip with even white teeth; a slight tremor entered her remarkably fine voice.

"The fact that the Sargasso Ogre got a man aboard — once — explains why you see no men here!"

Doc made his malleable voice express gentleness. "He led them into

a trap?"

She nodded.

Somewhere in the room an elderly woman began to sob. and to moan hysterically: "Oh, my poor husband! They killed him that time! I wish I could die! We'll never get out of this ghastly place!"

Three other women moved to her side, seeking to comfort her.

Doc Savage glanced about the room. The place was fitted with all the splendor of an Oriental palace, rich rugs upon the floor, tapestries upon the steel walls.

But Doc felt a growing sorrow and sympathy for these women, for all the richness of their surroundings. They were, he knew suddenly, passengers from ships which had drifted here in the years past.

"Have all of you been carried here on derelicts?" he asked. The auburn-haired girl shook her head and stroked the fine fur on her pet monkey.

"I was born in this place, and have lived all my life here." She indicated several of the young women, some of them mere girls. "They, also, were born here. There is no way of escape."

"But you seem to have a fine education. You speak a number of languages."

"There are books from the libraries of boats which drift here. And my father was a professor of philosophy in a London university, before his ship was disabled in a storm." Her small hand burrowed deeper into the rich fur of her pet. "My father — was killed at the same time as that woman's husband. My mother died many years ago."

Doc was silent. It was almost inconceivable that beings could live in this ghostly place for a lifetime, or for generations.

“Suppose you tell me all about the Sargasso — and the Sargasso Ogre,” he urged.

The titian-haired young woman spoke readily, swayed, no doubt, by Doc’s remarkable charm of manner.

“Men — women, too — have been here for generations,” she said. “No one knows for just how long. Some of the Sargasso Ogre’s gang are descendants of people who have been here a century or more. They are the worst. Long existence in this place seems to drain every human quality.”

The monkey, jumping off her shoulder, came and pawed curiously at the wires holding Doc.

“THERE have always been bad men in the Sargasso,” Kina la Forge went on. “But they have been controlled. We had a government, a tiny republic, such as the books say you have in the United States. My father was president.”

She paused, and, to hide the feeling in her voice, called softly to the monkey. The little animal did not desert Doc.

“About eight years ago, Bruze drifted to this place,” she went on. “He had been a rumrunner off the coast of the United States, and got in a fight with a coast-guard boat. That made it necessary for him to flee. He sailed for the coast of Africa, and encountered a storm there. Machine-gun bullets from the coast-guard cutter had damaged his masts, and they collapsed, rendering his schooner useless.”

Her voice turned cold. “Bruze is a devil”. He organized the criminal

element of the Sargasso. Then he seized power. Those who would not join him, he sought to kill.

"It was terrible! For more than a year, there was fighting, with each group fortified upon a boat. Bruze had this warship at that time. Then, through a clever coup of my father's, we captured the warship.

"We have been holding out here since. From time to time, the men made forays to ships which drifted into the Sargasso, to get food. We have water-distilling apparatus aboard."

She called the monkey again.

Reluctantly, the little creature abandoned its examination of Doc.

"Then came the trap which resulted in the death of all our men!" Kina la Forge continued. "That was five months ago. Since then, we women have not been off this warship. We can defend it easily, but we dare not leave for food. Our supplies are low. In fact, we have little but such fish as we can catch."

After she finished, Doc was slow in speaking. It was a fantastic, terrible story. The suffering these people must have undergone! The mere atmosphere of this zone of dead ships was one of horror.

"We have been trying to bargain with the Sargasso Ogre — Bruze," the girl said unexpectedly. "We have much of his treasure aboard. It was here when we captured the warship, years ago. We have promised to turn it over to him, if he will send us out of the Sargasso."

"What method does he use for getting out?"

Kina la Forge shook her head. "I do not know. That has always been a mystery. Only he and his followers know the secret."

“Do they have a submarine?”

“I have not the slightest idea. Their departure is always made at night. And on each occasion, they post men around this battleship, and keep up a steady rifle fire.”

“They might use airplanes! Do you ever hear the roar of motors?”

“No. We never hear any kind of an engine. They always set up a loud shouting, and a beating of that gong, when the Sargasso Ogre is preparing to depart. I know only that he does not use a surface craft. No boat of any size can be forced through the weeds, even when fitted with cutters.”

“How great is this treasure you have aboard — the one Bruze wants?”

“Six or seven millions, I suppose.” She said it as calmly as she would say fifteen cents.

DOC kept his own counsel for a time, reflecting on what a remarkable young lady Kina la Forge was. With six or seven million dollars in treasure under their feet, most individuals would walk about as if they were treading on eggs.

This redheaded girl showed a genuine unconcern over the hoard. This, it was true, might be because she had never been in the outer world, where money meant so much.

“Hadn’t you better turn me loose,” Doc suggested, after waiting in vain for the young woman to broach the same idea.

“No!”

"Why not?"

"You have talked very convincingly and I believe you. But I cannot take chances. There is too much at stake. We will not force you to leave, for that would certainly mean the Sargasso Ogre would capture you. But neither shall we free you. We will keep you prisoner for a few days or a few weeks, until there is not the slightest doubt of your being some new recruit of Bruze's gang sent to trick us."

Doc was no little disgusted at this. On few occasions had his art of persuasion failed him. But it was getting him nowhere with this queen of Amazons.

Kina la Forge turned away, the monkey perched upon her shoulder, and gave the same order in four languages, speaking each language as if it were her native tongue.

Several women started for Doc, with the intention of dragging him off to some prison cell.

The bronze man had no desire to spend time locked up. Furthermore, these warship brigs were usually strong. The cell might defy even his strength.

So, with a quick twist, he freed his legs. The wire all but dropped off, so much slack had his tensed muscles provided. His arms still secured at his sides, he bounded for the door.

These women were no different from their sisters in civilization. A chorus of scared shrieks went up. But Kina la Forge and some others plunged in pursuit.

Doc twisted outside, at the same time working the wires off his arms. The women had not done a very workmanlike job of tying him in the

first place.

Leaping, he caught the steel eave of a roof overhead. A single powerful swing put him atop it. He crouched there, waiting.

"Do not shoot him!" Kina la Forge was calling in three or four lingoos.

Doc flattened atop the steel armor plate, waiting for the women to run past underneath. They were unlikely to guess that he had leaped the considerable height to the superstructure roof.

His eyes roved instinctively. It was possible Bruze or some of his killers might be posted in the surrounding jungle of wrecked ships.

Perhaps a hundred yards distant, he discerned a slight movement. His eyes focused intently on the spot.

A man emerged from shadows and stood, washed by moonlight, upon the castled stern structure of an ancient galleon. The craft under his feet had probably been used in the Spanish Main treasure trade, centuries ago. The man, the details of his clothing indistinguishable in the moonlight, might have been a romantic figure from the pages of ancient history.

The jarring note about him was the modern submachine gun which he held to his shoulder.

Doc crouched a little lower. The gunner, it was apparent, had caught a flash of the bronze man, but did not know where he had gone.

Kina la Forge appeared, running along the deck.

She did not see the distant gunner in the moonlight.

The fellow ducked his head close to the sights of his weapon, aiming

at the young woman.

WITHIN ten seconds, the redheaded girl would undoubtedly have been the target for a storm of lead. But in that time, several things happened.

Doc launched himself from the superstructure. Tawny and huge, he landed like a cat on the deck.

Kina squealed — but she was already being carried backward. Great bronze arms defeated her struggles, yet were not painfully tight.

The distant submachine gun gobbled. It was drummed with tracer bullets. The slugs sprayed against the warship armor plate, glancing like sparks from a grinding wheel. Their rattle was that of drumstick upon tin.

But the fiery torrent was yards behind the bronze man. He veered into the superstructure and released the young woman. Her pretty features were faintly visible in the moonbeams that reflected through the door.

Her expression showed that she knew very well Doc had saved her life. But before she could speak, he was gone — literally swallowed by the darkness within the derelict battleship.

Gliding down various intricate passages, Doc came out again upon the deck, avoiding the women.

Rifles rapped angrily from the warship. The would-be killer with the submachine gun took a wild leap and vanished behind the high, thick bulwarks of the galleon.

Doc chose that instant to hook his grapple over the rail and slide

downward. He landed upon a jam of sticks and timbers which supported him. A flip freed the grapple. He stowed it within his clothing as he leaped across the weed laden sea.

Bullets began snapping about him, fired by other followers of Bruze, posted to watch the warship. But Doc had chosen a route where footing was plentiful. His low, flying figure was a difficult, unexpected target in the moonlight.

He reached cover safely. He did not linger in the vicinity, but hurtled onward, circling so as to reach the spot where he had left his weedcutting boat.

Fortunately, his enemies had not found the little shell. He seated himself on the fragile seat, grasped the cranks which operated the paddle wheels, and turned. The hull sped forward. Steering was accomplished by turning one crank faster than the other, in the fashion wheel chairs are manipulated.

It was necessary to keep a close watch to avoid collision with floatsam. At one point, he maneuvered around a large life raft.

There were at least half a dozen skeletons upon the raft, lying in the lashings of rotting ropes. They were victims of some sea tragedy, no doubt, individuals who had perished of thirst or hunger long before their raft had been carried into the Sargasso.

Doc cranked his strange craft onward. He came within sight of the Cameronic. Majestic, gleaming in the moonlight, the vessel was a welcome sight. She seemed the only thing alive in this moribund place.

Alive and aloft from the rest of the derelicts-for the Cameronic lay a goodly distance from the thicker cluster of wrecks.

Doc was still some distance from the Cameronic when a bedlam of shouting and yelling came from the liner.

Chapter XII

THE NIGHT DECOY

THE Sargasso Ogre — Bruze — and his followers had attacked the Cameronic. The attack had come from the bows, judging by the flash of firearms.

Doc put on every ounce of effort the paddle wheels would stand. The light shell nearly flew over the weed-crammed sea. The madly vibrating sickles made a shrill moan.

In the gloom cast by the flaming Cameronic bows, the bronze man distinguished four or five small craft. Bruze's boats!

Men, evidently left below to guard the boats, discovered Doc. Reddish lances of powder flame jumped out of the murk!

Doc cranked the left paddle more briskly. His shell veered for the liner's stern. Twice slugs tore rents in the thin hull of his craft.

He gained the liner. It was a long throw to lift his grapple to the rail. On the first attempt, the hook failed to hold, and came snaking back. The silken line was enameled, giving it a wire stiffness. It did not entangle easily.

Doc tried again, successfully. He mounted upward like a spider on a web, and topped the rail. Then he ran forward.

A watchman saw him, lifted a rifle, but lowered it when he recognized Doc.

"Keep your post!" Doc warned him. "They may try a flank attack from

the stern!"

Fighting seemed to be confined to the deck in the front of the ship. It was a good two hundred yards to the spot. Doc covered it in remarkably fast time, and was breathing but little faster when he finished. He had trained a lifetime for emergencies such as this.

The Cameronic defenders, taken completely by surprise, it seemed, were in a bad way. A metallic specter of violence, Doc appeared among them.

Upon his finger tips were the tiny hypodermic needles which administered the sleep drug. These needles were in-cased in cleverly made thimbles of bronze. Their presence upon his fingers could hardly be detected.

The fact that the thimbles were not noticeable, immediately gave Bruze's men the idea that Doc possessed supernatural powers. For, at his mere touch, whiskered, tough-muscled villains were stopped in their tracks. In each instance, they seemed to sleep a few seconds on their feet, then slump heavily to the deck, where their slumbers were continued.

Bullets sought wildly for the bronze man. Knives slashed. Some of the attackers carried halberds — long weapons which were half spear and half battleax. These pieces dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and must have come to the Sargasso on derelicts of that era. There were also rapiers, cutlasses, and assorted daggers.

The tide of the scrap began to turn. Doc's amazing fighting skill had never showed to better advantage. He was everywhere, and as hard to lay a hand upon as a puff of smoke. At the same time, he was as destructive as a monster of steel.

Wherever he appeared, men went into the strange sleep. This was probably responsible for the final defeat of Bruze's boarders. They began to retreat

Through the whole fight, Doc had been aware of a disquieting fact. His five friends would never miss an affair such as this. Yet they were not to be seen!

"STAND up to 'em!" Bruze was squealing from the bows. "Go get 'em! Tear 'em to pieces!"

His men continued to recoil. It was very well for Bruze to stand back there and yell. He was not in the fight.

Doc Savage skirted the embattled crowd and whipped toward Bruze.

The Sargasso Ogre saw him.

Instead of retreating, Bruze rushed forward. This was remarkable in itself. Few in number were the men who, after obtaining a hint of Doc's enormous strength, had ever sought to close with him. But Bruze was probably the strongest man Doc had ever pitted himself against.

Bruze had a pleased leer on his hawklike features. He was supremely confident in his muscles. They were huge. Already, tensing knots of them had torn out his shirt sleeves and ripped his shirt across the shoulders. It looked as if the man were bloated.

The two men met thuddingly! Two leviathans of bone and flesh. Blows smacked-blows which sank like fingers jabbed into putty, although the sinews upon which they landed were tough as bundled wire.

The pleasure suddenly went out of Bruze's leer. A shocked look

came on his predatory features. His expression was that of a man who had met up with an unpleasant miracle. He had never dreamed there was a foe such as this bronze man.

Doc, too, was somewhat startled. This man Bruze had a strength little, if any, short of his own.

Both men knew most of the fighting tricks in the book. Bruze tried battering with his fists, only to miss two thirds of his swings. He resorted to biting, gouging, kicking, and even clutched at his knife.

A bronze fist drove him backward before he could get the blade!

They smashed together again! They toppled to the deck! They grasped each other, and so terrific was their clutch that when their fingers slipped, skin came away as if scalded.

As a fight, it was virtually even. But Bruze was not satisfied with that.

"Help me!" he bellowed at his men. "Scrag this guy! Shoot him! Use a knife!"

His men had other things to do. They were taking a sound lambasting from the Cameronic defenders. One did try to point a revolver at Doc. But he was knocked along the deck by a bullet which struck his bony shoulder.

Bruze began to squeal and hiss as he fought. This did him no good. It merely wasted his breath. And it showed he was getting scared about the outcome of this hand-to-hand battle he had entered so confidently.

He was accustomed to opponents who were like rabbits in his grasp, not a tawny tiger who was his own equal.

Bruze got a grip on Doc's throat.

Doc whirled.

Bruze tried to hang on, but was flung off. He spun down the deck like a vaudeville tumbler, his great strength warding off injury.

He came to his feet. It was then that he realized his gang I was whipped. Instead of returning to the attack, he vaulted over the rail and vanished toward the weedy water.

His followers now broke wildly. Some of them followed Bruze in leaping over the rail. Others slid down the ropes by which they had boarded the ship. A few seconds saw them all overboard.

Doc ran to one of the Cameronic's officers. "Where are my men?"

"Didn't they get to you after you sent for them?"

Doc's golden eyes shot hard lights. "I did not send for them!"

THE man to whom Doc was talking registered bewilderment. 'But the lookout in the bow said you had called to him from out of the darkness to send your live friends to that boat!"

"To what boat?"

The fellow pointed over the rail.

"To that funny-looking boat, the caravel," he stated.

In the moonlight it was impossible to distinguish the vessel be meant. But Doc recalled it-a weird, ancient craft with all the grace of a half of a barrel. This craft had called forth some comment during the day because of its antiquity.

“What excuse did the man impersonating me give for calling my friends?”

“He said there was a chest of treasure. Your men were to go and get it.”

“Let’s talk to the watchman.”

They found the poor fellow dead in the bow. A long, steel-fanged arrow had impaled his heart.

The man’s death explained how Bruze’s gang had pulled their surprise. They had silently murdered the fellow with the arrow, then fired other arrows over the Cameronic’s bow, with strings attached. Pulling on the strings, they had dragged up ropes, which they had then climbed while men held the ends on the other side.

The shooting had all stopped. Bruze’s outfit had pulled away and were lost in the forest of derelicts.

Deck lights on the Cameronic, which had been on full force, were switched off, so those aboard would not present targets. Too, Doc Savage wanted to leave the liner without being observed.

SOME three hundred yards distant, Bruze himself saw the illumination vanish, and guessed the reason.

“The bronze guy has found out we decoyed his gang away. He’ll be sure to come huntin’ ‘em.”

Grimacing frightfully, Bruze felt of his monster muscles. Each was now a big package of pain. He had sorely strained himself. He did not mind that so much. The fact that he had managed to get nothing but a doubtful draw against Doc Savage was what irked.

He could see that his followers were not as much in awe of him as they had been. This was bad. They were human wolves, and the only way wolves can be ruled is by force. Let

their leader slip, and they would be the first to tear him to pieces.

Bruze's right fist was oozing crimson from a spot where he had bruised it on a stanchion after missing a swing at Dec. He pressed this fist to his shirt, with the result that it left a large crimson splotch. This looked like the leakage of a wound.

"The Savage guy is tough!" he growled. "But I could've handled 'im if I hadn't been shot before the scrap with 'im started!"

After these lying words, he gripped the bloody spot on his shirt and grunted as if in pain. He cursed a man who wanted to dress the wound.

This had the effect of redeeming Bruze's overrated reputation.

"Row to that caravel!" he growled.

They abandoned one small boat. They had lost so many men that there was no need of the extra craft.

SOON the caravel materialized in the moon glow. This craft was a large one of its kind. In comparison to modern boats, however, it was just a toy. The thing looked unbelievably clumsy. It floated fairly low in the water, supported by the wood in its hull. Had it been fully buoyant, it would have been more clumsy in appearance.

The masts were broken off close to the decks. Pieces of the bulwarks had fallen out. But it was a miracle that the craft was afloat

at all. It must have been here for centuries. Columbus had used two similar craft in his little fleet which discovered America.

As they neared the caravel, Bruze voiced a grumbling complaint.

"I wonder," he snarled, "how Savage's five men come to miss fallin' into our trap?"

None of his men knew.

Bruze boarded the caravel alone. He went directly to the high poop. This structure still bore traces of paint in spots where the sun rays did not touch. Probably an excellent paint job on the ancient craft at the time of its loss, helped to explain how it had lasted this long.

A narrow, low door admitted to the poop. Before this stood a chest, with the lid closed. It was a big, metal-bound chest. A look at it could not help but arouse a feeling of anticipation. It was exactly such a chest as artists always draw when they want to depict a pirate treasure.

Bruze did not go near the chest lid. It was a death trap. Opening it would close a circuit which would instantly discharge two full cases of dynamite, stored in the hold directly below the chest.

Moving gingerly, Bruze inspected the electrical contacts, making certain they were still in working order. Then he rejoined his henchmen.

"There ain't nothin' wrong with the bomb," he explained. "I guess them five pals of Savage's just didn't come around here. Wonder where in blazes they went to? And why didn't they come aboard?"

One man tossed away a half-consumed cigarette. Nobody answered.

"Well, maybe we'll get Savage!" Bruze grumbled. "He's sure to come huntin' his friends. I hope he walks up an' opens the lid of that treasure chest. He'll find the damnedest treasure he ever saw!"

The men poled their boats away, the weed cutters sawing briskly. These contrivances, although they served the purpose, were not as efficient as the ones Doc had perfected. They were, however, as silent as Doc's sickles.

Shadow, piled like black sand in the lee of a capsized freighter, concealed Bruze's crew.

Possibly five minutes later, there was a soft breath of a movement near the caravel rail. A great, silent bronze bat seemed to float up and perch on the rail. Doc had lost no time in coming here. He was arduous about his five pals.

He listened, but heard nothing. His sensitive nostrils dilated. A tang of tobacco smoke mingled with the unwholesome aroma of the Sargasso.

Doc's flashlight raced its thin white beam about. The radiance ferreted out a cigarette stub which lay in the water beside the hull.

Of Doc's men, only one smoked. Monk indulged in an occasional cigarette. But Monk always rolled his own. This stub was a tailor-made.

It had not been there long, as evidenced by the fact that the wrapper had not decomposed in the water.

Doc soon spied the alluring iron-bound chest. He went to it and moved around it slowly. What he saw seemed entirely satisfactory.

Leaning forward, he grasped the chest lid.

ALTHOUGH Bruze was highly puzzled as to why Doc's five aids had not fallen into the caravel trap, or even as much as visited the age-old derelict, the explanation was simple.

Monk and the rest had heard the machine-gun shots which would have resulted fatally for pretty Kina la Forge, had not Doc been on hand.

"To blazes with the treasure chest!" Renny had rumbled the instant he heard the firing. "It'll keep! Let's see what the excitement is!"

So they went to investigate. They did not fare as well as Doc in getting through the forest of derelicts. They lacked his agility. Reaching the vicinity of the battleship took half an hour.

Eventually, they chanced to sight a match flame ahead. This was one of the watchmen posted about the warship. He flipped away the match with which he had fired his cigarette, and drew in luxuriously of smoke.

Smack! The lookout toppled, instantly senseless from a blow upon the temple. He fell, and the impact shot streams of smoke from his mouth and nostrils.

The dapper Ham — dapper in spite of the laborious progress of the last hour — flexed his sword cane in his hands. It was he who had crept up and kayoed the sentry.

"The guy was watchin' that battleship," Monk whispered.

The men had showed no astonishment at sight of the warship. They were past being astonished. Had New York City suddenly turned up

in the Sargasso, they would have been glad to see it — but not unduly surprised. The weed crowded waste seemed to hold just about everything.

“The fact that they were watching that war wagon shows there’s somebody they don’t care for aboard it,” Renny muttered.

“I’m goin’ aboard!” Monk grunted.

“Wait! We’ll all go — “

“Naw! There may be more lookouts around here! You guys stay an’ fight ‘em off.”

Before there could be more argument, Monk bounded forward. His simian physique was just right for this sort of thing. He simply doubled over, using his hands to help maintain a balance, and hopped from one piece of floating wreckage to another.

He reached the warship — and was temporarily baffled. There was no climbing those sheer steel plates. Monk carried no silken line and grapple, such as Doc had employed.

He wandered along the hull, hoping to find a dangling line. He made a complete circuit of the vessel without locating one.

Then, in a spot where he thought certainly that he had looked on the first trip, he saw an inviting Manila hawser.

Reluctantly, he decided he had overlooked it on the first search. He had no way of knowing it had been lowered deliberately from above since his initial passage, to invite him aboard.

Monk tested, found the line solid, and climbed.

There was a reception committee at the top.

A wire loop snared Monk's furry neck. He let out a roar. Another wire got his left hand. One trapped the ankle which he had flung over the rail. He roared again.

A young woman scrambled out of a near-by hatchway, carrying a gasoline lantern. She held this high, to illuminate the scene of the capture.

Monk saw that his attackers were women. He could only sit on the rail like a big gorilla, a ludicrous expression on his homely features. Two more wire loops snared him.

Monk, seeming oblivious of the wires, gaped at the girls. Especially at the redheaded queen of the lot! She was little less than a vision. She would have been a knock-out in any company. But finding her here — it took Monk's breath away.

Another wire circlet fastened to his hairy person.

Monk came to life. He had no idea whether these ladies were friends or enemies. He preferred them friends. But they were not acting as such.

Flinging himself backward, Monk toppled over the rail. His great weight was too much for the women. They lost their grips on the wires.

Monk hit the water with a resounding smack. Between the wires and the sargassum weed, and a snakelike pipe fish which became entangled in the mess, Monk all but drowned.

He finally extricated himself.

Chapter XIII

THE HUNT

THE sartorially perfect Ham was propped against the hull of a half-dismantled sloop when Monk returned. Ham's face was red, and he shook from head to foot with laughter.

"What a figure you cut," he howled mirthfully. "I'll never forget it! You sat there like a frog on a log, and let the women lasso you!"

"Phooey on you!" Monk grumbled.

"It was the funniest thing — "

Monk interrupted this with the hair-lifting squeal of a pig in mortal agony.

Ham shut up, looking very indignant. Monk had but to make the slightest reference to anything that smacked of hams, and the dapper lawyer was silenced.

A bullet now hissed past them, followed by the clapping echoes of a shot. One of the other guards posted around the warship had run to a position where he could get a bead on them.

Renny leveled one of Doc's compact machine guns. It moaned deafeningly.

The gunman who had fired upon them beat a hurried retreat.

During the next several minutes, a sniping campaign was waged among the derelicts. Bruze's sentries eventually withdrew, doing it so

furtively that Monk and his friends were unable to follow them.

"We'd better get back to the Cameronic!" Renny suggested.

"Oh, there ain't no big hurry about that," Monk offered. "How about us having a try at getting aboard that old battleship?"

Monk was thinking of the redheaded peach.

The others were not deceived. They exchanged knowing glances.

"We were too far away to see what the women looked like," Long Tom grinned. "But from the way Monk is acting, they must have been swell numbers."

"The redhead was a beauty," Monk agreed fervently.

They studied the warship. At this point, a bullet came singing from the vessel. It did not strike anywhere near, but it had the effect of persuading them to defer their visit. They left the spot.

Kina la Forge was taking no chances. Uncertain whether the men were hostile or not, she had fired the bullet wide by way of warning.

The breeze was now blowing against their backs. They did not know it, but this had served to prevent them hearing sounds of the fight on the Cameronic. The wind, although not strong enough to move the derelicts in the thick weed beds, nevertheless caused numerous rattling, whistling, and moaning noises, which had also contributed to the failure to hear the fight.

But there soon came a sound which they had no difficulty hearing. A terrific, thumping roar! A great Hash lighted the sky some moments before they heard the blast. The Hash was like lightning.

The thunderous explosion was tossed back and forth by derelict hulls. until it became a laughing, mumbling medley of noises.

Monk and the rest increased their pace.

Johnny, who had chanced to be looking up at the moment of the flash, had secured a fair idea of where it had come from.

They neared the spot.

“Hey!” Monk breathed. “That explosion was in the caravel where we were supposed to go for the treasure chest! Look! The thin” has been blown clean off the map!”

THE destruction of the caravel was virtually entire. A considerable space had been blown free of flotsam. A deck timber had been cast upon a near-by metal hull, where it lay smoldering.

Monk and the others swapped grim looks.

“There must have been a bomb aboard,” Renny muttered.

“But what made it go off?”

“How do I know? Maybe it went off by accident!”

They were on the point of going forward for a closer investigation, when they heard voices and a movement near by.

“Wait!” Monk whispered. “Somebody is comin’!”

He pressed his fellows back into the shadows.

A moment later, a little cavalcade of men filed out from between two floating wrecks, leaping precariously from one piece of jetsam to

another. They were like ants doing some grotesque dance under the frowning hulks of the derelicts.

Bruze and a party of his henchmen! They were headed for the explosion scene. Their route was going to bring them very close to the spot where Monk and his friends waited.

Monk slid a fresh clip into his pistol-like rapid-firer. The others followed his example.

Bruze caught sight of the spot where the caravel had floated. He emitted a loud roar of pleasure.

“Look! The trap worked!”

The words reached Monk distinctly.

Bruze was all but jumping up and down in his delight.

“It worked! The bronze guy came an’ opened the chest lid! He got blowed to pieces!”

The last shocking statement no more than left his lips before a torrent of bullets blew cold on his face.

Only Monk’s mad rage at hearing the statement that the blast had killed Doc saved Bruze’s life. Monk fired before he had taken an accurate aim.

As it was, Bruze managed to twist aside and spring to cover.

His henchmen unlimbered guns. The weapons lipped flame. The gang also retreated hurriedly. They did not know how many men opposed them. And there was terror in the bull fiddle roaring of the tiny machine guns held by their opponents.

Ignoring Bruze for the moment, Monk and the others raced wildly for the explosion scene. Their faces were distorted; their eyes fixed in a sort of glaze. It was ghastly news, this which had just come to them.

Their bronze leader had perished! The thought numbed their brains.

In their mad haste to reach the spot where the caravel had lain, they stumbled headlong into the sea. They fought off the entangling weeds blindly, as if they were of no consequence.

With a pathetic eagerness, they searched the wreckage around the explosion spot. They turned over timbers. They even plunged into the weeds, and with waterproof flashlights, sought for Doc's mighty bronze form, or his fragments.

They found nothing. Many timbers of the caravel had been pulled beneath the surface by old cannons and other attached metalware. And the blast had been of such force as to virtually annihilate everything near it.

Renny's great voice boomed out, rasping, threatful: "Come on! We'll pay them for this!"

A SILENT, set-faced group, the five raced in pursuit of Bruze. They were like grim jumping jacks, leaping over the wreckage.

They were not long overcoming their quarry. Bruze had halted his crew, and was considering returning to learn who had launched that sudden, fierce assault.

Renny and the others went into action the instant they sighted Bruze. Flame poured out of their fists repeatedly. The bullets scooped planks off derelicts, or streaked the yellowed sea.

Only their knowledge of the Sargasso saved Bruze and his crew. Knowing the best routes for flight, they managed to keep ahead of the five grim men who pursued them.

The retreat led toward the circular fortress erected on the two barges.

Bruze reached the place, got his fellows inside, and banged the steel door shut.

Renny and the other four came up. They squinted thoughtfully at the stronghold.

Their first recklessness had evaporated. They were using caution now. But their fierce determination burned even stronger. Bruze would pay dearly for the trap aboard the caravel!

As they stared, searchlights squirted glaring rods of white from the turret.

Sighting expertly, Long Tom squeezed the firing latch of his pistol-sized machine gun. The weapon hooted.

Long Tom was the runt of Doc's crowd in size, yet he had no trouble targeting the noisy rapid-firer. Certain radically new features which Doc had incorporated in the recoil mechanism were responsible for this.

The searchlights went out like candles in a gale before Long Tom's bullets. For several seconds after the last one was extinguished, lens fragments jangled down the steel sides of the turret.

Renny took charge. Their fighting campaign, to be effective, required some one in command.

Although Doc's five aids held an equal ranking, it was the big-fisted engineer who was most fitted for the present emergency. Renny was a master of tactics. Had the job ahead involved chemistry, Monk would have assumed control; had it been an electrical task, Long Tom would have led.

"We'll post ourselves in a circle around the place," Renny muttered. "Latch the guns into single fire, and shoot only at flashes from their weapons. We've got to conserve ammunition."

The five deployed. Each twisted a small lever on his weapon. This set the machine guns to discharge one shot at a time.

They selected pieces of wreckage which offered shelter. Their shots became scattering, purposeful. Hardly a slug left their guns which did not enter some loophole in the turret.

Time after time, men screamed in agony within the fortress! Bruze's gang sought to use machine guns of their own, only to have sniping bullets tear their hands and arms, or dismantle their weapons.

Considering the moonlight, the shooting was little short of uncanny. After the lapse of a quarter of an hour, it had come to a point where not a man dared shoot from a loophole. To do so meant an instant slug in return, placed with awful sureness.

"Whew!" mumbled a man within the turret. "A guy might as well step up to one of them portholes an' take a crack at 'imself!"

"We'll fix 'em!" Bruze snarled.

A few moments later, the weird signal gong boomed from within the turret. Bong-bong, bong! The gong sounded with such volume that eardrums quivered. Bong, bong! The noise roiled for miles across

the fantastic graveyard of lost ships. Bong-bong-bong! The sound echoed and reechoed until it became a continuous mumbling.

Renny and the other four realized the significance of the gonging.

“Signals!” Renny called to his friends. “There’s only one thing they could be doing — summoning aid!”

IN view of the new development, Renny altered his strategy somewhat. He grouped his men.

“We’ll wait!” he whispered. “If they’re too many for us, we’ll have to retreat. We’ve got to use our heads to clean out this nest of vipers!”

They ceased firing and tuned their ears to the wind made creakings and wheezings of the Sargasso. Time dragged.

Monk glanced uneasily at his wrist watch. This was of the jump-minute variety, with luminous figures, and a tiny lid which obscured the radiolite when a betraying glow would have been dangerous. Only five minutes had gone by.

New noises became audible. Men coming! More of Bruze’s followers! The men, of course, did not live within the turret.

No doubt they were widely scattered, occupying the most luxurious (‘quarters to be found in the great island of derelicts. The gong had summoned them to the attack.

Renny listened alertly.

“Holy cow!” he breathed. “There seems to be scores of ‘em! Too many for us! We’d better get out of here!”

Cautiously, they withdrew.

Bruze's underlings had encircled the spot, however. They must have been ordered to do so by the gong code.

A revolver smacked six rapid shots! The bullets made shrill whistles past the men, and dug up small geysers in the jaundiced water! The slugs had been fired from a high point the crow's nest of a neighboring eighteenth-century frigate

Growling wrathfully, the five ducked for cover. Those shots had been accurate. Renny sought to lead the way from the spot.

Whe-e-e-chug! Lead dug into the weeds and water almost under him.

"We gotta pick that guy off!" Monk growled.

This proved a difficult task. The crow's nest was actually a tub of steel, fitted with loopholes. No doubt, in another age, snipers had lurked there to pick off the helmsmen on enemy vessels.

Their rapid-firers rapped out single shots.

Ham latched his weapon into continuous fire, steadied it against his sword cane, and let it moan. That did the trick.

Screams of pain began coming from the crow's nest.

"My arm — my arm! It's torn off! My arm — "

"Let's ramble!" Renny grunted. "Bet he's barely nicked!"

The temporary delay had let their enemies surround them, they discovered. Metal stormed frequently. Powder sound whooped back and forth.

Bruze's gang did not charge. They held a hearty respect for the terrible little machine guns. Instead, they skulked through the forest of wrecks, shooting from all sides.

Their position getting worse each minute, Renny's crowd worked slowly toward the distant Cameronic.

Johnny was wounded, not seriously, in an arm. Renny himself had received a painful bullet burn across the shoulders.

"Far be it from me to be a pessimist!" Monk grumbled. But I don't think we're going to make it!"

Monk was merely facing facts. They had covered almost a mile, but they were practically at a standstill. To continue onward meant almost certain death.

"Hey! hissed Ham. "Listen!"

The gong had started booming again.

THE weird sound kept coming for several minutes. It was not unlike a strumming on the bass string of a gigantic, distant guitar.

Bong-bong, Bong! Bong! Bong-bong!

The erratic boomings were undoubtedly spelling out words. Renny tried to get some idea of the code. The others did likewise. But, grope as they would, they could make nothing out of the uncanny orchestration.

With a final bong! came silence.

Renny and the other four waited for their enemies to resume shooting. Nothing happened! He even raised his head from behind a

log, inviting a slug. The truth dawned.

"The gong called 'em off our necks!" he roared. "C'mon, you mugs! Here's our chance!"

They quitted the vicinity at top speed, bounding from one piece of wreckage to the next. They said nothing, all their breath being needed for the terrible going.

Eventually, they neared the spot where they had left their boat. Once there, they would be comparatively safe, and certain of getting to the Cameronic, which floated impressively some distance from the edge of the vast field of derelicts.

They came within sight of the little craft.

"Hey!" squawled Monk. "D'you see what I do!"

The others did. Relief hit them, a relief so great that it weakened them like an illness. They could only sink, trembling, upon the nearest wreckage, and stare as if unable to believe their vision.

Doc Savage, a mighty bronze statue in the moonlight, was waiting at the boat! As he came toward them, a faint film of perspiration was noticeable, glistening upon his fine-textured skin. This was proof that Doc had just put forth tremendous exertion.

"We thought — that caravel — " Renny was unable to form a coherent sentence. "The explosion — holy cow!"

"They had a bomb trap on it," Doc said quietly. "I found the wires by grasping the lid and running my hands around it. Then it was a simple matter to locate the explosive, and arrange for it to let loose after I was safely off the caravel."

“But why — “

“I wanted to draw Bruze into the vicinity. In other words — locate him so that I could get on his trail. It was reasonable to believe he would come to the scene of the blast to see if I was killed.”

“But the gong signals that called ‘em off our trail

“Imagine they’re a bit sore about that,” Doc replied dryly. “You see, I was lurking near by during your entire fight. You were doing all right, so I didn’t show myself.

“But they finally got you in a bad way. So I went back to their fortress on the barges and sounded the gong. By hinting that there was a flank attack by a party from the Cameronic, I decoyed them away from you fellows!”

THE five men, tired and perspiring, sat there enjoying this information. They could imagine Bruze’s chagrin. That Doc had fathomed the gong code did not surprise them. Their bronze leader was a wizard at such things. In fact, as they had long ago come to realize, he was a wizard at all things.

Renny rattled his huge, hard fists together. He was thoughtful. Knowing the uncanny silence with which Doc could move, Renny believed there must have been an instance or two when Bruze might have been captured. He voiced this suspicion, along with a question.

“Why aren’t you trying to grab Bruze?”

A hint of mirth flickered in Doc’s golden eyes.

“I had hold of him once. And if you care to take my word for it, Bruze is very much a handful! He is the strongest man I ever encountered.”

Doc now described the fight on the Cameronic. This was the first his friends had known of the affair. Doc played down his part; his words even gave the impression that Bruze had more than held his own in the combat.

Renny and the other four were not deceived; however. The fact that Bruze had jumped off the liner showed how Doc had fared.

"You can't tell us you couldn't get hold of Bruze if you tried!" Renny grinned. "Since the explosion, I mean!"

Doc passed the compliment. "For the moment, it is best that Bruze remain at liberty."

"Why?"

"He has some method of leaving the Sargasso. Just how he does it is a mystery. And we've got to crack that mystery, brothers, or we may never get out of here ourselves."

"I see. You plan to trail him in hopes that he will lead you to the device he uses."

"Right."

"What about us?"

"You go back to the Cameronic."

The five did not object. Long experience had taught them that whatever plan Doc had, it was the best. Anyway, they

were tired. The comfortable chairs in the Cameronic lounge would be welcome.

Doc saw his friends safely in their boat. They sped away, four of them at the paddle-wheel cranks, Long Tom in the bows keeping an eye on the weed sickles.

A smoky haze was appearing on the surface of the Sargasso, such a haze as had been present that morning. It swallowed the little shell as it neared the gleaming hulk which was the distant liner.

Chapter XIV

RED DAWN

AN hour later, Doc appeared in the vicinity of the turret of a fortress on the two barges. He had taken his time. This was not to conserve his strength, the enormous reservoirs of which had hardly been tapped. He had done a little searching en route.

He had hoped to find some hint of the means Bruze used to enter and leave the Sargasso. It was possible, of course, that he only entered aboard derelict ships — craft which he had disabled that they might drift here and be looted at leisure.

But he surely had an efficient method of getting out. Moreover, it was a system by which a considerable number of men could be transported. The force he had put aboard the Cameronic in Alexandria — at least forty men — showed that.

Doc's hunt had drawn a blank, though.

He scouted the turret stronghold. It was quiet, but a spot of light showed here and there from a porthole.

Doc did not go too close. He had found the alarm system which protected the place. It was very complex and efficient and modern, employing photo-electric cells and ultra-violet light, in addition to the usual contact traps. Doc had put this partially out of commission, but it might have been repaired.

The absence of noise showed that not many men were within the turret. A large crowd could hardly have kept so quiet. Certain it was

that they would not have done so, for there was no reason for silence.

Finally, there came a procession of growled oaths from the stronghold.

"No, damn you! I don't want my wound dressed!"

Bruze's voice. Some one must have volunteered a second time to dress the injury which he claimed was responsible for his bad showing against Doc.

Some time later, the turret door opened. A man came out. He was a small, wiry villain.

Bruze appeared behind him.

"I don't hear anything!" said the wiry man.

"That's all right," Bruze growled. "I hope we don't hear anything. Noise, especially shooting, would mean something had gone wrong."

The pair stood there a while, hands cupped back of their ears.

"Ain't nothin' to do but wait!" Bruze growled. "Dammit! If it hadn't been for this wound of mine, I'd have gone along!"

This made it plain that Bruze was using the imaginary injury to keep out of any engagement in which he might encounter Doc.

To Doc, the words disclosed something else. Bruze, working with fiendish speed, had launched some other infernal scheme!

Doc pondered briefly. This meant danger to somebody. To the women aboard the warship? To the Cameronic? The women were accustomed to taking care of themselves. It must be against the liner!

A noiseless bronze apparition, Doc faded from the vicinity. He set a direct course for the Cameronic, and he traveled faster than at any time before.

He reached the spot where he had left his little shell of a boat. It was still there — but quite thoroughly smashed to bits!

Bruze's henchmen had found the craft.

Doc whipped from the vicinity, then prowled warily. There was no ambush, however — which might mean that Bruze's gang were afraid, or that they had some more efficient scheme for getting their hands on Doc.

The ruined boat meant a terrible swim through the weed-filled sea to the Cameronic. Drawing his knife, Doc honed it briefly on his shoe heel. Then he partially disrobed for the swim. This disclosed that a vestlike garment, fitted with many waterproof pockets, held the manifold items which composed his bottomless bag of tricks.

The haze had thickened, until the liner was completely lost from view. No sound came from that direction.

The swim to the ship was a nightmare, even to Doc. It consumed hours of terrifying, straining effort. The weeds clutched at him always. His knife dulled repeatedly, and had to be whetted on the leather parts of his vest, which he still wore. It was like being entangled in a vast fish net.

Dawn came before he reached the Cameronic. The sun was a red, gory eye in the east. He found ropes dangling over the liner rails, and climbed them. The truth confronted him instantly.

Bruze's followers had taken the liner!

DOC moved from spot to spot, inspecting the scene. Huge and expressionless, he might have been a robot man of tempered metal. Tendrils of seaweed dangled like strings from his form. At intervals, he popped, between thumb and forefinger, one of the tiny bulbs which, air-filled, gave the sargassum buoyancy.

He entered the 'lounge. There, a weird thing happened. The giant bronze man seemed to grow suddenly weary. He turned around and around, sluggishly, as if hunting a comfortable spot in which to repose. Then he fell heavily to the floor.

He did not sleep, however. With efforts strangely forced, he dragged himself for the door. His progress was by inches. His eyes were closed; his metallic features were a mask.

It was ages before he reached the deck. He lay there breathing heavily, but otherwise unmoving. He seemed to slowly awaken.

Doc had learned how Bruze's men had taken the Cameronic. Getting the information had nearly proved disastrous.

They had employed gas! An odorless vapor! Some of it still remained in the liner interior, and Doc had walked into the stuff.

He arose at last, and continued his search. This time, he held his breath whenever he was inside.

He found no bodies, except those who had perished in the fight when Bruze made his first attack. This fact indicated the gas was not necessarily fatal.

The strong room back of the purser's office gaped open. The heavy steel door had been stripped of its lock by use of a cutting torch.

Doc's hoard of diamonds and the gold bullion were both gone. Jewelry and money deposited by the passengers had also been taken.

More thought had entirely convinced Doc that those who had been aboard the liner were still alive. Why had they been carried off? That was simple. Their lives would be forfeited if he himself did not surrender. Then they would probably be forfeited anyway, if Bruze got his way.

In fierce silence, Doc set about his preparations. He found that his weedcutter equipped boats had been chopped to bits.

But one of the craft, apart from the others, had not been discovered. Doc carried this out on deck.

He stocked it with food. He intended to no longer use the Cameronic as a base. He carried a load of equipment, mostly ammunition for his one machine gun, from his suite.

He went back for a second load.

Hardly had he vanished inside, when a furtive form glided out of a recess in the superstructure. A man! He scuttled forward, soundless in bare feet.

It was Bruze. He had surmised Doc was headed back to the Cameronic, and has passed him under cover of the night, as Doc was making his terrific swim. His unlovely hawk features were plastered with both fear and elation.

His actions were those of a man with a plan. He floated straight to Doc's boat. A pair of powerful bolt cutters came out of a pocket. He grasped a link of the chain which turned the paddles. He cut half

through the link. Then he smeared the grease on the chain into the cut, so it would not be noticed.

Next, he seized Doc's pistol-sized machine gun. Jacking it open, he inserted the bolt cutters and pried. A piece of mechanism broke. He replaced the gun. The damage he had done was not evident.

He crept to the superstructure, and vanished inside. A gas mask lay there. He picked it up and donned it. Then he went forward, stepping silently.

From a stateroom, he removed a large mirror. He took this to the bows. Sheltered from Doc's view, he caught beams of sunlight upon the mirror, and reflected them toward the island of derelicts.

The Cameronic had been carried slightly nearer this isle during the night. And the haze had largely dissipated.

An answering heliograph flash came. The signaler was hidden on a wrecked sailing vessel.

Bruze spelled out words, using the same code employed with the gong.

"I have not been able to get a shot at Savage," he transmitted.

A lie, that! The plain truth was that Bruze had a mortal terror of Doc Savage. He had not dared shoot at the bronze man, on the chance that a first bullet might not kill.

"You want us to spring the trap at our end?" flashed the distant man.

"Yes," was Bruze's answering signal. "Savage will come in a boat. I fixed it so it'll break down if he tries to speed. His gun is out of whack, too."

"That oughta make things easy," the signals flashed back.

The sun signaling now ceased.

Bruze crept to the corner of the deck house and peered around. He drew a silent breath of relief. Doc Savage had not yet reappeared. The bronze man could not have seen the heliographics.

Doc appeared shortly. Bruze did not take the chance of watching. He knew something of Doc's uncanny keenness of vision.

Employing a regular lifeboat davit, Doc lowered his shell to the surface. Munching chocolate he had taken from the Cameronic candy shop, he slid down the ropes and planted himself carefully in the light hull.

The sickles clicking, the boat moved away from the liner. Doc made no effort to travel at more than normal speed.

The sun was already hot, although as yet not far above the horizon. The warmth seemed to increase the musty tang of the Sargasso. It made breathing harder.

Tiny sea horses, shrimps, and crabs scuttled about madly to get out of the boat's path. Writhing here and there were long pipe fish. The weeds fairly teemed with life.

Doc passed a smaller derelict or two. These craft floated like sentries on the outskirts of the thicker forest of wrecks. His golden eyes ranged over the fast drift of dead ships. The strangeness of the place, the wonder of its being here, had not ceased to affect him.

He neared the floating isle.

Four lifeboats suddenly appeared. They were fitted with crude weed cutters. Bruze's villains poled them along.

Doc spun the right-hand crank of his paddle drive. Then he bent effort to both cranks. One drive broke. Doc grasped the shattered portion. A split instant, he studied it. Cut!

He reached for his gun, jacked it open. He saw the damage.

From the lifeboats, a gun whacked. But long before either sound or bullet reached Doc, he was out of his boat.

HE sank beneath the surface like a dropped knife. For that matter, his knife was held out in front, cutting a passage. Down and down, he slashed his way. He had taken an enormous supply of air into his huge lungs.

The weeds extended far deeper than he had expected. The reason for this seemed to be that, when tendrils of the stuff died and sank, they were held by tentacles of weed which still floated.

His blade mowed briskly. His ears registered the chug! chug! of bullets into the water. He was no longer going down, but to the right. He covered some yards.

Slowly, he arose toward the surface. Out of his manypocketed, vestlike undergarment he took a small tube. This telescoped to a length of nearly four feet.

When he was near the top, as denoted by the jeweled glitter of sunlight, he shoved the tube up, seized it between his lips, and drank the salty brine out of it. Then he began to breathe.

It was not necessary to paddle to keep down. The weeds held him.

He lay, relaxed, entirely motionless. He could hear the gurgling of the boats near by.

Doc was not optimistic enough to believe his enemies would not suspect a trick as common as this one. So, when he had breathed until his lungs felt normal, he sank and continued on.

It was laborious business. Each inch was like a foot. He came nearly to the top once more, protruded his pipe, and lay immobile.

He waited longer, this time. A tiny, fragile sea horse came and lurked about, finally resting upon his nose. The thing looked like a monster dragon, that close to his eyes. It was covered with small, rough, bony plates, and had a tapering tail, which it switched. Its head and neck were indeed remindful of a horse. Altogether, it was not much more than three inches long.

The sea horse swam away when Doc moved. The big bronze man swam on.

He was a long time reaching the shelter of a derelict.

When he came to the surface, a fat man with a submachine gun was standing on a timber not a foot from his head.

The gunner saw Doc. His eyes bulged. His mouth dropped open and his tongue hung out. It was the first time Doc had ever seen a surprised man's tongue hang out.

The man began shooting. The first dozen or so of his bullets went screaming into the air. He swung his weapon down like a lead-spouting hose.

Doc grasped the timber and gave it a tug. The huge piece of wood

was water-logged, unwieldy. But Doc moved it enough to unbalance his enemy. The fellow toppled into the soupy weeds.

Doc's fist levered, popped.

The gunner gave one spasmodic kick, then began to sink.

Gripping the man, Doc hauled him up and placed him atop the timber. The unconscious fellow would not drown there. Never, if it could be helped, did Doc deliberately take human life.

He bounded away from the spot. A derelict was sheltering him from the gang in the four lifeboats.

KINA LA FORGE stood at the rail of her warship stronghold. Her position was just aft of the bow gun turret. Her wealth of red hair was stirring in the faint breeze. In her brocaded blouse, her belt of gold coins with suspended pistol and rapier, she presented an exotic figure. Her small pet monkey danced on the rail.

The unusual costume set off her entrancing beauty to advantage. Altogether, she was an exquisite creature.

"You come one step nearer, and I'll break your leg with a bullet!" she was saying.

Doc, still wet from his recent swim, argued: "Now, listen — "

"You heard me!"

Doc studied the charming picture she presented. Along with his other training for his perilous career of hunting trouble, he had taken a course in feminine psychology. Sometimes he wondered if he had learned anything, after all. The intricacies of the feminine mind were beyond any psychologist.

He had saved this young woman's life. And here she was promising to shoot him.

"Well, can I talk?" Doc asked in a pained tone.

"If you don't come any closer!"

Doc kept his distance. He told of the capture of every one aboard the Cameronic. The information was bad in itself, but he purposely made it sound much worse. This was to influence the redheaded beauty who had her gun pointed at him. He told of his narrow escape, and squeezed water out of his garments to prove it.

"Now you see why I came here," he finished.

"I'm still none too sure about you!" Kina la Forge temporized. "Bruze — the Sargasso Ogre — has some very clever men. Besides, another man came aboard our ship last night. He was a great, big, hairy fellow. We thought at first he was a gorilla. I have never seen a gorilla, but he looked almost like the pictures of them in the books."

"That was Monk — one of my five friends," Doc explained. "He is a great guy. You shouldn't have pushed him overboard."

"I didn't! He fell!"

Doc turned his head slowly. He cupped his ears. The Sargasso was creaking and whimpering in the breeze. But there were other sounds. Men approaching!

"I'M coming aboard!" Doc snapped.

"You do, and I'll shoot!" she shrieked.

Doc tossed his grapple, snared the rail, and climbed. He expected her to try to cut the silk cord. Nothing of the sort happened.

She was waiting for him at the top. She did not even aim her gun at him. The pet monkey danced about, chattering.

Her objections, it dawned on him, had been feminine contrariness only. Probably she was piqued at the ease with which he had escaped during the night, and wanted to make him sweat for it.

"Men are on their way, probably some of Bruze's outfit!" he told her. "You talk to them. I don't want them to know I am aboard!"

He stepped through a steel door. Waiting just inside, he could hear what was said without being seen.

"Ahoy, you women!" Bruze's voice roared from the distance.

Four women shot in Bruze's direction almost simultaneously.

Bruze yelled maledictions.

"We didn't try to hit him!" the redheaded girl said for Doc's benefit. "But we gave him a scare. I'll bet he jumped twenty feet flat-footed!"

Doc smiled faintly. Here was a remarkable young woman.

"Listen, you!" Bruze howled. "I got somethin' to say!"

"We don't want to hear it!"

"You gotta! I've just brought a liner named the Cameronic to our little playground, and —"

"I know all about it!"

“There was more’n three hundred passengers! We got ‘em all!”

“Alive?”

“Sure they are! But they won’t be for long! You dames have gotta turn over that gold you’re holdin’ on that warship, or we’ll kill everybody from the Cameronic! You can stay on the warship, if you wanta. But you gotta give up the treasure!”

“Tell him to chase himself!” Doc suggested, low-voiced.

“No!” Kina la Forge relayed to Bruze.

“You’ll wish you had!”

“You can’t scare us!”

Bruze made a few sulphurous remarks concerning woman-kind in general.

“We’ll bring our prisoners from the liner here one at a time, an’ kill ‘em right under your eyes!” he threatened.

“I expect you will! We’ll watch!”

It took nerve to greet Bruze’s hideous promise with hard-boiled flippancy, as the auburn-haired girl had done. But it was the best way of handling him.

“All right, all right!” Bruze screamed. “But if you see that bronze guy, Doc Savage, you can tell ‘im we’re gonna croak ‘is five friends if he don’t surrender to us!”

“And in just five seconds we’re going to start shooting at you if you’re

still in sight!" the redhead shrieked, driven to near breaking point.
"And we don't miss!"

Bruze and his gang evidently departed in haste, because the young woman came to the door inside which Doc stood. She leaned against it, pale and trembling a little.

"They mean it!" she choked.

"I know that!" Doc assured her grimly.

She shuddered. "I'm going to be a nervous wreck the rest of the day. Seeing Bruze always affects me like that. I — I think he killed my father with his own hand. I wish you had talked to them."

"I couldn't!" Doc replied gently. "They will keep their prisoners unarmed until they get hold of me. But the instant they talk to me, things will be at a crisis. I'll either have to give up or see my friends slain."

DOC remained aboard the derelict warship the rest of the day. He kept inside, where Bruze's watchmen, if any were about, could not glimpse him.

He had hoped to sleep a little, but that proved to be out of the question.

The women bombarded him with questions. They had had no news of the outside world for a long time. Some of them, of course, had never seen anything but this great raft of derelicts which was the moldering heart of the Sargasso Sea.

Doc told them all the latest news, including the newest in feminine styles. When he saw how pathetically eager they were, he used

crayons, which some one produced, and sketched the summer dress models from Paris and New York.

Another man would have been astounded at Doc's knowledge of these things. To the ladies, it was scarcely less remarkable.

It was not long before the inevitable began to happen. Comely young things began to regard Doc with more interest than due a wayfarer with news. His unusual physique, his undeniably good looks, were having their effect.

Young ladies cast appraising glances at their sisters, as if comparing the charm of the others with their own, with the ultimate idea of making a conquest of this big bronze fellow.

Nor was their ravishing redheaded leader unsusceptible. Indeed. she was the first one to show the symptoms. Before the afternoon was well along, she contrived to get all her subjects at work upon the." various housekeeping tasks aboard the warship. In this manner, she discouraged competition.

She did not know it yet, but she would have done well to save her gentle wiles. Doc was woman-proof. In his life, with its constant peril and violence, there was no place for the fair sex.

Consequently, he disregarded them. He simply exercised his remarkable will power and carefully avoided any entanglements.

This was not difficult for Doc. But it was occasionally tough on the young women who came in contact with the bronze man's amazing personality. They could not help but be attracted.

Doc was not unaware of the effect he had upon the fair sex. So he took care not to be snared, even by so gorgeous a young lady as this

titian-haired queen.

Chapter XV

SPECTRAL MOTORS

It was night. The breeze over the Sargasso Sea had died. At no time had the zephyr been strong enough to move the derelicts in the weed. To her memory, Kina la Forge had informed Doc, there had never been a gale strong enough to scatter the wrecks.

Doc rested the hook of his grapple snugly against the rail, grasped the enameled-silk cord and prepared to descend.

The redheaded ruler of the warship femininity stood near by. Her pretty features bore a pensive expression. She was discovering that her charm was having no perceptible effect on Doc. Privately, she considered this situation not to her liking, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Rather sooner than it came to most young ladies, it had dawned on Kina la Forge that this bronze giant was a man for no woman.

“Good luck!”

“Thank you,” Doc told her. “And you be sure and keep a close guard posted. Those fellows are liable to try their gas-mask trick.”

Kina la Forge called to the pet monkey. It came and skipped up to her shoulder. She scratched his ear.

“That’s where Nero is very useful,” she said, indicating the monkey. “He can detect the gas before it is strong enough to harm us. He always raises a fuss. That is our cue to put on masks. We have plenty of gas masks.”

“Bruze has tried to take this battleship with gas?”

“Often.”

“Well,” said Doc, “let’s hope he doesn’t try it tonight, and catch Nero asleep.”

“Don’t you want to take one of our masks?”

Doc tapped his pocketed undergarment. “I have one of them already”

He slid swiftly down the silken thread. The nearest piece of flotsam was out ten feet from the hull. He shoved himself out and landed lightly upon it.

The inevitable gray, smokelike mists which characterized the Sargasso nights enveloped him. If anything, the vapor, a sort of unhealthy fog, was thicker than on the previous night.

Doc did not mind. it could not get too dark for his purpose. The more gloom there was, the less likely his enemies were to see him.

He was, however, able to distinguish objects with fair distinctness for a score of yards in any direction.

He set his course straight for the barges whereon stood Bruze’s little fort. He progressed with greater ease than at any time previously.

During the afternoon. Kina la Forge had shown him a chart of the position of derelicts in the Sargasso. It seemed that the wrecks altered their location very little during the months — so little, in fact, that the chart was a year old and still fairly accurate.

The Cameronic, for instance, would take years to work into the center

of the near-continent of lost ships. The liner, having a deeper draft, and thus receiving a stronger shove from the ocean currents, would drift more swiftly than the smaller craft, even forcing her way among them.

There were, the titian beauty had told Doc, several well-defined paths through the wilderness of wrecks.

One part of the great mass of derelicts was not shown. This was the far western portion — a part which Doc had not yet visited. This was not on the map, the girl had explained, because Bruze always kept that end heavily guarded.

This had given Doc an idea that Bruze's device for leaving the Sargasso, whatever it was, could be found in that region. He intended to investigate.

First, however, Doc wanted to locate the prisoners Bruze was holding. And he had a ruse to try. A ruse he hoped would bring vital results.

FIERY slits marked portholes in Bruze's turret of a fort. The interior was more brilliantly lighted than Doc had yet seen it.

He took up a position near by and waited.

Voices muttered inside the stronghold. They might have been the growling of animals. Not a word could be understood.

For perhaps an hour, Doc crouched in patience.

Then the turret door opened. Four men came out. They carried a lantern. All four held submachine guns carelessly under their arms.

"You mugs get some rest!" Bruze's voice called out from inside.

"Tomorrow we'll cook up somethin' for that Savage!"

Doc kept his position, since the words had told him the four were merely going to whatever derelict they called home.

The men, holding their lantern high, stepped along a sort of makeshift path which had been formed by shoving chunks of flotsam close together.

Doc now advanced on the turret. The four departing men, he believed, would cause a ringing of the alarm. Right! The jangle of the hell reached his ears. Such alarms as Doc now set off would be attributed to the departing quartet.

A bronze smear close to the water, he gained the turret side. While the alarm bell still jangled, he tossed his grapple up and hooked the roof. This was flat as a tank, except for the center where the conical observation tower arose.

The grapple held. Doc did not climb immediately. He waited. He believed the alarms were all wired in one system, since he had found but one bell while on his gong-beating visit. But he wanted to be sure.

Swearing at the noise of the bell, Bruze or some one switched it off.

Silence! It was like the quiet in a graveyard. Since there was no breeze tonight, the usual creakings and whinings of the Sargasso were absent.

Soon a faint noise reached Doc's ears. It seemed to be the slam of a door. Other sounds told him somebody was moving about on the other side of the steel wall, very near him.

A series of rattlings reached him. The noises had the quality of

pebbles poured from hand to hand.

Doc climbed his silk cord. He made no more racket than a feather pulled up by a string. Reaching a point level with a porthole, he found it necessary to bend far over to peer through.

Just before he looked, he heard a hideous, guinealike cackle of a laugh. Then he stared.

Scrooge and his miser hoard! Only Scrooge, in his greediest dreams, never imagined a trove such as this.

Bruze sat crosslegged on rich cushions. Before him was a case, the lid pried off. Into this, the hawk-faced, overmuscled man dipped his hands. His little eyes were sticking out of his head like glass marbles, and he was so gripped by hysterical delight that he was sweating.

For he was handling Doc's uncut diamonds. A wealth untold!

About the room was stacked other treasure-gold bullion, gold coin in sacks, trays of jewelry, and cheaper trinkets in mounds on the floor. Loot from the ships named on the scalp belt! Ransom of a score of kings!

And in the midst of it sat Bruze a gloating fiend, with thews and sinews draping his great body like coiled snakes.

The Sargasso Ogre! At the moment, no other name could have fitted him more aptly.

DOC SAVAGE now did a surprising thing. He threw back his head. His pliant throat muscles fluttered a bit, then set themselves in position.

From Doc's lips came a low, whizzing moan. He interspersed sharp

popping noises made with his tongue.

It was probably one of the most perfect and difficult imitations ever given by the bronze man.

An engine in the distance, being warmed up! The popping interruptions were to represent backfiring.

Doc was working on the theory that Bruze's means of leaving the Sargasso, whatever it was, certainly had a motor in it. If he could make Bruze think he was hearing a motor, the man might rush to the place where he had his device hidden, just to make sure nobody was stealing it.

The ruse worked! Bruze — involved with his greed — failed to hear the sound at first. When he did hear it, he leaped erect with a suddenness which sent a round half million dollars' worth of diamonds skittering across the steel floor like gravel.

Bruze listened. He came close to the porthole. Compared to the bright light within the turret, the smoky moon glow was like darkness.

Doc remained unseen.

Bruze ripped a profane exclamation. He grabbed up a submachine gun and dived out of the room.

Doc slid down to a floating hatch. It gurgled faintly when he landed on it, but Bruze was making so much racket no one heard. A quick flip dislodged Doc's grapple.

The turret door banged open, and Bruze popped out, shaking his head, roaring. The alarm bell promptly began to jangle as he operated some of the trips.

Doc quitted the vicinity. Apparently there was no lookout in the tower, or if there was one, he put all his dependence in the efficient alarm system.

Reaching the shelter of a hulk, Doc circled. He was soon on Bruze's trail. The man was traveling alone, and very fast. It taxed even Doc's fabulous agility to keep up.

Bruze seemed to be following a path constructed through the derelict wilderness. Getting upon this, Doc had easier going.

Their course was west — toward the region that Bruze's followers guarded so carefully!

For almost an hour, they traveled. Then Doc received his disappointment.

NEAR the outskirts of the clot of lifeless ships, Bruze approached a monster hulk of a freighter. It was one of the largest freight-carrying ships Doc had ever seen. It had nearly the proportions of a liner.

Rust scales as large as books clung to the ancient hull, as Doc discovered upon creeping close. The deck was a tangled mess of rigging, shattered superstructure, and twisted rails. The craft seemed even more decrepit than other derelicts of like age.

Doc was disgusted. He had expected to find a ship with the upper works cut away, and a runway for plane take-offs built upon it; or perhaps a moored submarine. There was nothing of that sort here.

"What d'you guys think you're doin', startin' them motors!" Bruze screamed. "Dontcha know they're liable to be heard? You dumb cluck! Supposin' them women or that Savage should find this place?"

A door in the rusty old hull, close to the water, opened. Two men stepped out. Others were behind them. They were heavily armed and very alert.

“We didn’t start no motors!” one growled.

“Don’t lie to me! I heard ‘em! You had the mufflers off, too! Ain’t I told you never to run ‘em without mufflers when there ain’t no wind to cover the sound?”

“I tell you we haven’t touched the engines!”

Bruze shook his fists. “Call me a liar, huh?”

“You’re crazy if you think — “

The man got no further than that.

Whop! Bruze’s fist took the fellow alongside the head. The victim turned entirely over in the air and splashed in the weedy sea beside a log.

Leaping to him, Bruze grasped with his ropy hands. He must have squeezed terribly, for the other man screamed like a rabbit caught by a dog.

“I didn’t mean no harm!” he shrieked. “Honest, we ain’t touched the motors! And we ain’t heard nothin’ either!”

More men stepped out of the rusty hulk. They added their

assertions to those of their brother who had been so unwise as to make a crack about Bruze’s sanity.

“I’ll wring yer necks if this is a lie!” Bruze gritted. “I’m gonna look! I’ll

lay a hand on every motor! And if one is warm, you'd better start runnin'!"

He stamped through the door.

The other men remained on guard. Some one brought a carbide lamp.

This shed a great glare, and forced Doc to retreat to avoid discovery.

Using his silken cord and the grapple, Doc gained the deck of the derelict. Rust scales hung everywhere. The deck planks, laid over steel plates, were curled and warped until they resembled elongated breakfast food flakes. The smoky fog gave the place a spooky aspect.

Doc went to the handiest companionway. He found it closed with a panel of heavy steel riveted in place. No ingress by that route.

He sought another way into the hold. Again, rivets and rusty metal barred his way.

Searching diligently, he worked entirely to the stern. Every companion was plated securely.

The old freighter must have been a clumsy craft in her day. She had a tremendously wide beam — fully a hundred feet from one side to the other. A tub! No wonder she had broken down in some storm, to drift to this cemetery of the Atlantic. That a storm had disabled her was evident from the condition of the rigging, the funnels, and the superstructure.

Bruze's growling voice attracted Doc from his search. Further hunting was useless, anyway. The interior of the hulk was steel-plated

everywhere, as if she were a treasure vault.

"I can't savvy it!" Bruze was snorting. "I tell you, I heard a motor!"

suddenly he stopped and scratched his head. "Come inside! All of you! Never mind watchin' the door! There likely ain't nobody around!"

THE entire party now passed inside the mystery ship.

Doc promptly hooked his grapple to a rusty length of pipe which had once been a davit. Unreeling his line as he went, he descended — straight down upon the door.

He knew very well what chances he was taking. That sudden decision of Bruze's to call his men inside had smacked of a foxy trick.

Had Johnny, the sure-thing geologist, been around, he would have offered to bet that armed men lurked inside that invitingly open door, waiting for Doc to put in an appearance.

Unless Doc was mightily mistaken, Bruze had fathomed the imitation motor-sound ruse. But getting a look at the interior of the puzzle vessel was worth a chance.

What Doc had hoped would not occur, however, now happened.

A hatch in the side of the hull a hundred feet sternward grated noisily, then opened. simultaneously, another one near the bows also flung back.

A man leaned from each, gripping submachine guns.

Doc let the silk cord hiss through his fingers. He literally hurtled down. He was not more than a dozen feet above the door, anyway.

He thumped, light as a big cat, on a platform of driftwood which stood before the door.

Inside the door, at least a dozen men crouched. Those who did not have machine guns held pistols.

Doc leaped to the left. He did it so quickly that guns roared anyway, although he was no longer a target.

His hand raced to his clothing and back again. It made a gesture of tossing something through the door. Then he flattened against the rusty plates.

Close to his right ear hung a rust scale as large as a spelling book. There were many others like it. Too, the hull flared in such a fashion as to make it difficult for the men to lean out of the side hatches at bow and stern — they could not sight him. In the murk, his bronze skin blended with the rust somewhat.

One of the men started to shoot, regardless. The other, thus encouraged, did likewise.

Rust scales fell like big snowflakes. Timbers in the raft splintered, split, and jarred as if invisible horses were galloping upon them. None of the lead reached Doc.

Perhaps a minute passed. Nothing happened inside the door. There might have been sounds, but the terrific babble of the rapid-firers blanketed them.

Doc slipped through the door. His sinewy hands held no weapon. He did not falter, however, or seem to expect danger. His manner was that of a hunter who had made his shot and was going after his game, sure he had bagged it.

Chapter XVI

THE SARGASSO OGRE PLANS

THE compartment into which Doc sprang was a steel box. A door on the opposite side was tightly closed. Numerous loopholes perforated the walls. The place was simply a second line of defense guarding the entrance.

Further proof, this — that the mysterious freighter held something of great importance to the Sargasso looters!

Men sprawled on the steel floor. Some were piled atop each other like kindling. They breathed noisily, and to all appearances slept soundly.

Fragments of thin glass lay in one spot. Doc stepped on these, grinding heavily. When he took his foot away, the glass had become a powder so fine as to be unnoticeable.

His golden eyes ranged the sleepers.

There was no Bruze!

The master villain had been clever enough, or perhaps lucky enough, to be out of the tiny steel room.

Doc whipped to one of the loopholes and sought to peer deeper into the puzzling derelict. The darkness defeated him. He used his flashlight, but that disclosed only a long steel corridor.

Doc tried the inner door. This was of thick metal plates, and fastened securely on the other side. Time and tools would be needed to open

it. Doc had neither.

He could hear men rushing for the little room. If there were men on the other side of the loopholes, they were undoubtedly unconscious from the anaesthetic vapor. But the places of the unlucky ones would soon be taken by those now en route.

Doc spiked his flash through another loophole. The light planted a white bar down the middle of a cross-ship corridor, and revealed five or six charging men. They wore gas masks.

"Nail 'em!" Bruze was screaming from somewhere. "Get the guy! Don't let 'im out of that room!"

Doc spun over, picked up a submachine gun and turned it on the ceiling. An ordinary electric bulb furnished illumination. Lead tapped the bulb; it went out in a hissing of electric flame.

Leaning from the door, Doc mowed rust scales off the steel hull of the freighter. The submachine gun, heating, threw off waves of warmth. Bullets, fired by the men at the side hatches, came screaming back.

"We got 'im cornered!" Bruze screamed. "We got 'im in a hole!"

Doc threw down the empty rapid-firer. An instant later, a metal blob of an object flipped from his hand to the platform outside. It opened with a metallic click.

The thing had landed almost under the gently swinging invisible silk cord.

It gave birth to a curl of black smoke. More smoke came — a vast cloud of it. This spread in all directions. It crawled up the rust-cankered hull of the wreck. Like a gigantic black serpent lifting its

somber head to have a look over the Sargasso, it reared above the derelict.

Men in the hull hatches brought searchlights into play. These cast fat funnels of brilliance. Soon the yellowed sea and the packed driftwood were all aglow. The smoke monster looked oily and solid.

“That’s the stuff!” Bruze squalled. “He can’t get away now without us seein’ him!”

Inside the little steel room, a submachine gun began to moan. The sound was hollow. The clatter of bullets on steel mingled with the dull laugh of cartridges.

“He can’t hit nobody with that gun!” yelled Bruze. “Keep under cover! But turn lights through the loopholes!”

The submachine gun howled on and on. Finally, it stopped.

About that time, Bruze’s henchmen got up nerve enough to squirt flashlight luminance into the metal chamber.

They saw a rapid-firer — drum empty, the trigger tied back with a bit of silk cord.

There was no bronze man. The cloud of black smoke floated heavenward. Still no bronze man!

Bruze wailed and tore his hair.

Doc Savage had vanished as completely and as mysteriously as if carried away by that plume of sepia smoke.

BRUZE scattered his followers in a determined search. Some of them climbed to the ramshackle deck and used electric lanterns.

Others prowled the neighboring derelicts and floating trash.

There were, incidentally, not many large hulks near the mystery freighter. The craft itself was on the outskirts of the small continent of dead ships. Standing in the bows and looking west, it was possible to view a stretch of yolky water and weeds virtually bare of flotsam.

Near the door which gave into the hull, Bruze held a powwow.

"How'd he do it?" he yelled. "Savage didn't wear a mask, so it couldn't have been gas he got my men with! How about the birds in the room? Are they waking up?"

"No," said a man, "they're still sleepin'."

"I oughta shoot the lot of 'em!" Bruze snarled unkindly. "I can't understand how Savage could overcome a dozen of 'em like he did. They just wasn't up on their toes! That's all!

"What burns me up is his gettin' clean away! How'd he do it?" Then a man who had been in one of the hull hatches spoke up: "I think I've got that figured out. He got here by slidin' down a rope or somethin' from above! He must've went back the same way. We couldn't see 'im on account of the smoke."

Bruze knotted his fists. "And you didn't shoot into the smoke where the rope was hangin'?"

"We did, too!"

This was not a fact. The man had expended all his bullets in the direction of the float before the door. Not more than a minute before had the climbing explanation of the bronze man's disappearance occurred to him.

"I shot up an' down where the rope was danglin'!" he repeated wildly. He did not want to feel Bruze's angry fists.

Bruze was a slightly insane-looking figure. His hair was down in his eyes. He had fallen into the weedy sea during the hunt, and was stringing water. Weeds draped him like a coarse veil.

He tore wrathfully at the weeds. "I'm gonna change our plans! C'mon up close, you mugs! I don't want that Savage to overhear this. He ain't human, if you ask me. He may be hangin' around close!"

The others clustered about their Gargantuan chief. One fellow carried an electric lantern.

Bruze knocked the lantern out of the man's fist.

"No light!" he gritted. "Savage may be a lip reader!"

AFTER several seconds of silence, in which Bruze reviewed the plans he had in mind, whispered orders began flowing.

"We're going to wind this thing up tonight. I did think we'd hold off, in hopes of nailing Savage within the next day or two. But the guy is pretty slick. He might fool around and mess up our play. So we ain't gonna lose no time!"

"I don't get you, Bruze!" grunted a man.

"Shut up, and you soon will! Go wake up a gang of the boys! Better wake 'em all up! This is gonna be a big night!"

"Why not call 'em with the gong?"

"Because Savage knows the gong code. Didn't he sneak in and send a fake message that saved his five pals?"

“Sure, sure! I forgot that.” The man prepared to depart.

“Have ‘em collect at the fort!” Bruze commanded; then designated three more men. “You birds go help wake ‘em up!”

The four departed. They traveled together for a short distance; then separated. One climbed on a luxurious private yacht to awaken some of his associates who were quartered there. Another man entered the most luxurious cabin of a small schooner, also to awaken friends. The other pair attended to like missions.

Bruze’s followers had combed the Sargasso to secure fittings for their respective dens. The decorations were of the richest; the furniture was luxurious. Each man lived like a king.

For food, they had tasty preserved viands from the liners they had brought here and looted. Edible fish were to be found in the weeds. The ships had also yielded up fine clothing.

Not the least point about their existence here was that each man was in a fair way of becoming a millionaire — even if Bruze did hog a good share of their loot.

There was no grumbling when they were awakened. They yanked on their clothing, oiled their guns, and burdened themselves with cartridges.

They were of all nations, these devils, but brothers at heart.

Doc Savage was a menace. The Sargasso looters were getting their hands on more wealth than they had ever imagined possible. The bronze man, if they did not stop him, might put a halt to their good living. So they did not complain about being awakened — they were

every bit as anxious as Bruze to polish Doc off.

They gathered at the steel turret on the barges, a few at a time.

Bruze at once dispatched a squad to reinforce the guard at the mysterious freighter. He did this as soon as enough men were on hand.

“Don’t take no chances!” he warned. “Turn the lights on and keep a close lookout! Wear your gas masks! We don’t want Savage gettin’ in that boat!”

When the group had departed. Bruze glanced about, lips moving under his beak of a nose as he counted.

‘About a dozen yet to come,” he grunted. “Wish they’d hurry up!”

“What’s your plan, boss?”

“I’ll spill it when everybody is here!”

Seven evil-looking men now appeared in a group. They were chuckling at the expense of one of their number. This fellow was very fat, judging from the flabby bulges which stuffed his garments. If his appearance was any criterion, he would weigh at least three hundred pounds.

His skin was a brownish color. He wore a flowing burnoose of fine silk, and had curly black hair. He was a half-caste white.

His face was swathed partially in bandages. He carried one arm in a sling.

“Wallah!” he gritted with a strong Arabic accent. “By the beard of my father, I will stick a knife in the next man who makes what he calls the

wisecrack!"

"What's the fuss?" Bruze snapped.

One of the new arrivals laughed. "Big Sheik fell off the boat where he's stayin', he says! He skinned himself up some and sprained his arm! We was just kiddin' 'im a little!"

"Wallah!" snarled "Big Sheik." "I do not like this thing you call the kid!"

"Stop it!" Bruze snarled angrily. "You guys lay off Big Sheik!"

Bruze reigned his tribe of fiends with an iron hand. He allowed no horseplay, knowing that such goings-on often led to fights and ill feeling.

THE other men soon arrived. They bunched about their master. Big Sheik sulked on the outskirts, as if wishing to hide the fruit of his clumsiness.

Big Sheik's exotic garb attracted no undue attention. Indeed, some of the others were attired more flamboyantly. A few wore resplendent military uniforms, which they had plundered from derelicts. One wag even wore formal evening dress, including a silk topper.

All were heavily armed, however. Gas masks were in bags slung over their shoulders.

Bruze got down to business.

"I've come to the conclusion that Doc Savage is makin' his headquarters on the warship with them women!" he declared. "It's the safest hangout he could find!"

"That's good reasonin', boss!" agreed a man who knew it was always

ideal policy to flatter his chief.

"Kwayis khahs!" mumbled Big Sheik, in the rear. "Very nice! No doubt the bronze man fled to the warship after you so nearly took his life a few minutes ago!"

Bruze scowled, not certain whether this was flattery or a dirty dig.

"I'm doin' the thinkin' around here!" he growled. "Dry up, you brown tub of lard! But I think you're right, at that. Savage must be aboard that warship right now! We'll make sure before we act, though!"

"How?"

"By talkin' to that redheaded fire eater!"

"She won't tell us. She'll just start shootin'!"

"We'll try it, anyway! And if that don't work, we'll bring one of Savage's five friends to the warship. We'll hold 'im in plain sight, and slice his ears off. If we promise to stop the knife work if the redhead will talk — she'll tell us what we wanta know!"

"EL baqq bi eydak!" Big Sheik murmured reverently.

Bruze glowered. "What does that mean in English?"

"The truth is in your hands, oh master!" translated the fat man.

"You bet it is!" Bruze grinned nastily. "We'll find out if Savage is aboard the warship. If he ain't, we'll wait until he is! Then we'll get rid of 'im — and that redhead's fightin' gang, too!"

His men registered astonishment. Their faces — some brown, some yellow, some black, many white — all showed the same surprise.

“Dang!” one grunted. “We’ve been tryin’ to do that for a long time! It’ll be some job!”

“I’ve got a scheme,” Bruze declared. “It’s somethin’ I’ve been holdin’ for the last. It can’t fail; but it’s got one drawback. When them women see they’re doomed to death, they’ll probably blow the bottom out of that warship to get it over with — and to keep us from gettin’ the treasure they have aboard! They’re just that spiteful!”

“The treasure!” wailed one villain. “You ain’t gonna let that go to Davy Jones’s locker?”

“We gotta!” Bruze snapped. “We’ve got plenty without it! And with them and this Savage outa the way, and with our prisoners polished off, we’ll be plumb free to keep on gettin’ more booty.”

“What is your p!an?”

“C’mon! I’ll show you!”

Chapter XVII

THE FLAME TRAP

THE pillagers moved out of the turret fort and headed toward the distant warship. It was characteristic of Bruze that he walked in the center of the crowd. He was taking no chances of being picked off.

Closest to Bruze were the white men of his crew — the fellows who had been on the Cameronic, and a few others. Bruze put more trust in these men. Some were members of his old crew of rum runners, hard-boiled gentlemen who had drifted here with Bruze.

The men of other races moved on the outskirts or strung back in the rear. The huge, fat half-caste, Big Sheik, was the hindermost

Having his arm in a sling hampered Big Sheik. Every few feet, it was necessary to leap from one piece of wreckage to another. This required both hands and no little agility..

It was not long before Big Sheik tried to spring to the floating mast of some long-wrecked ship, missed it, and slammed into the water.

Every one laughed at the misfortune.

“Wallah!” gritted Big Sheik, exasperated.

“What’s the matter back there?” Bruze called angrily.

“Alas! My arm — “

“We can’t have you floppin’ around makin’ a noise!” Bruze interrupted Big Sheik’s explanation. “Turn around an’ go back! We can get along

without you!"

"Aye! I wrn do that, master!"

Bruze and the others went on, leaving their big compatriot behind. They were not making very fast time, since they were sacrificing speed for silence. They were successful in causing very little noise.

"That's the idea — plenty of quiet," Bruze muttered. "Ifs a good thing we left Big Sheik behind!"

Bruze would have entertained a different opinion had he been watching Big Sheik at the moment.

The huge man in the burnoose had thrown away the arm sling. Holding up his flowing silk garment as if it were a skirt, he was flying across the wreckage with a series of prodigious leaps.

Veering a bit to the right, he came to a prostrate form. This figure was that of a very fat man, brown of skin. He wore only his undergarments. He was unconscious. A knot over one ear hinted at the reason for the slumber.

The giant who had attended Bruze's conference now yanked off the burnoose and the rest of the bandages. This disclosed various garments and bundles of seaweed tied to his person to give it a fatty bulk.

A few rubs with the burnoose removed brown make-up. The bronze lineaments of Doc Savage appeared. He also scrubbed briefly at the oily black stuff on his hair, removing most of it. A quick brush with his fingers caused his hair to straighten and lay close to his head, like a bronze skullcap.

Doc left the burnoose and other stuff with Big Sheik. He knew the bulbous fellow would remain senseless for some time. In overpowering him, Doc had struck a rather heavy blow.

It had not been difficult to vanquish Big Sheik. Doc had trailed one of the fellows who had made the rounds to summon Bruze's henchmen. Big Sheik had been quartered by himself, and the messenger had awakened him simply by rapping noisily on the hull of Big Sheik's derelict until he got an answer.

Big Sheik, with his flowing burnoose, was ideal for Doc's purpose. The fat fellow actually had not injured himself. Doc had added the imaginary hurts to make the disguise more effective.

Doc now made for the warship. He bent every effort to speed. Many of his leaps covered an almost unbelievable space. He seemed to no more than touch a piece of wreckage before he was gone again. He swung slightly to one side, so as to pass Bruze's crowd without being observed.

BRUZE, striving for silence, was not maintaining a pace as fast as Doc's. It would undoubtedly take him more than an hour to reach the derelict battleship.

Long before that time had passed, Doc was in the neighborhood of the dreadnaught.

He ranged in a circle, alert golden eyes probing the smoky mist. He soon located one of the lookouts.

The watchman was seated on the bowsprit of a small sloop, which had apparently been a fishing craft before it became food for the Sargasso. The bowsprit was a pole about six inches thick. He dangled his legs over the edge, and kept his eyes fixed on the man-

of-war. All his attention was riveted upon that ship.

Suddenly he started as if a mosquito had bitten his ankle. He reached down to slap at the insect.

He seemed to go to sleep. Head foremost, he fell off the bowsprit.

A pair of great bronze arms caught him, and lowered his slumbering form to a drift of wreckage.

A close observer might have noted that thimblelike caps, each containing a tiny hypodermic needle, were fitted to Doc's fingers.

The metallic giant continued his explorations. There was nothing leisurely about his movements. He did not have any too much time for the work ahead.

Soon he found another lookout. This one was overcome in much the manner of the first, except that he was seated in a comfortable deck chair on a cluster of flotsam when disaster befell him.

The minutes dragged. Once in a while, a faint scuffle in the smoky night gave a hint of what was going on. None of these sounds were loud.

At length, even these noises ceased.

On the warship, several lighted portholes denoted that the occupants were awake.

Outwardly, the scene was entirely peaceful. At one time, however, Kina la Forge appeared on deck with a gasoline lantern. Her red hair was a gorgeous aurora in the light.

She called softly.

Four young women, posted as lookout about the derelict war vessel, hastily quitted their posts. They followed Kina la Forge inside.

After this, there was fluttering movement for many minutes. The lighted portholes still glowed at various points. Then silence fell.

Bruze's men now put in their appearance. They came in what they considered a very furtive quiet. It was impossible, though, to keep an occasional piece of wreckage from gurgling under the sudden weight of a man. And there were many small sticks which broke when stepped upon.

The sly approach had cost time. It had taken nearer two hours than one to arrive.

"If there was just some wind tonight," Bruze had muttered vehemently, "it'd make our job a lot easier! Sh-h-h! Can't you mugs be quiet!"

As if to mock his efforts to maintain a hush, a machine gun abruptly vomited a thunderous tumult! The muzzle lipped flame no more than fifty yards ahead!

The bullets screamed a frightening song above Bruze's head. He and his men flattened, or pitched headlong for the nearest cover. Two had the nerve to turn powerful flashlights toward the fire-mouthing machine gun.

The glare disclosed Doc Savage.

DOC promptly flung down his rapid-firer — it had come from one of the lookouts he had overpowered — and sprang for shelter.

At erratic intervals, his hurtling bronze form could be glimpsed through the ash-colored fog. His actions were those of a man stricken

with terror and in full flight.

"After 'im!" Bruze bellowed, suddenly recovering from the fright the unexpected volley had given him.

Spattering bullets from its fringes, Bruze's mob charged in pursuit. They yelped excitedly, like a pack of dogs.

Their bronze quarry had fled with great speed, yet they nearly overhauled him. They came so close that their lights, spiking through the night fog, showed Doc going up the sheer steel hull of the dreadnaught.

Doc was climbing his silk cord. The cord was not visible to his pursuers. To them, it looked as if Doc was gifted with some magical ability to scramble upward through thin air.

The pursuers loosened a flurry of lead. Their effort was a fraction too late. Doc had gotten safely over the rail.

Cr-r-ack! a rifle spat flame from the warship. The spot was a few yards forward from where Doc had boarded.

Cr-r-ack! Another shot! It came from a point many feet sternward.

"Wait!" Bruze barked at his aids. No use of us tryin' to get aboard! Them women will plug us!"

Bruze was unaware that Doc had fired both those shots from the man-of-war. Doc had tied two rifles to the rail in preparation for this event, and secured long strings to the triggers. A yank on the string had done the trick, giving the impression of two widely separated marksmen — markswomen, in this case — when in reality only Doc was on deck.

“Surround the boat!” Bruze howled.

This order was speedily executed. Rather, the men themselves thought they were moving fast. But before they had rounded the bows of the great rusting steel war dog of the seas, Doc had descended on the opposite side, using his silken cord.

The fog-filled night gobbled up the bronze man.

Bruze and his crew, thinking Doc was still aboard the derelict battleship, posted a heavy guard. They turned their flashlights on and propped them so that the beams illuminated the surroundings. Then, lest the light draw bullets, they concealed themselves.

Bruze himself happened upon one of the unconscious watchmen. Cursing, he delivered a terrific kick. This did not awaken the stupefied one. It merely rolled him off the spar on which he lay. He would have drowned, had Bruze not hauled him back.

Swearing a steady stream, Bruze sought in vain to awaken the fellow.

The other unlucky sentinels were soon discovered.

“A FINE kettle of fish!” Bruze wailed irately. “A swell gang of men I’ve got! You’d think this Savage was your pal, the way you let him waltz you around!”

“But we got ‘im penned up aboard the warship!” a man muttered mistakenly.

“Yeah, an’ lucky for you we have!”

“Aw, blazes, boss! It wasn’t us> that he put to sleep! It was these mugs on guard!”

“Shut up! If you had been here, I’m bettin’ it would have been the same thing. Half a dozen of you come with me. The rest stay here.”

“Aye, aye, chief!”

“And watch that warship!” Bruze thrust his hawklike face forward in the fog-smoked moonlight. His eyes glared venomously. “If Savage leaves that boat, I’m gonna have a lead party with the guys responsible for his gettin’ away!”

Uneasy glances were plentiful. The hearers did not doubt in the least that Bruze meant what he said.

“Honest, boss, we’re doin’ our best!” one muttered.

“Oui!” echoed another, a native of France. “Zat ees all we can do — our ver’ bes’!”

Bruze hurried away, his satellites in his wake. They looked like a line of big crickets hopping from one water-logged piece of wreckage to another.

“What’s your plan, chief?”

“You’ll see in a minute!”

Very soon they came to a large, rust-coated derelict which floated low in the water. This craft had the lines of a long pipe, flatted on top, and a battered superstructure fore aft. At one time these two fore and aft protuberances had been connected by a spidery steel catwalk, now torn away.

“Here we are!” Bruze declared.

"What's this tanker got to do with your scheme?"

"It's loaded with gasoline, ain't it?"

"Sure! We been gettin' gas for our lanterns and motors from it for a long time, and we ain't hardly tapped the supply. But what of it?"

"Remember the fire hose offn the derelicts that I've been havin' you birds bring and store here durin' the past few months?"

"Sure. You didn't explain why you wanted it here!"

"I'm explainin' now! We're gonna couple the hoses on the hull outlets of this gasoline tanker. The gas will flow by gravity, because we can draw from valves close to the water. We'll simply run the stuff onto the sea around that warship and set it on fire."

"The warship is steel. No gasoline fire is gonna melt it!"

"Who said anything about melting? The fire around the tub will make it so hot those aboard can't stand it."

"Yeah. I guess it will at that, boss!"

"Sure it will!"

"Won't gasoline evaporate offen the water, chief?"

"Some will, naturally. But not enough to put the fritz on our scheme. We've got enough fire hose to run seven or eight lines. Get busy!"

The men fell to with a will. They soon discovered that hauling heavy fire hose across the wreckage-packed Sargasso was a task, though. Bruze withdrew some of his watchers from the man-of-war, and put them to work with the hose.

An hour passed, and still another. The men took no pains to maintain silence.

Aboard the rusty battleship, things were very quiet. Lights still burned in the portholes.

But three lights had gone out.

Once a machine gun roared angrily from aboard the vessel.

"We got 'em guessin'!" Bruze leered. "I'll bet every one of 'em is watchin' in the fog!"

THE truth about the extinguishing lights and the machine-gun blast would have been a sickening shock to Bruze. The lights had gone out simply because fuel was exhausted. They were gasoline lanterns, and Doc had carefully emptied most of the liquid from them.

An alarm clock — a string winding around the ringer key and tightening on a trigger — had launched the machine gun volley. Doc had also prepared this.

It was important that Bruze and his followers should think the huge war dog of the seas was still occupied; and Doc had planned to that end.

Actually, there was not a soul aboard. Under Doc's directions, all the women defenders had departed before Bruze's arrival.

Bruze, unaware of all this, skipped from place to place, superintending operations. He was in high spirits. He thought he could see the end of all his troubles.

Gasoline began to flow through two hoses. Three-inch streams of the

highly volatile liquid swished upon the weed-filled sea. Floating, the stuff spread. It crawled like transparent worms.

The other hoses went into operation. The gasoline spread more rapidly. The fumes overpowered the musty reek of the Sargasso. Evaporation, however, great, could not compete with the hissing outpour of seven hose lines.

The dawn hour approached. Gasoline now covered all the sea about the old derelict battleship.

"We'll tell 'em what we're gonna do," Bruze announced. "We'll give 'em a chance to surrender. That way, we can get the treasure aboard that tub."

He advanced, keeping well under cover. He felt a little queer inside, and a strange sort of reluctance possessed him. Bruze was a calloused thug. He did not recognize these subconscious urgings for what they were.

Somewhere inside Bruze there was a speck of humanity. A tiny trace of a decent man! Bruze had had nothing to do with this inner fellow for so long that he had forgotten his presence.

The simple fact was that Bruze felt reluctant to perform the horrible deed he was contemplating. In spite of himself, he hoped those aboard the battleship would surrender.

Chapter XVIII

FATAL FIST

AT the moment Bruze was experiencing his strangely humanitarian urges, the former defenders of the derelict dreadnaught were doing exactly what he hoped they would do — surrendering.

The capitulation, however, was taking place at the mysterious freighter.

Beautiful, redheaded Kina la Forge had appeared out of the pale fog. She was trailed by a column of her followers.

The freighter guards let out a squawk of surprise at the sight. Suspicious, they leveled their guns.

“Don’t shoot!” the auburn-haired girl called anxiously.

“What’re you pullin’ now?” a sentry demanded suspiciously.

“We’re surrendering!”

“What?” The man could not believe his ears.

Kina la Forge repeated her information. At the same time, she continued her advance.

Startled, incredulous men poured out of the freighter. Some wore their gas masks. All had their weapons ready.

But the women seemed to be without arms. The rapier sheath and pistol holster dangling at the redhead’s gold-coin belt were both

empty.

A man appropriated the belt of gold coins and stuffed it greedily in a pocket.

“What a break for us!” he cackled.

“Why’re you doin’ this?” another man asked Kina la Forge.

“We are simply tired of fighting. We give up! The treasure is on the warship. You can have it”

More than one avaricious sigh went up at this information. The leader of the freighter guards designated one of his men.

“You go tell Bruze this!” he commanded. “You’ll probably find ‘im at the warship. Tell ‘im he can go aboard and get the gold and stuff.”

“Sure! And won’t he be mad to hear it!” The messenger bounded away, his elation lending wings to his feet. Even a plunge into the weedy sea, which he soon took upon missing a leap, did not drown his jubilation.

“Get inside!” the women were ordered, with a gesture at the freighter.

The redhead hesitated. “What are you going to do with us?”

“We’ll decide that later. Bruze will wanta have the say.”

Meekly the women entered. They looked cowed, completely defeated.

A door was opened in the small steel room inside the entrance. This gave to a long passage. The prisoners were all herded into this cavern of a place.

The guards, now that things were going so nicely, had all removed their gas masks.

Kina la Forge glanced about, apparently in fear.

"Perhaps we had better put up our hands," she told her sisters.

"No need of that!" said a man expansively.

But the ladies lifted their hands anyway. They pressed them against their luxurious masses of hair.

A close observer could have told that every woman was holding her breath.

The next instant, the guards began going to sleep on their feet. They toppled to the floor.

Thump, thump, thump! Within twenty seconds every man was asleep.

The women continued holding their breath. One, unable to do so any longer, exhaled wildly and drew fresh air into her lungs. She went to sleep. This happened to several others.

When nearly a minute was up, the redheaded leader gave a signal, and her followers began breathing.

EACH woman now shook out her hair. Thin particles of glass fell to the floor, tinkling. These were broken bits of glass globes which had been concealed in their tresses. Inside the globes had been an anaesthetic gas which spread quickly to all the passage and produced instant unconsciousness.

Yet it was a peculiarity of this gas that, within less than a minute after

mixing with the air, it became ineffective.

Doc had supplied the stuff, together with the plan for its use. He had used the same material once before at the door of this boat.

The bronze man himself now appeared, coming in through the hull door, which had been left open.

“Good work!” he told the titian-haired girl fervently. The young lady stared after him as he sped on down the passage. Her attractive features held disappointment. She had hoped there would be a more substantial reward. A kiss, for instance. Doc seemed to be very shy on ideas along these lines.

Doc reached a steel door secured by a big bar. He flung the bar back and shoved the door open.

A tremendous roar of joy greeted him!

Here were his five friends, together with every one from the ill-fated Cameronic. They occupied a large room, jamming every foot of floor space. Air was foul in the great cell.

Monk and Renny ran forward, howling their pleasure. The other three were close on their heels.

They spouted questions.

“Explain later!” Doc rapped. “We’ve got to get Bruze!”

They ran back down the passage.

Kina la Forge was bending anxiously over one of the sleeping women who had inhaled the anaesthetic.

Doc wheeled and stopped Monk. "You stay here!" Monk, wild at the idea of missing out on a possible fight, howled: "Now listen

"You're a chemist!" Doc interrupted. He drew various phials from his clothing, and passed them to the furry fellow. "Your chemistry experience will enable you to concoct a mixture to revive these women quickly."

"Aw, they'll only sleep a few hours anyway!" Monk complained. "Can't I go along —"

"Nix!" We've got to have some one here to take charge of the defense of this freighter in case something goes wrong. You're elected."

Before Monk could frame more objections, Doc and the others were gone. Grumbling, Monk prepared to revive the women who had been unable to hold their breath nearly a minute.

The redhead came over to offer her assistance. She gave Monk a ravishing smile.

"I'm sorry you got such a rough reception when we met the first time," she said.

Monk grinned from ear to ear. She was about the most entrancing creature he had ever seen.

He could see he was not going to mind staying behind so much.

DOC SAVAGE led his four companions at full speed. They were fresh from their enforced rest within the mystery freighter, and did a good job of keeping up.

"That boat you just got out of holds the secret of Bruze's being able to

enter and leave the Sargasso," Doc explained. "What is the method?"

"Holy cow!" Renny ejaculated. "This is the first we knew of it!"

"Have you seen the rest of the freighter?"

"No. We haven't seen anything but that one room and the passage to the door."

"Confound it, I wish I had my sword cane!" Ham snapped. "Say, Doc, we heard hammering in the stern part of the ship — as if they were working on machinery."

"That's right!" echoed Johnny, who still wore his glasses with the magnifying left lens.

"Whatever the contraption is, it's probably in the stern," declared Long Tom. The pale electrical expert was bounding along in the rear, hard put to it to keep up.

The sun was lifting. The fog had turned a vile red color, and was beginning to thin out. Instead of the limited vision of a few yards which the hazy moonlight had offered, they could now see a number of rods.

"Slow up!" Doc warned. "We're getting close!"

The hulk of the dreadnaught came into their range of vision.

Bruze stood upon the deck. From time to time he bent over to inspect objects which his men were carrying up from below and depositing at his feet

The treasure! The fruit of Bruze's first looting, which he had stored here when the warship was his headquarters. The hoard which he

had lost when Kina la Forge's father had engineered the capture of the vessel.

All about the rusty derelict the sea was glassy and greasy under a film of gasoline. The stuff still flowed from the seven hose lines which led to the near-by tanker. In their excitement, the men had not closed the valves.

Doc halted his four companions well distant from the dreadnaught
"Stay here!" he warned.

Going forward alone, Doc came within hailing range of the rusty man-of-war. He halted just beyond the film of gasoline. The fumes of the stuff were so strong as to make breathing difficult.

"Bruze!" he thundered.

A bomb might have exploded on the battleship deck. Men sprang to the rail.

"You're trapped!" Doc called, his powerful voice carrying with the volume of a loud-speaker of a public address system.

Bruze cursed violently.

"You might as well give up!" Doc informed him. "All we have to do is toss a match in this gasoline and you're done for!"

At the rail, a man lifted a submachine gun. His idea was to try to nail Doc.

Bruze struck the man a cruel blow. Bruze no doubt realized a powder blaze might touch off the reeking gasoline fumes. The blow was

hardly necessary, though; a quick clutch would have stopped the shots. But Bruze used his brute strength, as was his custom. And to that cruel act, he owed his end.

The stricken man toppled sidewise. His nerveless fingers tightened on the firing latch. A stream of bullets poured from his gun.

The powder blaze itself might not have detonated the vapor, but the weapon discharged some of its slugs into the sea/ The lead pellets rapped at wreckage. Some of them were tracers.

The tracers touched off the gasoline!

THE world seemed to turn to flame! With a whooping roar, the conflagration spread! The blaze did not confine itself to the surface. The congested fumes ignited with a great, mushy explosion.

The air for many yards overhead seemed to burn like invisible powder. The gigantic flash rouged all the morning sky.

Doc spun and ran, traversing the wreckage with prodigious leaps. He was out of danger. What he sought was to turn off the flowing gasoline at the tanker before that, too, caught on fire.

It was a grim race. Gasoline had soaked through the fire hoses, making them virtual fuses. But in many spots they were lying slightly below the surface, supported by the wreckage over which they draped. This checked the rush of flames.

Doc got the valves closed. Then he turned back. Flames were still flashing above the level of the warship deck, making it impossible to discern the situation there.

By the time Doc had rejoined his four friends, the scarlet sheets of

flame had ceased to jump so high. A monster pall of gloomy smoke was lifting as wreckage burned.

Upon the warship deck lay twisted, blackened figures. Not one showed movement

"It was the explosion of the fumes which got them," Long Tom declared. "Probably killed 'em instantly, or nearly so. Burned their lungs out"

Renny knocked his big fists together, looked somber, and said nothing. Ham and Johnny were also quiet

It was no more than Bruze deserved — this sudden, fiery death which had overtaken him and those with him. But that did not keep it from being appalling.

Nor did the fact that Bruze had brought it upon himself, becoming a victim of his own grisly trap, make the thing less horrible.

Doc Savage and his men had seen death in countless forms, but never had they witnessed a Villain meeting a more bloodcurdling end than this.

During the next few hours, they prowled the vicinity. It was desirable that the fire should not spread. When the flames threatened to crawl along drifts of wreckage, they used great swabs of wet seaweed to whip them out

"It will not spread now," Doc concluded at length.

They studied the rusty warship, now blackened from the heat Blazing hulks near by made it inadvisable to seek to reach the craft just yet But it was not going to sink. The treasure was safe.

"We'll be able to go aboard by nightfall," Ham concluded. "Let's go back to that freighter. I want to hunt my sword cane."

"You'd better think of something more important than that!" Johnny snorted, wiping his glasses. "The thing that Bruze uses to get out of this place, for instance!"

"Yeah!" agreed Renny. "Unless we get hold of that, we'll be stuck in this place! And that would be tough! I've never seen a spot on this old ball of mud that I liked less!"

Chapter XIX

MONK'S LAST SALLY

MONK and Kina la Forge met them upon their return to the mystery freighter. Monk, if appearances were any indication, had become rather well acquainted with the entrancing redhead.

A big grin was fixed so tightly to his homely face that it could not have been taken off with a cold chisel.

At these signs Ham scowled darkly. Nothing irked him more than to see Monk happy. And the idea of Monk enjoying the company of a young lady as charming as the redhead was almost more than Ham could stand.

Doc now introduced his four men — it was the first chance that had been presented for these formalities.

Kina la Forge smiled and curtsied to each.

To Ham she said pleasantly: "I am indeed glad to meet the father of so large a family."

"What?" Ham gulped.

"Monk has told me about your wife and thirteen children," said the redheaded queen.

"Why, the liar!" Ham growled. "I haven't even got a wife, much less a family!"

The two perpetual enemies, one big and furry and homely, the other dapper and sharply handsome, stood and glared at each other until Doc interrupted.

"Have you explored the freighter?" he questioned.

"Sure," said Monk, still leering at Ham.

"What did you find?"

"C'mon and I'll demonstrate."

Monk ambled into the freighter, then forward.

En route many Cameronic passengers hailed Doc, making almost pathetic efforts to express their gratitude for his services.

Coming to a companionway, Monk mounted. He entered a steel room. A battery of levers protruded from the floor. Monk shoved one of these

In the innards of the derelict, there sounded a great whining of motors and growling gears.

Monk pushed to a door on the opposite side of the cubicle.

"Look!" he cried.

Doc stared. The others peered over his shoulder.

"Holy cow!" exploded Renny.

The stern of the ancient, wide-beamed freighter was virtually an enormous trapdoor. The noisy machinery had opened this.

From where they stood to the open stern stretched a great metal track of an affair. On this stood a large flying boat. The wingtips just cleared the sides of the hull.

Other seaplanes were stalled near at hand. Four of them! "A launching catapult!" Long Tom declared breathlessly. "Sure. A good one, too. I looked it over." Monk was taking care to keep out of Ham's reach. "It's my idea that the planes were launched here. They're not fast crates, but they're built to carry heavy loads and fly long distances. Bruze simply used them to ferry his gang ashore whenever they went after a new victim."

"But the landings!" Johnny interjected. "How did they manage to get down on this island of weeds and wreckage?"

"There is a comparatively clear space near the stern," Doc told him. "By doing it carefully, a landing could be made on the weed-filled sea. You'll notice, too, that the hulls of these planes are fitted with razor-sharp knives."

They fell to examining the craft.

THE END