

Merchants of Disasters

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter 1. A MYSTERY MESSAGE

JOE Goopy encountered it first. Two of his companions saw it happen. Those companions didn't believe what they saw and took the attitude that it didn't matter much anyway. Joe probably would have agreed with them. He was rather tired of living.

The three were making their way to the hobo jungles outside Washington. Not one of them was sober. Panhandling had been better than usual. They had bought some canned heat, squeezed the alcohol out and gulped it down.

That was one reason Joe's companions believed their eyes had deceived them. They had seen strange things before when under the influence of canned heat.

It was just after dusk when it happened. Joe had plunged on ahead of his drinking partners, was weaving his way along the railroad tracks.

Joe's once tall figure was bent. His faded blue eyes were blank. He kept putting one foot in front of the other

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only because his subconscious mind told him to do so.

Then he paused suddenly. His skinny arms beat the air about him and he tried to run.

Behind him, his two companions had halted, mouths open. There was a faint burning odor in the air, and a sight such as they had never seen before directly ahead of them.

A faint cry came from Joe. It was a strangled sort of cry, apparently for help. It shut off in mid-beat as if strong fingers had been applied to his neck.

His companions turned and ran. It was some minutes before their courage returned enough for them to come back and investigate.

When they did, everything was calm and peaceful. Even Joe looked calm and peaceful. There were no marks of violence of any kind on his body. But he was very dead.

The body was picked up later that same night. The deputy coroner who examined it did his job hurriedly. The death of one human derelict more or less meant nothing to him.

He did note on the record that Joe Goopy's death was not homicide. Then he wrote "acute alcoholism" as the real cause, and let it go at that.

Being young and with a fair amount of curiosity, he wondered just what had killed the aged tramp, but he wasn't curious enough to perform an autopsy. Had Joe's companions told their story there might have been an investigation. As it was, the death was left a mystery.

LES QUINAN was confronted with a mystery also – a minor mystery, he believed at first. And to begin with, he paid but little attention.

In fact, he had noticed the queer light signals for several days before his interest was aroused. Even then he was only mildly intrigued.

That is, until he discovered he was the only one who saw the signals at all!

At that, he had no inkling of what he was about to discover or his actions might have been different. In which case the course of many lives would have been altered. A great number of those lives probably would have been saved.

Les Quinan didn't know about the death of Joe Goopy, of course. But if he had he wouldn't have connected that death with the queer light flashes.

The flashes, in themselves, seemed insignificant enough. Actually, they appeared only as long streaks of sunlight.

But sunlight does not originate in the fifth floor of a Washington office building. And besides, Les Quinan could not see sunlight anyhow. He was snow-blind.

Big, dark-colored glasses covered his eyes. He paced his office restlessly, unable to read, cursing the impulse that had taken him on a skiing trip and his own lack of caution which had resulted in the snow-blindness.

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Les Quinan was a patent attorney, and a good one. But he needed his eyes to read law books and to draw up legal documents.

Those eyes were improving, but he still could barely see well enough to get around at all.

But he could see the queer light flashes!

The surprise of that was so great that unconsciously he yanked the dark-colored glasses from his eyes, trying for a better look.

Without the glasses he could see nothing at all!

When the significance of that penetrated, the lawyer almost forgot his irritation. He called his secretary to see if she could see the strange lights. She couldn't.

There still would have been time for the attorney to have prevented much of what followed if he had obeyed his first surge of interest and investigated. He didn't

He might be excused for that. He had expected an important client to arrive several days before. The client still hadn't appeared. Quinan was worried. He would have been more than worried had he known how much his client was involved in what was to happen.

It wasn't until next day that he turned his attention back to the queer flashes. Then he noticed they were of different timing. Some were short and some were long.

For the first time he realized that signals of some kind were being sent.

Before he could do anything about it, the flashes stopped. But now, Quinan was fully aroused. He grabbed a handful of paper clips, paced back and forth flipping those clips absently at an old-fashioned cuspidor, but keeping his eyes on the fifth-story window across the way.

THE flashes had seemed to shoot upward and out at a slight angle. They would, he estimated, miss all buildings, continue on up into the air.

A frown creased his forehead. He turned, tossed another paper clip and nodded with satisfaction as a metallic cling rewarded his effort.

If the flashes merely went on out into space, how could they be received at the other end, that is if they were really intended to be signals?

Still frowning, he spun back to the window. He could barely distinguish the outline of the building across the street, but light streaks suddenly shot before his eyes.

Those light streaks were going on and off with great rapidity.

A gasp came from the lawyer's lips. He whipped a pencil out of his pocket, then swore helplessly.

The next moment and he had bellowed for his secretary. She came on the run. Her eyes opened wide as her employer began to dictate furiously. What he said apparently made no sense, but she obeyed orders and put down letters as Quinan barked them. The letters read:

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QPWDZ BRHYZ BBOPD WICGH WGBUF QXPUM WBEIE CHAUK EBRQS LTGJP RINDU LYLMF
OETYM FINDP BDT CZ VPTQD BMSSS

The flashes stopped. Les Quinan was fairly jumping up and down in his excitement.

"Transcribe that, write the letters out large, then read them over to me," he barked.

Quinan had been a radio operator on a subchaser during the World War. He had found it easy to read the letters, being sent in international code. And during recent years he had become interested in cipher codes.

The one in which the message had been broadcast was a mediumly difficult one, but the first two words had caught his attention and had given him a clue. Those words were not in cipher and they were:

"Death Today!"

ON the fifth floor of the building across the street, a tall, slender, well-dressed man turned away from a window. His features were almost handsome, his smile attractive, but his black eyes were hard.

"I believe you were right about that lawyer," he said calmly.

His companion grunted, raised his eyebrows slightly.

The tall man nodded. "I'll take care of it." Still smiling, he left the room.

Les Quinan was unaware that his interest had attracted attention. He probably would have ignored it if he had known.

His secretary had repeated the sequence of letters he had seen several times. His mind was accustomed to grasping details.

Pencil in hand, making huge letters and trying hard to see more clearly, he was working with deep concentration. Slowly, word by word, he was piecing the message together.

His jaw dropped. Perspiration appeared on his forehead. Something was wrong, radically wrong. Yet no one would believe him if he tried to tell what he knew.

The message he had decoded was too horrible.

For a moment he wondered who that message could have been intended for. No one could see that light, flashed up into the air. Yet had it been directed at anyone close at hand, a personal call or a telephone would have served the purpose just as well, probably better.

Then he dismissed that problem from his mind. He had to call help, had to get someone to aid him. He could call police, or Federal men, but then, if this proved to be a hoax or false alarm, he would be the subject of ridicule.

But he knew instinctively this wasn't a false alarm. And if it meant what it said the police and Federal men probably would be helpless anyway.

Les Quinan was unaware of the passage of time, did not realize that his secretary had gone to lunch, that he was alone in the office.

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Inspiration had struck him. He would call Doc Savage— Clark Savage, Jr. A smile lighted his features. He should have Thought of that before. Doc Savage was the one man for this job. For Doc Savage had fought mysterious forces before. He had been victorious, and conquered even when the odds were peat.

The lawyer swung around, reaching blindly for a telephone.

He heard the door of his office open and close. Dimly, he made out a tall, lean figure approaching him.

"Busy! Can't see you!" he almost shouted. "Come back some other time!"

His visitor's slow, unhurried approach did not pause.

The tall man's eyes flicked over the glasses the lawyer wore, noted the scribbled paper with its group of letters on the desk. He nodded, almost sadly, as if confirming something that pained him.

"Were you going to telephone someone?" he asked politely. His voice was low, refined.

"Get out, I said," Quinan barked. "I've got to get Doc Savage. I've — " His lips shut firmly, as if he had said more than he had intended.

"Ah!" The other's voice remained low. "So you were going to call the famous adventurer and mental marvel, the man who spends his life fighting evildoers. How touching."

Les Quinan came to his feet. There had been a subtle change in the other's tone, a touch of menace. For the first time the lawyer felt a touch of fear, realized the secret he had learned might be dangerous.

"Will you go?" he snapped. "I — "

The tall man moved, swiftly. Quinan saw the move but faintly. Instinctively, he tried to dodge. Then he swayed drunkenly for a moment and collapsed to the floor.

His visitor calmly drew a handkerchief, wiped a faint stain of crimson from a long, slender knife.

Still calmly, the tall man gathered up the papers on the lawyer's desk, put them in his pocket. On his way out he gathered up the notebook Quinan's secretary had used in taking his excited dictation.

Chapter 2. A CALL FOR HELP

THE story told by Quinan's secretary had no significance to the police. Even when the girl told them her notebook was lone, detectives could see no connection between the jumbled Letters Quinan had dictated and his murder.

Since the girl did not know where Quinan had gotten those Letters, or what they meant, the detectives could not be blamed overly much.

They never did connect the murder with what happened at the army proving ground that afternoon.

The proving ground was the center of more than ordinary interest.

The site was used for testing new inventions, new explosives and other developments in warfare.

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Theoretically, it was so located that it could not be spied upon by civilians.

Actually, it was possible to see the grounds, although from quite a distance, if high-powered binoculars were used.

The two men, well hidden, who were watching the activity on the proving ground had high-powered binoculars. And they appeared just as well pleased that they were considerable distance away.

They were the two who had offices across from that of the late Les Quinan.

Conversation lagged between them. They already knew what was going to occur. They were interested merely in seeing that everything went as expected. But even their features became more tense as drama unfolded before them.

At least two hundred soldiers and officers were on the field. They stood at ease, waiting for the test to begin.

They were not sure just what the test was to be, but rumor had it that they were to try out a new type of smoke screen. All had gas masks ready to don.

The gas masks really were not needed, the officers had reported, except that the glass in the goggles had been treated with a special preparation which it was hoped would make it fairly easy to see while passing through the smoke screen.

What the officers did not add was that intelligence reports were to the effect that a certain power had developed a combination smoke screen and poison gas, and it was hoped the preparation on the goggles would enable American troops to combat such an attack should it ever prove necessary.

That the tests were considered important was shown by the number of high army officers present. These high officials, however, made themselves as inconspicuous as possible. They had withdrawn to a nearby hill, and also expected to watch the test through field glasses.

Only a slight breeze was blowing. Everything was considered perfect for the business in hand.

The airplane that drifted overhead attracted no attention whatsoever. It was up so high, for one thing, and its motors could scarcely be heard. For another, thin banks of clouds made it impossible to see from the ground.

Then the smoke screen tests began.

SMOKE was released suddenly from a dozen points. It was caught in the slight breeze, gradually covered the big parade ground.

The smoke was dense. It was impossible to see through it with the naked eye. The troops had been drawn up at one side of the field. Gas masks were adjusted.

Clouds of the thick smoke drifted toward the soldiers, billowed high into the air. Officers gave arm signals. The troops advanced.

The first passage through the smoke screen was made successfully. The watching high command noticed that it took the soldiers just fifteen minutes to make the trip.

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And the troops came through in perfect skirmish line. Evidently the preparation used on the goggles had been highly successful.

Then officers signaled briskly. The troops pivoted, reentered the smoke screen.

That was when the unexpected happened. The first impression the watchers got was that of a receding picture. Smoke screen, proving ground and all appeared to move backward, rapidly.

The effect was that of watching a movie fadeout, where the camera is drawn back suddenly, changing from a close-up to a distant view.

Some of the high military officers yanked their field glasses from their eyes. Still the scene seemed to be dropping backward.

Then gasps came from the officers. A pyrotechnic display of great intensity appeared before them. It started some fifty feet in the air and continued all the way to the ground.

There was a maze of tiny blue and red sparks. The air was so full of them the smoke screen could hardly be seen – but the men beneath that smoke screen remained invisible.

The scene might have been one of awe-inspiring beauty had it not been so unexpected and inexplicable.

A cold chill of dread gripped the watching high command. Hands clenched, faces became tense.

Something was wrong, radically wrong.

The strange sparks laced through the smoke screen as if they had been darts of lightning – but lightning gone mad. The sparks made circles, then seemed to condense into an almost solid sheet of tiny points of fire. Again they appeared like darting light-signals.

A general shouted a command. The watchers darted for automobiles, racing downward toward the proving ground.

Minutes went by before they arrived. But the troops remained hidden in the smoke screen.

Soldiers who had been operating the smoke generators leaped into action as the officers arrived. Huge fans, prepared for the purpose, roared into action.

A strong surge of air swept the field, drove the smoke screen away.

Then the soldiers beneath that screen could be seen. They no longer were marching. They were sprawled in grotesque positions. Some had snatched the gas masks from their heads. Others apparently had been clawing at their throats when they went down.

SHARP commands rang out. Ambulances raced to the field. Bewildered doctors started to work. Each used a different method in trying to revive the more than two hundred victims.

Several of the stricken were revived. But there were not more than half a dozen of these.

The others were dead beyond all hope of saving.

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There were no marks on any of the bodies. And despite the display of "fireworks" which the watchers had seen, not a body was burned or showed any sign of having been near flames.

The survivors could offer little assistance in solving the mystery.

"I just found myself gettin' faint," one of them reported. "It seemed like I couldn't breathe all at once. Then I went down. That's all I know."

And that was all the medical and laboratory workers had learned late that night.

A thorough test had been made of the type of smoke used in the tests. It was found to be perfectly harmless, even without a gas mask. And the masks used were tested with every kind of known gas and found to be good.

Newspapers were making a terrific clamor. The first reports were sensational in the extreme. Some hinted at a surprise attack by some jealous rival nation.

The army felt it knew better than that. Autopsies showed clearly the cause of death. That was what made it all so unbelievable.

Stern-faced men met that night in the war department. Lights burned late.

They knew nothing of the deaths either of Hobo Joe or of Les Quinan. Nor did they have an inkling that Quinan had made a horrible discovery.

But they did reach the same conclusion that the patent attorney had reached.

They decided to call Doc Savage.

"Our own intelligence services will go to work at once, naturally," one declared. "But we should use every precaution, make available the services of everyone who might possibly be able to help us."

"It still might have been an accident," a second mused. "Remember, there have been instances in France where scores have been overcome mysteriously, some dying, in circumstances almost similar."

A bemedaled general snorted. "Nothing mysterious about those events. Fog merely forced poisonous fumes from factories close to the ground. The people breathed the fumes and collapsed. These men today were not poisoned." The war secretary nodded. "I agree, And we will get Doc Savage to aid us."

He reached for a telephone, gave a number.

In New York, on the eighty-sixth floor of a giant skyscraper, a man answered that call.

At first sight, that man did not seem so tall or so unusual. But there was something about him that always drew a second glance, and that second look proved how erroneous the first impression had been.

He was tall, but so perfectly put together that his height was not noticeable. His skin was a distinctive bronze, while his hair, combed close to his scalp, was only a slightly darker hue.

But his eyes were his most impressive features. Those eyes were like pools of flake gold, impelling, magnetic, almost hypnotic.

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"Doc Savage speaking," he said. His voice was not loud, but it had a peculiar carrying timbre.

In Washington, the war secretary spoke swiftly. A strange trilling sound filled the office. It came apparently from no one particular place, but from everywhere. It was a sound Doc Savage always made when surprised.

Across the room a giant of a man, with huge, bony monstrosities of fists, stirred himself up in his chair and looked interested.

Colonel John Renwick, known as Renny to his friends, was the only one of Doc's aids in the office with him at the time. Renny was a world-famous engineer, one who took pleasure in his work.

Even better than that work, however, he loved the adventures he encountered with Doc Savage. But he never showed that pleasure. Now, his features drew themselves into stiff, disapproving, puritanical lines.

Doc's trilling sound had been enough to prove that something was up.

The bronze man spoke softly, returned the telephone to his desk.

"Give me just one guess," Renny grumbled. "I'll bet it's about those soldiers who got killed today. We're going to get into something."

Doc nodded. "The army," he said quietly, "has found how those men died."

Renny showed a flicker of interest. The stern lines of his face relaxed a trifle. "And that was – "

"They all suffocated," Doc explained gently. "But not from any gas or any other known cause. The army is sure it was no accident, but deliberate murder."

Chapter 3. VISITORS ARRIVE

WORD of the army's conclusion reached the press. It increased the clamor in the newspapers.

Pacifist organizations claimed the army deliberately was trying to cover up a blunder that had cost the lives of two hundred men. They charged officers had allowed men to walk into a new and deadly gas without adequate safeguards.

Militarists were just as far on the other side of the fence. They charged that enemies of foreign powers had operated a death machine, one that paralyzed the lungs, killing American soldiers wantonly. Had the United States gone to war with all the countries accused, she would have been fighting more than half the world.

Scientists were interviewed. They gave as their solemn opinion the statement that the soldiers could not have been killed, that it was impossible for them to have suffocated in the manner described, and that, as a matter of scientific fact, they could not be dead.

A mass funeral was scheduled for the soldiers just the same.

And special orders went to all army posts calling for extra precautions. No one knew where the terror might strike next.

The affair attracted attention in other countries also, particularly those countries whose leaders made

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threatening speeches and pompous declarations about "our rights." Strangely, those leaders quieted for the time. Intelligence departments of the various nations were instructed to get and learn just what had caused the mysterious deaths.

Doc Savage's fame was world-wide. Word was sent down the line to keep an eye on the bronze man and his aids.

Those who received the orders tried to do just this. Certain secretive individuals suddenly manifested great interest in office space at the building where Doc had his quarters. The investigators were disappointed. Doc's offices were deserted.

An effort was made to pick up the trail either of the bronze man or of his five skilled aids. For a time, this also proved in vain.

Then came a rumor of strange visitors arriving in Washington. The investigators rushed there, sought trace of those strange visitors.

Two of those who came to the capital did not appear mysterious at all, nor did they seem to be courting secrecy.

In fact, they attracted much attention.

They came in a battered car. It rattled and clattered exceedingly and was covered with signs indicating it had once been the property of some college youth.

"Blondes and brunettes enter at their own risk," read a sign on one sagging door. "Redheads should know better."

The present occupants of the car did not seem interested in female companions of any kind. And certainly none of Washington's attractive stenographers showed any heart interest in them.

The driver was a slender man, clad in garments that would have been the despair even of a junk dealer. They were tattered and torn, as was an ancient felt hat that shaded a dirty face. His companion was no better dressed. He had the build and expression of a gorilla – not a pleasant, agreeable gorilla, but one in a bad mood.

The third occupant of the ancient wreck alone appeared presentable, and he was not human. While bearing a remarkable resemblance to the gorillalike man, this one was without doubt an ape. A bright red hat was on his head, while he squirmed uncomfortably in a vivid green sweater.

At a crowded corner the clattering car drew up to the curb and came to a stop. Solemnly, the big man hunched his way to the sidewalk, flipping one end of a chain. The ape leaped out, a tin cup in his hand.

The slender man behind the wheel also slid to the sidewalk, producing a battered hand organ. Without a word he began turning the crank.

The strains of "The Sidewalks of New York" startled passers-by. The ape danced about clumsily, bowing and scraping, his red hat in one hand, the tin cup held in the other.

"What's the second ape doin' along, he ain't even dancin'," someone snickered in the crowd.

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A crimson flush crept up the face of the gorillalike man. His companion appeared to be having difficulty in breathing. Several undignified snorts came from him, and he turned the crank of the hand organ more rapidly.

A burly, red-faced cop pushed his way through the giggling crowd.

"Come on! Get out of here," he roared. "Yuh can't block traffic this way!"

The gorilla-man looked up pleadingly, "Butta, officer," he whined in a child-like voice, "we gotta makka da mon – "

The cop put big hands on his hips and glared. "You oughta be dancin' on the end of a chain yurself," he said with heavy humor. "Yuh look more like a monk than the poor ape yuh're usin'. Get along now, before I get mad and run yuh in.

MORE choking sounds came from the slender man with the hand organ, but the music stopped. As the crowd's chuckles grew to full-throated laughter, the two men and the ape got back in their car and drove off.

"Daggonit, Ham, this was your idea!" the gorilla-man piped. His small eyes, almost buried in gristle, glared indignantly at his companion.

The other gave up trying to suppress his mirth. He almost doubled up with laughter.

Shortly afterward, the ancient car drew up at the rear of one of Washington's best hotels. The two men and the ape vanished through a rear entrance. They seemed to have been expected. At least an overdressed flunky, while eyeing them with disapproval, led the way to a suite of rooms.

The slender man dived toward a pile of suitcases already there, gave a sigh of pleasure as he extracted a suit that was the latest in fashion, and chose shirt, tie, socks and shoes to go with it.

Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, known as • Ham to his friends, enjoyed the reputation of being one of the nation's best-dressed men.

"If I'd only thought to get a picture of you in those rags!" his companion moaned.

Ham scowled, then smiled. "Yuh oughta be dancin' on the end of a chain yourself," he mimicked – then ducked a flying shoe.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, called Monk for quite obvious reasons, still was grumbling as he pulled the ape toward him.

"Come here, Chemistry," he piped. "At least you can't talk, and it might be better for a certain courtroom shyster I know if he was the same way."

Two of Doc Savage's aids had arrived in Washington – Ham, Harvard's gift to the legal profession, and Monk, one of the world's outstanding chemists.

Using their pet ape, Chemistry, as a prop, they believed they had staged their arrival rather cleverly.

In that, at least, they had company. A small man, who had been lounging near the hotel and had followed the wreck of a car to the rear, was smiling pleasantly.

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There was nothing particularly distinguished about the appearance of the small man. There was only one odd thing about him, in fact, and that would have escaped casual attention.

The wrist watch he wore was unusually large. Just now he appeared busy winding that wrist watch.

At about the same time, another odd character was making his way toward the hotel.

Tall, a good six feet four, this man was dressed entirely in black. He wore a high, black silk hat, which made him appear over seven feet tall.

His features were thin, and bore a puritanical look. On his back was a sign. That sign read:

Join the Anti-Marriage Society.

As the tall man walked, he also spoke loudly.

"What causes all the trouble in the world, brother? I'll tell you. It's getting married. You give away your freedom. You give away your pay check. You take orders from two bosses. One on the job, the other at home. Join my anti-marriage society. Put pressure on your congressman. Get a law passed forbidding marriage. Then you'll have prosperity. And that will make the country have more prosperity. Everyone will be happier."

A few people turned their heads and grinned as the big man went by. Most people did not. Washington was accustomed to cranks of all kinds.

Several youths, however, did press forward and reach for one of the handbills the big man carried.

When they opened those handbills, they stared after the big man dumbly. The bills read:

"Why don't you get married and settle down? You'll never amount to anything until you do."

Near the hotel Monk and Ham had entered the big man also turned toward the rear entrance. He tore the sign from his back and stopped talking.

To those who knew him, he bore a striking resemblance to Renny, the big engineer who had been in Doc's office when the appeal for aid had come from Washington.

That was what the small man loitering near the hotel thought, also. Once again he seemed busy with his wrist watch.

WILLIAM HARPER LITTLEJOHN and Major Thomas J. Roberts, the other two of Doc Savage's band of adventurers, had been in Mexico when they had received the sudden call from the bronze man, telling them to get to Washington at once, and to camouflage their entry.

Littlejohn, known as Johnny, was the archaeologist of the group. Major Roberts, called Long Tom, was the electrical expert.

Johnny had been investigating some new Mayan ruins, just uncovered. Long Tom had been called for consultation on a big power project.

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They didn't know the weird schemes being used by their friends to get into Washington. But they did have ideas of their own.

Fast planes furnished their transportation. And as they neared Washington they put their own plan into operation. They both became ill.

It wasn't hard to make the stewardess on the air liner believe they were sick, even if she was a trained nurse.

Long Tom appeared to be a physical weakling. Not very tall, his normal appearance was that of an undersized, anaemic individual. That impression was very deceptive, as those who had been unfortunate enough to tangle with him could have certified. But for the present he was glad he did look that way.

Johnny also did not appear overly strong. Glasses gave him a studious appearance, while his tall, lean figure appeared half starved.

Malaria, the scourge of the tropics, seemingly got both of them at the same time. First they would be burning up with fever, then they would be shivering with acute cold, so that the stewardess was borrowing coats from other passengers to pile over them.

The artificial fever was induced by swallowing a pill or so – one of a type perfected by Doc Savage, which his men always carried when going where they were in danger of malaria. The artificial fever always proved effective in burning up the germs of the real disease. Chills were produced by other medicine which slowed their hearts.

The pilot of their plane radioed ahead so that an ambulance was waiting. Faces covered, well wrapped up and on stretchers, the two were carried from the plane as soon as it landed.

The ambulance raced toward a hospital, a young interne seated beside his two "patients."

The interne went to sleep. He never did understand just why or how. Long Tom and Johnny could have told him, but they had vanished before the interne came to.

A small capsule containing a quick acting anaesthetic had put the interne out of the way. Then they dodged from the ambulance, and called a taxicab.

Not long afterward, they also reached the rear entrance of the hotel where Monk, Ham and Renny had preceded them.

A joyful reunion was held in the suite of rooms reserved for them. It was about this time that a bellhop entered with a big pitcher of ice water. No one could remember ordering the ice water, but they accepted it as just another evidence of the excellent service given by the hotel.

Before the bellhop left, he made a quick tour of the room, apparently dusting off the furniture. The bellhop was small, with a thin face. The only unusual thing about him was the oversized wrist watch he wore.

Doc's disguised entrance to Washington was far less spectacular than that of his aids. He came by train.

But even his aids would have had difficulty in recognizing him.

Among the bronze man's friends was a certain senator from the West. This senator had found Washington dull, was on a fishing trip.

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But apparently he was returning now. At least a man who looked just like him was on the train. That was a tribute to Doc Savage's remarkable skill in impersonating others.

When the train reached Washington, the "senator" left swiftly. He seemed to be expected.

Several newspaper reporters who started forward to ask questions found their way blocked by quiet-appearing men who nevertheless seemed to have much authority.

The "senator" was ushered toward a waiting car. The reporters noticed that it was the war secretary's car.

There was some speculation as to just what important bill was being planned that had brought the senator back.

Besides the reporters, only one other person seemed interested in the arrival of the "senator." That person received more than her share of attention from passers-by.

Even in a city with many beautiful girls, she was outstanding. Small, petite, dressed modishly in gray, she was standing where she could watch passengers leave the train. A small hat was perched on blond, curly hair that hung in ringlets around her ears. The merest wisp of a veil failed to conceal large blue eyes. Her hands twisted a small handkerchief.

As the "senator" moved from the station, an escort about him, she turned, trailed discreetly behind. Her eyes had narrowed slightly, seemed to gleam with sudden emotion.

A chauffeur opened the door, bowed politely as the "senator" stepped inside the official car. All but one of the Secret Service men who had formed the escort turned away. The remaining guard got into the auto with Doc Savage.

The chauffeur slid behind the wheel, speeded the car away expertly. The window was closed between the rear compartment and the driver's seat.

A strange, trilling sound came from the "senator" – the sound Doc Savage made when surprised.

Tiny, strange-colored sparks flashed in the rear seat of the car suddenly. The Secret Service man gasped, grabbed his throat as if choked. Doc Savage reached out, sought to open a door. The door was locked. The chauffeur looked over his shoulder. There was a mocking grin on his face. He wore a large, oversized wrist watch.

The Secret Service man pawed weakly for his gun. "T—that isn't the regular chauffeur," he managed.

Blam!

The gun in his hand blasted loudly. Tiny lines appeared on the glass between the two seats, but that was all. The Federal man tried to rise, then he slumped.

Doc Savage's movements appeared slow, but that was only because of his remarkable muscular co-ordination. In reality, he was working at lightning speed.

A small weapon came to his hand. He turned it on the lock in the door.

There was a terrific crash as an explosive bullet struck that lock. The door was practically blasted open.

A shrill shout came from the chauffeur. The mocking grin disappeared to be replaced by a look of desperation. A big truck was coming toward them. Deliberately, the chauffeur speeded up, then swung the car directly in front of the onrushing truck. At the last moment he leaped. He dodged from sight swiftly.

The weight of the truck spun the smaller car over on its side, crashed it along the pavement to smash with great force against still another machine. The overturned car folded up like an accordion. It would have been impossible for anyone to have remained in it and lived.

Doc Savage wasn't in it. Even as the chauffeur had jumped, the bronze man had grabbed the limp body of the Secret Service man and leaped to the street.

While sound of the crash still was echoing, a taxi speeded past. A girl was in the rear seat of the cab, a small girl, dressed in gray. A veil half hid her eyes. A peculiar expression was on her face.

Chapter 4. A FEMININE RAIDER

THE Secret Service man recovered rapidly. He was surprised at the ease with which Doc Savage carried him.

The bronze man had not waited for a crowd to gather. With his companion in his arms, he left the scene rapidly, found a cab.

"S—somebody tried to kill you," the Secret Service man gulped when his voice returned.

Doc's eyes were pools of whirling gold, but he did not reply. The statement was hardly one that needed a reply.

"B—but how was it done?" the other pursued. "T—there wasn't any smell of gas, there wasn't anything that seemed to be wrong—but suddenly I felt myself going out like a light."

Doc shook his head. "Whatever it is, it does not work instantly," he said. "That enabled us to escape."

He offered no other explanation when he talked with the secretary of war. "I had hoped your presence here would not be known," the secretary said wearily. "The immediate attempt on your life show we are up against extremely clever and resourceful men, who have an excellent intelligence system."

"You believe you face a widespread plot?" Doc asked. The secretary's face became old. "I do not know. That is the trouble. There have been strange rumors—very strange rumors. And some strange things have happened, as well."

The bronze man looked his question.

"I don't know that there is a connection between the rumors and the merciless murder of so many of our soldiers," the war secretary went on. "But I am inclined to believe there is."

He paused, then continued. "Briefly, what we have heard is this: Underground information has reached us that a new death weapon has been perfected, one that it is impossible to guard against, and one that would be capable of wiping out both armed forces and civilians, in case of war."

"The experience at the army proving ground would seem to bear out the existence of such a weapon," Doc agreed.

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The secretary nodded. "Exactly, and we do not know yet what that weapon was, or how those soldiers were killed. We know only that they are dead. Our men are at work, but we want you to help also. We must find out what that weapon is, why it was used, and what is behind it all."

"My men and I will do our best," Doc Savage said simply.

A slow smile broke over the secretary's face, then he sobered. "I knew you would. And I know you have faced formidable opponents before. This time, I am afraid you are faced by a more deadly and clever enemy than at any time in the past."

The war secretary's features flushed, his face became heated. "Spies are at work. That we know. Who they are working for, or why, I cannot tell. Valuable secrets have been stolen. Whether this is their work, also, or not, I do not –"

He broke off suddenly. The door of his office swung open, the Secret Service man who had been with Doc in the car rushed in. His eyes were wide with excitement.

"We've found the fake chauffeur," he blurted.

The secretary swung in his chair, a protest over the interruption unuttered.

"He was slumped in a doorway not a block from the scene of the accident," the other rushed on. "He was dead. He had been stabbed through the heart."

An exclamation of disappointment came from the secretary.

"A glove, a woman's gray glove, lay almost under his body," the Secret Service man added grimly.

DOC SAVAGE's gold-flaked eyes glinted strangely.

"Was he still wearing his wrist watch?" he asked.

The Secret Service man's jaw dropped. "W—why no," he said blankly.

The war secretary jerked erect in his chair. "There may be a connection, at that. There may be a connection," he muttered.

Doc Savage glanced at him. "Yes?" he prompted.

"We always get thousands of tips, usually false ones, in every crime or tragedy," the secretary explained rather abashed.

"This one probably is worthless also. But a lawyer, a patent attorney, by the name of Les Quinan, was killed the other day. He, also, was killed by a knife. After the newspapers printed the story of the affair at the proving ground, and told of the strange lights observers saw, Quinan's secretary telephoned. Quinan also had seen some strange lights, she said. She thought there might be some connection, but –"

He shrugged, and his face became weary again.

Doc Savage and the Secret Service man said nothing. There had been strange lights also, in the rear of the auto just before the Federal man became unconscious.

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The bronze man had entered the capitol building in the guise of a senator. He was without disguise when he left.

Apparently he believed there was no longer need to attempt secrecy, since his presence must already be known to those he was opposing.

He saw no one who appeared to be interested in his movements. But then, the two most vitally interested were considerable distance away.

One was the tall, distinguished-looking man with cold, black eyes, who had driven the knife into Las Quinan's heart. His companion was shorter and heavier, and despite the fact that he was no older than the tall man, he wore a short, black goatee.

The goatee bobbed as he spoke. "I don't like this, Leon," he said anxiously. "That bronze devil is bad medicine. Perhaps it would be better if we got out while we can."

Leon Spardoso's black eyes became even harder. "We cannot leave yet, Holst. Had you forgotten?" he asked silkily. "Besides, who would suspect Leon Spardoso or Grant Holst? Just remember who we are supposed to be." He laughed, as if at some secret joke.

A thin smile broke the broad features of his bulkier companion. Grant Holst's goatee wagged with satisfaction. "Right, and that was my idea. But Doc Savage escaped that blundering fool we put on the job – "

Leon Spardoso's black eyes flashed. "But the blundering fool did not escape my knife. And you know what happened at the hotel."

Grant Holst did not answer in words. His round, seemingly good-natured face changed. For an instant it showed the merciless gloating of one who took pleasure in killing.

At almost the same moment, Doc Savage was entering the hotel. He did not stop at the desk. He went direct to the elevators. If he noticed the small, thin man who watched from behind a newspaper, he gave no sign.

The small, thin man disappeared a moment later. That, probably, was because he had caught sight of the two men who slipped into the hotel after Doc Savage.

One of the two was the Secret Service man who had been with Doc earlier. The second was another guard. The war secretary was taking every precaution he could. He wanted Doc protected. For despite the excellence of his own intelligence workers, the secretary was pinning his hopes on Doc Savage and his men. Doc never failed to inspire such confidence.

Near the suite of rooms that had been engaged for his men, Doc Savage paused for an instant.

His features did not change expression, but a queer light flashed in his gold-flecked eyes, his nostrils twitched slightly.

The next moment and he had bounded forward, turned the doorknob.

The door was locked, but Doc hardly seemed to pause. His weight shifted slightly, then his tremendous muscles tensed, and he shot forward, his shoulder striking just above the doorknob. The door popped open.

The bronze man's queer, trilling sound filled the air.

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Inside the room were several limp, apparently lifeless bodies.

A FAINT acrid odor was in the air. It was this odor which had attracted Doc's attention as he neared the rooms. His keen sense of smell had caught a scent that the average person would not have noticed.

For a moment the bronze man stood perfectly still, his eyes photographing the scene.

Monk and Ham evidently had just finished taking a shower. They had collapsed, wearing only their shorts. Beside them, one hairy arm outstretched, as if he had fallen while trying to aid his idols, was Chemistry.

Renny was stretched full length, face down on the floor. He undoubtedly had been making for the door when stricken. Long Tom was draped over a radiator by a window. He had been trying to get that window up.

Johnny's anaemic-appearing frame was slumped in a chair. A glass of water had spilled from his hand.

Doc thrust a small tablet into his mouth, then moved forward. The tablet was one of his own devising. It furnished oxygen, made it unnecessary to breath outside air. And from the faint odor in the room, it seemed apparent that gas of some kind had been used.

But the bronze man first inspected the pitcher of water on the table. Poison could be the answer, although it seemed unlikely that all five of his aids would drink and be overcome at the same time.

Then he did a strange thing. He leaped to a writing desk that had been placed close to one of the windows. Sunlight streamed in on that desk.

His arms a blur of motion, he whipped several large blotters from the desk, sped to the bathroom. A moment later came the sound of running water.

Almost at once, the bronze man was back in the room. He grabbed Monk's huge, hairy arm first, felt for a pulse. There was none.

For nearly the first time in his life, Doc Savage showed emotion. A flash of pain flickered in his gold-flecked eyes.

Doc Savage had risked his own life many times. He knew that sometime he must forfeit that life. But always he tried to protect his aids, even at the risk of his own life.

This time his men had been struck down while he had been away. They seemingly were dead.

The bronze man was recognized in medical circles as one of the world's greatest physicians. At some time during each year, he slipped away to the Fortress of Solitude, where alone, and far from civilization, he studied the latest in medical science, and perfected technique of his own.

His knowledge on the subject was boundless. And he was using all of that knowledge now.

His aids had been gassed. That had been apparent when he had seen faint vapor arising from the blotting paper. A poisonous powder of some kind had been brushed on that paper. As the sun's heat beat down, the heat had transformed the powder into gas.

By placing the blotting paper under water, Doc had stopped the poisonous fumes. But he needed to do far more than that.

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No oxygen tanks were available, but he did have a supply of the oxygen tablets. He placed several of these in the mouth of each victim. Then his hands flashed to the equipment kit he carried about his body, under his clothes.

Shots of adrenalin started hearts to beating faintly. But the lung muscles were paralyzed, the men were not breathing.

Doc's long fingers flicked with lightning speed. Another medicine vial came from his equipment kit, a syringe was filled.

The needle point of the syringe sped in and out of limp flesh as each man and Chemistry received a shot in turn. The drug was similar to that released by glands when a man is under the stimulus of intense fear or excitement – the fluid that makes giants of individuals ordinarily weak, the strongest muscle-stimulant known.

Seconds later, the soft sound of breathing filled the air.

Long Tom, although the weakest-appearing of the group, was the first to recover. "I was in the bedroom and didn't come in until I heard loud bumps," he explained. "Then I rushed out and the stuff caught me."

"An extraordinary phenomena of imbecility on the part of semieducated individuals whose perception powers suffered a lapse," Johnny gasped.

"He means we were dumb not to have been suspicious of that bellhop," Monk piped weakly. Monk spoke with difficulty.

"When I get my hands on that mug!" Renny sat up slowly, his huge, monstrosity of fists opening and closing to show what would happen when and if his wish were granted. "And we thought we were on guard, ready for anything –"

"What they're trying to say, Doc," Ham explained solemnly, "is that we got a little extra service on the part of a bellboy, who must have brought poison dope of some kind in here when he brought us ice water. If you hadn't shown up when you did –"

"Did the bellhop wear a large wrist watch?" Doc Savage interrupted.

Ham's face mirrored bewilderment. "How did you know?" he barked.

Doc did not answer the question. Instead, he told of his conversation with the war secretary.

A childlike grin crossed Monk's homely face. "Sounds good," he chuckled. "There oughtta be some fightin' in this."

"There won't be any fighting, there'll just be a massacre, if I can find that bellhop," Renny said grimly. Sometimes the big engineer had a one-track mind. This was one of the times.

"You're not interested in fighting, you half-witted relative of an ape," Ham jibed. "You just think that girl Doc saw at the station and in the taxi may be involved in this, and want to find her."

"Why, you –" Monk sputtered wordlessly. He did like to fight. In fact, he preferred a good battle to a good meal, but he had a weakness for pretty faces also, a weakness that had got him into trouble before.

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"What do you want us to do, Doc?" Long Tom asked. The sallow-appearing electrical genius looked eager.

"Be aphonic," Johnny rapped. The archaeologist's eyes glinted slyly.

"Be what?" roared Monk. The hairy chemist looked bewildered. Johnny's habit of using big words often confused him.

"Just be silent," Ham said wearily. "Of course a descendant of the jungles couldn't be expected to understand plain English."

"Why you animated cartoon of a law book –" Monk lumbered forward angrily, only to stop suddenly. Doc was speaking swiftly and concisely.

"Monk, you and Ham check with the police, then investigate on your own. Learn everything you can about the habits, past life and friends of Les Quinan.

"Renny, you and Johnny rent a plane and fly back to New York. Here is the equipment you are to get from the laboratory."

"And I?" Long Tom asked anxiously.

"Go to the closest camera shop," the bronze man said. "This is what you buy." He explained tersely.

Long Tom looked bewildered. "And then?"

"Then we go to Les Quinan's office," Doc said softly, "to investigate the queer flashes he saw."

THE two Secret Service men trailed discreetly after Doc as he left the hotel. The bronze man did not appear to notice.

The small, thin man wearing the big wrist watch, stood across the street. He appeared cheerful. Then his face pictured amazement. Monk and Ham came out of the hotel, walked away. A moment later Long Tom, Renny and Johnny appeared. Renny and Johnny got a cab as Long Tom went down the street.

"It couldn't be!" the little man gasped. He acted as if he were seeing ghosts. Then he grabbed his watch, appeared to wind it furiously. A moment later he hailed another cab, trailed the taxi carrying Johnny and Renny to the airport.

A policeman had been on duty outside Les Quinan's office, presumably on the theory that a murderer always returns to the scene of his crime.

The policeman had been recalled when detectives came to the conclusion that a disgruntled client from out of town had wielded a knife on the lawyer. Officially, they said an arrest was expected soon. Privately, they hoped the case would soon be forgotten. There were no clues that they could find.

Long Tom didn't see much use in visiting the office, either. He saw less reason for the big package he carried. But he asked no questions as Doc joined him and they went to the office building.

The hallway to the office was clear. Doc moved swiftly, tried the door. A surprised expression crossed Long Tom's pale features. The door was unlocked.

"What – " he started.

Doc held up one hand for silence. Without noise he was inside the office, Long Tom behind him.

The office had been well searched. Desk drawers were yanked out, papers were scattered from the filing cabinets.

The lean electrician's mouth formed an "O." Police undoubtedly had not been responsible for the disorder. Then Long Tom's jaw dropped as he saw something else.

A closet door was faintly ajar. The door moved slightly.

Doc did not appear to see it. "I imagine our visit here will be fruitless," the bronze man said loudly. One hand was jammed into his coat pocket.

The closet was a dozen feet from where Doc and Long Tom stood. If someone were hidden there with a gun, he could fire before either of the two could cross half the distance.

Doc half turned. One eyelid blinked rapidly. Long Tom did not change expression. Doc's hand came out of his pocket casually. Something dropped, fell on the floor.

Thick smoke rolled upward, filled the room, Long Tom dodged to one side. Hidden by the smoke, Doc flashed across the room, yanked the closet door open.

Someone screamed loudly.

Long Tom chuckled in spite of himself. He went to the windows, opened them, allowing the smoke from the small bomb Doc had dropped to escape.

Held firmly in Doc's powerful grip, was a small, exceedingly pretty girl. She was dressed entirely in gray, with blond curls encircling her face.

Chapter 5. A KIDNAPING

THE girl closed her mouth suddenly. Her eyes flashed. "Turn me loose at once or I shall scream for the police," she snapped.

Long Tom snickered audibly. "Girl caught ransacking office of murdered attorney threatens to call police," he jeered.

"I wasn't ransacking the office," the girl said furiously. "I was just looking for – " She broke off, put one small fist against her mouth.

"Looking for what?" Doc Savage prompted. "It is about time you did some explaining."

"I have nothing to explain. I have a right to be here. I am Olivia Payne, a newspaperwoman."

"Where did you drop your other glove?" the bronze man asked quietly.

The girl's startled glance fell to the bag she was carrying. Only one, instead of two gray gloves, hung through

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the strap there. Her face paled.

"That glove was found near another murdered man," Doc pointed out softly. "The police are looking for the owner of that glove."

Olivia Payne's expression became more frightened. "I ... I just saw him fall, and ran over to see if I could help. T—then I saw he was d—dead, and ran," she stammered.

Doc Savage looked at her steadily, his gold-flecked eyes inscrutable. He did not remind her that he had seen her in a taxicab only seconds before the time of the murder.

"Why are you here?" the bronze man repeated.

Olivia Payne gulped. She appeared to have difficulty in speaking.

"Let's call the cops, Doc," Long Tom put in airily. The lean electrician was far from being as susceptible to feminine beauty as Monk. He had no intention of calling the police, but he thought the threat might help to make the girl talk.

The result was not what he expected.

The girl's hand darted in and out of her handbag. She produced a small but deadly-appearing pistol.

"I do not intend to talk," she said coldly. "You two stand perfectly still and you won't be hurt. I'm going now."

"Where's your knife – the one you killed the fellow with?" Long Tom gibed.

The girl's face flushed, her hand trembled. Doc Savage moved. So swiftly that the girl did not realize what was happening until it was all over, one bronzed fist shot out, took the gun from her hand.

"Did you know Mr. Quinan?" Doc asked politely.

Tears flashed to the girl's eyes. "Y—yes," she half sobbed, "I did. But I don't know anything about his death."

"A prevarication, as Johnny would say," Long Tom put in dryly.

Doc Savage's gold-flecked eyes continued to hold those of the girl. "Why were you here? What were you searching for?" he insisted.

Olivia Payne's lips set stubbornly. "I came here looking for a feature story," she said sullenly. "Quinan was a patent attorney. I thought I might find records of some strange inventions that would make a good yarn."

"I am still waiting for a truthful answer," Doc Savage said patiently. His gold-flecked eyes seemed to revolve, appearing to exert a hypnotic effect. The girl's mouth opened.

Then that mouth closed. Long Tom stood as if frozen. Even Doc Savage jerked erect.

A radio blared into action on the street below. It was a radio on a police car, and had been turned high.

"Calling Doc Savage! Calling Doc Savage!" came the voice of the police announcer.

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"Contact the airport at once. Two of your men have just been killed in a plane crash!" FOR a moment there was absolute silence in the office. Long Tom's face became even more sallow.

"Johnny and Renny," he whispered. "How could it have happened, Doc? They were both excellent pilots – "

Then Long Tom stopped talking. Doc Savage no longer was there. The bronze man streaked from the office, raced to the street

Long Tom ran to a window, looked down. The officers in the police car saw Doc Savage as he reached the street. They slowed down. An instant later, and the bronze man leaped onto the running board.

The police car shot away, siren wailing. Long Tom whirled, face grim.

"You lady, if you're mixed in with the gang that's behind this – "

The electrical expert's face grew longer. He said words to himself. The girl had fled.

Across the street, a man with cold, black eyes had watched the scene in the office. He permitted himself a slight smile.

"Perhaps we now are beginning to get started after all," Leon Spardoso said.

Grant Holt's small goatee bobbed rapidly. "There is no reason why we should have failed this time. If we can wipe them out, one at a time – "

The other nodded, face more serious. "Doc Savage is the only man I really fear. We must get him, too. But if we can get his aids, that will help some. I still cannot understand why we did not succeed at the hotel."

"Doc Savage again," his companion snarled. "That man can smell trouble."

"I'd feel better if we knew just where—ah—Mr. Blank was, and when the deal will go through," Leon Spardoso said thoughtfully.

Grant Holst nodded gravely. "We can't afford to have anything go wrong with that end of this thing," he agreed.

Smoothly, with a lithe grace that his squatty body belied, he went to a desk. He opened a drawer, placed his hand inside.

Long Tom, standing at a window in the office of the late Les Quinan, was still staring out into the street. But he was looking downward, not up. Even if he had been gazing higher, it is doubtful that he would have noticed anything.

Queer, strange—appearing light flashes were streaking toward the sky. But as Les Quinan had discovered, those flashes could not be seen unless dark colored glasses were worn.

DOC SAVAGE'S bronzed features showed no emotion as the police car whipped in and out of traffic, raced for the outskirts of the city and the airport.

But his huge fists were white with the strength of his grip on the side of the car. The driver, after one glance at him, abandoned any idea he might have had about conversation. He devoted all his energies to driving.

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A crowd was packed about strewn wreckage at the far end of the field. The police car, siren roaring, blasted a path to the side of an ambulance near the smashed plane.

A plump, worried–appearing man in shirt sleeves elbowed his way forward as the police car came to a stop. Perspiration was streaming from his face.

"I'm Jones, the airport manager, Mr. Savage," he said hurriedly.

"How did it happen?" the bronze man rapped.

Jones' stubby legs paddled swiftly to keep up as Doc drove toward two still, crimson–splashed figures on white stretchers.

Renny's big body seemed curiously small, as if it had been twisted and torn. One of the engineer's huge fists was outflung, fingers clenched.

Johnny's appearance was more peaceful. But his face was swelled and darkened, and there was an ugly, deep gash on the archaeologist's head.

"It took us some minutes to prepare a plane for them, although they had wanted to take off at once," the airport manager was explaining.

"But the plane was checked carefully by experienced mechanics. I am sure that it was in perfect shape. They took off with the big man, Colonel Renwick, I believe, at the controls.

"We noticed something was wrong, even as the plane started. It wobbled, and since we knew Colonel Renwick was an excellent pilot, we could not understand that. But then the plane appeared to straighten out and leave the ground.

"It wasn't fifty feet up when it suddenly plunged downward. The motor appeared to gasp and stop. I ... I cannot understand it."

"Did you notice anything unusual at all?" Doc Savage asked quietly.

Jones gulped, seemed about to answer "no," then changed his mind. "I... I didn't personally," he admitted, "but one of the mechanics thought he did. Of course, it may have been his imagination, but he thought he saw strange–appearing flashes of light about the motor just before the plane crashed."

Doc Savage did not reply. He knelt beside the broken bodies of his friends.

"They weren't breathing when we got here," an ambulance surgeon said matter–of–factly.

LONG TOM'S first impulse had been to race after Doc, follow him to the airport.

The electrical expert had changed his mind. There was nothing he could do that Doc couldn't, he knew, and in spite of the tragedy, there was a job still to be done.

With stolid features, he opened the big package he had carried, went to work. He didn't know that his movements were of interest to two men across the street, but he pulled the blinds in the office just the same.

Doc Savage had instructed him to do so.

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The job took Long Tom scarcely twenty minutes. When it came to an electrical and mechanical task, he was almost without an equal.

Long Tom was feeling low. A close bond existed between Doc's aids, although a casual observer, to hear them scrapping, would have doubted it.

He didn't doubt for a minute but that the plane crash had been deliberately planned.

He had just stepped from Les Quinan's office when the attackers struck. There were six of them.

Leon Spardoso and Grant Holst believed in taking no chances. With Long Tom left alone, they had seen an opportunity to get another of Doc's men. They believed a half dozen huskies should be enough to subdue one anaemic appearing individual

Long Tom thought differently.

The attack was launched with startling suddenness. The only sound was the whisper of rubber-soled shoes as they rushed down the hallway.

That wasn't much warning, but it was enough to give Long Tom time to turn around. He got his back to the wall.

The gorillas were swinging blackjacks. They were in a hurry. Two of them bumped into each other just as they swung at the small figure of the electrical expert.

Then they learned what others had discovered before – that Long Tom merely looked like a pushover – that he was far from being one.

He ducked, caught hold of the wrist of one of the men, yanked him forward and snapped down. The man's arm broke, and Long Tom grabbed the blackjack.

Arms swinging, he laid about him violently. The pug with the broken arm howled with pain and danced about, getting in everybody's way until one of his companions unfeelingly swatted him across the head. Then he sat down and kept still.

After the first rush, the remaining five attackers drew off a little. Then they poured back. They didn't seem to need orders.

One came at Long Tom from either side, the remaining three launched a frontal assault. Long Tom got two of them with lusty blows that sprawled them unconscious.

But then someone dived at his knees, knocked his feet from under him. He knew he was lost, and rolled his head as a blackjack drove toward him.

The blow only partially connected, but he went limp, as if he were unconscious. The toe of one shoe made scraping movements on the floor.

His attackers were experienced. The second blow Long Tom caught across the top of his head really knocked him out.

It was some minutes before the party left the building. The three injured gorillas had to be brought back to their senses. A crude splint was fashioned about the broken arm.

Most of the group drifted out one by one, so as not to attract attention. The last two brought Long Tom. Liquor had been poured over his face.

A cop strolled forward to investigate, turned away as he caught a whiff of that liquor. Just another drunk being taken home by two friends, the cop reasoned.

Chapter 6. THE THIN MAN LEADS

IT didn't look like home to Long Tom when he recovered consciousness. In fact, had the walls been padded, he would have thought he was in an asylum.

The room appeared to be entirely of metal. A small window, scarcely a foot square, provided the only fresh air. Light came from fixtures cunningly concealed in the ceiling. An uncomfortable metal chair was the only furnishing.

Long Tom was bound tightly to the chair.

The light in the room was very strong. It was reflected on the smooth, highly polished metal. The glare made it practically impossible to see.

Long Tom opened his eyes, then closed them again hurriedly. Even with his eyes closed the brilliant glare beat through on his eyeballs, added to the racking pain in his head.

His hands had been tied behind his back. The position was awkward and very uncomfortable. Also, he was very warm. Long Tom squirmed around, kicked and threshed, made himself even warmer. Perspiration ran down his face—and down his arms.

Then he sat very still.

The lights dimmed, and a panel opened in what had appeared to be a solid metal wall. Two men came in. One was tall, the other short and chunky. Black hoods completely enveloped their heads. Each wore a large wrist watch.

"A scrawny-looking little runt to be such a fighter, isn't he?" the tall one remarked impersonally.

The short man chuckled unpleasantly. "Now that he's conscious, I see no reason to delay," he said nastily. "I'll get —"

He stopped, and made a choking noise. His tall companion also was standing rigid.

'Colonel—Renwick—and—Littlejohn — alive," the tall man said slowly and unbelievably.

Long Tom's head shot up, his eyes flashed delightedly. It might be an act, but he didn't believe so. The tall man spoke as if he were receiving a message somehow, although that appeared impossible.

"Ambulance—surgeons—administered—Oxygen—started—lungs—to—work," the chunky man went on. "Renwick— and—Littlejohn—critically—injured—in—fall—but—due —"

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to—prompt—arrival—Savage—probably—will—live."

AN inarticulate sound of rage burst from the short, stocky man. "Everything goes wrong!" he snarled. "Those two should have been dead. But at least we can kill this one. And with him there will be no mistake."

The tall man threw up one hand. "I would like to experiment also," he said silkily, "but for the present, perhaps we should wait. We may need a hostage yet."

Long Tom's pent-up breath went out in a sign of relief as the two left the room. His arms came free. He leaned over and untied the ropes about his feet.

Getting his arms free had been no particular feat, but had it been discovered at once, he would have been helpless, with his feet still tied.

Long Tom's coat and shirt, like those of all Doc's aids, were impregnated with a potassium compound, the chemical that flames when it comes in contact with water. Perspiration had furnished the necessary liquid. The ensuing fire had burned the ropes off Long Tom's wrists.

It had been painful, even though his skin was coated with a solution similar to that used by fire eaters, but he had been caught without any other method of escaping in such a situation.

The electrical expert gave little thought to his deferred sentence of death. It had been deferred, and that was enough. He was jubilant over the information that Renny and Johnny were still alive.

He inspected his prison carefully. There seemed no method of escaping from it. The window was far too small to crawl through.

Then he took a pencil from his pocket. At least it appeared to be an ordinary pencil. Tugging and pushing, he got the metal chair over against the wall. By standing on that and stretching his arm, he could just get his hand above the level of the window sill.

He held the pencil out the window for some time.

DOC SAVAGE remained at the hospital for more than an hour with Renny and Johnny. In fact, the bronze man personally examined their injuries when they were taken to the operating room.

The house physicians were pleased to watch the famed skill of this man about whom they had heard so much. He did not disappoint them. His examination was exceedingly swift and thorough, his conclusions exact.

Both Renny and Johnny had escaped easier than they had any right to expect. Renny had suffered a broken right leg and a fractured arm. Several of Johnny's ribs were caved in and there was a mild concussion from the blow he had received on the head.

Being in excellent physical condition, their recovery was only a matter of time.

"But it looks like we're going to be out of this, and it started out so interestingly," Renny groaned. His thin, puritanical lips were even more tightly compressed than usual.

"What caused the crack-up?" Doc asked.

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"We saw some queer flashes, then it seemed we couldn't breathe," Renny explained. "We reached for oxygen tablets and still we couldn't breathe, and about that time the motor stopped."

He gasped slightly. "Of course," he said disgustedly. "There was a little guy hanging around the plane when it was warming up. And, now that I think of it, he did look something like the bellhop who tried to kill us at the hotel."

The bronze man returned to the hotel. His aids were supposed to report back there when they had completed their assigned tasks.

Only Chemistry was in the rooms. He had been left behind by Monk and Ham. Chemistry jabbered excitedly. Doc was one of his favorite people.

The telephone rang sharply almost as the bronze man closed the door. A peculiar look flashed to his gold-flecked eyes as he answered it. There was no response to his greeting, but after a few seconds a click sounded to show the connection had been broken.

Doc got the hotel operator on the line and spoke briefly.

The bronze man was waiting quietly when Monk and Ham returned. For once the two were subdued. They made their entrance without their usual wrangling.

"Will they live, Doc?" Ham asked anxiously. A newspaper extra in Monk's hand showed where they had learned of the plane crash. The hairy chemist's features expressed childlike concern.

Doc reassured them. A small smile spread over Monk's homely features. Almost affectionately, he gave Ham a tap that sent the dapper lawyer spinning across the room.

"Daggonit, I told yuh Doc would save them, you halfbaked shyster," he shouted.

"Why you antediluvian throwback!" Ham raged. The long cane he carried suddenly lost its outer covering to reveal itself as a slender sword which he waved menacingly.

"Did you learn anything of value?" Doc put in calmly. He was accustomed to the continual squabbling between the two.

Ham quieted. Monk looked rather sheepish.

"Nothin' much, except this Quinan guy was a better lawyer than Ham here," the chemist said maliciously. "At least Quinan practiced his trade. He was a patent attorney and made a fair amount of money. Unmarried. No woman trouble, no enemies that the cops could find.

"There was just one odd thing," Ham said thoughtfully. "His secretary told us –"

The dapper lawyer stopped speaking. The telephone bell rang sharply.

Monk was nearest. Automatically he started forward. A bronze streak shot before him. The burly chemist was knocked to one side.

"Don't!" Doc rapped. Then he raced into the adjoining room.

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A second telephone was there. Doc lifted the receiver and listened for a moment.

"Thank you," he said. Then he was back with Monk and Ham.

"The call is from the drugstore two blocks south of here," he said swiftly. His voice remained low-pitched, but there was a peculiar tone in it that brought Ham's head up, that caused Monk to grunt.

"Get the man making the call. Question him," Doc ordered.

Monk's long arms swung back and forth rapidly, his piggish eyes glittered. "Daggonit! Action at last!" he piped. He raced from the room.

"I'll have to go along to protect him," Ham muttered protestingly, but he also appeared delighted at the prospect of trouble.

The telephone rang again as Monk and Ham tore down the hail.

Doc's actions were deliberate, but he wasted no motions. He closed the outer door and called to Chemistry. The ape scurried with him into the next room.

The bronze man closed this door also, until only a slit remained. He waited for a full minute. The telephone continued its angry clatter.

Then Doc produced a long, slender pole that resembled a fishing rod. He extended the pole through the slit in the door, used it to lift the telephone receiver. Blam!

A terrific explosion wrecked the room containing the telephone. Furniture was torn to pieces. Had there been anyone in the room it would have been impossible for them to have escaped alive.

MONK and Ham heard the explosion as they reached the hotel lobby. They did not slow their breakneck speed. Doc's actions had indicated something was wrong, but they had full confidence in his ability to handle any problem.

The hotel doorman saw them coming. "Lieutenant Colonel Mayfair's car," he bellowed loudly.

Ham's jaw dropped. He didn't know that Monk had a car. A big limousine with a uniformed driver at the wheel swooped up before them.

"For once in your life you had foresight enough to be prepared for action," Ham gulped. He catapulted into the rear seat of the big car.

Then strange howls came from him.

"The drugstore, two blocks south," Monk piped. "And make it fast."

He got into the car after Ham. He sat down with great suddenness as the machine jumped ahead. Then, for the first time, he appeared to notice the weird noises coming from the dapper lawyer.

Ham was tangled up with an animal that looked as if it had just escaped from a slaughterhouse. A kindly observer might have called it a pig.

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In some ways it did resemble a pig, but it was probably the homeliest pig ever allowed to live. Its snout was extra long, its body was thin, its backbone high and sharp.

Right now it appeared to be doing its best to nip chunks out of the dapper lawyer's legs. It was squealing delightedly.

"Get that – that monstrosity off me before I turn it into pork chops," Ham raged.

Monk grinned mischievously. "Those are just love bites," he consoled. "You know Habeas loves you."

The driver turned his head slightly, even as he wheeled the car through heavy traffic at a reckless rate.

"Did I do right, boss?" he asked hopefully.

"Quite right," Monk assured him solemnly.

The pig was Habeas Corpus, Monk's pet. Unable to bring it with him when Ham had the bright idea of their disguising as organ grinders on their trip to Washington, he had done the next best thing.

He had arranged to have Habeas shipped after them at once. While Ham had been busy with the police, Monk had slipped out, rented a car and had Habeas brought to the hotel in style to await a good time to spring him on Ham.

Ham, at least publicly, protested a great dislike for the pig. Habeas adored him. Right now, the pig was trying to climb into Ham's lap. The lawyer took a swing at him.

"Dang it, leave that pig alone," Monk howled. "He's worth –"

The car lurched hard as the driver put on the brakes. Monk stilled. Ham also stopped fighting with Habeas. They had reached the drugstore.

"Go in and buy some flea powder for this inhabitant of mud puddles," Ham suggested bitterly. "That way you'll have a legitimate excuse to look around and see who made that call."

Monk started to get out. Then he found it wasn't necessary. A man had come out of the store. He was a small man with a thin face. He wore a large wrist watch.

Ham grunted with recognition. "The fake bellhop," he breathed.

"Do we pick him up here, or later?" the hairy chemist rumbled.

Ham considered swiftly. The little man was approaching a small roadster. He did not appear to notice the limousine.

"Maybe we can trail him and find where the gang he belongs to hides out," the lawyer decided.

Monk nodded agreement. "I'd hate to pick on a little guy like him, anyway," he rumbled. "There oughtta be more to make it interesting."

As the little man drove away, Monk told their chauffeur to trail along behind.

It seemed simple enough.

Chapter 7. MONK FINDS HIS FIGHT

DOC had to spend some time explaining to the hotel manager that there must have been an attempt to kill him, but that it had failed.

The hotel manager appeared to doubt the story. Nothing like that had ever occurred in his hostelry before. Besides, he had heard that Doc Savage sometimes experimented with dangerous chemicals.

He was beginning to lose his enthusiasm over having the famous bronze man and his aids as guests.

Somewhat unwillingly, he ordered bellboys to transfer the luggage to another suite of rooms. His feelings were assuaged somewhat by the sizable bill Doc gave him.

Police were trying to figure out the puzzle. Doc left them with the problem. It was a difficult one now. It hadn't been so tough when the bronze man discovered it.

Chemistry's actions had been enough to convince Doc someone had been in the rooms. The fake telephone call had given him the necessary clue.

The would-be assassin had been clever. The bomb had been cunningly concealed beneath the table where the telephone rested. Tiny wires connected that bomb to the bell box.

The first telephone call had set up an electrical circuit in the bomb when Doc had lifted the receiver. Examination of the explosive had told Doc it was of an extremely sensitive type.

The bomb was harmless, once the electrical circuit was started, until that circuit was broken, then it would explode. Operated on the principle of doors that open when a circuit is interrupted, the explosive was to go off when the receiver was lifted a second time.

A watcher undoubtedly had waited until he was sure Monk and Ham were with Doc before making the second call. Had the three been in the room then, when the receiver was lifted, they all would have died.

But the bronze man had anticipated the second call, had arranged for the telephone operator to trace the number of anyone who sought to reach him. He had waited a reasonable length of time, to give Ham and Monk a start, then exploded the bomb to deceive the listener at the other end of the wire into believing he had been successful.

The hallway was crowded with curious spectators. Doc eased through as swiftly as possible, went to the new rooms assigned to him.

Long Tom's failure to appear had been significant. The fact that the death plot had been launched without Long Tom's presence was significant also. It meant the would-be killer had known the electrical expert wasn't going to show up.

Doc made several phone calls. Washington police gave quick co-operation. It took them only a few minutes to learn that a "drunk" had been carried from the building where Les Quinan had his offices. Doc understood.

FROM a large-sized suitcase, the bronze man brought out many small bottles and tablets. These he placed in

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the equipment case he carried about his waist.

Some of the articles that had been there, he removed. Doc used that kit for emergencies. At all times it was well stocked with devices mostly of his own invention. But on occasion he varied the contents. Those times were when circumstances indicated he might be up against new and unusual situations.

Opening of the hall door into the adjoining bedroom was practically noiseless. Hinges on the door were well oiled.

Doc heard the sound but he gave no sign. Without haste he closed the suitcase and locked it.

Concealed in one hand was a small glass bulb. That bulb contained a quick-acting anaesthetic gas.

The bronze man came to his feet, acted as if he intended to depart. His hand made a quick, darting motion. There was a faint crash as the glass bulb broke in the adjoining room.

A man gave a startled yell.

Instantly, Doc flashed into the room. He caught the intruder just as the other fell.

The man was tall, dressed like an old-fashioned college professor, with dangling black coat tails. A brown derby hat topped a pale forehead. His complexion was pasty, his eyes pale and watery.

He wore no wrist watch at all, but a large, ancient timepiece was jammed into one vest pocket, attached to a heavy gold chain.

Effects of the gas lasted only a short time. The tall man recovered swiftly, blinking his eyes rapidly.

"I do not blame you for your precautions, Mr. Savage," he said plaintively, "but really I am harmless."

Doc Savage said nothing.

The other sighed. "I see that I had better explain myself," he complained.

"If you will," the bronze man agreed.

"I am Carl Zolg, a science instructor," the other said. He sat up on the bed where Doc had placed him, reached in his pocket and produced a huge-bowled pipe.

"I read of the horrible thing that happened to our soldiers. Then I learned you were investigating the case. I came here to tell you what I know.

Doc nodded slightly. "Proceed."

Carl Zolg's voice lowered. "The man behind this is Paul Payne, a fiend if there ever was one," he whispered.

"Does he have a daughter or a sister, Olivia Payne?" the bronze man asked.

Carl Zolg nodded his head rapidly. "A daughter. You have met her? You know of her already?" he questioned excitedly. "She is just as bad as he is. Why, she –"

"Tell me of Payne," the bronze man interrupted.

Carl Zolg put the big pipe in his mouth, removed it, pulled out a tin of tobacco. His fingers were trembling slightly.

"Payne is a maniac, but a scientific maniac," he blurted. "He used to come to me for aid on scientific problems. He told me he had invented a horrible death weapon. He said he didn't think the American government would use it – it was too terrible. But he intended to try and sell it elsewhere."

Zolg paused. He put the pipe back in his mouth, tamped down the tobacco. A strange glitter came to his watery eyes. "I tried to dissuade him. He cursed me. Then he disappeared. When the tragedy happened, I sought to find him. He is in the Middle West – Kansas City, or some place like that, I know. Then I thought I had better come and tell you –"

He broke off. Doc Savage rose from his chair, then sank down again.

A strange, weird display of tiny sparks swept through the room. The sparks did not burn when they touched the flesh.

The bronze man's features twisted. Zolg appeared to sag. His teeth were gripping his pipe tightly.

Doc's hands went to his throat. His face slowly changed color.

"You—you –" he gasped. Then he was still. Slowly, his big body crumpled to the floor.

Carl Zolg recovered with surprising quickness. He raced to the side of the bronze man. One hand felt for a pulse. The other pressed over Doc's lungs.

A faint grunt of satisfaction came from him. He ripped open Doc's shirt, worked swiftly.

Three minutes later he slipped from the room. The bronze man lay where he had fallen.

Zolg went away very hurriedly. He seemed to have forgotten to light his pipe.

LEON Spardoso was reading a newspaper. He wasn't displaying any particular pleasure.

STRANGE DEATH ALMOST GETS SAVAGE AIDS

Queer Light Seen by Mechanic Linked to Mystery Annihilation of Soldiers Lung Paralysis Machine Believed Used From a Distance; Country Near Panic

"They should have been killed," Spardoso growled.

The story underneath the headlines told of the accident at the airport. Several congressmen were quoted as loudly demanding immediate solution of the outrages. One said he believed it was all a plot by a foreign power to force tribute from the United States.

Spardoso's black eyes lighted somewhat when he read that statement.

"You don't know the half of it, senator," he muttered. In an adjoining column was a feature article about Doc Savage. It listed some of the cases he was known to have solved. All of such cases weren't listed, but that was

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simply because the bronze man didn't reveal his activities when it was unnecessary.

"With the famous Clark Savage, Jr., working in conjunction with Federal forces, officials are confident the murderers will be found," the article concluded.

Spardoso read that statement aloud. He gloated a little. "Wait until they learn Savage is dead, with all his aids either the same way or out of the picture," he jeered.

Then he put the newspaper down. He turned a wondering face toward Grant Holst. The bulky man's goatee was moving up and down, but the sounds he was making could hardly be called words.

"The bronze devil got away again!" he blurted at last.

"Blast-wrecked-room-but-Savage-two - aids-un-unharmd," he went on. He spoke as if he were receiving a message, but there was no other sound in the room.

"Aids-now-trailing-me. Standing-by."

"Bronze devil is right!" Spardoso snarled.

"And this deal still isn't completed," Grant Holst moaned. Perspiration appeared on his broad face. Then his expression cleared somewhat. "But even if Savage gets an idea what this is all about, it still won't do him any good."

The telephone rang. Spardoso looked startled. He hesitated for a moment before he answered.

A voice rattled swiftly in his ear, Spardoso started to ask a question. The receiver clicked at the other end of the line.

Definite worry brought two creases in the tall man's face. "Something's screwy," he croaked. "That was a call from a man who said he was at the hotel. He said the explosion failed to kill Savage, as we know, but that the bronze devil was dead now just the same."

Grant Holst's goatee dropped. "Somebody is cutting in," he cursed.

Leon Spardoso nodded, plainly nervous. "There are plenty who would like to," he agreed. "And that call means someone knows about us. We've got to act fast. Is everything set for the next demonstration?"

"All set," Grant Holst snapped. "Then we can clean up and clear out. But there are at least two Doc Savage aids prowling around now we'd better get rid of. I'll fix that."

Once again he went to his desk, and opened a drawer. This time he kept his hand inside the drawer for quite a long period.

Monk and Ham had no idea a trap was being laid for them. In fact, they were quite well pleased with themselves.

The man in the roadster didn't seem to have the slightest inkling that he was being followed. He drove at a normal rate of speed, kept to well-traveled highways, and made no turns or twists.

The roadster led the way outside the city. It turned in toward a big house set well back from the road.

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Monk sighed happily. "I hope there's enough of them there so I can get in a couple of good swats for Johnny and Renny," he piped.

"We should go back and tell Doc what we've found out," Ham put in.

Monk nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. Then the subject was dropped. Monk was of the direct-actionist school. Ham wouldn't admit it, but he preferred that method himself.

There was a minor argument about Habeas Corpus. Monk wanted to take him along. Ham didn't. Ham finally won by pointing out that Habeas might get hurt.

The chauffeur was instructed to drive on down the road for ten miles or so, then return. "Don't rush," Monk cautioned. "And if we're not waiting for you, you wait for us. We don't know how long we'll be gone."

They got out of the car and took a circular route toward the house, keeping well concealed behind trees.

It wasn't night yet, but it was dusk, and they didn't think they'd be seen.

Finally they approached the house from the rear. No one seemed to be around at all. That emboldened them, but Ham kept a tight grip on his sword cane.

They found the back door unlocked. That didn't seem so strange, for it wasn't night. It did seem peculiar, however, if this was the headquarters of the gang they were after, that there were no guards around.

"Feel confident they're safe," Monk piped, but he felt slightly uneasy. He opened and closed his hairy fists.

Inside the house they could hear someone talking. Apparently only one person was present, the little man they had trailed. He seemed to be speaking over a telephone.

Monk growled his disgust. Even Ham appeared disappointed. They went forward more recklessly.

The little man saw them just as they entered the room where he was. He half turned, seemed paralyzed with fright.

"We want to talk to you," Ham said harshly.

Then he felt as if he had been tackled by an entire football eleven. Men streamed into the room from two doors at the side. Other men smashed into them from the rear.

A roar came from Monk. His disgusted expression changed to one of delight. His huge fists mowed a cleared space around him.

Ham tried to get his sword cane free. A heavy object came down on his hand, knocked the cane to the floor.

The air became full of swinging fists and grunting bodies. Monk was in his element. A rough-and-tumble was his kind of fight. He used his feet as well as his hands.

Men groaned and hit the floor. Ham moved around more swiftly, with the grace and speed of a fencer. His hands darted in and out, rapierlike.

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A sudden squealing came from behind them. Habeas Corpus hadn't approved of being left behind. He had wiggled out through a window of the car and trailed behind as swiftly as he could.

He entered the fight by nipping whatever portion of anatomy he saw closest. Some of the attackers preferred standing up for several days after the fight.

One of the men launched a lusty kick. It caught Habeas in the ribs. He squealed with pain.

Monk went berserk. He dived forward, abandoning his position in a corner where attackers could reach him from only one direction. The man who had kicked Habeas suddenly lost all interest in the battle.

The little man who had led the way to the house slipped behind Monk, hit him solidly over the head with a billy. Monk also lost interest. About the same time, four men ganged up on Ham.

The dapper lawyer went down fighting—but he went down. Another blow from the billy ended his part in the melee.

Chapter 8. DOC GETS A MESSAGE

THE report of Doc's demise was slightly exaggerated.

He did lay still for several minutes after Carl Zolg departed. Anyone who looked at him would have thought him dead.

But the bronze man had a strenuous course of exercises. Part of those exercises developed his lungs. He could hold his breath far beyond the normal length of time.

The queer flashes in the air had been warning enough that the strange death weapon had been launched. Johnny and Renny had discovered that even Doc's oxygen tablets were not proof against it. But as long as he did not breathe, the bronze man was safe.

He went into the adjoining room and to a window. He filled his lungs with fresh air.

After that, he inspected the equipment kit he wore. His eerie trilling sound filled the air as he identified what had been taken by Zolg.

Without haste, the bronze man went to the street and summoned a cab. He gave the driver instructions as they went along.

As Carl Zolg had bent over him, Doc had dropped a small, marble-sized object in the other's pocket.

The small marble was of metal. Inside the marble was a complicated mechanism that would have been the envy of a watchmaker. A tiny battery operated the mechanism, causing it to throw off a steady flow of spark signals.

The battery usually became exhausted after an hour, but that was long enough for the purpose for which it was intended. A small radio directional finder permitted Doc to trail whoever had the marblelike object.

The trail led to the airport. Doc stayed in the cab for several minutes, and when he left it his appearance had changed. He no longer looked like the bronze man. Rather, he was an undistinguished-appearing individual,

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and might have been taken for a clerk.

An airliner was almost ready to depart. Carl Zolg was buying a ticket. Doc had no difficulty in getting close enough to hear the conversation.

Zolg bought a ticket for Colorado.

One of the two Secret Service men who had been trailing Doc was surprised when the "clerk" approached him. His expression changed slightly as the "clerk" talked.

When the airliner left, the Secret Service man was riding in the seat behind Zolg. Zolg found the peculiar marble in his pocket soon afterward. He became frightened, thought it was a bomb. He threw it out the plane.

Doc went back to his cab. He gave the address of Les Quinan's office.

The attack on Doc at the hotel had alarmed the war secretary, even though he knew the bronze man's ability to escape traps. Four more Secret Service men were assigned to keep watch over him. These picked up the trail at Les Quinan's office. With one of the original pair still on the scene, five were now on guard.

The Secret Service men no longer made any particular effort to hide themselves. They realized Doc knew they were present. But, also, they did not advertise their presence. They slipped up, one by one, inconspicuously.

They did not see what Doc hoped to gain by another inspection of Les Quinan's office, since the ground there had been gone over thoroughly, but they had a wholesome respect for the bronze man's ability.

The Secret Service men entered the building, but did not follow Doc to the floor where Quinan's offices were located.

Even had they done so, they probably would have missed what Doc saw.

The bronze man donned a pair of glasses. The lenses were colored. As he reached the corridor he slowed, almost as if he were looking for something.

Then he nodded.

Nothing could be seen with the naked eye, but through the glasses letters sprang into view at one end of the hall. The letters had been left there by Long Tom as he scribbled with the toe of his shoe when he had seen capture was inevitable.

All Doc's aids were similarly equipped. A chemical in the shoe polish they used left marks that could be seen through the colored lens.

The letters read: "kd-uk." The code was a simple one of contraction, used when time was short. Translated, the letters meant simply: "kidnaped, unknown," which made it easy to figure out Long Tom was explaining he had been kidnaped by men unknown to him.

The bronze man paused only briefly. Then he went on into the office. This time he inspected the private quarters the lawyer had occupied.

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A big blotter was still on top of the desk. From a nearby washstand, Doc took a can of talcum powder. He dusted this powder across the top of the blotter carefully, until a thin layer completely covered it. Then he turned on an electric fan. The fan blew the powder away.

But the powder stuck in tiny fragments wherever the surface of the blotter had been broken.

When Les Quinan had been killed, he had been working at his desk, making long lines of letters. One line of letters in particular stood out. They were:

QPWDZ BRHYZ BBOPD WICGH WGBUF QXPUM WBEIE CHAUK EBRQS LTGJP RINDU LYLMF
OETYM FINDP BDTCZ VPTQD BMSSS

Under them came the words: "Death today."

Doc had found the message that had resulted in Les Quinan's death.

There were other letters also. It was simple to see that Quinan had tried both "death" and "today" as the key words for the cipher.

The bronze man nodded without speaking. The work made it apparent that Quinan had been an expert on ciphers. The type used was known as the most complicated form of the Beauford cipher – of the scrambled alphabet type, easy to decode when the key word was known, but otherwise one that would take hours.

In this case, Quinan had discovered the key word was "Death." In decoding it, he had written the word "death" first, then placed the remaining letters of the alphabet after it. Then a rectangle of twenty-six alphabets had been constructed, by sliding one letter at a time.

The result had been to give a code key by reading:

DEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZ EATHBCFGIJXLMNOPQRSUVWXYZD
ATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDE THBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEA
HBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEAT BCFGIJJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATH
CFGIJJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHB FGIJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBC
GIJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCF IJKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFG
JKLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGI KLMNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJ
LMNOPQRSUYWXYZDEATHBCFGIJK MNOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKL
NOPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLM OPQRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMN
PQRSUYWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNO QRSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOP
RSUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQ SUVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQR
UVWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRS VWXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSU
WXYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUV XYZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUVW
YZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNOPQRSUVWX ZDEATHBCFGIJKLMNQPQRSUVWXY

The second word "Today" had been used as the key for the message. The next step was easy. The word "Today" was written over and over above the message itself, giving:

TODAY TODAY TODAY TODAY QPWCZ BRHYZ BBOPD WICGH TODAY TODAY TODAY
TODAY WGBUF QXPUM WBBIE CHAUK

TODAY TODAY TODAY TODAY EBRQS LTGJP RINDU LYLMF

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TODAY TODAY TODAY TODAY OETYM FINDP BDTCZ VPTQD

TODAY BMSSS

Finding the letter "T" in the top row of the code alphabet, he ran down that column until he came to the letter "Q." Then he glanced at the outside letter of that row. It was an "N." Finding "O" on the top row, he ran down to "P," then again looked at the outside letter. This time it was an "E." Swiftly he worked. The message Quinan had read, just before he died, had been:

"Newde athwe apona succe ssbri ngpro spect toarm yprov inggr oundw iliki litwo hundr edthe reto day."

Or, with the words divided properly: "New death weapon a success bring prospect to army proving ground will kill two hundred there today."

And two hundred had been killed.

HAD Les Quinan been able to pass that message on, the tragedy might have been prevented. He had not been able to do so.

Finding it now had only one advantage – it gave a clue to the type of cipher being used by the criminals in transmitting messages. But even that was no great help. The chief asset of the complicated Beauford cipher is that the key word can be changed for each message, and if such changes are by pre-arrangement, anyone picking up the code would face a difficult and time-taking job of translation.

The message made one other thing definitely clear, even had there been any doubt remaining. The death of the two hundred soldiers had been no accident – it had been murder.

Doc left the private office, returned to the room where Long Tom had been working.

The object he removed there had been cunningly concealed. Long Tom had done his work well.

In the dusk, it was not difficult to transform the private office into a pitch-dark room. The bronze man worked swiftly and efficiently at the washbasin there.

When he turned on the light, he held a long roll of developed motion-picture film. This had been in the camera Long Tom had concealed in the adjoining room.

Doc's eerie trill sounded faintly as he examined that film under the light

Then pistol shots blasted out below.

Doc's entrance to the office building had been spotted by the two men across the street. They hadn't noticed the Secret Service men.

The gunmen who had been dispatched to take care of Doc ran into the government men.

Three of the killers, slipping in at the back of the building, had been halfway up the stairs when they had been seen. They answered a command to halt with bullets.

One of the Secret Service men went down.

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The others hunted points of concealment and opened up. The roar of gunfire was very loud.

The three men on the stairs were mowed down almost at once. The Secret Service men were winning the fight handily when other killers arrived.

One of these opened up with a Tommy gun. The Secret Service men were forced back.

Four killers raced up the stairs, while the man with the Tommy gun acted to protect them.

Then Doc appeared.

The bronze man held a peculiar-shaped pistol in his hand. In appearance it was oversized, with a drum on top.

Ordinarily, Doc did not use weapons, depending upon his own skill and muscular prowess to get him out of any difficulty. In the present case, lives other than his own were involved. He could not afford to take chances, when chances might cost the life of a Secret Service man.

There was a bull-fiddle roar as the peculiar-shaped weapon went into action.

The gunmen went down as if their legs had been mowed from under them. The man with the Tommy gun fell halfway down the stairs. He was a big man wearing a long coat and a large-sized wrist watch. He had a brutal face and a thick neck. That neck was broken. He was dead when Secret Service men reached him.

THE surviving Federal men looked at Doc with some awe. They had heard of his fighting ability, but to mow down five killers was more than they had expected.

"And we was supposed to be guarding you!" one of them breathed.

Doc put away his weapon. He brought out a hypodermic, filled it with a dark-colored liquid.

"Give those I shot a dose of this," he suggested. "They will recover at once. Perhaps they know who sent them."

Jaws dropped. The Secret Service men had supposed the killers dead.

Doc did not explain, but the bullets he had been using were of his own invention, and were known as mercy bullets. They were light, and would penetrate only a short distance under the skin, not far enough to cause serious injury. But they were loaded with a sleep-inducing drug that brought unconsciousness.

"If these babies know anything, they'll talk," one of the officers grunted. He was the one who had been with Doc from the first.

The faces of the four surviving Federal men were hard. They had seen one of their own slain, and besides, the killers might be linked with those responsible for the mass murder.

The first to revive was known to the Secret Service men as Blinky. He had a lengthy criminal record, including two trials for murder.

Blinky's face was pale enough to begin with. It became even paler as he saw Doc Savage.

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"I ... I didn't know you was the guy we was supposed to kill," he stammered.

"Who hired you?" one of his questioners rapped.

Blinky pointed a trembling finger at the man who had been firing the Tommy gun.

"Dutch, there," he muttered.

The officer turned the body over. "Never saw him before," he snapped.

Others of the gunmen knew no more as they also returned to consciousness and were questioned.

"Well, Mr. Savage, what do we do now?" a Secret Service man asked.

Then he looked startled. Others did the same. The bronze man had vanished.

The guard who had first been with Doc looked at the body of the machine-gunner, and grunted slightly.

The oversized wrist watch was gone from the dead man's arm. The slain gunman's coat also was gone.

A PATROLMAN was at the front door of the building, holding back the crowd of curious spectators drawn by the sound of the shooting. Police sirens and ambulance bells sounded in the street.

The patrolman did not remember having seen Doc Savage. In fact, he was sure no one had left the building by that entrance since he had arrived.

Doc hadn't. He had gone out the rear way. And he had changed appearance again. His neck appeared to have thickened. His features had been transformed until they looked brutal. He wore the coat from the dead machine-gunner. And on his wrist was the oversized watch.

Carefully, he circled the block. He appeared to know exactly where he was going.

There was no mystery about that. It had been apparent from the first, even before Doc found the decoded cipher, that Quinan must have seen something that had caused his death.

At Doc's instructions, Long Tom had installed movie machines in the office, trained on the building opposite. Those machines, electrically operated, would record anything they saw. The sensitive film would pick up things that even the eye would miss.

And the film had. A message had been there. It had been the message sent by Long Tom after he had found himself in the all-metal room.

The pencil Long Tom had used was a delicate type of flashlight, transmitting short, sharp flashes.

Long Tom also had reasoned correctly. And the message he had sent had been received by Doc.

Chapter 9. TRAPPED

KNOWING that Long Tom was a prisoner in the building across the street, Doc Savage could have called for police aid before going to the rescue.

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That was not his way. And in this instance it seemed apparent that men who thought nothing of killing two hundred soldiers would not hesitate in the least over wiping out one man, if danger threatened.

Attention was centered in the street in front of the building. No one saw the shadow that drifted up to the structure in the rear.

The building was of the modern type, with inclosed fire escape, difficult to reach. That did not seem to bother the bronze man.

Steel-strong fingers caught into small niches. He went up the side of the building as easily as a human fly. At the fifth floor he paused briefly, then continued upward.

Windows at the fifth floor were of the frosted type. It was impossible to see through them.

A lone man was on the roof. He was smoking, unaware of any danger. The cigarette made him easy to spot.

He had no inkling he was not alone until a dark figure materialized beside him. He gave an inarticulate grunt, reached for a gun.

Strong fingers took the gun from him. The next instant a hand had caught him in the back of the neck. Pressure was exerted on nerves there.

The man became rigid. He was conscious, but unable to move.

Doc Savage spoke briefly and swiftly. The man answered dully, without conscious thought.

As a physician and surgeon, the bronze man knew just where to press to put his victim into a state of semicoma. And he had discovered one certain nerve that enabled him to extract information as easily as if the other were under the influence of truth serum.

Most of the man's replies were negative.

Doc tightened his grip. The man slumped down, unconscious.

Cautiously, the bronze man started his descent, inside the building. The roof guard had known little. But one thing he had insisted upon.

"Nobody can get away from the fifth floor once he gets on it," he had said. "And them that ain't liked ain't seen no more."

The fifth floor did not look dangerous. The only unusual feature about it was that only one office appeared occupied. That stretched across the hall at the front of the building. No names appeared on doors along either side of the corridor.

A strange figure drifted down the hallway. It was dressed in a long coat and tattered trousers. A big hat covered the head. Arms hung slackly at the sides.

The figure made no noise, despite its rather large size. There was a good reason for that.

The feet were at least a foot off the floor.

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HAD anyone seen the figure, he would have believed he was seeing a trick movie shot. There was apparently nothing to support it, nor was it touching either the walls on either side or the ceiling above.

Seemingly, it defied the laws of gravity. The figure was almost to the doorway at the end of the hall when a voice issued from it:

"Long Tom? Long Tom?"

The voice was not loud, but it had a peculiar carrying quality. The call echoed in the silent corridor.

The door at the end of the hallway remained shut. But a hand appeared.

The hand came out a small hole high in the wall, and behind the floating figure. There was a gun in the hand. A silencer was on the barrel.

There was an angry spat as the gun spoke. A moan came from the floating figure. It doubled up, as if tired. Then it fell to the floor.

The hand disappeared. Seconds went by. The figure on the floor did not stir, but nevertheless it began to move. The entire floor of the corridor was moving with it.

Noiselessly, the figure was carried toward the doorway at the end of the hallway. That door opened an inch, then it was yanked wide. The light inside the room had been turned out.

Leon Spardoso peered around the edge. His eyes were on the figure being brought toward him by the moving floor.

Then he yelled. "It's a trick! That isn't a man!" he bellowed. Fright was in his voice.

"Of course it is not a man. Here I am behind you," came a voice.

Spardoso whirled. There was a puff of smoke and a burst of flame at the far side of the room. An eerie figure seemed to materialize from that smoke and fire.

Grant Holst had been standing at one side, far away from the open door. He screamed. The gun in his hand came up, spoke rapidly.

Neither Spardoso nor Holst was superstitious. But the ghostly shape that had appeared in the room with them was enough to shake even strong nerves. It smacked too much of witchcraft.

But Spardoso was paralyzed for only an instant.

"It's another trick!" he shouted.

Even as he yelled, there was another burst of smoke and fire in the room. A second eerie figure appeared.

A bell sounded loudly, with steady, continuous ring. The fright disappeared from Holst's face. Spardoso spun, grabbing for the door.

A tall form was racing down the hallway toward him. Dim light flashed on bronzed skin.

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A gun leaped to Leon Spardoso's hand. Blam!

Spardoso was a good shot. He knew he could not miss at that distance. He heard a solid smack, and knew he had not missed – but the bronzed figure did not even pause. The mercy pistol in Doc Savage's hand came up.

Spardoso's foot jammed on a button on the floor. A steel screen dropped from the ceiling, just outside the door. Without an instant's pause, the tall black-eyed man leaped to a row of buttons on the nearby desk, pressed one.

From outside came a solid thud as a second steel screen fell into place.

The eerie figures in the room already were fading, drifting away in smoke. At the foot of the first one to appear, Holst found a thin wire.

His short goatee bobbed disgustedly. "Almost caught by a magician's trick," he snorted.

Leon Spardoso nodded, but his hard eyes held reluctant admiration.

"He's good at that. First an inflater dummy to trick us, evidently suspecting the hallway was wired to an alarm bell."

"Yeah, and then a Greek fire mixture," Holst barked.

Finding of the thin wire made the explanation simple. Small, torpedolike objects had been hurled into the room from the opposite end of the corridor. They had burst into smoke and flame when they struck, creating the impression of ghostly figures.

The wire explained the voice that apparently had issued from one of the figures. Not even as expert a ventriloquist as Doc Savage could throw his voice that far, but his voice could travel over the wire, through a tiny microphone, and issue from an equally small speaking unit at the other end.

Spardoso and Holst wasted no time. They opened another door, climbed two steps. They were in a narrow passageway, paralleling the corridor.

Narrow slits along the top, near the ceiling, permitted them to look into the hallway.

The second steel screen that had been dropped should have been behind the plugging figure of Doc Savage, cutting off his retreat.

"He's trapped," Spardoso croaked, "but shoot for his head. I fired for his body without effect. He must be wearing that bullet-proof underwear we've heard about."

Holst muttered assent. Cautiously they pulled themselves up, glanced through the narrow slits.

A curse burst from Spardoso. The hallway was vacant.

Doc Savage had not expected to gain the room at the end of the hallway. The guard he had questioned had been able to tell him of a few of the precautions taken to protect that office.

He had expected to create sufficient diversion to permit him to force entrance on the side of the corridor from which Long Tom's plea for help had come.

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In that he had succeeded.

The instant the first steel screen had dropped, he had reversed his direction, plunged backward, getting clear of the second door. Noise of the ringing alarm bell covered the noise he made as he had forced an entrance toward where he believed Long Tom was held.

Then he paused.

Another corridor lay on this side of the hallway also. It was a corridor entirely of steel.

Even as he paused, there came clicking sounds. His ruse had been discovered. A steel screen blocked the entrance through which he had come. Other steel doors closed and locked automatically into the rooms that lined the strange passageway.

Doc Savage was trapped!

The bronze man had known when he left the hotel that Long Tom undoubtedly had been kidnaped. He had expected to find him well guarded, and had acted accordingly.

It was for this reason that he had changed the contents of his emergency kit. But he had not foreseen that he might encounter quite such a difficult job as he now faced.

For once he was puzzled. To escape, even alone, would take time. To find Long Tom and get out with him would require more time.

And it was certain that the killers would seek to wipe out both Long Tom and himself as soon as possible.

Doc's hand darted to his equipment belt. His fingers grabbed several of the smoke bombs he had cached there.

The steel corridor was filled with dense, rolling smoke. Snipers from the outside would find him a difficult target.

A moment later and that seemed doubtful also. There had been a steady current of air, whipped in through vents in the ceiling by powerful fans. Now that changed. The fans had been reversed. The smoke shot out.

Doc's gold-flecked eyes flashed slightly. It would be possible to continue exploding smoke bombs, but sooner or later the supply of those bombs would be exhausted.

His powerful, steel-strong legs bent slightly at the knees, he hurled himself upward.

The leap was one that would have made a champion high jumper proud. Doc's fingers caught in the vent above him. He drew himself up, held there with one hand.

With the other, he extracted the small microphone he had used in making the "ghost" speak. He adjusted the microphone so that it would magnify sound.

Spardoso and Holst had been momentarily disconcerted. They weren't now. Doc Savage, they felt, was in a place where even he couldn't escape. They could kill him at their leisure.

Then their faces paled, tear drops damped their faces.

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Across the street, the curious throng attracted by the shooting there looked up in amazement. Secret Service men listened with slack jaws.

A voice was roaring from some place high up on the side of the building. Curiously, that voice seemed to issue from the identical spot from which black smoke was pouring. And the voice was speaking to the Secret Service men.

"This is Doc Savage," came the unmistakable tones of the bronze man. "Two desperate criminals will soon seek to flee from this building. Guard all entrances. Do not let them escape. But under no circumstances permit anyone to enter the building!"

It took an instant for the full meaning of those words to penetrate. Then Federal men and police rushed forward. The crowd hung back for a moment, then attempted to follow. They did not succeed.

The Federal men knew who Doc was after, knew he must mean those responsible for the mass murderers had been cornered. They passed the word on to the police. The latter drove the crowd back. It was no time to take chances on further heavy loss of life.

Long Tom heard Doc's voice. He didn't even change expression. He had expected Doc to come for him. And he divined the purpose of the bronze man's call.

Doc was merely acting to prevent, if he could, the escape of the two arch-killers, and at the same time seeking a diversion to give him time to get to Long Tom.

The plan worked, but not exactly as expected.

Spardoso and Holst were no fools. If they remained, they might find escape cut off, despite certain precautions they had taken.

They wasted neither time nor words. Certain records and supplies were dropped into suitcases. These they carried as they raced toward the rear of the building.

There was a small, private elevator there. It dropped them arrow-swift to the ground floor. A secret passageway carried them through to the basement of an adjoining structure.

They paused there for a moment. Grant Holst's features were far from good-natured by now. They glowered fanatically.

"At least we know not even Doc Savage can get out of this," he gritted.

He reached up, caught hold of a switch, and pushed that switch home.

The building rocked and shook as if in the grip of a terrific earthquake. A tremendous explosion rent the air. A moment later there was a gigantic billow of flame. It originated on the fifth floor and appeared to turn the building into a seething furnace almost at once.

Chapter 10. A BLAZING TOMB

MONK'S first impression was that he was in a hospital. Cool, capable hands placed a cold rag to his aching head. Then he decided he must be wrong. Heaven undoubtedly had been his destination. His tiny eyes

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flickered open and closed again almost instantly.

Moist, smooth lips had touched his face. And standing beside him was as beautiful a girl as he had ever seen. She was dressed entirely in gray.

Monk held his eyes closed tightly. Again came the touch of cool lips.

"Yeah, it must be heaven," he muttered. One big paw shot out suddenly, caught the slender wrist of the girl beside him.

"Daggonit, I'm willing to co-operate!" he complained. "Kiss me again.

A burst of uproarious mirth filled his ears. His eyes shot open, his features twisted indignantly.

"Ham, sitting up weakly in a nearby chair, was doubled over, laughing so hard tears were streaming from his eyes.

"He-thought-you-were-kissing-him," Ham said to the girl. His voice was strangled.

The hairy chemist sat up shakily and looked around. Then crimson flooded his homely features. He dropped the girl's hand.

A contented squeal came from Habeas Corpus. The pig was on the sofa beside the chemist. It had been Habeas' soft snout Monk had felt nuzzling his cheek.

"And you thought you'd made a conquest!" Ham howled. "As if any girl would look at you, conscious or unconscious!" A faint smile flashed across the girl's face. The smile wiped away for an instant the worry that had been there.

"Don't pay any attention to him," she consoled Monk. "I think you are rather cute."

"Cute!" Ham really did strangle. The idea of homely, hairy Monk being called cute was too much.

Monk scowled. "You straw-filled clothing dummy!" he yelled. "You jealous –"

He broke off as an idea hit him. He looked at the girl more closely, and his eyes got even smaller.

"Ain't you the one Doc found prowling around that lawyer's office?" he asked. "What were you doin' there, and why did you have your thugs slug us out here?"

Ham stopped laughing. Worry returned to the girl's face. She seemed about to speak, then changed her mind and put her hand on Monk's forehead.

"You've had quite a shock," she said quietly. "Wait a few minutes, and then I'll explain."

She took the cold cloth from his head and started out of the room.

"One more application of this and you will be all right," she said.

Ten minutes passed before Monk and Ham decided they had been tricked. Their heads still weren't working very fast.

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A thorough search of the house failed to disclose any trace of the girl.

FROM letters and other papers it wasn't hard to learn that the house was the property of Paul Payne.

"Doc said the girl called herself Olivia Payne," Ham reminded.

Monk grunted. He was still mad.

There was a small, excellently equipped laboratory on the second floor. The hairy chemist's eyes were puzzled as he studied some of the objects there.

"Daggonit! It looks like this Payne may be the main guy we want!" he piped.

Ham nodded grimly. It did look that way. Neither could understand why they had been knocked out, then left in the house.

They didn't try to puzzle it out for very long. They got Habeas and went back to the highway. Monk's hired chauffeur was dozing in the front seat of the big car.

They got in and started back to town.

"Sure was a good-looker you guys was callin' on," the driver volunteered. "I saw her as she came out and drove away."

Monk said words under his breath.

"Saw a flock of guys come out of there earlier. Tough mugs," the driver added.

Monk said some more words. Ham grinned. "They were my friend's rivals," Ham said solemnly. Monk's words became louder and more bitter.

THEY saw flames shooting up while they were still some distance from the heart of the city. Fire engines were making the streets howl.

Monk became very silent. Ham lost his smile. Closer, they could tell now the scene of all the activity was near Les Quinan's office.

They had to leave the car and Habeas several blocks away. Even then they had difficulty getting through police lines.

The streets were filled with a curious, excited crowd. It was the biggest fire Washington had seen in some time. And the explosion that had preceded it had created considerable mystery.

The building was doomed. Firemen weren't even making an effort to save it. That was useless. They were concentrating streams of water on adjacent property. It was going to take all their skill to keep the entire block from being destroyed.

All kinds of rumors were heard.

Monk and Ham finally located a Secret Service man. He told them as much as he knew.

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"If it hadn't been night, a great many lives would have been lost," he said. "As it was, Doc Savage's warning was heeded, and we kept the crowd back, and except for a few getting hit by falling bricks, no one was hurt."

"And the men Doc told you to watch for?" Ham demanded grimly.

The Secret Service man shook his head. "We didn't get them," he snapped. "I only hope the bloody murderers are roasting in their own hell."

"What about Doc?" Monk demanded anxiously.

The Secret Service man didn't seem to want to talk. He swallowed hard and turned away as if he hadn't heard.

"If he shouted a warning, he must have known what was going to happen," Ham put in loyally. "And if he did that, then he'd get out –"

Monk did not seem to hear. One big paw shot out, caught the Secret Service man by the shoulder, spinning him about.

"Well?" he rapped.

"I ... I'm afraid he's in there!" the Secret Service man gulped. "No one could escape that inferno!"

Spardoso and Holst watched the flames with satisfaction. They had not even bothered to disguise themselves.

A few in the crowd might have known who had occupied the fifth floor of the burning building, but that was doubtful, and the very size of the milling throng was protection enough.

"Wait until those thermite bombs go off," Holst gloated. "Then there really will be a hot fire."

"Hot enough to make even that bronze devil wish he had stayed out of our affairs," Spardoso snarled.

The two saw Monk and Ham as they forced their way through the fire lines. They stood not two dozen feet away – as Doc's aids talked with the Secret Service man.

Holst smirked and whispered: "Those dumbbells will think just what we wanted them to think – that we burned up, too."

"Neither of them looks very bright," Spardoso agreed.

Heat from the burning building reached even to where they were standing. Spardoso took out a handkerchief and mopped perspiration from his brow.

Monk turned around just then. The hairy chemist's features were drawn back into such a ferocious grimace that Spardoso took a step backward in spite of himself.

Monk's eyes swept over him. Then his piggish orbs concentrated on Spardoso's exposed wrist. He saw the unusually large watch strapped there.

Doc had spoken of large wrist watches.

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The homely chemist went into action. A shrill bellow of rage came from him. He gave the impression of jumping up and down like an angry ape, even as his powerful legs shot him forward.

Monk didn't know who Spardoso was, but he did want to ask some questions.

Ham whirled. The dapper lawyer didn't hesitate. He might bicker continuously with Monk when there was nothing going on, but when there was trouble, he acted first and bickered later.

He took out after the chemist.

Spardoso didn't know what he had done that was wrong. He didn't wait around to find out. He went away from there. Holst went with him.

The two gained the crowd a dozen paces in front of Monk and Ham. Had Doc's aids called for help, the result might have been different. They didn't.

But Spardoso did.

"Help! Murder!" he bellowed. Holst joined in.

The crowd opened to let them through. Monk and Ham did look like desperate characters. The marks from their previous fight were still on them, and their clothing had been torn.

A policeman jumped toward Monk. The chemist knocked the cop down. That was a tactical error.

The crowd, neutral until then, jumped on Monk and Ham.

It took some time for the Secret Service man who had ran after them to rally enough police to stage a rescue and explain.

By then, Spardoso and Holst were far away. They had reached the car where they had stored their suitcases. No one, apparently, had seen them go.

Just as they drove away, there was a terrific noise. Firemen on nearby buildings were almost swept from their perches by concussion.

The floors in the doomed structure had let go, plunging everything inside through to a fiery tomb in the cellar.

Chapter 11. SNOW MEN

G-MEN are trained to keep close mouths. Police are sometimes more talkative. One of those who had been present when Doc shouted his warning, and who had been told by the Federals who the "desperate criminals" must be, had a newspaperman friend.

The fire was still raging furiously when the first extras hit the street.

The press screamed that the arch-criminals who had caused the mass murder of the soldiers were in Washington! They had been almost in the hands of Federal officers. Then they had set off an explosion and a fire.

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The newspapers took it for granted that the crooks must have escaped. In this, they were right, although they couldn't have been sure.

Newspaper editorial writers almost ran out of adjectives howling for action. Frightened congressmen were right behind them. It wasn't known that Doc Savage was believed to have perished in the blaze. Ham was responsible for that. He convinced the press that if Doc had known what was coming – as he must have, said Ham – the bronze man would have been prepared to escape.

What Ham didn't add was that he and Monk had been unable to locate either Doc or Long Tom. There was no doubt in their minds but that the two must have been together. There was the chance, of course, that the two were on the trail of the crooks. In that case, Doc would have left a message some place. They went looking for that message.

Government and military men had worries of their own. It was certain that there was a terrible, mysterious death weapon in existence. Until the principle of that death weapon could be learned, it was impossible to work on a defense against it. Gas masks had been proved worthless. There didn't seem anything else to try.

Military men were worried, also, because they did not know who controlled the death weapon. With such a menace existing, an attack might be launched on the country at any time.

The senator who had expressed the opinion that there might be a plot to extort billions in gold from the country had been laughed at to start with. He wasn't now. Even high government officials concurred privately that the senator might be correct.

SECRET SERVICE men swiftly uncovered the identity of the two men who had occupied the fifth floor of the burning building. The disclosure came as a shock, even to them.

For Spardoso and Holst were well known to Washington. They wrote a column of capital gossip that appeared in more than one hundred newspapers throughout the country. The column also appeared in leading newspapers of the various capitals of the world.

Of the past history of the pair, little could be learned. They had appeared with plenty of money – unusual for newspapermen – and had soon established themselves.

Their column had been a success because of its many inside facts. Undoubtedly, they had greased many palms among minor employees in various departments to get those facts.

They had explained the taking of an entire floor for their offices by saying they wished room to entertain. Rival columnists had been skeptical, but that was all.

Secret Service men agreed that for a couple of spies, if spies they were, no better front could have been devised.

A widespread search was launched for the missing pair. Within an hour their descriptions had been wired to every large city in the nation. A corps of men manned telephones contacting small towns in every nearby State.

Every possible exit from Washington was watched by Federal men. This guard, however, was not set until several hours after the fire started.

And it was about then that Monk and Ham began to get really worried.

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No trace of Long Tom or Doc could be found!

Doc had vanished before. On occasion he had been missing for days. But somehow, Monk and Ham thought that this time was different.

Usually, even when he left hurriedly, he managed to leave some clue behind him.

This time, there seemed no logical reason why such a clue should not have been left. If he and Long Tom had fled the burning building in pursuit of Spardoso and Holst, one or the other could have telephoned the hotel and left a message.

No such message was awaiting them.

"He could, it seems to me, at least send us word on the micro-radio," Monk frowned.

They got receiving and transmitting equipment similar to the small, compact outfit that the bronze man usually had with him, but repeated calls brought no answer.

Sometimes solid steel walls would interfere so with the weak waves that they could not be heard. But neither Ham nor Monk wanted to think of that.

"If they did get him – " Monk raged.

" – we'll get them," Ham finished for him, more quietly. "Doc would want us to do so in any case," the lawyer added, "not out of revenge, but because they are a menace to the country and must be stopped."

The hairy chemist nodded. They went back to the burning ruins of the building.

They had to be sure, and they couldn't be sure until the fire went out and the ruins could be searched for the remains of bodies.

Hours passed. It was just noon when firemen noticed the first strange happening in the smoldering embers.

WATER had been poured continuously on the smoking debris during the night.

By daybreak, the building was practically demolished; only the brick walls and a mass of wreckage in the basement remained. Occasional flame flickered from this wreckage.

The water caused dense clouds of steam to rise. After a while these clouds became thinner. Then firemen could see a number of battered, squarelike objects that looked like huge metal safes.

It was on one of these metal objects that attention centered. The first thing to attract notice was the sudden appearance of flame shooting up through the metal. Tired firemen turned the full force of one hose on the flame.

The water had no effect at all.

The fire appeared to be dancing about. Then it could be seen that it was cutting a pattern, about like that of a huge porthole.

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When that was discovered, the hose was turned in a different direction. It didn't seem possible, but the flame acted as if it were being guided by human agency.

After a time the flame disappeared. For quite a while then, nothing occurred at all.

Monk and Ham were more than excited. They were dancing about wildly. They wanted to dive into the wreckage and investigate. Firemen held them back. Even wearing asbestos suits, the heat was still too great for human flesh to stand.

Secret Service men pointed that fact out. They didn't want Doc's aids to be getting their hopes too high.

Then the flame appeared again for a minute or so. When it vanished, it could be seen that a hole now was completely cut through the metal wall.

A minute later a snow man appeared!

At least, he looked like a snow man. His body appeared covered with snow and ice. Steam poured out on all sides of him. The snow man clawed at his face, and there was more steam. Then he walked uncertainly in the direction of the street.

A second snow figure came into view. This one was larger than the first, and moved with surer steps.

A cheer went up from the firemen. Streams of water beat a path through the smoldering embers for the two figures to follow.

They reached the street and were almost overwhelmed by Monk and Ham.

The first figure to appear worked with fastenings about his neck, and pulled a strange hood from off his head. Long Tom's sallow-appearing face came into view.

His teeth were chattering.

"H-hurry u-up an' g-get me-me outta t-this," he stammered. "I-I'm freezin' to d-death."

The second man also removed the hood from his head, stepped out of a sheathlike garment that was frosted and caked with real ice.

"A rather disagreeable experience," said Doc Savage.

LONG TOM actually received treatment for frostbite, where Monk and Ham had expected to find him roasted.

Doc Savage's more robust constitution had brought him through without ill effect of any kind.

It was from Long Tom that Monk learned what had happened.

"Doc knew the only way they could get us was by fire, and he had spotted the thermite bombs they had hidden up there," the electrician explained.

"Dec already had on one of these suits when the fire came, and managed to incase the thermite bombs in another one, so they wouldn't go off.

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"But it took him some time, using the fire from one of the bombs, to get into the room where I was. He decided we had better stay there. No ordinary fire could reach us there, and with these suits on we were safe enough.

"We got jolted around a lot when the floors let go, but because the metal room was so bulky, it didn't go down all at once, and the fall wasn't enough to hurt.

"Then all we had to do was wait until the fire burned out over us and get out."

Secret Service men were examining the suits worn by Long Tom and Doc.

Ice and frost had disappeared from the suits now. It seemed impossible, even yet, that those suits could have protected the two men from the terrific heat to which they had been exposed.

Doc did not explain, although a skilled chemist would have understood, if he could have made the proper tests.

The suits really were in two layers, airproof, of a transparent asbestos composition. Between the two layers was an improved type of the ammonia solution used in refrigeration systems which depend upon heat to produce ice.

Under influence of strong heat, the solution circulated constantly between the two layers of the suit, passing through numerous small, almost invisible coils, that acted as condensers.

The effect had been to incase Long Tom and Doc in portable refrigerators. Oxygen tablets had provided air for them during their long stay.

Doc's apparent feat of magic in reality had been only the practical application of well-known scientific principles.

THERE was one witness to the reappearance of Long Tom and Doc who did not believe his eyes. He didn't want to believe what he saw.

He was a very small, very thin man. Any of Doc's aids would have recognized him had they seen him. He remained out of sight.

"Our opponents know that we escaped alive," Doc said quietly.

"But how could they?" Monk blurted. "Daggonit! They're not hanging around, are they?"

"They are not," Doc said.

"And how could you know they have learned you're alive?" one of the Secret Service men said.

Doc didn't seem to hear.

"We must leave here at once," he said crisply. "If we do not, I am afraid a new tragedy will occur."

Doc might have been a prophet. Actually, however, he had seen the expression on the face of a man rushing toward them. It was another of the Secret Service men.

"Thank heavens, you're alive!" the G-man gasped. "We've got to act, and act at once."

Doc looked at him. He said nothing.

"There's to be another massacre!" the other blurted. His features were pale. "An undercover man phoned in the tip. He did not know where the disaster would strike, but said his source was authentic. We tried to check – and we found the undercover man slain."

The G-man's voice rose. "We've got to do something! We must! Or hundreds more may die!"

Chapter 12. DEATH STRIKES AGAIN

ALL eyes were turned on Doc. The bronze man's features were emotionless, but his mouth was tighter than usual.

"We must trace Spardoso and Holst," he said quietly. "Have you checked all airports?"

"Of course!"

"Then ask regarding a private transport plane that took off late last night containing five men, with one known as Bird as pilot," Doc rapped. "Meet us at our hotel."

The Secret Service men looked startled, but they hastened to obey.

Doc and his aids went to their rooms. The bronze man had equipment there that he had to get. Again he changed the contents of the kit he wore around his body.

Monk and Ham told him swiftly of their adventure. "Payne must be involved in this some place," Monk argued.

"I imagine you will find his daughter also has left the city. Did you check on that?" Doc asked.

The pair looked abashed. They started to make telephone calls.

"A girl answering the description of Olivia Payne departed on an airliner early last evening, headed West," Ham reported after a time.

Doc nodded, as if that was what he had expected.

Two Secret Service men rushed in. "You were right!" the leader snapped excitedly. "Such a plane did take off last night. It cleared for Florida."

"Any report from the man assigned to shadow Carl Zolg?" the bronze man asked.

"Yes. He wired this morning from Chicago. Said he believed Zolg intended to head on toward the coast."

Once more the bronze man nodded.

"We got in touch with headquarters," the Federal man went on. "They are assigning an army plane to us. As soon as we can get to the field, we can take off for Florida."

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"And I'd like to be behind the machine gun if we catch them," his companion barked.

Dec said nothing.

An army plane was waiting for them. It was one of the huge, four-motored flying fortresses.

There was some argument about permitting Habeas and Chemistry to ride. That was settled when Monk and Ham flatly refused to go unless they could take their pets along.

Doc spoke to the major in command of the plane. A gasp came from the G-men when the plane headed west instead of south.

"But t—they headed for Florida – "

Dec shook his head slightly. "They altered their course after take-off," the bronze man said. "During the night they changed planes. At the present time they are on their way West."

Monk cast a long, speculative look at the oversized wrist watch Doc had on his arm.

IT was almost dark when the plane took off. A majority of the passengers were tired and fell asleep almost at once.

Doc alone appeared unwearied. The bronze man opened a suitcase filled almost entirely with bottles of chemicals and went to work.

He was busy for a long time. Members of the crew of the flying fortress watched him from time to time. They could make little of what he was doing.

The flying fortress roared on through the night at better than two hundred miles an hour. It was still dark when the giant plane landed at St. Louis to refuel.

About the same time, another plane landed. This one did not come down at a regular airport. It landed on a flat Kansas field. Emergency flares provided light.

Five men left the plane. An automobile was waiting for them. They got in and drove toward Kansas City. Two of the men were Spardoso and Holst.

The driver of the car spoke briefly.

"All arrangements are made," he said.

Spardoso grunted with satisfaction.

Kansas City seemed the center of interest of a number of other men, also.

These men did not arrive in a crowd. They came singly and apparently did not know each other. They had only one thing in common. All were natives of other countries.

The war lords of Europe had not been idle. Certain information had been obtained. The various military poups would have been surprised to know that each had learned the same thing.

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Secret orders had been dispatched to representatives in the United States. Those orders were being obeyed.

It was because a part of one of those messages had been learned by the Washington undercover man that there was any warning at all. It had been his fate not to learn the full message at once, and to pay with his life when he sought further information.

THE flying fortress was refueled as rapidly as possible. Soldiers stood on guard. They were unaware the plane was being watched by others as well.

The government intended to take no chances. Every possible precaution was being taken to safeguard Dec Savage and his men.

The flying fortress itself, it was felt, was insurance enough against any attack in the air. Heavily armed, speedier than most pursuit ships, military men believed there was only one way of destroying such a plane – and that was by another plane smashing into it.

There was no reason to expect such an attack in this case.

The sky was murky when the giant ship took off. It had gone barely a score of miles, was still gaining altitude, when the attack came.

It was an attack for which no defense had been perfected.

The pilots were unsuspecting. Even when they first heard the sounds of two other ships they were not alarmed.

Then the other two planes came into view. They appeared suddenly from behind cloud banks. Together, as if operated by one control, they dived downward. Their course would take them directly ahead and on either side of the flying fortress.

It wasn't until they were directly upon it that the pilots of the huge army plane saw their peril. Then they discovered that an inch-thick wire cable was suspended between the two diving planes.

Two figures hurled themselves from the cockpits of the raiding planes. Parachutes blossomed above them.

At the same instant the speeding propellers on the flying fortress smashed into the swaying cable.

The two planes had been connected together in the same manner that navy "hell-divers" rope their ships together for stunts. The absence of any sign of weapon aboard the two ships had made it appear impossible that they planned harm.

Now, army machine-gunners trained their weapons on the two men under the parachutes. Their fingers tightened on triggers, only to relax. It seemed too much like murder.

There was a terrific tearing noise as the propellers tangled with the cable. The propellers were torn to pieces.

A huge fragment from one propeller tore into the pilots' compartment. One flier was beheaded. The second received only a glancing blow, but that was enough to knock him unconscious.

The huge plane, motors screaming, shot earthward.

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Doc Savage had been dozing. He came awake instantly. His trained ears told him all he needed to know.

Without loss of a second, he dived toward the pilots' compartment.

One thought flashed through the minds of all aboard the big ship. Their mission had been known.

That was apparent, and now they were being rendered helpless. None worried about death. All were concerned about what was about to happen because they were going to that death.

The mass murderers would strike unhindered. Hundreds more would perish.

Then a gasp of hope came from the plane's crew. The big ship whipped out of its spin. Doc had seized the controls.

Only for a moment did hope rise. Then that hope vanished.

The cable they had struck had been shorn by the propellers, but one end had been spun so that it was looped about the blunt nose of the huge plane.

And at the other end, still fastened to the wire and with motor roaring, diving and twisting, was one of the two attack planes.

Even Doc's skilled hands could not prevent a second spin, could not prevent them being yanked downward.

A crash seemed certain.

Monk, next to Doc probably the best pilot of the bronze man's aids, dived into the compartment. The hairy chemist asked no questions. He seemed to know instantly the only thing to do.

His long arms went out, moved the form of the unconscious flier, then he slid behind the wheel, took over from Doc.

The bronze man flashed from his seat, leaped toward the hole torn by the broken propeller. The opening was quite large enough for him to get through.

A moment more and he was outside the cabin.

In one hand Doc held a small, blunt-shaped instrument. With his other fist he held firmly to the plane. He stretched forward as far as he could.

In that instant, the darting plane at one side went into another dive, puffing down the nose of the flying fortress. Monk fought vainly at the controls. Doc hung head down, suspended by one hand.

The bronze man's motions were as calm and deliberate as if death were not a matter of seconds. The powerful wire cutters he held closed around the straining cable.

Doc's steellike muscles contracted. Tendons bulged on his arm. The hand holding the wire cutter turned white under tremendous pressure. Ting!

The parting cable made a sound like a pistol shot. Doc's body swung wildly. The hard ground was rushing toward them at better than three hundred miles an hour.

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MONK, his homely face strained, pulled hard at the controls, fairly yanked the big ship out of its dive, threw the nose upward for a moment.

That moment was enough. Doc's feet swung back. He hurled himself bodily back into the pilots' compartment.

Doc took over the controls. There was a loud crash followed by a spurt of fire as the plane which had been tied to them smashed into the earth.

The flying fortress appeared doomed to the same fate. Directly under them was a fairly level field, but trees loomed ahead.

The bronze man did not hesitate. He side-slipped the huge craft, spun it on one wing.

With the last possible feet of altitude, he dived, then leveled off. The plane bounded high, but came down intact and rolled to a stop.

White-faced members of the crew got to the ground. They were safe, but their giant, five-hundred-thousand dollar craft was crippled. They had been racing against time. Now they could not avoid a delay. That delay might cost lives.

The radio operator, with Long Tom's aid, rigged a temporary aerial to contact St. Louis and ask for a rescue plane.

And then Doc Savage's features showed emotion suddenly. His face became more stern, his gold-flecked eyes flashed.

"We are too late," he said quietly. "We would have been too late in any case, but that is no consolation. There has been another tragedy."

There was a startled silence. The army men looked unbelieving. Doc had spoken with conviction, but they did not see how he could know that he was speaking the truth.

The bronze man's aids did not question the statement. They knew Doc would not have spoken unless he was certain of his information.

A moan came from Monk. The hairy chemist's homely features were strained. Ham's eyes narrowed and his fists clenched. Long Tom's face looked even more sallow than usual.

"A review was staged at the Fort Leavenworth field, early this morning," Doc went on.

"Five hundred soldiers were parading. Strange lights appeared over the field and dropped rapidly.

"The soldiers fell. Some were revived. A majority are dead!"

Chapter 13. KILLERS AT WORK

A FEW additional details were added when the rescue plane arrived from St. Louis shortly afterward.

The army post had been well guarded. No civilians had been present. Army officials were absolutely at a loss

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to explain the tragedy, however. The death toll was high – just how high it was still not definitely determined.

This time there hadn't even been a smoke screen to hide what had occurred. The only explanation advanced so far was that a lung–paralysis machine must have been used, shooting rays that in some manner halted breathing.

Doc said nothing when this theory was explained. The bronze man was unusually grim.

The few soldiers who had been saved, it was learned, had been given oxygen treatment. This, it seemed, was because such treatment had been recommended by Doc Savage in blanket instructions sent from Washington to all army posts.

Oxygen, it was reasoned, in some instances evidently started the lungs to working again. Or, as others pointed out, it might have been that those saved did not receive the full force of the death ray.

HURRIED conferences were being held in the war department at Washington. Messages were radioed to Doc, pleading that he speed his investigation. Scores more government men were placed in fast planes and rushed toward Kansas City.

Early editions of afternoon papers blazoned the news of the latest tragedy in gigantic headlines.

A newspaper photographer managed to get through army sentries and snap several pictures before bodies of those killed could be removed.

The pictures created a sensation. More graphically even than printed words, they told the tale of terror of this new death weapon.

Faces of the dead were contorted horribly. Their tongues protruded, bearing out early reports of autopsy surgeons that their lungs had stopped working and that they had been suffocated.

National mourning was declared. Several hundred amateur detectives flooded police stations all over the country with offers of help and reports of seeing "sneakylooking men carrying large packages" that "must contain the death machine."

Amid the general shock and bereavement, one group of men was affected strangely. This group showed no sorrow, but did display intense excitement not unmingled with bewilderment.

They were the representatives of foreign powers who had been sent to Kansas City after their governments had received secret tips. Some of these men, carrying diplomatic cards, managed also to get on the field at Fort Leavenworth, usually saying they hoped they might be of some help in solving the mystery.

The last statement was true, as far as it went. Without exception, each man did want to solve the mystery – for his own country.

A death weapon that struck with such power and force, against which it seemed impossible to perfect a defense, would be a real talking point for those powers that were land–hungry.

As report of the latest occurrence reached Europe – and the news got there fast – cables in code came back to the representatives.

"Get that weapon," was the sense of each order.

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There was another who showed no sign of shock over the calamity. He was Carl Zolg.

with the Secret Service man still trailing him, Zolg moved to a side-street hotel, dismissing his taxi several blocks away.

Zolg's tall, scholarly-looking features displayed no emotion whatsoever. His pale, watery eyes were unworried. His long coat tails flapped in the breeze as he walked.

Occasionally he stopped at some shop window, apparently interested in the display.

This was not technically correct. He was interested only in what he saw reflected in the window.

Zolg had been aware for some time that he was being trailed. Each time he stopped before a store, he merely made sure that the Secret Service man was still there.

Apparently he was expected at the hotel he entered. He didn't even bother to register. That had been done for him. Still in the guise of a rather simple, absent-minded savant, he followed a bellboy to the room reserved for him.

Once the boy disappeared, his apathy dropped from him. He went to work swiftly.

The huge, old-fashioned-appearing watch he wore in his vest pocket was tugged out. He worked with the stem of that watch for some time. Then he did a strange thing. He laid the watch, face up, in the palm of his hand, and just held it there. It remained that way for quite a while.

Slowly, a smile crossed his pale features. It was rather an unpleasant smile. He took out the bottle he had stolen from Dec's equipment kit, and his smile changed to one of gloating. He fondled the bottle lovingly.

After that he changed clothes, and changed character.

The Secret Service man was a good one. He realized Zolg probably knew he was being followed, but Zolg appeared harmless. However, the Federal man saw no use in taking chances.

He parked himself behind a newspaper in a distant corner of the lobby. He almost lost Zolg as a result.

When Zolg reappeared his long-tailed coat had vanished. He was clad in a neat-fitting blue suit. His shoulders were hunched, so that he apparently had lost inches from his height. Glasses hid his pale eyes. Make-up had altered the shape of his mouth. He carried a cane and walked with swift, jerky strides. Altogether, he seemed another man.

It was the watch that betrayed him. The Secret Service man caught one glimpse of the thick gold chain draped across the front of Zolg's vest.

That was enough. For a moment, the Secret Service man wondered about that. The chain had seemed almost too prominent, as if Zolg wanted to be recognized and followed.

Then he dismissed the thought. Even the most skillful of quick-change artists sometimes make errors. That must be what Zolg had done.

ZOLG got into a taxi, headed for the airport he had left only a short time before. The Secret Service man was near, also, when the airliner arrived with Olivia Payne.

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The girl's pretty face was worn and tired. It seemed almost as if she had been crying.

Then her face changed. She caught sight of Zolg. A quick cry of happiness came from her. She raced forward, threw her arms around his neck, kissed him.

"Father!" she cried.

The government man was bewildered. Doc Savage had sent him a message. From that message it was easy to know who the girl was, but it was a surprise to hear her call Zolg "Father." Her father was supposed to be Paul Payne.

The Federal officer did some quick thinking. The answer seemed clear. "Zolg" must, in reality, be Payne. That would clear up a number of points.

For in that case, Payne really was involved in the mass murders. Payne was an inventor. He could have devised the death weapon, have put it in the hands of Spardoso and Holst, who were using it for their own purpose. And "Zolg" had tried to kill Doc Savage in the Washington hotel. If he were the inventor, that would seem logical also.

Zolg and Olivia Payne were walking toward a taxi. Subconsciously, the Secret Service man noticed that the girl's worried look had returned, and that she was talking fast, seemingly demanding explanations.

That was easy enough to figure out, also. Perhaps she really hadn't known to what use her father had intended to put his death machine.

Here was information that Doc Savage should have at once.

The Secret Service man hesitated. He could rush to operations headquarters here at the airport, and probably contact Doc Savage by radio. But if he did that, he might lose the trail of "Zolg" and the girl. There was no assurance that Zolg wouldn't change hotels.

There was a commotion near the airport waiting room. A policeman ran out, looked around excitedly.

The Secret Service man hardly noticed. He had made up his mind. He would follow Zolg and the girl, find out where they went, then contact Doc as soon as the bronze man arrived.

He raced toward his waiting cab, leaped in.

Probably he should have been more careful. But he hadn't been expecting an ambush. He was caught completely by surprise.

He had no chance as a gun was jabbed into his ribs by a man who had been waiting inside the cab. A second man got into the taxi behind him. He also held a gun.

The loud-speaker system at the airport went into action just then.

"Thurlow! Paging Steve Thurlow! Attention! Report to the office here at once! It is a matter of life and death!"

The Secret Service man sighed softly. He was Steve Thurlow. And he already realized that it really was a matter, not of life and death – but of just death!

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The cab went away swiftly. Thurlow noticed that the driver was not the one who had brought him to the airport. The killers probably had slugged the first man, if they hadn't slain him, then substituted their own thug.

There was no question about the jam he'd gotten into. Each of the two gunmen beside him wore a large wrist watch. Zolg had spotted him, had notified his gang.

Thurlow's gun was yanked from him. His gold badge also was taken.

One of the killers chuckled nastily. "I always did want to pose as a G-man," he sneered.

"Shut up," rapped his companion. The other did. Thurlow tried to involve them in conversation. They wouldn't talk.

In spite of himself, cold perspiration broke out all over the Secret Service man.

The taxi left the main highway, worked through twisting and winding streets, then took a road that led along the river. After a while it reached a secluded spot and turned off the road, west to the river's edge.

Thurlow was forced out. The Secret Service man's eyes flashed. He had no chance, he knew, but he was determined to go out fighting.

As the second killer followed him from the cab, Thurlow launched a desperate right. The man reeled back, cursing. He yanked up his gun, fired, as Thurlow tried to dive in.

The bullet caught the Secret Service man through the belly, doubling him over.

Then there were several more shots. The thug who had been struck was especially vengeful. He did not care to give Thurlow an easy death.

A majority of the bullets struck in non-fatal, but very painful spots. Both kneecaps were broken by heavy slugs.

After a while, the bullet-riddled, bleeding body was dragged down to the water. There was a splash. Then the body disappeared.

"I only wish that guy was Doc Savage," one of the killers snapped.

DOC was just arriving in Kansas City. There he learned of the futile attempt made to reach Steve Thurlow.

"We found a cabbie that had been slugged," a patrolman reported. "He must have driven Thurlow out here. Then three guys moved in. They got the Federal dick. But he'll show up all right. Those guys generally do."

The bronze man shook his head slightly, his features hard. Mass murderers would not hesitate to wipe out a lone government man.

Monk and Ham tried to say something. They didn't get a chance. There were a lot of smoke flashes. A small army of men ran toward them.

Reporters had learned Doc and his aids were on the way. Through an error, the information had been given out in St. Louis. The attempt to kill them aboard the flying fortress was known also.

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Doc was almost mobbed by the press men. Questions were shot at him from all sides as flashlight bulbs continued to flare.

Monk and Ham got their share of questions, also. They took their cue from Doc.

The bronze man told as little as he could. He minimized his share in bringing the flying fortress down safely, paying tribute to the plane's crew.

To all questions regarding the mystery death weapon, he merely shook his head.

Then he asked a favor – that he and his aids not be followed or hampered while they were in Kansas City.

Newspapermen agreed. The seriousness of the situation impressed even hardened veterans of disaster.

In return, Doc promised that if any real information should be uncovered, and the master minds behind the plot found, he would inform the press promptly.

That was an easy promise. With the entire country's attention centered on the tragedies, the government would be more than glad to announce that the menace was ended.

One reporter, with the card Daily Eagle in his hatband, arrived as the other newspapermen left. He was particularly insistent in his questions. In particular, he wanted to know about the rumor that a girl was mixed into the case somehow.

"Ask Colonel Mayfair," Doc advised gravely.

Monk blushed. Indignantly he denied that there was any truth in the report. The reporter left.

His first action was natural enough. He rushed for a telephone. But after that he acted strangely for a reporter. He didn't call a newspaper. He called an entirely different number. His voice was excited:

"I've solved it, boss," he shouted jubilantly. "I know now how that guy knew you came here, and also how he found out some other things. He's wearing one of our wrist watches!"

Chapter 14. A STRANGE TRAP

DOC had realized from the first that the oversized wrist watches must play some part in the mystery.

As soon as he had examined the one taken from the slain machine-gunner, he had the answer.

The watch was cleverly constructed. It wasn't a watch at all, really. But through it, messages could be received without even a person a foot away knowing anything about it. Some of the watches, Doc decided also, could send as well as receive. The one he had was a receiver only.

Signals were transmitted to the back of the wrist in the form of heat flashes, easily read by anyone who understood Continental code. Only in the case of highly important messages, Doc had learned, was a cipher code used. Then it was usually necessary to copy the cipher down and decode it.

Doc had not found even that necessary. His trained mind, with a memory that was photographic, had no difficulty in translating the messages.

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Such a message had been sent by Zolg. Doc had received it, had known that killers had been ordered to get Steve Thurlow. He had promptly radioed a warning to the F.B.I. offices in Kansas City.

The Kansas City office had been slow in picking up Thurlow's trail. The warning had reached the airport just seconds too late. Examination of the wrist watch also had disclosed to Doc that a new development was being used in the transmission of messages. The watch was a highly sensitive, delicate radio receiver.

But it did not receive ordinary radio waves.

The watch had been constructed to receive microscopic waves of a type not previously used for communication. It was practical application of the long-known fact that infrared light really consists of extremely small waves.

It was this that had enabled Les Quinan to see the signals flashed from the office opposite him when he wore colored glasses. Those who wore the oversized wrist watches had felt the signals, not seen them.

A car was waiting for Doc and his men. They were whisked from Fairfax Airport, bordering the river on the Kansas side, across into Missouri.

The trail of those they sought led there. It remained now to pick up the trail.

The advantage Doc had in having one of the overgrown wrist watches made that seem an easy thing to do. It wasn't until much later they discovered otherwise.

Steve Thurlow had been right on one hunch, wrong on another.

The Secret Service man had expected Carl Zolg to change hotels. Zolg did better than that. He didn't even return to the one he had first visited.

Thurlow also had believed Carl Zolg and Paul Payne to be one and the same persons. In this he was wrong.

Olivia Payne discovered her error in the first few seconds. She showed only mild surprise. She tucked her hand under Zolg's arm and talked rapidly.

They changed cabs several times, although Zolg was certain his shadow had been taken care of. Then they stopped at an inconspicuous dwelling in the residential section.

Leon Spardoso and Grant Holst greeted them at the door. They were smiling. Zolg appeared surprised. The girl gave a faint gasp and her color changed.

As soon as the door closed, Spardoso and Holst produced guns. They jabbed them hard into the sides of the new arrivals.

Carl Zolg's pale, watery eyes showed fright. He gave a startled bleat and lifted his hands.

"B—but what is the m—meaning of this?" he stammered. "I... I thought you were friends of Mr. Payne. He is the one we w—want to see."

Grant Holst chuckled mirthlessly. The black goatee that had covered his chin was gone. But in spite of the use of make-up, his skin was slightly paler there, indicating where the goatee had been.

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"We are friends of Mr. Payne," he said smoothly. "He sent us to meet you."

Leon Spardoso bowed politely toward the girl, took her purse from her, removed the small gun it contained, then returned the purse. He put his own gun away.

"Even beautiful ladies sometimes speak with too much bite," he explained silkily. With elaborate politeness he ushered Carl Zolg and Olivia Payne into an adjoining room. The room was furnished in excellent taste.

The only unusual features about it was a radio-type panel, a duplicate of one which had been destroyed in the Washington offices. Transmitters in the wrist watches had only a limited range. A large set was used wherever the pseudo columnists had headquarters.

"I... I don't understand," Olivia Payne stammered. Carl Zolg also looked pained. "T-this is an imposition," he said. "Mr. P-Payne won't like this."

"On the contrary, we are acting on his orders," Grant Holst said. He ran his hands over Zolg's clothing, apparently found no weapon, and put his own gun back into a shoulder holster.

At the same time, the short, heavy-set man brought his other fist up from the floor. The bunched knuckles caught Carl Zolg squarely at the base of the jaw.

Zolg's tall frame left the floor completely, then struck and crumpled. He was out cold.

"BUT what – " the girl gasped. Her eyes sparkled angrily. She moved toward Holst swiftly. Light glittered on steel as a sharp-bladed knife slid from the sleeve of her dress.

Holst leaped back. Then Leon Spardoso had caught the girl firmly by the elbows.

"What is the meaning of this?" Olivia Payne snapped.

"Simply that Carl Zolg is an enemy of your father," Grant Holst explained gravely. "He went to Doc Savage and told him your father is behind the mysterious mass murders."

Anger left the girl's eyes. Blond curls bounced against her cheeks as her head jerked.

"C-Carl did that?" she asked slowly.

Leon Spardoso nodded. "He did. And the danger is great. Fortunately, we learned in time what Zolg had done. Your father still has a chance."

"It all depends on you," Grant Holst put in.

Fear left the girl's features. Her small chin jutted and her eyes narrowed.

"Tell me what is to be done," she commanded.

DOC SAVAGE and his aids were in the district office of the F.B.I. Full details of the tragedy at Fort Leavenworth were being given them.

The inspector in charge of the office was haggard. "Searchers have found only one clue. At some distance from the post, but within view, we found where a group of men must have been standing. The death machine

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undoubtedly was there."

Doc Savage rose suddenly. "We will report to you if we find anything," he said.

With unusual haste, the bronze man led the way outside. A car had been assigned to them. Doc got behind the wheel, Long Tom at his side. Monk and Ham piled into the rear seat.

"What's up, Doc?" Monk asked excitedly. It was unlike the bronze man to leave a conference with almost discourteous haste.

"Olivia Payne is en route to meet her father," Doc Savage explained.

Monk's homely features became agonized. "Y-yuh mean she really is mixed up in this?" he asked desperately.

"She at least has information of value," the bronze man said.

Long Tom kept his eyes on the oversized wrist watch. The gadget fascinated him, had done so ever, since Doc explained how it worked.

"Tell where she was going?" the electrical expert asked. Doc shook his head. "Merely assigned guards to pick her up at the park and protect her."

Doc wheeled the car through traffic swiftly. The bronze man's uncanny sense of timing made passage through even the narrow, twisting streets of the business district appear easy. They sped into a large park.

A car appeared before them. Monk's breath came in sharply.

There were several men in the car, In the rear seat, head half turned and with profile unmistakable, was Olivia Payne.

Those ahead seemingly did not know they were being followed. But they were stepping on the gas, roaring away south and west, away from the city.

Doc pressed down on the accelerator. He was driving a machine used by G-men, geared for high speed. They soon were on country roads.

"Mercy pistols," Doc said briefly.

His aids nodded, produced the queerly shaped weapons that fired sleep-inducing bullets.

Doc never killed when it could be avoided, and this time, more than ever, the others understood why he wanted his victims alive. Dead ones can't talk.

The car ahead whipped around a sharp curve. Dec swung in pursuit.

There was a huge cloud of dust ahead. Doc's car raced through it.

The road ahead was clear. The car they had been following had vanished.

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Brakes smashed down hard as the bronze man pulled almost to a stop, then swung the machine swiftly. Tire marks showed where the auto with the girl had turned from the highway. It had followed a faint, winding trail through the trees.

Guns crashed as Doc started to follow. Lead smashed through glass and into the side of the car.

"Out!" Doc rapped.

His aids obeyed swiftly, diving to the shelter of the trees. Their queer-shaped weapons came up.

The borrowed car lacked the armor plating and bulletproof glass of Doc's own machine in New York. Chances of success seemed better if there was more freedom of action.

Long Tom caught a glimpse of a man leaning out to shoot. The electrical expert's weapon made a bull-fiddle roar, and the man went down.

A grunt came from Monk. There was a flash of gray far down the trail. Ham saw it at the same time. The girl was running swiftly. Br-r-r-r-r-r!

Doc's weapon sounded in a long burst. Two other attackers went down. The bronze man leaped ahead, his aids at his heels. They followed the girl.

Olivia Payne could move nowhere near as fast as Doc and his aids, but she had a long head start. She disappeared for a moment.

When Doc, with the others in close pursuit, rounded a corner, they saw the mouth of a cave. It was of the type generally found farther to the south, deep in the Ozarks. The opening led down toward the river, not far away.

Doc slowed, and the others caught up with him. There was no further sign of those who had fired upon them.

"Might be a trap," Ham cautioned.

Doc nodded. Then they all froze.

A scream came from deep in the cave. It was a girl's scream, and the fright it betrayed would have been impossible to counterfeit.

Without an instant's hesitation, Doc leaped ahead. Trap or no trap, the bronze man did not even consider any other course. His aids kept pace with him.

THE cave, strangely, was faintly lighted. Electric bulbs, far spaced, led from the entrance. Undoubtedly it was a tourist attraction during certain seasons.

The opening was not large, but almost at once it led into a wider corridor. The air was cold and damp, as if from off the water.

Doc and his men sped forward.

A small flashlight came to Doc's hand. Monk wondered why, but only for a moment. The bronze man kept the beam trained downward.

When several openings appeared ahead, Doc chose one without delay. Prints from the girl's high-heeled shoes were easy to see on the floor.

After the first cry, there was silence. The silence was eerie after the suggestion of panic in the scream. Monk growled faintly to himself. Ham wore a slightly superior look. Doc was leading the way. That was all the lawyer cared to know.

The passageway widened, just as the electric lights overhead went out.

Doc stopped suddenly. He stopped too suddenly for the three who were following him. They crashed into him. The four went rolling to the ground.

The ground acted peculiarly. It appeared to rise up and clutch at them. Monk had the sensation of smothering, of being seized in a stiff, crushing substance.

The others were mixed up with him, in a confusion of arms and legs.

Then Monk knew nothing more. The others also became quiet. Doc was the last to go limp.

Chapter 15. DEATH SENTENCE

AWAKENING was unpleasant. There was the matter of numerous bumps, some on the head, for one thing. Unconsciousness had been induced by continuous swinging of clubs outside of the enveloping substance that had trapped them. Those clubs had been wielded lustily and vigorously.

Ham looked around in well-bred amazement. He was clad only in his shorts. The others were similarly attired, even Doc. The bronze man's equipment kit had been taken from him.

The oversized wrist watch also had been removed from Doc's wrist.

The hands of the four were manacled, and the manacles attached to rings in the stone above their heads. They appeared to be in a cavernous pit. There was a light far overhead.

Nearby lay the substance that had trapped them. It was a grotesque-looking object. Slightly more than an inch thick, it seemed constructed of mesh steel, so malleable that it could be twisted into any shape.

Long Tom looked at it in amazement.

"The latest in tank traps," Doc explained dryly.

Long Tom's eyes grew wider. There had been rumors of such a device, but he had never seen one before.

It was not hard to see how it worked. The mesh steel could be laid out and staked to the ground, then covered with a thin layer of dirt. When a tank rolled upon it and struck the release key in the center, the steel snapped up, completely inclosing the tank. The mesh even lapped over at the top, halting the progress of the tank and preventing the escape of its occupants.

Such a trap not only was highly efficient, but it saved the time of digging pits, previously used in warfare.

Doc and his men had been caught even more easily than a tank when they had rolled upon the release key.

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Heads had been cracked when they touched the sides of the mesh.

Monk and Ham caught the answer at once. A shrewd gleam appeared in the hairy chemist's small eyes. This whole case was screwy. It had been strange enough from the start. Then had come the secret of the big wrist watches; and now they had encountered a tank trap.

Rumors of the tank trap had said it was the closely guarded secret of a foreign power. It seemed queer that Spardoso and Holst should even know about it, let alone possess one.

Speculation was halted suddenly. A sardonic voice sounded from above.

Leon Spardoso and Grant Holst were leaning over the edge of the pit.

"I wanted to wait until you were all conscious," Spardoso said suavely. "For I have a high regard for Mr. Savage. I wanted to see how a brave man dies."

Doc Savage said nothing.

Spardoso laughed shortly. "You may be a miracle man, Savage," he rasped, "but this time I have taken the precaution of removing all the many devices you usually carry with you to escape from tight spots. There will be no escape."

Doc, if anything, appeared slightly bored. "Get it over with," he advised calmly.

Spardoso did a creditable job of bowing, even leaning over as he was. "I shall," he said.

He pressed a small key beside him. There was a muffled boom, followed almost instantly by the sound of rushing water. The pit was below the level of the river. The explosion had torn out a protecting wall.

As those above watched, water stormed in the pit, rose above the heads of those manacled there. The water came almost to the top of the pit before it stopped rising.

For a long time those waiting there watched in silence. Nothing stirred beneath them.

"They're dead," Grant Holst breathed. He smiled with satisfaction.

A third man joined the two at the top of the pit. Carl Zolg had returned to his normal appearance of a somewhat absent-minded professor.

He rubbed his jaw tenderly. "You know, I still don't think you should have hit me quite so hard," he complained.

Grant Holst snickered. "I had to make it look realistic, didn't I?" he pointed out.

The three started from the cavern. "With Savage out of the way, we are ready to collect," Spardoso said grimly. "We'll take that secret right now, Zolg."

Zolg's watery eyes looked slightly apprehensive. "I—I haven't got it," he confessed suddenly.

His two companions didn't say anything. They merely looked. Zolg didn't like the way they looked. He talked fast.

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"I can get it! I can get it!" he rattled. "That's why I visited Doc Savage in Washington. I failed to kill him – he dodged death the only way it could be dodged – but I did get what I was after."

"And then made us think someone was trying to muscle in by phoning us you'd killed the bronze devil," Holst said savagely.

Zolg paid no heed to the interruption. He pulled out the vial he had taken from Doc's equipment kit, showed it to the others.

Spardoso allowed himself to smile faintly. "Oh, I see."

Zolg nodded with relief. "It will be easy, you see. Everyone knows Doc Savage perfected the best in any line. And I have – ah – the key to the secret within easy reach."

"You'd better have," Holst growled, suddenly harsh. "We've got everything lined now. But we've got to be able to do our part. If we don't –"

His face paled slightly. "Those we are dealing with do not play gentle," he added.

Spardoso nodded. Then the tall man's jaw dropped. They had reached a small room leading off from the main corridor of the cavern. Severed rope was on the floor.

"I forgot about that knife," he confessed.

"And now the girl has escaped," Holst snapped. Carl Zolg smiled. "Do not worry, gentlemen. She knows where her father stands in this. She will not talk – and she'll show up quickly enough."

They rounded up the men still under the influence of the mercy bullets and went away.

OLIVIA PAYNE did appear fast enough. She materialized practically as soon as the others left, emerging from another of the many winding corridors in the cave.

Her features were tear-stained, her gray costume somewhat torn by rough treatment. Her blond curls hung limply about her face.

She moved slowly and cautiously until she stood by the small lake of water that now filled the deep pit. Light came feebly from the bulb overhead that Spardoso and Holst had forgotten to extinguish.

Then she drew the long, sharp knife from her sleeve. She looked at the knife for a moment, drew back her arm.

"I would not do that, Miss Payne," came a calm voice. A faint scream came from the girl's lips. The knife dropped from her limp fingers to disappear in the water beneath.

A bronzed head had broken the surface of the water – the head of Doc Savage. A moment later and the features of Monk, Ham and Long Tom came into view.

"B—but, you're dead!" the girl gasped. "I led you into a trap. I am responsible for your being killed."

Doc's bronzed, finely muscled figure moved to the edge of the pit, came up easily into the corridor outside. The girl did not even notice his brief attire. Her attention was centered on his expression.

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"I ... I'm glad. I did not want them to kill you," she said simply.

"I know," Doc said. "You have been bewildered and confused."

"But how did you escape?"

Long Tom answered. He also came from the pit, as well as Ham. Monk was the only laggard. The hairy chemist appeared embarrassed about his deficient costume.

"Those crooks thought they'd taken all Doc's equipment, but they hadn't," the electrical expert chuckled.

"They had us handcuffed to the wall down there, so our bodies could never be found. But Doc is a Houdini when it comes to getting out of manacles, and he still did have some equipment left."

Long Tom pointed to the calves of Doc's legs. One bulged out more than the other.

"False skin," Long Tom explained. "Doc's had many things, including oxygen tablets, concealed there. He got free at once, then freed us, picking the locks of the handcuffs. We used oxygen tablets and stayed down until we figured our hosts had gone."

The girl nodded dumbly. She hardly seemed listening to Long Tom's words.

"Y—you forgive me?" she asked Doc.

This time it was Doc who looked slightly embarrassed. There was an expression in Olivia Payne's eyes that appeared quite often in the eyes of girls when they saw Doc. "I think we should hear your story," Doc suggested. "Of course." The girl sighed. "I need your help."

"It all started some weeks ago," she explained. "Father, who is a chemist and an inventor, made a discovery he said was of vital importance. He wrote to a patent attorney." "Les Quinan?" Ham asked.

The girl nodded, talked on as they walked from the cavern. "Carl Zolg is my father's half brother, and worked with him as his assistant, but he didn't always understand just what father was doing."

Doc's gold-flecked eyes flashed. Many things were becoming clear.

"Father never got to Quinan, but I didn't know that until today. He disappeared, but Uncle Carl told me everything was all right, and I didn't worry until those soldiers were killed at the proving ground. Then I did. The method of death was about as father had described his discovery.

"We have a house in Washington, and I was staying there. Uncle Carl wrote me he was coming there, and I was at the station when you, Mr. Savage, arrived."

The girl paused, blushed slightly. "I—you—you attracted me, I guess, and I wanted to know who you were. I followed, and saw your chauffeur run. I didn't see who killed him, but I did see him fall, and went over to see if I could help. That must have been when I lost my glove."

"And your visit to Les Quinan's office?" Doc asked.

"I was looking for papers or letters father might have written. I was becoming more and more sure his discovery was being used for the murders – but I didn't dare talk."

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Again Doc nodded.

"Then I went home to find these two" – she motioned at Monk and Ham – "unconscious in the house."

"Left there to throw suspicion on you, I see now," Ham put in dryly.

"I got a wire from Uncle Carl," the girl continued, "telling me to come to Kansas City. I did, and he met me made up to resemble father. They look much alike, so that was not difficult. He told me he was going to take me to father. Instead –"

"He took you to Spardoso and Holst," Monk growled.

"Yes. They put on an act. They told me Uncle Carl had double-crossed father. I believed that. I still do. But they told me they were working to checkmate Uncle Carl at father's direction, and that you had to be sidetracked. I was to lead you here, and you were to be held prisoner."

"And then?"

"Then I discovered the truth." The girl's eyes flashed. "When I got here, Uncle Carl was here also. I realized I had been tricked. I screamed, to give you warning, but it was no use. I was tied up and you were trapped.

"They no longer worried about my knowing about them then. They talked openly. They have father. You've got to help me. Father's a prisoner. You've got to save him. He's not guilty of these murders. It's Uncle Carl and the others –"

"We will do our best," Doc said.

THEY found their car hidden far off the road. From the trunk in the rear, an odd assemblage of coats and clothing provided more complete attire for the bronze man and his aids.

Doc drove swiftly on the way back to town. He was unusually quiet. His aids were, also.

It was too bad, Long Tom figured, that Spardoso and Holst had taken the oversized watch from Doc. Picking up the trail might be more difficult now.

Then he thought of something and his mouth tightened. The crooks must have discovered Doc had that watch. That was why the bronze man had been deceived by a false message when the girl had led them into a trap. If only they could have one of those infra-ray receivers that the others didn't know about –

Doc stopped before a jewelry shop about that time. When he came out, he had four wrist watches in his hand. All were unusually large.

"I wired specifications and instructions ahead," he explained briefly.

Long Tom's mouth dropped. Doc thought of everything. Eagerly, he put one of the watches on his wrist.

It was some hours before they received any information. They went to their hotel, retrieved Chemistry and Habeas and changed to better-fitting clothes.

None had any trouble reading the message when the heat impulses struck the backs of their wrists. Spardoso and Holst were evidently confident there no longer was any danger of their messages being intercepted.

But the news Doc and his men received did not bring cheer. Those they wanted already were far away.

And they had Paul Payne with them!

Chapter 16. AN AMBUSH FAILS

PAYNE was older than Zolg. His hair was streaked with gray. His long, lean features showed marks of suffering. Only his eyes flashed defiance behind the glasses he wore.

He was strapped firmly in the seat of a speeding plane. About him were grouped Zolg, Spardoso and Holst.

"I'll never tell! I'll never tell!" Payne rasped. His voice was harsh, scarcely more than a croak.

Zolg smiled thinly. Grant Holst chuckled.

"I'd like to make a bet I can make you talk, just by using a few tricks I picked up in Africa," Holst said conversationally.

"Now, now, that isn't necessary," Leon Spardoso put in. The tall, lean man grinned at his squatty companion, flicked a spot of dust from his freshly pressed suit. "Sometimes you impress even me as being unnecessarily brutal," he remarked.

"Just let me try," Holst snarled.

Perspiration flowed freely from Paul Payne's face, dampened his shirt.

"I can stand anything you do!" he rasped. His flashing eyes turned on Zolg. "You, Carl, you traitor, tried torture. You know it doesn't work."

Zolg nodded mournfully. "He is tough to have such an old shell," he conceded. "But torture really isn't necessary."

With the air of a stage magician performing a difficult feat, he whipped a bottle from his pocket, the bottle he had stolen from Doc Savage.

He held it so Paul Payne could see the label on it. The inventor paled slightly.

"T—that won't work either," he managed. "You know that stuff often is unreliable."

"Not this," Carl Zolg smirked. "For this came from Doc Savage. He wouldn't have had it if it wasn't good. It explains how he used to get some of the information he did."

"Used to get?" Payne faltered. "Y—you mean Savage is dead?" "Right."

Payne's body seemed to wilt even more. "I ... I had hoped he would get me out of this, would block you, Carl," he muttered.

Zolg did not answer. As the others watched, fascinated, he pulled a physician's syringe from another pocket, carefully filled it with fluid from the vial.

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Paul Payne tried to dodge. He had no chance, he was tied too tightly.

Almost brutally, Zolg pushed the syringe into Payne's flesh, jabbed down the plunger.

Payne's eyes blinked. Slowly, intelligence was drained from them.

"Now we'll get the information we want," Zolg gloated. "Ask whatever questions you desire."

The label on the vial read: "Truth Serum."

The message Doc and his men received had only given part of the information they needed. But that information was enough to put them to work.

Spardoso and Holst were headed for San Francisco. They had sent orders ahead in preparation of their arrival, although they had not told where they intended to land.

Another surprise awaited Doc's aids as they reached the airport. The bronze man's own huge, four-motored ship was awaiting them. It had been flown from New York by a transport pilot on Doc's orders.

Not as heavily armed as a flying fortress, it was easily as swift, and it had trick devices which Doc had used more than once in escaping air attacks. But they expected no such attacks. It seemed unlikely that their enemies knew they still lived.

Besides the devices, it had other things Doc wanted. There was a well equipped workshop in the rear of the plane.

Olivia Payne was nearly in tears as she boarded the ship. Monk had accidentally blurted out some of what they had learned. She knew her father was in the hands of Spardoso and Holst.

Monk and Ham went to the controls. They might bicker a lot – they probably would on the entire trip west, but they did know how to fly.

Doc and Long Tom were at work almost before the plane took off. They seemed to know exactly what they wanted to do. Occasionally Doc would draw a brief sketch. Long Tom would nod and go on with his work.

The girl watched them wordlessly, and with interest. She did not understand just what they were doing.

Either Spardoso or Holst would have understood could they have been present. They not only would have understood, but would have been faintly alarmed.

INSTEAD of being alarmed, the two were frankly jubilant. Carl Zolg also wore a pleased expression.

Paul Payne alone did not share their feeling. He looked more than a little sick. His eyes no longer flashed defiance, they held a beaten, broken look.

"D–did I talk?" he faltered.

"Like an actor. You ran on and on, bragged even about what you had done, how easy it was, and gave all details," Carl Zolg said complacently.

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The inventor deflated. Then strength seemed to come to him suddenly, he lunged at his bonds, got one arm free. His hand flashed out, fingernails raking the leering face of Carl Zolg.

"I'll get you! If it's my last act, you'll die!" he screamed. "You've made me betray my country. You're not fit to live. You should suffer a thousand –"

Leon Spardoso jeered. Grant Holst's face did not change. As cool as if he were about to offer a friendly greeting, he slugged Paul Payne once, twice, three times.

The inventor went very limp. Crimson came from his nose. "Y—you've killed him?" Zolg breathed.

"Not yet," Holst said calmly. He untied the ropes that bound the inventor to the seat. Then he grabbed the other by the coat collar, started to drag him toward the rear of the plane.

"What now?" Spardoso asked indifferently.

"A ten-thousand-foot drop won't do him any good. He's no use to us any more," the chunky man said callously.

Spardoso frowned faintly. Tension came to Carl Zolg with a quick jerk. Zolg's pale eyes appeared startled, as if he were considering something he hadn't thought of before. One hand drifted slowly to a pocket, brought out his huge-bowled pipe, jammed the stem in his mouth.

Spardoso's eyes flickered slightly. He kicked Payne's prone body negligently.

"Keep him for a while," he said briefly.

Grant Holst looked up, eyebrows lifting.

"There is always the chance that even with truth serum prepared by the lately renowned Doc Savage, we might not have been given the full secret," Spardoso explained. "We'll take him along, at least until we get to San Francisco and can test the information he gave us."

A slight film slowly vanished from Grant Holst's eyes. They appeared much more normal.

He nodded, resignedly. "You're right, at that." He retied the inventor roughly.

An almost silent sigh escaped Carl Zolg. After a while he took the pipe from his mouth, put it back in his pocket. He never had lighted the tobacco that could be seen in the big bowl.

Spardoso spoke briefly to the pilot. Then he went to equipment greatly resembling a radio set, worked a key swiftly.

Ham and Monk, among others, caught the message.

"He'll arrive at three p. m. We shouldn't be far behind at the rate we're moving," Monk growled.

Ham nodded. "Rather unusual to land near Richmond, but perhaps they have a hide-out near there," he agreed.

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Doc acted swiftly. He also sent a message. He used a secret government code, and his message went to the F.B.I. offices in San Francisco.

"Use great caution in making arrest," his message ended. "These men are the ruthless killers we seek."

The G-men believed they were ready for anything. Every agent in the Bay region was called for duty.

The field Spardoso had designated for the landing was not really an airport, but it would serve. And there was no indication that Richmond was the ultimate destination.

But Richmond is directly across the bay from San Francisco, is only a short distance from Berkeley and Oakland. From such a central location, the criminals could flee to any spot they wished, should they escape the trap laid for them.

Federal men intended there would be no such escape. They left their cars at considerable distance from the field. They hid themselves beneath rude, camouflaged shelters, which would make them invisible from the air.

They not only were armed with machine guns, they had tear gas, riot guns, rifles, pistols and a small field gun.

Doc had warned that the plane would be met by accomplices of the criminals. G-men kept careful watch on all approaching roads.

As it grew near three o'clock, nerves grew tense. The inspector in charge of the G-men distributed gas masks of the latest type. There was no use taking chances, something might go wrong.

He wasn't following the exact instructions given by Doc, but he shrugged that off. After all, he'd had considerable experience in catching criminals himself.

The inspector might have been slightly doubtful, however, if he had seen the short, slender man who had fled with the arrival of the first G-men.

The little man had been sent direct to San Francisco from Washington. Doc or any of his aids would have recognized him.

The little man smiled thinly, looked at his watch. The watch he looked at was the one he wore on his wrist. But he appeared to wind the wrist watch a moment later.

Twenty thousand feet up, in the substratosphere, Leon Spardoso received the warning. He swore slightly, then grinned, explained to Grant Holst.

Holst also smiled. The plane circled several times, almost invisible over the field where they were to land.

The little man wasted no time after sending his message. He already was some distance from the landing field. He went away even farther.

By and by he saw faint sparks appear over the field. In the bright sunlight it was almost impossible to distinguish those sparks, but the little man knew they were present.

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G-men appeared to be running around in circles. Some yanked the gas masks from their heads and clawed at their throats. As the sparks increased, the field seemingly receded into the distance.

The display went on for some ten minutes. There were huddled bodies of G-men all over the field.

Slowly, the scene assumed its natural perspective. Again the little man fiddled with his wrist watch.

The drone of the plane sounded, faintly at first, then with increasing loudness. It swooped out of the sky, made a perfect landing.

Not a shot was fired as the plane rolled to a stop and three figures got out, carrying a fourth.

The little man drove up in a car, just as the plane took off again. Now the plane contained only the pilot, who would land at a regular airport and explain that he had made a routine flight.

Spardoso and Holst scarcely glanced at the motionless, contorted bodies about them. They chuckled slightly at sight of all the armament that had been waiting them.

Paul Payne took a look – and fainted.

Carl Zolg was paler than usual. Occasionally he glanced at his companions. There was a strange gleam in the back of his watery eyes as they drove away.

Chapter 17. CHEMISTRY CAUSES TROUBLE

A HUNTER found the bodies of the G-men. He was a very badly frightened hunter.

He had been a mile away when he had heard the plane, had watched it with idle curiosity. Then he had wandered over to see why such a big ship was landing in an isolated field.

The plane was gone before he arrived. But the dead were not.

The hunter ran as hard as he could to the nearest telephone. That was some distance away. It took him quite a while to get his breath back after that, and then he had difficulty in making his story believed.

Police had not been taken into the confidence of the G-men. But they finally decided to investigate. When they did, ambulances roared to the scene.

Doctors did no good. They tried everything that had been tried at Fort Leavenworth and at the army proving ground. But this time nothing worked.

The uproar that had followed the previous tragedies was more than doubled this time. The terror now had struck from coast to coast.

San Francisco, in particular, felt the panic. Always apprehensive and long jitterish, fearing an attack from the Far East, the newspapers there went further than any others in feverish and inflammatory articles.

All the mass murders now were laid to a "certain Far Eastern power." No country was named, but everyone on the Pacific coast knew what the reference meant.

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Excited reports came in of bombing squadrons being sighted at sea, of mystery fleets rapidly approaching the shore. One wild rumor even had an expeditionary force being landed near Monterey.

The rumors were checked as rapidly as possible, and in each case found to be erroneous. But that did not allay apprehension. Rather, fear increased with every hour.

The terrible "mystery death" was loose in the Bay area. No one knew when or where it might strike next.

The perpetrators of the outrage must also be loose in the Bay area.

Everyone carrying a brief case was the object of suspicion. The police stations were crowded with "suspects," a majority of them there because anonymous accusers thought they were the persons wanted.

There was some talk of mobilizing the National Guard, of clearing the streets, while a house-to-house search was made in all the Bay cities.

This suggestion was considered seriously for a time. It would be a gigantic undertaking, but if it would prevent additional tragedies and result in catching those responsible for the past ones, responsible officials believed it might be worth while.

Then the uselessness of the plan was pointed out. The criminals undoubtedly had a hiding place that would escape search. If not, they would get out at the first sign of danger, and such a hunt would probably bring a real, almost uncontrollable panic.

Even then, the hunt might have been attempted. But the stories in the newspapers changed.

No one knew exactly where the new information came from. The stories merely said "it is learned from a source considered reliable."

It was now learned, the new stories went on, that there was a widespread spy ring in operation. This spy ring, the report continued, had in some manner obtained the mystery-death weapon.

No explanation was given as to why there had been the mass murders, but the intimations were that these probably would cease soon.

"The reason for this," the accounts concluded, "is that the mystery weapon is believed to have been disposed of to one of the two Far Eastern powers at present engaged in a slight 'misunderstanding.'"

This story, while it indicated the frightfulness of the new death weapon would continue to claim victims, eased the tension somewhat. It is harder to visualize tragedy at a distance.

Strange, there was a certain group the story did not please at all.

These men were not together. They had widely separated lodgings. They were the same men who had been summoned to Kansas City on orders from their own governments. Similar orders had brought them on to San Francisco.

When the new story appeared, these men became highly excited. More cables were dispatched to dictators and military rulers in other countries. The essence of all these cables was:

"Have been double-crossed! What do I do now?"

Merchants of Disasters

Answers arrived quickly. In each case, also, the reply was almost identical:

"Get mystery weapon at all costs."

The representatives of the foreign powers went into action. Scores of undercover men were put to work.

All were looking for the three men who had landed with their prisoner on the Richmond field.

Doc and his aids also were searching. But they were using a different system. They were using the strange machine the bronze man and Long Tom had constructed on the flight West.

Faces of the four were grim. Doc's instructions had been disobeyed.

The bronze man had advised the Federal officers to guard all roads to the field near Richmond, but not to attempt to get too near the field itself. In that way, he had expected Spardoso and Holst to be trapped as they started to drive away.

This had not been done. And as a result of the bungle the G-men were dead.

It had seemed unlikely that the death weapon would be employed from an automobile, particularly when it might endanger the occupants of that automobile also. But by concentrating themselves, all the G-men had been wiped out.

Doc, also, was the "reliable source" who had furnished the latest story to the newspapers. But not even his aids knew that, even though they realized Doc was far ahead of them in figuring out what the whole thing was about.

The machine Doc and Long Tom had built was set up in a hotel room. It resembled the equipment Spardoso and Holst had had in their offices.

In fact, it was the same type of powerful, infra-ray radio sender.

Long Tom's face was tense. Monk and Ham also were leaning forward, and for once they were silent.

Doc pressed down on the key. He sent a message swiftly.

That call was received by all who wore the oversized wrist watches.

SPARDOSO and Holst couldn't believe it. The chunky man reached up to stroke the now-missing goatee. His eyes were wide and staring. They were staring at the watch on his wrist.

His taller companion paled, his tongue wet lips that were suddenly dry.

"It ... it couldn't be," he breathed. "T—that bronze devil is dead!"

"He can't be. He's the only one that could pull this!" Grant Holst shivered slightly, his eyes blinked rapidly.

"It's got to be stopped!" Spardoso screamed frantically. His quicker wits recovered first. He bounded to a duplicate of the infra-ray board, pressed the key. Then he moaned.

Merchants of Disasters

A howl came from the transmitter. That was all. "He's sent his message, now he's left his set on so that anything we send won't be heard!" Spardoso howled.

Grant Holst also recovered. Fright was in his eyes, but merciless determination as well. He acted fast. Runners were dispatched to call in every wearer of an oversized wrist watch that could be found.

A small map was consulted. This map gave the location of most of those who were missing. The men reported hourly.

"Now I know why the newspapers printed what they did," Spardoso gritted. "That bronze devil was behind it to start trouble for us. We've got to act quickly or we'll be stopped yet."

"We still have a chance," Holst said, but he also was shaken.

Minutes passed. One by one the men they sought returned. They were bewildered. Spardoso and Holst offered no explanations. Fear drops beaded their faces.

The small, thin man received the message sent by Doc just as he had finished dinner.

He didn't know the message was from Doc. The heat impulses were no different than they had been at any other time.

A gleam of anticipation came to the little man's eyes. "Go to Market Street. Walk toward the Ferry Building on the right-hand side of the street until contacted. Dangerous assignment," the message read.

The little man obeyed orders.

Monk and Ham also were on Market Street. They were riding in a cab with the curtains drawn so they couldn't be spotted from the outside.

"We don't go to them, they come to us," Monk chuckled.

They both spotted the little man at the same time. They had been driving slowly, watching for overgrown timepieces. Finding the little man made their job easier. They both knew him.

Leaving the cab, they drifted along behind their intended victim. Trailing him was easy along the crowded street.

The little man had no inkling of danger. The first he knew, the two had stepped up on either side of him. A hairy fist clenched his arm on one side, a lean, powerful paw caught him on the other.

"Daggonit! We had to chase you clear across the country to get to talk to you!" Monk complained.

The little man tried to yell. Monk didn't even stop walking. He merely swung a fist rather absent-mindedly. It didn't look like a hard blow, but it caught the little man under the ear, and he no longer was walking.

Instead, head lolling, he was being carried along between Ham and Monk. ONE or two people nearby thought they had seen Monk slug the little man. Then they changed their minds. There was nothing to indicate anything was wrong.

The little man probably was ill. He was ill, in fact. The blow he had received hadn't been a light one.

Merchants of Disasters

He didn't recover until he was back in the hotel room where Doc and Long Tom waited.

Doc's voice was very mild, but his gold-flecked eyes were twirling more than usual. Those eyes exerted a hypnotic effect that few were able to resist.

"Your name?"

"Zeke Devine," the little man said.

"Where are Spardoso and Holst?"

Devine swallowed hard. The bravado he usually wore slipped somewhat. Then he shut his lips tightly.

Doc did not waste time. His long, powerful fingers shot out. They touched nerves on the back of the man's head. Thereafter, the other answered questions readily.

Monk had a few questions he wanted to ask after Doc finished. He wanted to know if the little man was responsible for the accident that had injured Johnny and Renny.

Devine said he was. It was with difficulty that Ham prevented Monk from using his big fists.

When the argument was over, Doc had vanished! "You hairy substitute for brains," Ham moaned. "Doc has gone, and we'll miss the fun."

"Yeah?" Monk's tiny eyes glittered. He leaned forward, whispered in Ham's ear. The dapper lawyer smiled.

Some time had passed and night had fallen. At Long Tom's suggestion, Zeke Devine was placed in jail for safe keeping. Then Ham slipped out and made several purchases.

Doc did not return.

Long Tom watched his two friends curiously, but said nothing. He had been told to stay near the infra-ray transmitter, so he could relay messages if necessary.

After a while the electrician ordered dinner for Olivia Payne and himself. The girl appeared dazed. The latest example of the mystery death had affected her greatly. She ate almost mechanically.

Habeas and Chemistry romped in another room where Monk and Ham were trying on various costumes.

Chemistry was particularly interested.

After a time, Monk put his head through the door, careful that the clothes he was wearing did not show.

"You two watch Chemistry and Habeas," he instructed. "Ham and I are going out for a short while."

The two slipped out another door. They were grinning, well pleased with themselves. Getting out of the hotel offered a minor problem, but they finally got out a back way without being spotted.

Monk thought he made a good-looking Chinese. Ham had his doubts. Both were clad in long, flowing robes. Their faces had been tinted and they kept their heads down. If they didn't have to speak Chinese, they figured they could get by.

Merchants of Disasters

Zeke Devine had told where Spardoso and Holst were hiding. It was an address in Chinatown.

Confidently, Monk and Ham made their way there.

What they didn't know was that they had a pursuer, Chemistry was credited with more than average ape brains. That might be doubtful, but he could imitate almost anything he saw done.

He had imitated Monk now. No sooner had the two left, than Chemistry also struggled into a gown. He didn't have a thing for his head, but that didn't bother him.

And no one would ever mistake his hairy cranium for the skull of a Chinese.

Monk and Ham had almost reached their destination when Chemistry caught up with them.

The ape gibbered with satisfaction, expecting praise.

Monk groaned. Even Ham said words that Chemistry realized could not be complimentary.

The two men tried to rush on ahead. Chemistry wasn't having any of that. He kept up with them.

Chemistry had been spotted sometime back. His affection for Monk was well known.

The chemist and dapper lawyer were hampered by the robes when thugs jumped them. So was Chemistry.

They all put up a good fight, under the circumstances, but not good enough.

"You and your screwy ideas!" Ham shouted.

"And you and your fool ape!" Monk moaned.

They didn't say anything more for quite a while. Slugged unconscious, they were hauled into a dark doorway, then down into a cellar. After that, they were carried through winding halls far underground.

Chemistry went with them.

Chapter 18. A SECRET REVEALED

MANY other strange figures were drifting through Chinatown. These were not as conspicuous as Chemistry had been.

The spies for foreign powers had worked swiftly when they sought information. And their sources were good. It did not take them long to gain a general idea of the territory where their quarry was hidden.

Most of the men knew each other. They had met in many strange lands.

In particular, there was a towering individual, evidently a Russian, a hearty, good-natured chap. He appeared to know all of those now in the search. In fact he had tipped off most of them.

The Russian drifted from one to another, spoke briefly. It was plain, he pointed out, that all were after the same thing. Fine! None wanted either the Chinese or the Japanese in possession of such a death weapon.

Merchants of Disasters

Why not then, he suggested, join forces in the present search? When the search was successful, then they could toss dice, shoot it out in a dark room, or try any other plan they wanted until finally the winner was decided upon – the winner to have the secret.

Surprisingly, all agreed. Each could see where cooperation now would be of no harm – in fact, it would be an advantage in keeping track of the progress of the others.

Then, when the secret was located – that would be a different proposition. Each was busy scheming how he would outwit the others.

It was the big Russian who led the way toward tile building where Monk and Ham had disappeared. He, also, gave directions. The men scattered. Trained at moving silently and without attracting attention, the force dissipated.

But they all began moving toward one central point.

The big Russian appeared satisfied. He also vanished. In the darkness, none had noticed that the Russian had gold-flecked eyes.

But in getting things going, there was one point Doc had missed, also.

He hadn't seen Monk and Ham overpowered. And Long Tom, at the hotel, did not dare send a message to Doc telling that the two had disappeared, since such a message would be known at once to Spardoso and Holst.

Monk and Ham had been in Chinese hide-outs before. They thought they had never seen a more expensively furnished one – or one they cared about less.

Oriental tapestries were on the walls. There was a Thick rug on the floor and the faint smell of opium in the air. No sound entered the big room at all, indicating it was some distance under the ground.

Silent figures stood on guard at the four doors leading from the room.

Steel bands were locked about Ham's arms, fastening him upright in a high-backed chair. Other bands encircled his ankles and legs of the chair. Monk was similarly held.

The air was sultry and close, the position uncomfortable. Ham's eyes opened slowly and painfully. There was a big knot on top of his head.

The Chinese kimono Monk had worn was torn and twisted, giving him a ludicrous appearance. As Ham's eyes sought him, the hairy chemist tried to hide his face.

"You should," Ham complained bitterly.

A whimpering sound came from Chemistry. The ape also was held fast by steel bands.

Monk and Ham twisted their heads painfully to look at him. For the first time they became aware of the third prisoner in the room.

Paul Payne was the picture of dejection. His chin was sunk on his chest. Tears of futile anger glistened on his battered cheeks.

Merchants of Disasters

A gleam of Interest flicked in Monk's tiny eyes. Family resemblance made it clear that here was the father of Olivia Payne.

"Take it easy, fellow," he urged gruffly. "Doc Savage will get you out of this. He'll get us all out."

Payne's head came up. For a moment there was a flicker of hope in his eyes, then hope died. He shook his head.

"Not even Doc Savage can undo what I have done," he said wearily.

Ham looked startled. "You aren't really mixed up in this mass murder, are you?" the lawyer asked.

Payne gave a slow negative. "No, but it's just as bad. Others have my secret now. I ... I talked."

For a moment it appeared the inventor would break down entirely. "They gave me truth serum, forced the secret from me, when I could not help myself."

"But – "

"I know, you are going to say truth serum doesn't always work. But this serum was concocted by Doc Savage himself, and taken from him by Carl Zolg."

A queer look flashed to Ham's eyes. He looked at Monk. The hairy chemist managed a grin.

"Why that – " he started. Then he stopped. Leon Spardoso and Grant Holst had entered the room noiselessly.

"The master villains themselves!" Ham jeered. Spardoso chuckled mirthlessly. Holst rubbed his hands together. "I do not think you three will be with us long," Holst rumbled. He turned toward Payne.

"Our men are at work now. In just a few moments we will know definitely whether you told us the truth or not. If you did – " He grimaced.

"You mean you are testing the secret Payne gave you under the influence of the truth serum?" Ham asked innocently.

"Exactly," Spardoso snarled. "After that – "

Spardoso stopped speaking. Everyone stopped speaking. No one would have heard them if they had spoken.

There was a terrific explosion from somewhere close at hand. The shrieks of men in agony mingled with the crash of shattered furniture and glassware.

SPARDOSO and Holst ran from the room. Only the guards at the four doors remained motionless, and their eyes were wide.

Blank astonishment was on Paul Payne's face. He did not seem to comprehend what had happened.

An "I-expected-it" look settled over Ham's features. Monk didn't look exactly displeased.

"As I started to say," the hairy chemist went on, "I helped prepare that truth serum."

Merchants of Disasters

"But it worked! I told all I knew! What could have happened? What is wrong?" Paul Payne was almost hysterical.

"Yeah, it worked all right," Monk grinned. "But you didn't tell what they wanted to know. You must have given them the formula for some explosive."

"But ... but – " Payne didn't understand.

"That wasn't a 'truth serum,' it was a 'lie serum,'" Monk explained patiently.

"Doc knew there was always the chance that one of us would be caught sometime, and an effort made to use our own stuff to force us to talk. We fixed up a serum that makes you batty for a time. You couldn't tell the truth after using it, even if you wanted to do so. That was the bottle Zolg swiped with the label 'truth serum' on it."

Paul Payne's expression slowly changed. He smiled. "As Olivia would say: 'Oh, boy!'" he gasped.

Monk became serious. "We're not out of the woods. In fact, there is no telling what they'll try now, if Doc don't hurry – "

He broke off. Spardoso and Holst had returned to the room. The face of the chunky man was horrible to see. It was contorted with terrible rage. Spardoso's features were white, his cold black eyes deadly.

Carl Zolg, who followed them into the room, appeared almost frightened.

Neither Spardoso nor Holst spoke. The chunky man walked up to Payne, slapped the inventor hard across the face.

An inarticulate squeal of rage came from Monk. He strained futilely at the steel bands that held him. Ham's eyes narrowed, his fists clenched.

"Dang it! If you hurt that guy – " Monk began.

Holst gestured sharply. Two guards stepped forward. Before Monk or Ham realized what was happening, they had been gagged.

They could do nothing except squirm helplessly at what followed.

Holst worked with the speed and precision of a medieval torturer.

Payne was stripped. His body was spread-eagled on a flat table, face upward. Holst drew a knife. Brutally, he jabbed a small hole in the flesh on either side of Payne's waist. He put a third hole almost in the center of the stomach.

The punctures were not deep, but they bled freely. Pure agony dampened the inventor's brow.

Without pause, Holst produced a peculiar, tri-pronged instrument. One prong was put in each of the three holes. There were set-screws at the top of the instrument. As Holst turned a master screw, each prong was driven slowly into Payne's body.

Merchants of Disasters

Neither Monk nor Ham ever cared to remember what followed. They were helpless. Payne's shrieks of pain beat into their eardrums.

Payne was brave. He had not been boasting when he had said earlier that he could stand much. Monk, burly as he was, wondered if he could have stood what the slim-bodied inventor did.

But there are limits to endurance. Payne reached that limit. He talked.

This time he told the truth.

Guns roared, not far away. There were sudden, startled yells and more shots.

Holst, still leaning over Payne, an expression of satanic delight on his face, jerked erect. It took several moments for the killing lust to leave his face.

Payne had fainted, had gained temporary release from the agony biting his vitals.

Monk and Ham were weak. Unconsciously, they had been straining continuously with all their strength.

Usually, even in the heat of combat, the lawyer and the chemist felt little emotion toward their foes. This time it was different. Trained as they were in Doc's precepts against killing, had they been free they would have been unable to restrain themselves.

Spardoso, always quickest to act, leaped for a door at the first sound of struggle outside. He stayed there only an instant.

Noise of combat was coming closer. Spardoso whirled, darted toward another door. Carl Zolg raced after him.

"Time to go!" Spardoso rapped harshly.

Holst whirled. A knife came back to his hand. He darted across the room, lifted the knife to drive it into Monk's chest.

A furry thunderbolt launched itself across the room. Chemistry's four feet were shackled, but there was nothing wrong with the powerful muscles of his legs.

His hurtling body crashed against that of Holst, knocking the chunky man aside. Holst lashed out desperately, but missed.

A door smashed open. A huge giant who looked like a Russian started in. The guard fired at him. To miss seemed impossible, but the Russian merely reached out, seized the gun, then knocked the guard unconscious.

Holst squealed with sudden panic. Others might be deceived, Holst was not. He recognized Doc Savage.

Doc paused for just an instant, one hand darting to his pocket. He made a throwing motion.

Nothing apparently happened. Holst darted out the door and vanished.

Doc did not pursue. The gun he had taken from the guard swung in his hand. The three other guards did not hesitate. They fled.

Sounds of fighting increased. The raiders evidently were encountering strong opposition.

Swiftly, Doc freed his aids. Strong clippers in his enormously powerful hands sheared through the thin steel bands. Chemistry likewise was loosed.

"Out!" Doc ordered.

The bronze man seized Payne's body, carrying it carefully and tenderly.

Monk and Ham would have left by the door Doc entered. The bronze man didn't. He chose another exit.

They ran through winding, twisting hallways, dimly lighted, and up flights of stairs.

Occasionally someone tried to bar their way. These, Monk obliged. He worked off part of his overwhelming anger in that way.

They were almost at the street when the expected happened. There was another explosion.

Spardoso and Holst were running true to form. As Doc had anticipated, they had this hide-away also ready to destroy if occasion warranted.

Chapter 19. MERCHANTS OF DISASTER

PAUL PAYNE was in urgent need of medical attention. Despite the desire of Doc's aids to pursue Spardoso and Holst, they realized Payne must come first.

Doc did not pause. He took Payne at once to their hotel.

Then the bronze man's wonderful medical skill came into play. Payne's body had suffered terribly, the nervous system had received shocks that might even have killed a younger man.

Doc worked with him carefully and patiently, calling on his tremendous knowledge to ease the other's suffering in every way possible.

Olivia Payne had paled when she first saw her father's battered form. She rallied, gave what assistance she could.

Long Tom listened to Monk and Ham. The electrical expert almost said understandable words when he learned they had been so close to the men they sought, but had been unable to capture them, while he had been idle.

Chemistry appeared trying to give a play-by-play account to Habeas. At least, that was how Ham explained it. The dapper attorney did not feel like joking, but he wanted to get his mind off the suffering he had witnessed.

Ham felt also that he was beginning to get an inkling of what it was all about. Pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place. If he was right, the need was for fast action.

Doc acted fast. Paul Payne soon recovered consciousness. Under Doc's treatment, strength appeared to come to the inventor.

Merchants of Disasters

The bronze man issued swift orders. His aids jumped to obey.

Chemistry and Habeas were locked in a room. Doc was taking no chances of another mishap being caused by the animals.

Olivia Payne was instructed to remain with her father, Then Doc led the way to the street, engaged a big, open car.

His aids wondered how he knew where they were to go. Comprehension came a moment later.

Doc produced a small, peculiar-appearing compass. The needle of the compass swung northeast. The bronze man gave orders to the driver.

Monk and Ham remembered the tossing movement Doc had made when Holst was fleeing. The rest was easy to figure. Doc could have caught the chunky man, but he had wanted to bag all the gang at one time.

And when his arm had moved he had thrown a pulverized powder of a rare mineral found In South America, which clung to Holst's coat. The mineral had unusual magnetic qualities. Through use of the special compass Doc had devised he could follow the flight of anyone he sought. The powder often was easier to use than the marble mechanism he had slipped in Zolg's pocket.

By watching the compass, Doc could follow the trail of those he sought. It was a trick he had used before.

They had been riding for some time when the needle in the compass started jiggling rapidly.

They were on Golden Gate Bridge.

Doc had given the driver of their car money in advance. Afterward, the driver figured this was a break for him. He happened to look around as he drove off the huge bridge on the Mann County side.

His passengers had disappeared.

The Golden Gate Bridge is the longest of its type in the world. Renny could have quoted statistics for an hour in describing the many unusual features of its construction.

It has a center span of forty-two hundred feet, held up by enormous cables. These cables pass over four huge towers, seven hundred and forty-six feet high.

It was one of these towers that held the attention of Doc and his men. The needle of Doc's compass pointed directly toward it.

The answer was simple. But Doc, then, did a strange thing. He whipped a pair of glasses from his pocket, leaned back until he could study the gigantic cables, high in the air.

He crossed the bridge swiftly, vanished skyward.

His aids asked no question. They did not have to. They knew now where the men they sought were hidden. They knew also what they had to do.

They entered the tower.

Merchants of Disasters

The towers were unique, unlike those of any other bridge in the world. They consist of five thousand and four cells, constructed in the most involved, intricate manner conceivable.

The builders had not purposely created a jigsaw puzzle, they had been concerned only with stresses and strains. But the result had been the same.

An elevator led upward from the bottom. To reach some of the cells it was necessary to take that elevator to one point, then climb up and down ladders, through manholes, and weave back and forth.

Spardoso and Holst had selected one of the best hiding places in the world.

Workmen told of two of their number getting lost in one of the towers while the bridge was being built. They were not found until next day.

Monk, Ham and Long Tom soon believed this.

Doc had left them his compass. It was a help, but not much.

Travel in a straight line was impossible. Then Long Tom made a discovery. It was a discarded manual, dropped by some workman. It contained twenty-six pages of directions.

Using flashlights, their progress after that was more rapid.

And then they halted. They had reached another small room. But this one, unlike those they had passed before, was not vacant.

It was filled with strange objects, as if on display. Everyone of those objects was an instrument of war.

A gasp came from Monk. The hairy chemist's small eyes stared. There was an improved type of flame-thrower, small models of big guns, planes, tanks and weird floating nets.

Also there was a model of what the United States army had regarded as its most closely guarded secret. It was a model of the automatic bomb-sighter, the only one ever developed that insured absolute accuracy in bombing from great heights.

Ham's face was hard. The hunch he had had was being proven correct.

And then they all froze. From some place, not far away, came a faint sound of voices.

Cautiously, they crept up one ladder, through another cell, then down two more ladders.

The voices grew louder. They were the voices of Leon Spardoso, Grant Holst and Carl Zolg.

Doc's action had been swifter than those of his aids, but they would have puzzled an observer more.

He went to the top of the seven-hundred-and-forty-six foot tower. Then he went along one of the huge cables.

Had he been seen, he probably would have been accused of sabotage. He had the powerful wire clippers in his hand.

Merchants of Disasters

With the grace and speed of an acrobat, he moved down the swaying cable. A tugboat hooted below. A freighter moved slowly out of the mouth of the harbor.

The freighter appeared a toy boat, far beneath. A fall would mean instant death.

Doc Savage moved on the wind-swayed cable as easily as on a sidewalk. And as he moved, he used the clippers.

Wire fell away beneath him.

The bronze man crossed the full four thousand two hundred feet to the big tower at the other end of the span.

Then he turned. He practically ran back across the cable. A moment more and he had entered the tower where his aids had vanished. He descended rapidly.

For the moment, his aids had forgotten even that Doc had vanished. They were too intent on what they were hearing.

"The messengers are on their way," came Spardoso's voice.

"And we'll take them one by one, make each think he alone is doing the buying," Holst chuckled. The short, chunky man seemed over his irritation.

"A fortune!" came Carl Zolg's voice.

"Certainly a fortune," Spardoso said contemptuously. "But it's worth it. We had to kill a lot to put this thing over. These babies are getting tough to convince anymore. But all of them saw our two-ah-demonstrations. They are all eager to buy."

Monk's stubby fingers bit hard into Ham's arm. "Wait," the lawyer whispered.

"I think I'll retire after this," Holst said reflectively. "The hazards for freelancers are getting tougher, and this will net enough to satisfy all of us."

Long Tom said nothing. But light had dawned. The conversation, coupled with what they had seen a few minutes before, spoke for itself.

Spardoso and Holst were spies. But they worked not for patriotism, not for any particular country, but for greed.

That they had a widespread organization had been shown. Now the reason was apparent. They stole secrets from everyone – they sold to everyone.

They thought nothing of mass murder if it meant money for them. They advertised their wares where they knew there was a market, and trafficked in death.

They were true "merchants of disaster."

SPARDOSO moved. From where Doc's aids were hidden, they could not see, but they could hear.

Merchants of Disasters

A dynamo began to hum. It seemed incredible that all this could have been hidden in a bridge tower. But Doc's aids had long ago learned that nothing was impossible.

The equipment here undoubtedly had been raised from a boat below, to avoid detection. And the towers evidently were not inspected.

Monk's fingers gripped tighter on Ham's arm. They came down so hard that the dapper lawyer flinched in spite of himself.

The reason for the humming dynamo became apparent "I think we can collect twice, in some places," Spardoso was saying calmly.

"We'll radio our agents abroad. They can get busy at once."

Ham's muscles tensed. Long Tom's short, thin frame bunched.

A powerful radio! They should have suspected it! The bridge could be used excellently for that purpose.

The three reached for their mercy pistols, moved forward.

Once the secret of the mystery death was sent on the air, nothing could stop future disasters. The spreading of the secret had to be stopped.

Monk wondered briefly what had become of Carl Zolg. Zolg had spoken only once, then seemingly had gone away. Then Monk forgot all about the renegade.

A soft voice spoke behind them. "Wait!" said Doc Savage.

His aids stopped. They did not even show surprise at the bronze man's sudden appearance, or wonder how he had solved the complicated cell system so rapidly.

They knew how excellent his memory was, and knew that he had once studied the bridge plans. That was explanation enough.

A startled exclamation came from Spardoso. Then the tall, lean man with the hard black eyes swore furiously.

"Something's wrong. The aerial isn't working," he snapped. The breath went out of Long Tom suddenly. He knew, now, what Doc had been doing.

"It is impossible to get in at them from here," Doc whispered. He moved, led the way swiftly.

An alarm sounded loudly.

Monk said words under his breath. Spardoso and Holst took no chances. They even had a protective system here.

Doc did not hesitate. He dashed forward, the others right behind him.

Spardoso and Holst had whirled, grabbed weapons that lay beside them. Those weapons came up as they heard the approach of running feet.

A moment more and Doc and his aids would be on them. Their bulletproof underwear would protect them from harm unless they were shot through the head.

They did not even pause to consider that danger. Spardoso and Holst had to be stopped.

And then came a scream. Olivia Payne was pushed into the cell with Spardoso and Holst, held firmly by Carl Zolg.

A gun blasted. Lead smacked into metal.

Spardoso leaped, reached down a manhole and tugged. Paul Payne's squirming figure was pulled into view. Spardoso knocked a gun from Payne's hand.

Holst knew an advantage when he saw one. He darted behind Olivia Payne, put his gun at her head, just as Doc and his aids bounded into the room.

"Surrender, or I'll kill the girl!" Holst snapped.

Chapter 20. A NEW REMEDY NEEDED

FOR a moment there was absolute silence. Everyone stood as if a human statue.

In that moment, Monk wondered again, curiously, where Zolg had been during most of the time they had been listening to the others talk.

There was a peculiar, half-triumphant look on Zolg's pale features.

He undoubtedly had been some place else in the tower, and had caught the girl as she crept near.

Neither Monk nor the others wondered why Olivia and her father happened to be there. The answer was self-evident.

Even while Doc had been tending Payne's wounds, the Inventor had been voicing threats. The treatment he had undergone at the hands of Holst, coupled with the loss of his secret, had filled the old man with deadly rage.

He had sworn, and repeated, that he would get Zolg. Despite his condition, it was apparent he had prevailed upon his daughter to help him trail Doc and his men.

That trailing had been successful – too successful. A few moments more and it all would have been over. The mass murderers would have been captured.

Now, all was lost.

For there was no doubt as to what Doc's decision would be. His aids knew it, even before the bronze man raised his hands and spoke quietly.

"We surrender," Doc said.

Holst smiled, a smile of victory. He had always heard Doc Savage would make any sacrifice to save a woman

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from harm. Holst had doubted that. It wasn't according to his code.

But he had taken the chance the report was right. He had gambled, as he saw it, and had won.

Weapons dropped from the hands of the bronze man's aids.

Holst shifted the muzzle of his weapon. Such a chance might never come again. He intended to shoot the bronze man between the eyes.

Ham was watching Doc. The bronze man did not appear to move, but he gave the impression of a spring coiled for instant action.

Doc saw the weapon alter its position. A quick acting anaesthetic bomb came to his hand. He could crush that, leap before Grant Holst could attempt to carry out his threat to kill the girl.

No one was watching Paul Payne. It was the inventor who went into action first.

Payne's eyes had never left Carl Zolg. From some place Payne produced a second weapon. He gave a half-choked cry of rage.

Blam!

The weapon spouted fire.

PAUL PAYNE intended to kill Carl Zolg. He was a better inventor than he was a pistol shot. The bullet tore through Zolg's pocket, but did not harm him.

But the speeding lead did not miss all targets.

Grant Holst crumpled slowly. Crimson spurted from the back of his coat. The bullet had caught him through the heart.

Other shots came suddenly. Some of the spies' men had returned, attempted to save their employers.

Olivia Payne dropped to the floor to escape flying lead. Doc's aids swooped up their mercy pistols.

Their bull-fiddle roar filled the small room. But only for a moment.

The first shots missed Spardoso and the master spy went into action. He jumped to one side, pressed a button.

The room was plunged into darkness. Ham and Long Tom whipped out flashlights, snapped them on.

The flashlights did no good. A second button had been pressed by the lean, black-eyed man. The room was filled with dense smoke.

Firing ceased. No one dared shoot again for fear of killing a friend.

And then the weird, strange flashes appeared!

From some place nearby there was the sound of a manhole cover clanging and a lock snapping. No one but Doc Savage noticed.

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Monk found that he could not breathe. He could hear Ham and Long Tom also gasping for breath. A half-strangled sound came from the girl.

The hairy chemist moved blindly, In the darkness he could not find the door by which they had entered, would not have used it if he could, without taking his friends along.

This was it, he thought. This was the end. The murderous weapon that had killed hundreds was to claim a few more victims.

And then he gasped. His head felt clear, suddenly. His straining lungs drew in great gasps of fresh, pure air. The smoke dissolved, and lights came on.

"I am sorry it was impossible to act sooner," came the calm tones of Doc Savage.

There were figures strewn about the room. Many were those of the spies' aids, mowed down by mercy bullets.

Olivia Payne was clutching her father's head in her arms. The inventor was gasping weakly.

Spardoso and Carl Zolg had vanished!

"They tried the death weapon on us! What was it?" Long Tom burst out.

Monk sighed. "I can tell you that much. I knew what it was when I heard Mr. Payne reciting his chemical formula. He found something no other chemist ever has found, a vital secret."

"And that?"

"An oxygen destroyer," Monk said simply.

THE hairy chemist paused dramatically. "Doc evidently has known for some time. He prepared an antidote, or we wouldn't still be alive. Isn't that correct, Doc?"

The bronze man nodded. "It was clear from the beginning," he said, "that a chemical of some kind was being used that temporarily destroyed the oxygen in the air. Everything In nature has its natural enemy. Paul Payne found the enemy of oxygen. That was why the soldiers suffocated."

"But you saved us," Olivia Payne put in.

"I found the counterirritant to the oxygen destroyer," Doc said. "It took a minute or so for that to become effective before I could release pure oxygen and clear the air; that is why you were subjected to so much discomfort."

Monk's piggish eyes glowed. Doc made it sound simple. The hairy chemist knew the bronze man had really performed a wonderful scientific feat In finding how to nullify the terrifying death weapon.

He could understand other things, also.

Dropped in the form of time bombs, set to be exploded by atmospheric pressure at a certain height, the oxygen destroyer caused the weird fireworks display that had been reported by observers. All within range perished for lack of air.

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Doc had escaped at the hotel because he could hold his breath. Renny and Johnny had been moving through the air, obtained fresh oxygen that way, but the motor of their plane had been stopped because it was inclosed.

The killing of the soldiers, as the others had heard, had been to impress prospective buyers of the deadly secret.

Gas masks were helpless against it. The impression of a receding picture, which observers also had noticed, had been caused by the chemical change in the air.

Ham also had been thinking. "But Zolg was in the room with you, Doc, when he tried to kill you," he objected. "Our oxygen pills didn't work. So what saved him?"

"The oxygen pills did not work if they had been exposed to the destroyer," Doc corrected.

"As for Zolg, he had a large pipe in his mouth. Unless I am mistaken, he was obtaining fresh oxygen from a tube hidden in the large bowl of that pipe."

"And Zolg and Spardoso have escaped!" Long Tom raged.

"Zolg ! Where is that criminal?" Paul Payne shrilled. "We still have failed to stop the peril. There is still work to be done."

Doc said nothing. He went to the manhole cover through which the two had disappeared. After some work, that cover came off. A light was flashed into the cell below.

Huddled there, faces contorted, hands clutching their throats, were Carl Zolg and Leon Spardoso.

"It was Zolg who released the oxygen destroyer this time," Doc explained softly. "He knew Spardoso intended to kill him, so he wanted to act first – and kill us as well.

"Spardoso fled to the room below with Zolg. They locked the door. Zolg released more of the deadly chemical. Zolg expected to save himself again by use of his pipe."

"But he didn't," Ham gasped.

Then the dapper lawyer took another look. He understood how Zolg had paved the way for his own death.

The bullet fired by Paul Payne had torn through the bowl of the big pipe before it struck Grant Holst.

INFORMATION found in other cells of the bridge tower brought quick arrests of all who had worked for Spardoso and Holst. They merely were summoned to headquarters in various cities by use of the infra-ray signals, then arrested.

In Europe, there were some executions. Prospective buyers of the oxygen destroyer were met by Doc's aids as they approached the bridge tower. A majority of these were deported.

Paul Payne recovered rapidly, to find himself a hero. Doc Savage had given Payne most of the credit for wiping out the "merchants of disaster."

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As soon as he could, Payne went to Washington. There he intrusted his secret to the war department. It was placed with other formulas of death devices considered too barbaric to use by the United States.

It was in Washington that Monk again saw Olivia Payne. All Doc's men were present in the war secretary's office as they received the government's thanks.

Monk wasn't interested in that. It took considerable maneuvering, but he finally got Olivia in a corner. With her curls framing her face, her lips looking more kissable than ever, she had never appeared more attractive.

Monk was flustered. But for once in his life he could talk. He talked at length.

Ham watched, a sly grin on his face. That grin broadened as he saw Olivia Payne slowly shake her head. She thought no one else saw, but she stole a quick glance at Doc. The look in her eyes then was the one Monk wanted to see.

The hairy chemist wandered discouraged to a window. Ham sidled next to him.

"You are a great chemist, aren't you, Lieutenant Mayfair?" he asked politely.

"What of it?" snapped Monk.

"Nothing," Ham said innocently. "But I have thought of one more discovery the world needs. One that would save the lives of many."

"What's that?" Monk growled suspiciously.

"If an oxygen destroyer can be found, then this discovery can be made also," the dapper lawyer grinned. "And you're just the man to do the job."

"What the world in general, and one Lieutenant Mayfair in particular, should have, is not the oxygen destroyer – but a love inspirer."

THE END