

THE DERRICK DEVIL

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. THE FLOWING RED DEVIL

THE man carried a .30-30 rifle in one hand and two boxes of cartridges, both open, in the other hand. He acted as if ready to drop the cartridges and use the rifle any instant.

The girl had a shotgun.

"I've got a hunch guns ain't a lot of good against this thing!" the man muttered.

"What's the matter, Reservoir?" the girl asked. "Believe in hobgoblins?"

It was too dark to tell much about them, only that the man was tall and skinny, except for his middle, which was big around, making him like a snake that had swallowed an egg. A nice snake, of course.

The girl was about the right size, and if she didn't have a good form, the darkness lied. It was impossible to tell about her coloring.

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"I still maintain I saw something coming out of the casing of that wildcat well, Miss Vida," the man muttered. "Reservoir Hill may be old, but he ain't going nuts!"

The girl laughed. It was, somehow, not a very enthusiastic mirth.

"Sam Sands was to watch the well until midnight," she said. "It's eleven. Time you and I were relieving Sam."

Holding the rifle with his finger in the trigger guard, the man shuffled off. The girl took long strides and kept at his side.

Tall, dry grass brushed their field boots. Leaves of scrub oak rustled in the night breeze. Over in the hills somewhere, an owl was making a racket.

They topped the small hill and before them the spidery thin pyramid of an oil well derrick stood reared against the cloudy night sky. A modern pipe derrick, and the drilling rig was evidently a rotary.

The well was not a producer, because the breeze was coming from that direction and it carried, instead of the smell of crude oil, the odors usually found around drilling wells.

"Reservoir" Hill stopped.

The girl waited, but when he did not move or speak, she grew impatient. "Well!"

"We've got the wildcat shut down because our boss driller has disappeared," Reservoir Hill said, slowly.

"Well?" the girl said again, sharply.

"I've got a horrible suspicion," continued Reservoir Hill, "that we've already found our driller!"

THE girl was puzzled. She held her shotgun in the crook of her elbow and eyed her companion. A stray beam of moonlight came through a crack in passing clouds to illuminate the man. He looked as if the ends of him had been squeezed to make him big in the middle.

"What are you driving at, Reservoir?"

"Remember that gummy stuff we found in the gully below the drilling rig? It was near where we found the clothes our driller was wearin'—when he—well, when he disappeared."

"That was just old lube or grease that somebody had scraped out there."

"It wasn't lube," Reservoir Hill said, shuddering.

"No?"

"I know lube oil." Reservoir Hill wet his lips. "I've worked in refineries too many years not to know grease or lube. This stuff looks more like—well—" He fell silent.

"Like what?"

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Reservoir Hill gave a large shrug.

"Forget it! When they have been in the oil fields as long as I have, they sometimes got funny!"

The two of them walked toward the drilling rig. It was a complete outfit, even more modern on close examination. Everything was in readiness for the striking of oil, catch dams have been thrown across gullies with fresnos.

It was a steam rig, and the boiler was located far enough away that a possible unexpected outpouring of natural gas from the well would not be likely to reach the boiler fires before they could be extinguished by a supply of water which was kept close at hand. Steam was brought from the boiler to the machinery at the well by pipe.

And oil field scouts, fellows who know their business, would have said that here was a wildcat drilling outfit which knew what it was doing.

Hill stopped, inhaled until his chest was almost half as big as his stomach, and blasted a yell.

"Sam!" he howled. "Sam! Where are you?"

Echoes came gobbling back from the red oak carpeted hills.

"Tsk! Tsk!"

the girl clucked. "You must think Sam's over by Ponca City or somewhere!"

They waited. Night breeze seemed to have suddenly stopped rustling the red oak leaves, but it might have been a freak of the night.

Reservoir Hill growled, "Well! Didn't answer, did he?"

The girl had become concerned.

"Sam can't be asleep! Your yell must have made half the Indian warriors in the Osage sit up in their graves!"

They ran forward, guns ready. The man, Reservoir Hill, produced a big, shiny flashlight which gave poor light and not much of it. The light immediately found shiny substance on the ground.

Reservoir Hill stared. His throat made a rasping noise more eloquent than any other sound could have been.

"Them's Sam's clothes, ain't they?" he croaked.

THE male clothing—hat, shirt, coat, trousers, socks, heavy oil field shoes—lay exactly in a position they would occupy if the former wearer had lain down on his back and his body had become nonexistent.

The shirt was inside the coat, with the shirt sleeves down inside the coat sleeves in a natural manner. The socks were even inside the shoes.

"Ah-h-h!"

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Reservoir Hill growled. He sounded as if trying to bolster his own courage.

The girl eyed him curiously. "Why are you scared? This is a practical joke! It's too silly to be anything else!"

"Humph!" Reservoir Hill, to avoid the question, walked forward with his flashlight.

He took only a few paces before he wrenched to a rigid halt. His throat made its queer noise.

The girl ran forward, stood at his side and stared at what he had found.

"Some one had dumped more of that queer-looking grease," she said.

Reservoir Hill wet his lips. "Listen! Our boss driller disappeared! We can't find him anywhere! But we find this gummy stuff!"

"I still say it's grease!"

"I haven't been working with crude oil and things for nothing, all my life," growled Reservoir Hill. "And I know this ain't grease!"

"What is it then?"

"Ain't quite ready to say what I think it is!" Reservoir Hill mumbled.

"Why not?"

"Don't like to scare women when there maybe ain't no need!"

"I was brought up on Indian massacre stories," the girl said, dryly. She was calm enough to make it seem as if she had been, too.

Reservoir Hill skulked forward. Silhouetted against the glare of his own flashlight beam, he was like a caricature of an old Indian fighter on the trail of a hostile redskin. He threw his light over toward the derrick.

He lifted his .30-30 and flame and noise came out of its muzzle.

The girl ran forward. "What is it?"

"Going into the well casing!" Reservoir Hill shrieked. "Throw my flashlight on the darn thing!"

The girl grabbed his flashlight, pointed its poor light in the direction of the derrick floor and the drilling casing which stuck upward in the center. The light was extremely weak.

"Battery about gone!" she complained. "I can't see—!"

Then she saw. Maybe she had been brought up on tales of Indian massacres, but the scream she poured out now would have done justice to the most easily frightened maid.

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THE thing going into the oil well casing had substantial reality to it, that was certain. It was not transparent, like a jelly. It flowed as some jellies will melt and flow when dropped on a hot stove. It was going into the sixteen-inch casing.

Color of the flowing mass was red.

"Whatever it is, we'll stop it!" The girl's shotgun banged hugely, banged again. Louder than the .30-30, it did not have as ugly a sound.

But the translucent red mass disappeared down the casing.

The girl and Reservoir Hill dashed forward, weapons ready. There was no sign of the red mass on the derrick floor.

Reservoir Hill touched the steel casing pipe. He wrenched his hand back, leaped to one side, grabbed up a fistful of waste and scrubbed his palm furiously.

"There's gooey stuff on the casing!" he howled.

The girl looked closely. The "gooey stuff" was there. She did not touch it.

There were other marks on the casing. Shiny streaks left by lead! Big streaks made by the .30-30 slugs, and small ones where the shotgun slugs had hit.

The girl said, hoarsely, "Our bullets hit everywhere!"

"Hah!" Reservoir Hill took the flashlight out of her hand, and turned it on the derrick floor. "Look! A trail of the gooey stuff!"

The girl said, "Let's follow it."

They followed it to the mysterious, shapeless mass they had found on the ground—the stuff that looked like grease, and yet didn't.

Then the smeared path continued on to the clothes lying on the ground.

"It goes right to Sam Sand's duds!" Reservoir Hill dropped to a knee, explored briefly, then gulped, "Vida!"

"What?" asked the girl.

"The gooey stuff is all over Sam's clothes!"

There was rustling of leaves and crackling of dry twigs in the red oak thicket near by. This sound proved to be made by two men, who soon galloped up.

Reservoir Hill used his weak flashlight to identify the newcomers.

"Ah-h-h!"

he grunted. "Andershott and Cugg! Practically nobody!"

Chapter II. THE MAN NEEDED

ENOCH ANDERSHOTT was a man who strove for the effect of a rugged pioneer. He was big. His ruggedness stuck out all over him. His clothes were calculated to enhance the rugged aspect. Tweeds. He had a small mouth wrapped around a big cigar. His red face was redder because of running, and his breathing was a *wish-wish-wish* series of noises.

"Give me those guns!" he yelled. "Your bullets almost hit our cabin! Such carelessness is inexcusable!"

Which was typical of Enoch Andershott, who was always trying to browbeat some one.

Alonzo Cugg had big eyes with a permanent scare deep in them, and a way of holding his hands as if ready to sprint. No one knew of any reason why he had ever been scared of any one or why he should be. He seemed about one hundred and thirty pounds of skin over wires, and was about two shades lighter than a khaki shirt.

A big black dog came out of the red oak brush, making no noise. The dog was nearly pony size and had bloodshot eyes. The canine lifted a whiskered black lip off nicotine yellow fangs that were more than an inch long.

"Heel, Whitey!" ordered Enoch Andershott arrogantly.

The black dog skulked to Andershott's heels. There was no white whatever on the dog.

Enoch Andershott and Alonzo Cugg owned an adjacent oil lease. They had scouted the Sam Sands-Vida Carlaw-Reservoir Hill drilling wildcat and a geologist had told them that the way the strata was running, there might be an oil dome under this region, a few thousand feet under the old production. So Andershott and Cugg were here in person, keeping an eye on things.

The oil blue book listed both as millionaires.

"You might have shot us!" Enoch Andershott yelled.

"You got a cellar over there you can get in?" suggested Reservoir Hill sourly.

No one said anything for a while.

"What was happening?" Andershott growled.

"At risk of being called crazy," said the girl, "I'm going to tell you.

"Our driller, Ben Hogan, disappeared last night. We'd shut down drilling when a broken gear we'd ordered hadn't come. Ben Hogan took a walk. We never saw him again. We found his clothes. There's no reason why he should walk off naked—"

"You're forgetting that gummy stuff!" interposed Reservoir Hill.

"We found some stuff that looked like jelly or lube or something on the ground," explained the girl. "To-night, Reservoir Hill wanted to post a watch at the well. Sam Sands had first part of the night."

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THE girl fell silent, looked at the dog. The dog's eyes were luminous green and almost awful in the weak flashlight's glow.

"We came out to relieve Sam Sands, found his clothing, saw a red object going into the oil well, and shot at it," the girl finished.

"We found another gob of that gummy stuff and it ain't lube oil!" added Reservoir Hill.

Enoch Andershott asked, "Miss Carlaw, were you here last night when your driller disappeared?"

"No."

"Then you just have this man Reservoir Hill's word for it?"

"Bless my children!" growled Reservoir Hill. "I'm gonna pat your wrist for that!"

Reservoir Hill started forward, and the big black dog came walking, stiff-legged, from behind Enoch Andershott. The dog made, deep inside himself, sounds like something dying. His fangs curved inward like a snake.

"Heel, Whitey!" said Enoch Andershott.

The dog stopped, but did not cover the fangs with lips.

Nobody spoke. Alarm in Alonzo Cugg's eyes had increased; his hands were more than ever in position for running.

"If there's more reckless shooting," said Enoch Andershott shrilly, "we'll call the sheriff!"

That seemed what they had come over to say. They walked away.

There was considerable crashing of brush when they went away, as if Enoch Andershott were smashing his path through instead of making any effort to go around.

"He does everything alike!" growled Reservoir Hill. "Just bulls through!"

The girl murmured, "You don't like him?"

"He flimflammed me out of my first stake," growled Reservoir Hill. "I had a lease over by Bartlesville, years ago. Enoch Andershott, a young man then, was my driller. He came into Bartlesville one night and told me the tools were lost in the hole.

"I didnt have money enough to run a fishing job. I was disgusted. He knew that. Andershott bought me out through another guy for a song. You know what I found out the next day, Viddy?"

"What?"

"My well had hit oil!"

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"I'm sorry," the girl said sympathetically.

"So was I."

On a lease to the north, pumping started up and walking beams squeaked. The sound had an unnatural quality.

The girl and Reservoir Hill poked about with the poor flashlight. They found nothing. Then they walked toward the house.

THE house was one of those oil field things. Wood and corrugated tin. Inside, it was beaver-boarded, and no paint had been used. Floors were bare. Living-room furniture consisted of a table and ten kitchen chairs.

On the table was a deck of cards and an ash tray half full of ashes and cigarette butts. The girl accidentally upset the ash tray when she put her shotgun on the table. Reservoir Hill helped her in cleaning up the mess.

"Wish you'd try to get along with Enoch Andershott," the girl said. "Since he and Cugg have the lease adjoining us."

"We'll be all right!" Hill grunted. "Unless I meet him in a dark cañon when nobody is looking!"

They threw the ash tray mess outdoors.

"Reservoir!" the girl said.

"Huh?"

"Why are you so worried over the disappearance of our driller and Sam?"

Reservoir Hill went to the door and expectorated into the darkness. He had not laid his rifle down. He said, without looking at the girl, "Viddy, did you ever hear of that Indian legend about the papoose that was warned by his mamma not to dig holes in the tepee floor?"

"First time I knew you were interested in native folklore, Reservoir," the girl smiled.

"The papoose dug the hole in the tepee floor, anyway," said Reservoir. "An earth devil that lives in the center of the world sent his mean, red spirit up through the hole and grabbed the little papoose and ate him all up, except his grease, which would fry and sputter in the hot place at the center of the earth."

Reservoir Hill gave the girl a chance to speak, but she didn't seem able to think of anything.

"There's other legends about earth devils who send red spirits up to get men."

"Nonsense!" snapped the girl, "Indians have legends about everything!"

"Not everything!" Reservoir corrected. "And where there's smoke, there's sometimes fire."

"You actually believe such an insane theory?" the girl asked.

"Now look," Reservoir grinned wryly. "Don't be so tough on your old partner."

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The girl got up and paced. "But it's impossible! It's too ridiculous!"

She paced some more, stopped, reached for the cards, and absently turned over the top one. It was a king.

"Reservoir!" she said suddenly. "Did you ever hear of Doc Savage?"

RESERVOIR HILL sat in the chair, tilted it against the wall and balanced the rifle across his knees.

"I guess there ain't many who ain't heard of that fellow. Once I heard that fellow was going to stop his plane for fuel in Tulsa, and I drove up from Okmulgee, hell-bent for election just to see him. Me, who wouldn't cross the road to see Adam eat the apple."

"Did you see Doc Savage?"

"Nope, He had come and gone."

"But you know Savage's reputation, don't you?" Reservoir Hill eyed his rifle. "I know that he has invented a type of drilling bit that I think is gonna come into general use. I've also heard that a lot of geologists use his theories."

"Do you know what his real business is?"

Reservoir Hill wet his lips, did not lift his eyes from the rifle, and said nothing.

The girl continued, "Doc Savage's life work is supposed to be the righting of wrongs, the aiding of oppressed, and fighting crooks whom the law cannot bring to justice."

"I read that somewhere," Reservoir admitted. "I wondered how he made it pay."

"Doc Savage would probably be interested in this."

Reservoir Hill sniffed. "He wouldn't touch a thing so small!"

Outdoors, a man screamed. He was some distance away. His first scream sounded as if it took out some of his throat lining.

In grabbing her rifle off the table, the girl knocked the saucer ash tray to the floor and it broke. She and Reservoir Hill ran outside.

"That squawk was over toward the wildcat derrick!" Reservoir yelled.

They ran in that direction. Before long, they heard a hideous growling and snarling, sounds loud and utterly ferocious.

Enoch Andershott appeared suddenly. He charged toward them.

"Help!" he squawled. "It tried to kill me!"

It was his voice which had screamed.

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He reached Reservoir Hill and the girl and grabbed them both at once.

"A damned jelly thing flowing along the ground!" he screamed. "It almost caught me!"

"Hell!" Reservoir Hill ran toward the oil derrick, holding his inefficient flashlight.

The giant black dog with the fangs came unexpectedly out of the brush, and stalked, snorting, toward Reservoir Hill. Hill spun madly, and beat the dog back to the girl and Enoch Andershott.

"Heel, Whitey!" screamed Andershott, and the dog stopped.

"Keep that durn man-eater here!" growled Reservoir Hill and went back with his flashlight and rifle to search in the darkness.

It was almost fifteen minutes before he finished. "Couldn't find it," he said. "There's another one of them slimy trails coming out of the well casing. It goes around through the brush and back again."

THE giant black dog made hideous slobbering and snarling noises. It had been making them steadily.

Enoch Andershott shuddered. "I was p-prowling around your lease because I didn't believe your story! This thing g-g-got after me! I r-ran!"

"An' didn't fall down!" Reservoir Hill said, gloomily.

Enoch Andershott did not resent the insult. For a man who affected a rugged pioneer air, he looked scared.

"Want us to accompany you to your cabin?" the girl asked.

"If you would!" Enoch Andershott said, gratefully.

Reservoir Hill sniffed.

The cabin on the Andershott and Cugg lease was the customary type. The living room held one rocking chair and only six kitchen chairs. There were no cards on the table. An old pipecap served as an ash tray, and a newspaper was folded so that black headlines showed. The headlines said:

OUTLAW "TOMAHAWK" TANT TRAPPED

POSSES SURROUND ELUSIVE BADMAN

Not much more of the story was readable, because some one had spilled coffee on the paper.

Alonzo Cugg gave them a meaningless stare. Enoch Andershott grunted fiercely at them, having regained his courage. The black dog showed long teeth.

Reservoir Hill said, as he and Vida went back to their own lease, "Fine thanks, we got!"

The girl went into a tiny room that evidently served the Sands-Hill-Carlaw partnership as an office. There was an old country-style telephone beside the desk. She gave the hand ringer a crank.

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"Get me Doc Savage, in New York City," she said into the mouthpiece.

"Viddy!" Reservoir Hill yelled. "What crazy thing you gonna do?"

"It has suddenly dawned on me that this mystery is serious!" the girl said, grimly. "I am going to get it solved!"

"Wait a minute!" Reservoir Hill yelled. "I don't think—"

"I want to talk to Doc Savage," the girl said into the telephone.

She listened for a time, then said, "That's unfortunate. I'm coming to New York. I have to see Doc Savage. You try to find him in the meantime."

She hung up.

"Well?" asked Reservoir Hill.

"I TALKED to a man named Monk, who said he was one of Doc Savage's assistants," the girl explained. "He said Doc Savage was not in New York, that he was off at some place called a 'Fortress of Solitude.'"

"That," grunted Reservoir Hill, "let's Doc Savage out!"

"It does nothing of the kind!" said the girl, firmly. "I'll stop off and tell Andershott and Cugg that I'm on my way to New York to get Doc Savage. It may make them more comfortable if they know that."

"But why the heck go all the way to New York yourself? Telephoning will do just as good!"

"There's another reason."

"Huh?"

"Money."

"Oh!" Reservoir Hill pursed his lips out in the manner of a man who understands perfectly.

The girl said, "We're drilling this wildcat well on borrowed money. It's been an expensive well. We've already sunk over fifty thousand dollars. Our oil properties here in the Indian Dome Field are mortgaged heavily. Unless we can borrow more money on them, we may be sunk before long."

"Don't tell me about it!" groaned Reservoir. "I recite it in my sleep!"

"There's money in New York," said the girl. "I'm going after it! And after Doc Savage!"

Chapter III. MURDER IN THE AIR

THE plane was a big, low-winged cabin job, and probably one of the fastest and most comfortable commercial types of airliner in the world. It was one of hundreds of such planes flying regular schedules on Uncle Sam's air lines.

The plane was an hour out of Cleveland, Ohio, bound eastward, and flying high. Pilot and co-pilot were taking it easy. The hostess, having noted that it appeared no one was going to be sick on this flight, had stopped to talk to the fellow who wore pince-nez glasses.

The fellow was a wiry chap with a plain blue suit and a bright necktie. His face had a deep tan, and it was this tan which had moved the hostess to stop and talk to him, to permit herself to be talked to was more like it.

The man looked like a city grifter, except for the deep tan. Tans like that did not come from sunlamps. The pince-nez glasses made him look more gentlemanly, too.

The man had been trying outrageously to flirt with the hostess, and she had ignored him until this point.

As she halted beside his seat, the hostess noticed that the fellow wore plain black gloves of a very rich-looking leather.

Privately, the hostess wondered why the fellow had not tried to flirt with the girl in the adjacent compartment. This girl was as pretty as any young woman the hostess had ever seen on a plane. That was something, because chorus girls and millionaire's cuties are frequent travelers by plane. The girl in the next compartment was preoccupied, as if she had something on her mind.

The hostess happened to know that this pretty girl was down on the passenger list as Vida Carlaw, of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The hostess immediately wished she hadn't stopped to let the wiry fellow with the black gloves speak to her.

"Listen, baby," said the man. "How about you and me going places and doing things after this magic carpet parks us in little old New York?"

The hostess didn't like the dead look in the man's eyes. Anyway, it was the crudest kind of approach.

"I beg pardon!" she said frigidly.

"Listen, sweetie pie," said the black-gloved man. "I'm the little airplane girl's friend. I like your type. You've got me all up in the air—"

"Then stay there!" suggested the hostess, and walked to her seat in the rear of the plane.

The hostess was angry as she plumped down on the cushions. Perhaps the anger dulled her wits. She did not dream at the moment that she had been deliberately insulted. The wiry man had purposefully made her so angry that she would flounce back to her compartment and not show herself for a while.

The hostess remembered that another queer customer had come aboard the plane at Cleveland, too. This individual was big and wore a light gray-belted combination topcoat and a large gray hat, with the brim yanked down.

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He had, the hostess also recalled, worn gloves, but she couldn't remember their color. This man had kept his chin in his collar when he came aboard, and had been wearing large horn-rimmed glasses, such as the movie stars affected when they wanted to disguise themselves.

The hostess was so wrapped in her thoughts that she failed to witness what was happening forward in the cabin. It was just as well, for it probably saved her from having nightmares.

THE plane was of the most modern type, which meant, of course, that it did not have the old-fashioned line of wicker seats down each side. Instead, there was a succession of boxlike compartments which could be made up into upper and lower berths. These compartments gave comparative privacy.

The wiry man with the black gloves suddenly whipped over into the seat beside Vida Carlaw, who had picked up a magazine and was reading it.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Say, what do you think you're doing, anyway?"

The wiry man did not answer. He was looking at the magazine. It was open at a picture of a remarkably even-featured bronze man's face. The bronze man's hair was only slightly darker than his skin, and his eyes were a flake gold tint, and strange, even in the picture. The caption beneath read:

DOC SAVAGE

A Rare Picture of the Man of Mystery

The wiry man stared at the picture. He wet his lips. He reached over and put a finger on the picture.

"What's the idea of gandering at that?" he demanded.

Vida Carlaw retorted, "And why should I tell you anything?"

"Suppose I tell you, then," said the wiry man. "You're going to see this Doc Savage. That won't do, see!"

"And I presume you think you can do something about it?"

"I hope I can," the man said, calmly. "Because, if I don't get away with it, they'll probably hang me."

The girl's eyes mirrored her changing thoughts. At first, she didn't believe the man. Then she doubted. Suddenly, she knew he did mean it, and she was scared. She tried to get to her feet.

The man was carrying a blackjack up his sleeve, the thong around his wrist. He struck her over the head so hard that his glasses fell off. She collapsed, not all at once, but slowly, with every muscle rigid, her eyelids doing a fast flutter.

The man leaned across her, grasped the window and raised it. The window was large enough to jump out of.

The wiry man replaced his glasses on his nose, then crossed to his own compartment and got a big bundle. Two parachutes! He put one on the girl, the other on himself, and cinched the harness tight.

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He scooped up the girl and it was plain what he intended to do—jump with her, and open her ‘chute, then his own.

An unbroken fastness of wooded hills lay below, offering no landing place for the plane.

The man picked up the girl. Her eyes had opened.

"Tough, ain't you?" the man snorted, and raised his blackjack.

Instead of striking, the wiry man emitted a scream so full of agony that it made every occupant in the plane jerk erect. His glasses fell off again.

A NEWCOMER had seized the wiry fellow. The appearance of this new arrival was striking. He might have been sculptured out of hard bronze. The contour of his features, his mobile and muscular mouth, his ample forehead, his lean cheeks denoted a power of character beyond the ordinary.

The bronze of his hair was a little darker than the bronze of his features. The hair was straight and fitted so close as to give the appearance of a metal skullcap.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of all was the bronze man's eyes—like pools of flake gold, glittering when reflected light reached them, so that they seemed to exert a hypnotic influence.

The wiry man struggled with the bronze giant. He had no luck at all, for his Herculean captor demonstrated strength far beyond the ordinary. Muscles in the bronze hands, the forearms, and up and down the metallic neck, were like bundles of piano wire. The spectacles were stepped on and broken.

Vida Carlaw, conscious but weak, endeavored to maintain her balance as the plane gave a lurch, the pilot's attention having been distracted by the fight.

Confusion now seized the plane. Screams of the wiry man had been so agonizing as to arouse pity. Several passengers rushed to his aid.

The co-pilot charged to help. He saw the giant holding the smaller man, and made a mistake. It was natural that, not knowing the facts, his sympathy should be with the little fellow.

The co-pilot drew a revolver which regulations prescribed that he carry, and jabbed it against the giant's back.

"Get your hands off that man!"

The giant freed the wiry man. The fellow scampered toward the rear of the plane, parachute flopping against his shanks.

The co-pilot started to give the bronze giant his fiercest stare. Then he got a look at the big fellow, and his jaw sagged; his eyes popped, and he dropped his gun.

"Oh, slay me for an idiot!" he gulped. "Honest, I didn't know who it was! Didn't recognize—"

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The bronze giant ignored the co-pilot's apologies, and sprang toward the rear of the plane. The baggage hatch door was open to the sky.

The wiry man was floating under an open parachute behind the passenger airliner.

The bronze giant seemed capable of instantaneous decisions. He rushed back to Vida Carlaw.

"Equal to a parachute jump?"

Vida Carlaw made a smile with an effort.

"Anything," she said, "to escape this ringing in my head!"

The bronze man nodded, then stooped, scooped tiny particles which glittered on the floor and dropped them into a pocket. The girl watched his actions without saying a word.

THE bronze man now whipped to the seat which he had been occupying and yanked open a bag. It held a parachute.

At this point the plane's hostess suddenly realized this metallic giant was the mysterious fellow who had gotten aboard at Cleveland wearing tan combination coat, horn-rimmed glasses, and hat with brim yanked down.

The bronze man began donning his parachute.

"Bring your plane as close as you can to where that man's parachute is going to land!" He did not shout, but he seemed to have a voice with some unusual tonal quality which caused it to carry over the confusion inside the plane.

Somewhat surprisingly, the pilot obeyed the command, the reason being that he had gotten a good look at the big bronze fellow. Recognition had swept over the pilot's face like a shock.

If five minutes ago any one would have tried to tell Vida Carlaw that she would allow a strange man to persuade her to make a parachute jump out of a plane some thousands of feet up in the air, she would have denied the remotest possibility of any such thing.

"Count ten, then jerk the ripcord ring," she heard herself directed.

Then she jumped.

The parachute opened. Vida Carlaw did not feel as much of a shock as she had expected. She looked downward; the world seemed to be rocking—first it would be high up on the right, then on the left. She decided the parachute was swinging.

The earth began to get bigger. What had resembled bushes swelled into trees; cracks became deep gullies, and a winding gray string turned into a concrete road.

Vida Carlaw observed a car was parked on the road not far from where they were going to land, a man standing close to the car.

Her late assailant!

The giant, who looked as if he were made of metal, seemed to be trying to guide his 'chute toward the road, by spilling air from one side. Entire success did not attend this. He landed in some brush.

The young woman landed easier than she had expected, picked herself up and called, "Hope this isn't a sample of what the rest of my life will be like!"

GETTING no answer, she craned her neck. The big metallic man was gone! He must have twisted out of the parachute harness and vanished into the brush with incredible abruptness. Vida Carlaw listened, and thought she heard him over toward the road. She was not certain.

On the road, the automobile engine could be heard. It speeded up, gears clashed, and the car moved off. When she last heard it, the car was making sound indicating high speed.

Vida Carlaw continued to listen. A few insects made a racket, but there was nothing else. The birds in the woodland must have been frightened into silence by the descending parachutes, since birds fear anything large in the air.

Then the bronze man appeared in a near-by glade, coming from the direction of the road.

Vida Carlaw reflected that he did not look nearly as large as he had in the plane. One really had to be close to him to appreciate his size, a phenomenon, she decided, which was due to a remarkable symmetrical muscular development. He did not have the pachyderm shape which usually marks very strong men.

Vida Carlaw demanded, "Just who are you anyway?"

The bronze giant looked at the strikingly pretty woman, without being visibly impressed.

"Clark Savage, Jr.," he said. "Sometimes called Doc Savage."

Chapter IV. DEATH WITHOUT REASON

VIDA CARLAW'S mind promptly became involved with a number of thoughts. She was astonished to learn that this remarkable fellow was the man she was flying to New York to meet, Doc Savage. And the high points of the parachute jump—her first—ran through her mind. Nor was she in the habit of having men try to kidnap her.

Besides all this, Vida Carlaw was an exquisite young lady who was accustomed to having members of the opposite sex show marked admiration when they were in her neighborhood. She was accustomed to taking their breath away. But this fellow appeared no more moved than if he were looking at a tree.

"What happened to the man who crowned me?" Vida asked, sharply.

"He got away."

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Vida Carlaw mused that she had really never seen a more handsome man than this one.

"How did he do it?" she asked.

"Stopped a motorist. Pointed a gun at the driver, probably."

Vida Carlaw decided she liked the bronze's man's voice, just as well as his looks. That voice properly belonged to an opera singer.

"I was coming to New York to see you," she said. "A fellow named Monk, who said he was one of your assistants, told me you were away at some place he called a Fortress of Solitude."

"My return occurred sooner than expected. Monk mentioned your telephone call—hence my being aboard the plane."

Vida Carlaw, being as inconsistent as any young woman with her looks might be expected to be, decided that this bronze fellow was short on chivalry. He hadn't even asked her how she felt after her first parachute jump. She decided to give him some frost.

"Why didn't you make yourself known in the plane?" she snapped.

"My life's work is the rather strange one, of helping those who are in trouble, and doing a bit toward dealing with those who are beyond the law. Enemies are the result. Their attacks come in queer ways. Safety demands caution in the case of a summons such as yours."

Vida Carlaw decided to feel insulted.

"I see! You thought I was a crook!"

"One cannot always tell."

Vida Carlaw felt herself getting angrier. Some thought might have convinced her that she was not getting anywhere. But this young bronze fellow—he was obviously young—was not acting as a young man should in the presence of a very pretty girl.

"So you think I'm a crook?" she snapped.

He did not help matters by inquiring, "Just what are you?"

"I'm an Oklahoma oil producer and wildcatter! My home is in Tulsa, and I'm putting down a wildcat well with two partners, Sam Sands and Reservoir Hill. Something has happened to our driller, and to Sam Sands!"

With the story all out, she waited to see what he would say.

"Give more details," he requested.

The bronze man's voice had not changed, but Vida Carlaw got the feeling that he was interested in the mystery—if not in herself.

The young woman told him what had happened; she even included the Indian legend which Reservoir Hill had told her about the papoose who had dug a hole in the tepee floor, only to have the spirit of an earth devil

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come up through the hole and consume him, all but his grease.

At the end, Doc Savage asked, "Have you any enemies?"

"Why, no!" The young woman registered surprise.

"Then how do you explain the attempt to kill you on the plane?"

Vida Carlaw studied a speck far away in the sky. It had not been there a moment before.

"I can't imagine! The whole thing completely mystifies me!"

There was silence for a few moments. The young woman became conscious of the droning noise, and decided the speck, now larger, was making it.

"A plane!" she said.

"Yes," Doc Savage said. "Probably a ship carrying some of my aids."

THE bronze man inserted a hand inside his shirt and brought out a round black bottle. Apparently he wore next to his skin some kind of a vest with pockets. He threw the round, black thing into near-by brush. It immediately gave off a prodigious quantity of smoke of strikingly brilliant, yellow hue. Such smoke would attract attention for miles.

The newcomer plane drew closer, proving to be no ordinary type of ship, but a gyro, a plane with the usual fuselage, but with whirling wings like big windmill blades. The craft demonstrated its ability to land in restricted areas by coming down on the near-by concrete highway.

The first man to alight was the answer to a tailor's dream. Sartorial perfection itself! Slender, with a wasp waist and good shoulders, he had the figure for wearing clothing, and he was togged out in correct afternoon dress from striped trousers to cutaway, tall silk hat and a slender black cane.

This man removed his topper and executed a smart bow. His not unhandsome face was characterized by the large, mobile mouth of an orator.

"This is Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks," Doc Savage explained to Vida Carlaw. "His friends call him 'Ham.'"

"And I hope I may include you instantly among those thus favored," "Ham" said, gallantly. "And especially do I pray you to accept my services at any time needed in a protective sense. There is, unfortunately, a low fellow with us who may annoy you, but I beg of you to overlook him, since the poor chap is actually believed not to be entirely—"

"Tellin' lies about me already, huh!" piped a squeaky, almost childlike voice from the plane.

The owner of the voice appeared—an individual who would block traffic almost anywhere. He nearly missed being as wide as tall, and his hands dangled well below his knees.

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He had an incredibly homely face, and his hair, rusty upstanding bristles, was not confined alone to his head, but was distributed over his visible anatomy. General effect was that of an amiable gorilla.

"This is the man to whom you talked on the telephone," Doc Savage told Vida Carlaw. "Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, better known as 'Monk.'"

"Monk" gave the attractive young woman a grin which threatened to dislodge his ears. He pointed at the well-dressed man.

"Don't believe what this shyster, Ham, says," he advised. "Sometimes I wonder if that wife and thirteen children haven't kinda unhinged his mind."

The dapper gentleman in afternoon dress looked as if he were about to explode.

"I'm not married!" he yelled.

"Tsk,tsk!"

Monk clucked.

"These two are really friends," Doc Savage told Vida Carlaw.

"Friends?" Monk sneered. "I'll tie knots in his neck!"

"You missing link!" Ham gritted. "I'll cut so many holes in you that they'll think the moths have been in a bearskin rug!"

THE hilly, wooded country was not thickly settled; this concrete road was the only one for miles, and other roads being mere trails. Automobiles were not thick.

There was still another man in the plane, doing the flying. This individual was extremely tall, and so thin that it often made people nervous to look at him. He had a tremendous forehead. His suit did not fit him, and from the coat lapel, by a ribbon, dangled a monocle which seemed to have an unusually thick lens.

"William Harper Littlejohn," Doc Savage said, presenting this other man to Vida Carlaw.

"

An hedonistic tympanum of concinnity," said "Johnny."

The girl looked stunned. "Johnny really knows little words," Monk explained, "but he saves 'em for birthdays!"

"Johnny said it was a pleasure to meet such a charming beauty," offered dapper Ham.

"We want to find a sedan," the bronze man explained. "Baby blue color faded out, model three years old, had a red-and-blue cover on spare advertising a swimming pool."

They took to the air in the gyro.

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A bit later, Monk, in between staring at the ground, in search of the car, advised the young woman that Johnny was really one of the world's leading experts of geology and archaeology and that the monocle which dangled from Johnny's coat lapel was not a monocle at all, but a powerful magnifying glass.

He himself, Monk admitted, was a chemist whom every one but a few jealous contemporaries admitted was one of the greatest in the world.

Ham, the young woman pried out of Monk with difficulty, was a lawyer. "But he don't amount to anything in the opinion of anybody except Harvard Law School!" Monk added.

Five minutes later Doc Savage said, sharply, "There is a town ahead! It has a flying field! The sedan we are hunting appears to be parked on the field!"

Vida Carlaw strained her eyes in the direction of the town. She could see the town, and an open field which was probably the airport. How Doc Savage was able to spot the car was beyond her. He was not using binoculars, either!

And it was the car! They landed and inquired.

"There was a little, lean fellow came running in here and hired my pard and our plane to fly him to New York," explained a shabby fellow on the field.

"Give me the description and the numbers on the plane, and the name and description of your partner," Doc requested.

Once he had the information, Doc Savage returned to the gyro, and they took off. The craft was equipped with radio. The bronze man got in touch with the authorities in metropolitan areas, giving a description of the plane, the pilot, and the wiry man, and conveyed information that the latter was wanted for attempted kidnapping.

As darkness fell that night, Doc Savage, his three aids and Vida Carlaw were seated in the field office at Newark airport, questioning the pilot of the rented plane.

"I ain't done nothin'!" the pilot protested. "I don't know what's wrong! I land my plane at the field here, and a bunch of cops grab me! What's it for?"

"We are tracing your passenger," he was told.

"Oh, that skinny squirt with the tan? Say—I thought there was somethin' screwy 'bout him! He wanted to be put down in a pasture anywhere on Long Island near New York City. He gave me twenty dollars extra for that. After I parked him in a farmer's cow pasture, I flew over here; then these cops—"

"Can you point out that pasture on a map?"

The pilot could and did.

The farmer's field was near Jamaica. The farmer who owned it had seen the plane alight, and was mad about it scaring his cows. He had seen the man who got out of the plane. The fellow had walked down a near-by highway, trying to thumb a ride toward New York, until lost to sight. Thousands of cars used that highway

each day.

"We ain't got a chance in a million of finding that guy now!" Monk grumbled.

Doc Savage said, "With a little luck, it shouldn't be so hard."

"Huh?"

Doc Savage lifted from a pocket several fragments of broken glass. When he turned his flashlight on them, they glittered.

"This," he said, "is our cue."

EXISTENCE of Doc Savage's establishment on the eighty-sixth floor of one of the most prominent buildings in the city was not unknown to the general public. Very few persons, however, actually knew a great deal about the place.

No newspaper had ever been able to secure actual photographs, although many had tried, and there was a handsome standing bonus for any staff photographer who could succeed. Some artists' drawings, rank guesswork, had been published, but these were nowhere near correct.

Doc Savage's headquarters consisted of three rooms. One, the reception room, was small, and furnished with little more than a huge safe, some comfortable chairs, and a fabulous-looking inlaid table. The other two rooms were immense.

One room was a library of scientific tomes, almost unequaled in the world for completeness, and the other was a laboratory which was the envy of the few great scientists who had seen it.

"Goodness!" said Vida Carlaw, eyes roving over the place. "I am beginning to comprehend why you have such a fabulous reputation!"

Doc undoubtedly heard this compliment, but his shell of calm disinterest did not crack, a fact that piqued pretty Vida Carlaw somewhat. She had decided to try a little flattery and see what would happen.

Vida hadn't been able to make the bronze man out yet. She wasn't sure he approved of her; certainly he was not following the example of his three aids, who were giving her the gallant attention which a ravishing beauty deserved.

Doc Savage, leaving them in the reception room, entered the library. New York City has several telephone directories, among them one with a red cover which is known as the "red book" and which lists under proper headings, the names of persons and firms following the various professions.

Doc Savage took this directory to the telephone. The manner in which he seated himself and adjusted the light indicated he was tackling a lengthy job.

In the reception room, his three men talked with their pretty guest. Vida, as the conversation continued, was agreeably surprised when it dawned on her that the men were remarkably clever fellows. It was at this point that she got an inkling of the truth—each of Doc Savage's aids was something of a wizard in his particular profession.

WHILE they were talking, Monk's attractive secretary arrived from his penthouse chemical laboratory near Wall Street. This pretty young woman—Monk claimed he had the snappiest secretary in New York—was escorting a remarkable-looking pig.

The pig had ears made for flying, legs for running, a snout for inquiry, and a scrawny body. The pig gave evidence of careful grooming. There was about him the aroma of expensive perfume.

Monk's secretary left immediately after delivering the pig.

"This is Habeas Corpus, my pet," Monk told Vida Carlaw.

The young woman studied the unique-looking porker.

Ham said loudly, "That insect should be exterminated!"

Ham went to another telephone—there were several—and called his exclusive club.

"Bring my Chemistry down in the morning," Ham directed.

After hanging up, Ham listened, and could hear Doc Savage talking over the other telephone, making one call after another. Ham could not distinguish the bronze man's words.

Monk was asking Vida Carlaw, "Do you believe a mysterious jellylike creature did any killing?"

The girl hesitated, nipping at her lips. "You probably think I'm foolish, but, after all, no one really knows what is in the depths of the earth. Of course, scientists have a general idea, but there may be—things—down there that they don't know anything about."

Monk agreed. "I've run up against enough queer stuff in my time to learn never to be too surprised."

"Our oil well is deep," said the pretty girl. "It might have happened—"

Doc Savage came in from the library.

"Everything possible to locate your would-be kidnapper, has been done," he said. "Only thing now is to wait. And it might be advisable for all of you to get some sleep in the meantime."

Chapter V. HE WANTED TO HELP

WINDOWS of Doc Savage's skyscraper headquarters were of unusual type. The glass, perfected by the bronze man himself, was of a new variety which permitted occupants of the office to look out with ease, but which prevented any one outside looking in. The special glass admitted a rather diffused light.

Morning sun had the reception room full of gentle light when a tapping on the door awakened homely Monk from sleep in a chair near the inlaid table.

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Before he started for the door, Monk felt in a trousers pocket to make sure a certain coin was still there. Ostensibly, this coin was a half dollar; actually it was made of a radioactive metal which worked upon a hidden relay and electroscope combination which opened and closed the door. The device opened the door as Monk neared it.

A neat-looking fellow stood outside. He had ruddy cheeks and a distinctly English manner. Monk knew he was from Ham's club.

The flunky was leading an animal which was almost an exact replica of Monk himself. Whether this creature was ape, chimpanzee, monkey, or some other variety of anthropoid, would be difficult to tell. In truth, experts had disagreed on that point.

"Take that blankety—blankety—blankety—blatherskite of a thing over to the river and tie a rock to it!" Monk yelled.

Ham got out of the chair where he had been sleeping.

"That's my pet Chemistry!" he shouted indignantly.

"Bless me!" Monk said, gloomily. "Don't you think I know it?"

The messenger departed.

Bony Johnny, still apparently sound asleep, said without opening his eyes, "An ichorous enigma of lobelia pigmentation!"

"Blazes!" said Monk. "It's a wonder he don't choke on them words! Anybody know what he just said in his sleep?"

"He's muttering about the red monster out of the ground," Ham said.

From the library, Vida Carlaw called, "May I come in?"

They said she could, and she did. She looked radiant.

The telephone rang. Doc Savage, standing near the window, scooped it up and said, "Yes. . . . Requested immediate duplication, eh? . . . when will he return? . . . Yes. That earns the reward for you."

The bronze man hung up.

"We now have a line on the man who tried to kill Miss Carlaw," he said. "We will try to trap him and induce him to tell us what is behind this mystery."

"Don't see how you worked it, Doc," Monk said.

The bronze man made no explanation. Monk, after he had waited for a reply until he was sure he was not going to get it, passed it off with a humorous suggestion that, "Somebody get a hammer, so we can awaken Johnny."

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THE See-Well Optical Co. was not an elaborate establishment, which probably accounted for the proprietor having opened his doors an hour earlier than was customary for such firms. He was a round, bald man.

Doc Savage asked, "The man said he would be back when?"

"In about twenty minutes," replied the rotund proprietor.

Doc said, "It is not necessary for you to do anything about him. Just give him what he comes for."

"That's swell!" gasped the fat man. "I was afraid I was gonna mix up in something!"

Doc Savage returned to his companions, who were waiting in a car down the street. The machine, a long, discreetly dark sedan, had little outward appearance of armor plate and bulletproof glass construction.

"I take it our man is going to show up here," Vida Carlaw said. "But how did you find it out?"

"Remember his glasses?"

"Of course. They were broken when you saved me."

"I picked up the pieces," Doc explained. "Examination showed the man would be very far-sighted without the glasses. In fact, he would just about have to have new glasses at once. Naturally, he would get them as soon as possible."

Monk squeaked, "So you phoned optical concerns, offering a reward to be tipped off when anybody had such a prescription for glasses filled!"

The street was full of noisy cars carrying people to work and newsboys calling morning editions. One newsboy came along the street, howling a headline.

"Oklahoma outlaw escapes!" the boy squawled. "Tomahawk Tant evades airplanes and posses!"

Monk said to the young woman, "Your native land seems to have made the headlines this morning."

"Tomahawk Tant!" The girl sniffed. "They won't catch him!"

"No?" Monk grinned at her. "The outlaw has never lived who beat the law for long. Look at them. Al Spencer, Matt Kimes, Pretty Boy Floyd—all bad ones. And they all got licked."

Doc put in casually, "What about Tomahawk Tant? Not much about him has reached the East."

"He's one of the old-time types of outlaw out there," Vida explained. "One of the cleverest. No one really knows much about him."

Monk began, "Well the law will get him—"

"Down!" Doc Savaged rapped. "Here comes our man!"

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THE wiry man appeared, walking, wearing a dark-blue topcoat, which he must have purchased somewhere, and a dark hat. His black gloves appeared to be the same ones he had worn in the plane. He entered the optical concern.

Five minutes later, the man came out, stood and beckoned for a taxicab. One drew up and he stepped in.

"The usual method for trailing him!" Doc Savage directed his aids.

The trailing method was not Doc's invention. Monk, Ham and Johnny each got a taxi, and they took turns, one on the trail, while the other got ahead. By switching about casually, they made it almost impossible for the man in the taxi to learn he was being trailed.

The quarry went to an obscure hotel in the theatrical district. He had his cab wait, and entered.

A moment later, Doc eased into the hotel and noted several innocent-looking loafers in the lobby. The bronze man purchased a newspaper, seated himself, and held the paper so it concealed his face. He kept watch through peepholes in the paper.

On Doc's lap lay a black instrument which might have been mistaken by a photographer for a light meter or photometer.

In a few moments, the wiry man came down in an elevator, carrying a small, new briefcase. He passed Doc Savage without his slightest suspicions being aroused, and left the hotel.

Doc was watching the unusual instrument on his lap. As the man passed—the indicator needle crept up on the scale, then came back again when he had gone.

The instrument was a compact, supersensitive device which registered the presence of any magnetic metal—steel, iron, etc.—in the immediate neighborhood. Surge of the needle probably had been caused by a quantity of steel in the briefcase. Guns?

Doc Savage went to the hotel clerk, made his identity known, exhibited some money, and received a volley of information. The wiry man had registered the previous evening—but there was a surprising angle to this.

The fellow had not been alone! Nearly a dozen men had registered with him! All of these men had been sunburned. None of them were now at the hotel.

Doc Savage returned to his car, where Vida Carlaw waited. Since the bronze man had now lost track of the quarry, and his own aids, he drove toward his headquarters. Any report would come there, as Doc's men trailed their quarry.

"I have been trying to figure out why I was attacked in the plane," Vida Carlaw said. "It has me baffled."

"The idea was to stop you soliciting the aid of my men and myself."

"But why?"

Doc did not answer that one.

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THEY had not been in Doc's skyscraper headquarters reception room for long when incredibly bony Johnny put in an appearance. He fiddled with his monocle.

"A superabundant expenditure of indefatigation," he said.

Vida Carlaw blinked. "Would somebody translate that?"

"He says we have been wasting our time," Doc explained.

"Yes," added bony Johnny. "The wiry man and his pals are watching this very building!"

Johnny replied, continuing to use small words. "They don't want us to investigate this mystery of the red things out of the ground."

Doc Savage directed Vida Carlaw, "You stay here."

"Alone?" She looked uneasy. "They tried to kill me once, and maybe—"

"This place," Doc Savage told her, "is practically impossible for an outsider to enter."

The girl studied the bronze man.

"Right," she agreed.

Long ago, Doc Savage had installed in the building a private high-speed elevator which admitted directly to his personal garage in the basement. So far as was possible, existence of both elevator and garage were secret. The elevator deposited Doc and Johnny in the basement garage.

They followed a passage which admitted to a near-by subway tunnel, down which they ran, avoiding the electrified third rail, and crouching close to the sides of the tunnel to let trains go past with a deafening uproar. They came to the surface some blocks distant.

It was late enough in the morning that the streets were full of sunlight. Doc had a knowledge of the vicinity, so he and Johnny did not take to the sidewalks, but kept inside stores and business establishments, working from one to the other, sometimes going to the roofs to accomplish this.

"There's a spy!" Doc Savage said finally, and pointed.

The spy was a long fellow, almost as long as Johnny, and his arms and legs looked almost as bony as Johnny's. His middle, however, was paunchy inside a big overcoat. The fellow lay prone on a rooftop, peering upward at Doc's skyscraper across the street.

It was a tribute to Doc Savage's stealth that the spying man was unaware of an impending attack until Doc got him.

They wrestled in silence for seconds. The man kicked, butted with his head, flounced his skinny body. He was a very bony man with a tremendous stomach. He did not cry out.

"Hell!" he growled suddenly, and gave up. He said nothing more, stared at Doc Savage intently, plainly amazed by the bronze man's strength.

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"I've met strong hombres in my time!" he muttered. "But this is the first time I ever ran into a human bear trap!"

Johnny came up and searched the man. The fellow had two big single-action six-shooters in the waistband of his pants, and plenty of cartridges in various pockets.

"Name?" Doc Savage requested.

"Considering I've got kind of a general idea who you are, just from looking at you," the man said, "I don't mind giving you my name. I'm Reservoir Hill!"

BIG-WORDED Johnny had an exclamation which he invariably used when surprised. It escaped him now. "I'll be superamalgamated! Vida Carlaw's partner!"

"I can prove I'm Reservoir Hill!" said the prisoner.

"You could have all kinds of papers and stuff," said Johnny. "They can be faked."

"Pull up my coat tail and shirt and take a look at my back," the prisoner suggested. "There is a tattoo there. You can tell it's been there for years, because there is a scar through it."

The tattoo was there; so was the scar, and both had obviously been there for years. The name read:

CROTON HILL

"Croton is a reservoir, part of the water supply of New York City," said the long, lean captive. "That's how I got nicknamed 'Reservoir.' How's Viddy—Miss Carlaw?"

Doc Savage suggested, "I thought she left you in Oklahoma?"

"Viddy just thought she did! That darn red thing coming out of the ground, and killing our driller and Sam Sands got me kinda worried! I was afraid something might happen to Viddy. I knowed she was coming East to see you, so I followed her, by plane, to keep her out of trouble!"

Reservoir Hill sighed. "So you're Doc Savage! One time I came a-helling all the way from Okmulgee to Tulsa, just to get a look at you, when you stopped off in a plane, but you had left before I got there."

Bony Johnny, catching Doc's eye, pursed his lips and looked skyward, a gesture which indicated the bony geologist did not believe Reservoir Hill's story.

The bronze man released Reservoir Hill and the old oil man made no attempt to run.

Doc asked, "What did you fear might happen to Miss Carlaw?"

"Well, I didn't know!" said Reservoir.

"There are no oil wells around New York out of which red monsters might come," Doc reminded him.

"Tell you, I didn't know!"

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"What were you doing at this spot?"

"Listen!" said Reservoir Hill. "I was coming to see you about half an hour ago, and I get me a look at an hombre who is watching your hang-out. Now this hombre is one I've seen in Oklahoma. Why should some rannihan from Oklahoma be watching your hang-out? So I decide to do some pussy-footing! That's what I was doing when you caught me!"

"A glib answer to everything," bony Johnny said.

Reservoir Hill put out a flinty-looking jaw, "Don't you get tough, bonebag!"

"Acquiescence occupies ephemeral supereminence," Johnny said, dryly.

"Somebody translate that!" Reservoir Hill requested. "If it means what I think, I'm gonna see who's best man!"

"He merely said that your story seemed all right for the time being," Doc Savage translated, not quite literally.

Reservoir Hill, mollified, asked, "What do we do about these several ginks around here, all watching your place?"

"We'll take care of them later," Doc said. "I want to question you and Miss Carlaw, in hopes of turning up something."

THEY returned to Doc Savage's headquarters through subway, underground tunnel and the high-speed elevator.

They looked in the reception room, library, and the laboratory. They went out and examined the hall; then Doc went back into the laboratory, opened a hidden panel, and consulted recording dials of concealed instruments.

By these, he could tell if any one had come near the eighty-sixth floor recently. There was even a small concealed camera which photographed any one who appeared in the corridor, and Doc developed the tiny negative which this took.

"Vida Carlaw left alone," he said finally.

Chapter VI. THE TRAIL

"SOMETHING has happened to Viddy!" Reservoir Hill squawled.

Doc Savage went into the library and swung out a section of bookcase, to disclose a device which recorded telephone conversations to his headquarters. It was not unlike an ordinary office dictaphone.

He connected a reproducing microphone and a loudspeaker and played the record back. There had been a telephone call.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Doc Savage's office," Vida Carlaw had said, answering the telephone. "Doc isn't here."

"Viddy," the harsh-voiced caller had said, "this is Reservoir Hill. Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Oh! But I thought you were in Oklahoma?"

"No. I'm waiting down in front of the building; I'm with Doc Savage. We've got some important information. Come down right away."

"I'll be right down."

That had ended the call.

Doc Savage stopped the instrument and placed a fresh record on the recorder.

Reservoir Hill yelled, "That guy faked my voice!"

Johnny eyed him intently. "To me, it sounded like yours!"

Reservoir Hill knotted his fists and took a step forward.

"In my country, they shoot 'em dead for such cracks!" he snarled.

Johnny, who had been an erudite college professor in his time, snarled back, "Any time you're ready, you sage-hopper!"

For a moment it looked as if there was going to be a fight; then Reservoir Hill grinned thinly. "Sage-hopper? They don't have sagebrush in my part of Oklahoma!"

Doc Savage led the way downstairs, taking a regular elevator this time. In the lobby, there was some excitement, which they had missed by coming into the building by the secret underground route and up in the private high-speed elevator. There were policemen present, and an elevator captain was explaining.

"A girl came down in one of the elevators. Some guys were waiting here in the lobby and they grabbed the dame, banged her over the head, and dragged her away!"

Doc interrupted to describe Vida Carlaw.

"That's the one they got!" said the elevator captain.

Doc hurried outside. There was no sign of Doc's two aids, Monk and Ham. Nor was there any trace of the mysterious men from Oklahoma.

"They got Viddy and cleared out!" Reservoir Hill groaned; then he scowled at Doc Savage. "They put something over on you! You're overrated! You ain't what you're cracked up to be!"

Doc did not reply, and showed by no sign that he was affected by the other man's opinion.

Johnny, not exercising as much composure, scowled and demanded. "Look here, Hill! What do you know about what is behind this? What are you hiding?"

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Reservoir Hill did not exactly give a start, but it was evident that he was shocked. He moistened his lips. "What you mean?"

"My personal opinion is that you're not telling all you know!" Johnny snapped.

Reservoir Hill put out his jaw.

"Any more of them cracks and one of us is going to go to the hospital!"

Doc Savage said, "In view of the fact that the affair seems to be getting more involved, it might be advisable to call in our other two men, Renny and Long Tom."

THE remaining two members of Doc Savage's group of five aids were no less remarkable than the others.

"Long Tom" was Major Thomas J. Roberts, an electrical wizard whose name would probably pass down through history because of some of the things he had accomplished. Yet he did not look like a man of deeds.

He was slight, appeared fragile, and his complexion was about as inviting as that of a mushroom. No one could remember him ever having looked differently—nor could any one ever remember him having been ill.

Colonel John Renwick was "Renny." Fame followed Renny for two, things—his fists and his engineering ability. Both were big. His fists were so large that archaeologists maintained that even the famous "Cardiff giant" had not possessed bigger hands. Renny's ability as an engineer matched the size of his hands.

Long Tom and Renny arrived a short while after Doc telephoned, and the bronze man gave them a short outline of what had happened.

"What are we waitin' for?" Renny rumbled in a voice reminiscent of a peevish lion roaring in his den, he being excited over the prospect of action, which he loved.

"Monk and Ham may have succeeded in trailing the girl's captors," Doc explained.

"More than likely Monk and Ham are somewhere quarreling!" feeble-looking Long Tom suggested.

Big-fisted Renny drew a newspaper from a pocket, sat down, and began reading the front page.

"I see an outlaw named Tomahawk Tant is sorta struttin' his stuff in Oklahoma," he rumbled. "Holy cow! If this earth devil thing takes us to Oklahoma, what you say we sorta relieve the citizens of Oklahoma of their outlaw, Tant, too?"

Reservoir Hill demanded, sharply, "Somebody been trying to sick you onto Tant?"

Renny looked up. "You sound interested!"

Reservoir Hill shrugged.

"Hell, no! I was just asking!"

Bony Johnny said, calmly, "Reservoir Hill, you understand, Renny, may not be telling all he knows."

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Reservoir Hill had been seated in a chair. He got up and pushed his sleeves up his wrists.

"Blister my britches!" he growled. "I've took enough loose talk!"

"And I," Johnny said, calmly, "haven't had any exercise for some time. When we finish, bet you sing a different tune."

Doc Savage requested, "Postpone that a moment, please!"

BOTH prospective combatants halted. They saw the bronze man go to the large array of sensitive radio apparatus with which the laboratory was equipped. A small electric call light on one of the panels was flickering, and Doc Savage touched a switch, cutting a loud-speaker into circuit.

The apish Monk's squeaky voice came out of the loudspeaker. "Them guys gave us the slip! They had a big plane planted in a little field! They got the plane in the air and left us twiddling our thumbs! They had the girl!"

"They take her in the plane?"

"Yes!"

Doc Savage switched on the radio transmitter and asked, "Did they learn you followed them?"

"Don't think so!"

"Which way they go?"

"West!"

Reservoir Hill shouted, "Heading for Oklahoma!"

"Come on!" Doc said, sharply.

Doc's big armor-plated sedan was carrying them toward the water front a few minutes later, a siren moaning under the hood, to request police to clear traffic. This courtesy was extended to Doc Savage because of past services to law and order.

The clammy smell of the river was soon soaking into their nostrils.

HIDALGO TRADING COMPANY

The sign decorated the front of a building that was ancient, and of brick. The structure had a colossal hugeness about it, and it carried also the outward air of a building disused. The moribund aspect was deceitful, for this was Doc Savage's giant water-front hangar and boathouse.

A red light on the front of the car served the double purpose of police light and infra-red projector. The invisible ray which it transmitted caused concealed photoelectric eyes to actuate machinery that opened the big hangar door. After the sedan was inside, the door closed.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Reservoir Hill gazed at the interior of the big building as lights came on, and his eyes popped a little.

"Durndest place I ever saw, or I hope to have rings around my tail!"

The interior proportions of the warehouse hangar were much greater than it had seemed from outside. There were several planes, varying in sizes and types, speed boats and a cabin cruiser, and even, over to one side, what seemed to be a submarine.

"The rest of you follow in the large plane," Doc Savage directed Johnny, Renny and Long Tom. "We want to lose no time. Contact Monk and Ham and pick them up."

The three aids nodded. Contact could be established by the short-wave set that was handy in all the cars and planes, and Monk and Ham had used one of the cars to trail the thugs who had kidnapped the girl. The car had been standing near the entrance of the building.

In conclusion, Doc added, "Reservoir Hill will go with me in the small speed ship."

"You hombres sure work fast!" Reservoir Hill offered.

AN hour later, Reservoir Hill's opinion had not changed.

By that time, Doc's plane had traversed a slice of Pennsylvania which would have surprised even an airspeed expert. The ship was a small one, consisting of a cockpit for two, radio equipment and a tiny fuselage and wing assembly—the rest of it was motor. Almost two thousand horse power!

The largest cities of the United States have police departments equipped with radio receiving and transmitting stations, and Doc Savage just finished communicating with a number of these, with the result that a net was now spread over Pennsylvania, and other States over which a plane bound for Oklahoma might fly.

"I'll be whiskered if I knew the law was fixed up so elaboratelike for catching crooks!" said Reservoir Hill.

It was not long before they picked up a report that the fleeing plane had been sighted over the town of Clarksburg, West Virginia.

Doc Savage's little ship, setting a pace that would have won any national air race of recent years, overhauled the quarry near the town of Middleport, on the Ohio River.

The fleeing ship was a big modern low-winged job, with two motors. She was of standardized aluminum color. In ordinary company, she would have been fast, but Doc Savage's small racer buzzed around her like a fly around a chicken.

The cockpit of Doc's machine was completely enclosed.

The bronze man slid the hatch back, stood up against the rip of the whipstream and waved for the other ship to land. There was farmland below, level enough to be used for that purpose. The answer was rifle muzzles poked out of the other plane.

The bronze man sank hastily into the cockpit. There was little chance of ordinary rifle slugs penetrating the skin of his ship, which was of a new type of alloy.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Fully a dozen bullets hit the little plane in the next few minutes. Reservoir Hill heard the sounds they made, and knew what they were.

"I wish this fight was on the ground, with Winchesters!" he snorted.

DOC SAVAGE drove his little ship for a spot ahead of the other ship. While he was jockeying for a position ahead of the nose of the other craft, he made adjustments with certain knobs and controls.

"What's them jiggers?" Reservoir Hill asked, pointing at the gadgets which Doc Savage was adjusting.

"The valve controls for a tank of gas in the real," Doc explained. "The gas, when released in the air, is invisible, but causes a chemical reaction with the air which makes it noninflammable. In other words, a plane flying into this vapor will stop, because the air gas mixture sucked into its motor became nonexplosive."

Reservoir Hill craned his neck, looked back.

"They must suspect your game!" he grunted.

The other plane had whipped into a sharp dive, almost standing on its nose. Doc sent his little ship down after it.

The Ohio River, running high and muddy, was crooked, wide, and yellow below. In some places, the river overran its banks. The hills had a scrubbed look, as if recently rained upon.

"Hey!" Reservoir Hill squawled.

The yell was caused by the action of the other plane in suddenly wrenching level. Men leaned from its cabin windows with rifles. Their bullets rapped the armor of Doc's ship.

"Viddy!" Reservoir Hill yelled. "See her!"

Doc Savage made no comment, but he could see the girl distinctly. She looked attractive, even from that distance, and apparently had not been harmed. She waved at them, then put her fists up in a fighting attitude.

"Viddy's quite a gal!" Reservoir Hill yelled. "Blast them rascals! May their craws fill with cockleburs!"

Doc worked into a position ahead of the other ship, but again the other craft dived. The pilot was wary, taking no chances whatever. The other ship leveled out several hundred feet below. Doc arched down toward it.

In the west, clouds hung in the sky, thick clouds, black, with occasionally a long, red lightning spark dropping from them to the earth.

"Look!" Reservoir Hill pointed.

The men below had opened the door of their plane and were hurling a figure bodily out of the ship.

"Viddy!" screamed Reservoir Hill. "They're throwing her out!"

The falling, skirt-clad figure did not wear a parachute.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"WE gotta do something to save her!" Reservoir Hill screamed.

At the moment, that did not seem an entirely sane suggestion. The form was falling. In movie cartoons, they dive planes down and draw falling men and women aboard; but in actual life, it is not so easy.

Doc put the plane's nose down. A falling human body does not acquire speed which cannot be bettered by a fast plane, due to the resistance of the air. There was a chance of the plane overtaking the falling body. Reservoir Hill did not know this.

"Don't follow her!" he screamed. "I don't wanta see her hit! I don't wanta see Viddy die!"

Doc Savage knew, split seconds later, that he had wasted his time. The body was going to hit before he could possibly overtake it—was going to hit in the river.

"Maybe—hitting the water—won't kill her!" Reservoir Hill croaked.

Doc Savage had no such illusion. Water, struck at the speed at which that body was falling, had the demolishing force of a solid wall.

The pitiful, twisting figure hit the muddy, flood-bloated river.

Doc Savage pulled his plane out of the dive so close to the surface that water splashed up from the falling body and actually slapped the plane's body like so much shot.

He hung the plane's nose in the sky until it lost momentum and was about to stall, then arched off on a wingtip and came back, looking overside for any traces of the body.

They cruised for several minutes, and nothing came to the surface.

"We gotta land and see if we can find her!" Reservoir Hill yelled.

"There is no chance of any one surviving a fall like that," Doc explained quietly, and pointed the bawling nose of the plane into the sky.

RESERVOIR HILL swore in the other seat. He made his fists into balls of hard gristle and reared up angrily.

"Viddy may not have died!" he screeched. "You're gonna land and look for her! You're gonna land—"

Doc Savage grasped the old man's arm. He did not speak, but something—it might, of course, have been the evidence of terrific strength which his grip conveyed—caused Reservoir Hill to sink back, limp and defeated.

"Yeah, you're right," the old oil man muttered. "Viddy's dead. The swellest little girl Oklahoma or any other durn place ever saw!"

Doc climbed his plane after the other craft, which had made good use of the delay. The other pilot had flown directly toward the immense mass of clouds that was the distant thunderstorm, and the ship had covered a good part of the distance.

"They're gonna beat us to it!" Reservoir Hill groaned.

They did. The clouds, the thunder, the lightning and the rain swallowed the plainload of killers like some harridan, symbolic monster tossing in the sky.

Chapter VII. PREPARATION

THEY never found the plane carrying the killers. The craft vanished thoroughly, completely. Doc Savage and his aids even flew over the path covered by the thunderstorm, on the chance that the vanished plane had been struck by lightning and fallen in flames. They found nothing.

That afternoon, the air over the States of Kentucky, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Tennessee, as well as Illinois and Indiana, became filled with planes, all searching. Radiograms from Doc Savage, addressed to the war department in Washington, caused every available plane to be ordered to take up the search.

The army planes found nothing, either.

Doc Savage and all his aids, when the latter arrived in the big plane, dragged the Ohio River and searched the banks for hours, but likewise found nothing.

"Poor Viddy!" groaned Reservoir Hill.

"Her body probably got caught under a snag, and has been buried with mud," a river man told him. "Reckon you'll never find her!"

EARLY next morning, a small boy going out to get his cows, found an abandoned airplane in a meadow on his father's farm. The spot was near Cleveland. The plane had evidently landed there the previous day, and it had been raining so heavily that no one had seen it.

The farm boy noted something peculiar the minute he stuck his head into the plane. Some one had dipped a finger or a stick into dirty oil—later examination showed the oil had been drained from the plane's motor—and printed a name on the veneer lining of the cabin:

TO DOC SAVAGE

Below the name was a series of the strangest kind of marks—circles, dashes, half-moons, stars, crosses. Just about everything. It had an obvious resemblance to some kind of a code.

The farm boy lost no time. He had read the newspapers, had listened to the police broadcasts about the plane over his short-wave radio, and his dad's telephone connected with the long-distance system.

The lad telephoned Doc Savage. And he was on hand when the man of bronze with his aids sank his big amphibian plane expertly on the meadow. They had left the little ship behind.

Doc talked to the farm boy for some time. The bronze man then took a casual look around the clearing, and one glance at the writing in the plane—if writing it was. Then he went back and talked awhile to the boy.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

The lad was bright. He knew something about radio, was an amateur photographer, and interested particularly in planes. He had, he admitted, been studying books on aeronautical engineering. He had even been experimenting along those lines himself, having built a streamlined kite.

Doc Savage got a case from his plane, one of the metal boxes employed to transport his equipment. He removed a number of objects, some of which he did not unwrap, and presented them to the boy.

Monk, Ham and the others, much more interested in the abandoned plane, gathered around it. They paid little attention to what Doc was telling the boy, and when the bronze man joined him, they were full of questions. The farm boy went toward home.

"Look!" Monk said, and pointed.

He was indicating the interior of the plane.

But the bronze man made another tour of the clearing. Apparently he found no tracks. He came back.

By this time, the farm boy had reached his home. A few moments later, his kite was in the air. It was a trim-looking streamlined kite.

Monk nodded approval. Doc, of course, had asked to see the kite in the air. The real purpose of that was to get the boy out of the way, in case there should be danger.

Monk decided the kite was a good job. The lad surely must be interested in airplanes.

Doc examined the hieroglyphics painted inside the abandoned plane with cylinder oil.

JOHNNY had already been poring over them. Johnny had translated a Chaldean tablet which nobody else could read, except Doc, and Egyptian hieroglyphics were almost English to him. But this time, he was baffled.

Reservoir Hill walked off into the damp woods which bordered the meadow. Hill appeared consumed by gloom. The others presumed he wanted to be alone with his morbid thoughts. They did not pay him particular attention.

Doc used a pocket mirror on the oil symbols. Often a mirror will turn apparently meaningless marks around and cause them to become legible. It didn't this time. The bronze man tried covering different parts of the marks, and scrutinizing them with the mirror and without.

Homely Monk became impatient. Monk liked action. Moreover, the horrible thing that had happened to Vida Carlaw preyed on his mind. By moving about, he kept himself from thinking of that so much.

"I'm gonna see where Reservoir Hill went." Monk said. "Him and me will probably look around for some trace of which way these fellers went."

Monk ambled into the thick brush. Reservoir Hill had mashed the wet grass down with his feet. The trail was easy to follow.

None of the others paid particular attention to Monk. They were occupied with the puzzle of the symbols in oil. Ham, Renny, Johnny and Long Tom were baffled by now. As a matter of fact, they had been from the

first.

Doc Savage, however, was still at it. He had produced paper and pencil, and was trying different combinations of the symbols. Once, he made the strange, trilling noise which was so unearthly, so defiant of description. It had a definitely baffled undertone this time.

The bronze man abruptly put the pencil and paper away.

"The characters have no meaning, apparently," he said.

Johnny, at least, and probably the others, knew that the metallic giant's admission covered a great deal of territory. Doc had done more than study the marks and write them down in different orders.

His agile brain had probably probed into a dozen ramifications of pictorial language, not neglecting the various systems of symbols used by hobos to indicate houses which are good and bad pickings.

Suddenly, so brief that the others almost failed to catch it, Doc's trilling sang out.

"Quick!" A crashing haste was in the bronze man's voice. "Get your weapons ready!"

Ham gulped, "But what—"

"We have fallen for a trick!" Doc told him.

MONK was at that moment having trouble following the footprints of Reservoir Hill. The old oil man, to Monk's surprise, had kept walking. The footprints had been close together, an indication Reservoir had merely plodded on. But Monk had expected to catch up with him earlier.

A haystack appeared ahead. Monk expected to find Reservoir on the other side. He walked close to the stack, rounded it, and stopped. No one was in sight. But the grass! Not one set of footprints—many—not all Hill's—what—

Monk's cogitation ended there.

Hay fell on him. Hay and a man. The man kicked Monk in the face as he came down. Monk made a honking noise, grabbed the fellow, banged him on the ground. The victim actually bounced. And he sounded as if he had a leak somewhere, through which a lot of air had been driven.

"Blazes!" Monk exploded.

The man answered the description of one of the crowd which had decoyed Vida Carlaw to her fate. Monk cocked a fist and waited for the fellow to arise.

Monk was a bloodthirsty soul, and had no great scruples about hitting a man when he was down. He liked to see this one bounce. When he couldn't get up was time enough to work him over on the ground. Doc Savage had never quite succeeded in training Monk to restrain his impulsiveness.

More hay and more men arrived. One. Two. A third. Monk whooped, scooped with his arms, got two of them. He did a neat trick and rapped the third on the top of the head with a heel. Only three! Just exercise!

THE DERRICK DEVIL

None of them were big.

Monk got an arm around each of the two surviving foes, jumped up and down, ape fashion, turned two somersaults, and had them dizzy. It was going to be simple.

Other men were heaving from the haystack. Hands got hold of Monk. Fists hit him.

The tops of haystacks are weighted down. It is a precaution the farmer takes to keep his hay from being blown away. Two fence posts, joined by a wire or binder twine, usually make up each weight.

One of these fence posts was the deciding factor in the fight. For ten minutes or so after it hit him, Monk lay in abysmal darkness and dreamed he was just one jump ahead of dapper Ham who, not surprisingly, had become equipped with horns and a spike-pointed tail.

Ham caught up with Monk, and began to dig at Monk's ear with the lip of his sword cane. If Monk had had arms or legs, he could have fought back—

MONK got around to opening his eyes. There was no Ham. The sword cane in his ear was a finger. The owner of the finger was a hard, brown rascal with a face that would have interested a criminologist.

"This ticklin' always wakes 'em up," said the owner of the finger.

Monk shut his eyes and relaxed. He was going to let the other start screwing a finger around in his ear again; then he was going to knock the blazes out of the lad.

There was nothing wrong with the idea, except that Monk discovered he was tied hand and foot.

"Up and away with 'em," a man said airily.

Monk decided to let out a bellow, on the chance Doc would hear. He sucked his chest full of air, got set—and they stuck a wadded felt hat in his big mouth.

The homely chemist was lifted, carried rapidly through the timber. His captors did a lot of looking behind them. They dropped a word or two which convinced Monk they were the same mob which had pursued Vida Carlaw to New York and attempted to prevent her reaching Doc Savage.

"That bronze guy isn't anybody to kid around with," one uneasy fellow remarked. "The way he moved around in New York was somethin' to see!"

"We got the girl outta his hands, didn't we?" another snapped.

"We didn't stop 'er reachin' 'im, did we?"

They came to a graveled road, one evidently not used very much. Two automobiles stood under a tree beside the road. Big cars.

Monk noted they had well-worn tires. No tread marks on such tires to make identification easier. Monk scowled at the cars.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"You old pot-belly!" Monk thought. "I had a hunch you wasn't what you let on!" He'd have said it aloud, but for the gag.

Reservoir Hill sat in the front seat of one of the cars. He pushed out his mouth at Monk and spat over the side.

The captors heaved Monk in the other car. Everyone loaded aboard. The motors hooted, and the machines rolled. Both cars traveled fast for two miles.

"You figure we'll be safe in Cleveland?" a man asked, doubtfully.

"Sure," said another. "When we get to the city limits, a fake telephone company truck will meet us. We'll dress up as telephone company linemen, ride right into the burg, and nobody will suspect a thing."

"It'll take us right to the joint over Blackie's garage on Nineteenth, where we're gonna hang out?"

"Sure."

Monk was down on the car's floorboards, where they had shoved him. He had squirmed about, and quite accidentally, had found a pencil. It was lying where some one had dropped it, perhaps by accident.

Monk went through some motions that might have been those of a man bothered by a cootie. He got the pencil. It was stubby, just right to hide between his fingers. Furthermore, the floorboards were exposed at one end, where the carpet had been kicked up. Writing a message on them would be simple.

Monk wrote.

THE car bearing Monk drove two more miles and came to a bridge over the same creek which ran through the farmer's place. The creek was so much larger here that it could not have grown naturally. So it was probably nearing Lake Erie.

The car stopped in the middle of the bridge. The other car pulled up behind and also halted. Men got out quickly and threw their coats under the cars, directly beneath the engine pans.

"That's so no oil will leak onto the bridge planks and show we stopped here," a man said.

They yanked Monk out of the car.

The bridge was a low concrete structure. The men produced a rope and tied it to one of the bridge's rail pillars.

A motor boat was approaching. It was a big craft, but had a well-silenced motor. It was hardly more noisy than an automobile. Those in the motor boat hailed the others.

"Make it snappy!" they advised.

"Wait a minute," a man said. "It'll only take a second to see if our trick worked."

The fellow leaned into the car and examined the spot where Monk had been lying. He burst out in a harsh chuckle.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"It worked!" he said. "Here's what he wrote: 'Fake telephone company truck, Cleveland. Blackie's garage on Nineteenth.'" The man squinted more closely. "It's followed by some kind of mark. I guess it's this guy's private sign, or somethin'. It don't mean nothin' to me."

They all burst out laughing. Monk got a gleeful kick in the ribs.

"We foxed you," he was told. "We dropped that pencil on purpose. We fed you that dope. You threw Savage off the trail yourself, because we'll let him find these cars abandoned on the outskirts of Cleveland."

Monk made puppy noises around his gag. His eyes were rage filled.

THE men began climbing down into the boat. Monk was lowered. It seemed two of the crowd were going to drive the two cars to the outskirts of Cleveland and abandon them. Then old Reservoir Hill was lowered into the boat. Monk's little eyes popped.

Reservoir Hill was bound hand and foot!

"They got me, then laid for whoever followed my trail!" old Hill gritted.

The coats were yanked from under the automobile oil pans. Away went the cars.

The boat lifted its bow and began to travel.

Reservoir Hill told Monk, "I guess you can figure what they're gonna do?"

Monk nodded.

"They're gonna scrag us if Doc Savage don't forget all about this!" Hill growled.

Chapter VIII. THE HIGH EYE

DOC SAVAGE had done one thing daily since childhood. He had devoted a two-hour period to exercise. Not merely a flexing and strengthening of the muscles, but a scientific system of actions designed to strengthen eyes, olfactory senses, vision, hearing, and the others.

Perhaps the most unusual, and no doubt the more important, was the set of mental exercises which quickened his wits, strengthened his memory, and otherwise had equipped him with the amazing physical and mental powers which he possessed.

His aids, while remarkable gentlemen, did not have the bronze man's powers. They did not need them, however, to read the story of what had happened where Monk had been seized. Monk's captors had made no effort to cover up sign, and the story was plain.

Ham, searching in the hay, came up with an object and gulped, genuine grief in his voice, "Monk had this in his pocket!"

THE DERRICK DEVIL

The object was an ear of corn which Monk carried to feed his pet pig, Habeas Corpus.

Doc Savage made a quick circle, his flake gold eyes reading further sign.

"Reservoir Hill was seized first," the bronze man explained. "Monk was following Hill's trail and was seized also."

Big-fisted Renny rumbled angrily, "Doc! That writing in the plane, with engine oil, must have been done just to decoy us here!"

"It was," Doc agreed. "Here. The mob went this way."

They had no trouble following the trail to the gravel road. But not even a bloodhound could have followed it any farther.

THEY were back at the plane when the farm boy came running up.

"Somebody wants you on the telephone," he told Doc Savage. "He said to tell you that by now you probably know you had better talk to him."

The bronze man whipped to his own plane, entered the control cabin, and switched on the radio transmitter. Ordinarily, it operated on a short wave, but he lengthened the wave length to that of the police broadcast band. A number of police stations maintained both transmitting and receiving equipment

In not much more than a minute, police were tracing the telephone call to the farmhouse. This method of having the call traced was necessary, since the caller was waiting on the wire, and the farmhouse boasted no other instrument with which to locate a call.

Doc whipped toward the farmhouse. The boy's kite was still high in the air. It was a well-designed kite, because it remained almost stationary.

The voice on the wire was that of the man who had tried to seize Vida Carlaw on the big passenger plane from Oklahoma—the lad who had narrowly escaped from Doc.

"No doubt you are having this call traced by now," he said wisely. "Therefore, I'm not going to be sucker enough to talk very long. Get this! We've got one of your men, and we've got old Hill. Hill is a meddling old goop, so we're going to shoot him and leave him on a road somewhere. You'll hear about it when his body is found.

"This will be done to demonstrate we're not birds who can be fooled with! As long as you lay off us, your man Monk won't be damaged! But no longer, see!"

The confidence in his voice was not up to that in his words. He seemed very glad to hang up.

Not more than three minutes later, a report came that the call had come from a drug store in Cleveland, but the man had gone by the time police could get there. Another call came half an hour later. Yes, the man had escaped.

Doc went out and watched the farm boy fly his kite.

"Doing all right?" he asked the boy.

"I think so," the boy said. "I'm doing my best."

"In an hour," Doc suggested, "you can pull it down."

THE telephone rang. It was the Cleveland police. Two cars had been found abandoned on the outskirts of town. A message to Doc Savage was written on the floorboards of one. His plane took Doc and his aids to the spot in less than fifteen minutes.

The police officer who guided them to the abandoned cars said, "The message obviously indicates that the mob is hiding out on Nineteenth Street at a place called Blackie's Garage. We've got a squad headed for there now."

Doc Savage studied the message in the car.

"You can tell your squad to forget it," he said.

"Huh?"

The bronze man indicated the strange-looking mark which Monk had made following his message.

"Ancient Mayan," the bronze man explained.

"Eh? A shunt may what?" The officer hadn't got it.

"A hieroglyphic in prehistoric Mayan," Doc Savage elaborated.

"I'll take your word for it. What's it mean?"

"It conveys a message. It says that nothing written is to be believed."

"I'll be damned!" said the cop. "Why'd he write something if he didn't want it to be believed?"

"Monk was probably kidding somebody," Ham explained. "Monk is quite a brilliant fellow."

This would have startled Monk, who had never heard Ham call him anything less dense than a bob-tailed baboon who had fallen out of the nest at an early age.

Doc Savage left it to the police to locate the drivers of the cars, who would probably have made themselves hard to find by now. He flew back to the farm where the abandoned plane had been found.

"I noticed the boy had stopped flying his kite," Ham commented as they landed.

They found the youth in the cave where his mother kept her canned fruit.

He was working over Doc Savage's portable equipment for developing motion picture film.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"It was simple enough that I didn't have any trouble making it work," the young man explained, pointing at the developing apparatus.

"What is he doing?" Renny rumbled, and bent over some of the developed film.

"Holy cow!" he exploded after an inspection.

Each square of film showed a large area of the surrounding country. Aerial photographs!

"Doc gave me one of his aerial cameras," the boy explained, as proud as a pup with a bone. "I fixed it to my kite. It took a picture every minute or two. But they're so small I can't make out much."

"We will use a magnifying glass," Doc told him.

The bronze man produced, not a magnifier, but a projector out of one of the equipment cases. They operated it on the plane's battery system, and threw the images in the cabin, with the windows covered.

The pictures had been taken frequently enough for them to fairly well follow what had happened. They saw Reservoir Hill captured, then Monk.

"Monk," Ham said, admiringly, "put up quite a fight!"

Ham never had a civil word for Monk, to his face or behind his back, except on those occasions when he had a horrible fear his sparring mate was in trouble.

The pictures showed the mob shifting their prisoners from the cars to the boat.

"Now!" Long Tom exploded, "if that boat just didn't go too far for the camera to still get it!"

The boat had not gone far. Four or five miles down the coast, once it reached the lake. There was a small cove. The power boat had stopped at a houseboat, had tied up astern of the other craft.

"We will look into this," Doc Savage said, quietly.

WHEN their plane slid down over the cove with the motors cut, Doc and his aids could distinguish a number of things. First, the cove, while more than a quarter of a mile wide, was really the mouth of a stream. A fast-running stream, and a muddy one. It muddied the lake for some distance outside the cove.

They kept their heads inside the plane's cabin. The alloy metal which covered it would deflect anything but a special armor-piercing bullet. Also bulletproof were the windows, through which they watched.

Ham voiced the obvious. "Nobody in sight."

They could have seen any one in the speed boat. It was open, except for the motor box. But the houseboat was different. It seemed about fifty feet long, needed paint, and could hide a hundred men from a plane in the air.

Doc swung once more around the cove. He flew up the stream a short distance, and back, close to its muddy bosom. They saw no one. They saw no boat.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Eyes open while we land," Doc said, quietly.

The plane stroked its underside over the water, not throwing up much foam. Doc gunned the engines. They rode close to the houseboat, but not too close.

No sign of life.

"Take the controls," the bronze man said.

Renny took over, but gulped, "Doc! They may be ambushed aboard! They may have a bomb fixed—"

"Swing the right wing—tip close enough to permit my getting aboard," Doc interposed without appearing to have heard the objection. "Then stand by."

The bronze man wore under his clothing, as he always did when he goes into action, the alloy chain mesh which he had perfected. The stuff that was so light, yet almost as impervious to bullets as the skin of the plane itself.

Before the bronze man got out of the plane, he donned another device which he had lately invented. It was a hood, transparent, in shape not unlike a goldfish bowl turned upside down.

The lower part fitted his shoulders tightly, and there were straps to hold it on. The material was thick, not glass, nor any combination of glass, but a chemical product that was as tough as steel.

A shoulder pack breath-purifier could be used in conjunction with the hood, making the wearer independent of outside air. A neat gas mask.

Wearing it, Doc got out on a wing of the plane. Renny maneuvered the ship expertly. A leap, easy for the bronze man's muscles, put him aboard the houseboat.

HE did not step on deck immediately, but maneuvered along the rail. There was a chance an explosive might be set off by weight on the deck's planks. Finally, Doc did go aboard. He listened. Then, with a casualness that hardly showed the care he was using, he went below.

It had never been an expensive houseboat. The woodwork was cypress, painted. The furniture was cheap stuff, most of it made for land use. Dampness had caused some of the glued joints to come apart. The carpets were mildewed.

Some one had lived aboard recently. Men, evidently, and not seamen. Things were not shipshape.

There was no one aboard, no prisoners, and no niches in which any one could have been concealed.

Doc went forward and examined the manner in which boat was moored. It was not anchored. It was tied to a mooring buoy, in the manner of yachts in their home harbor.

Renny taxied the amphibian close and called, "Where's Monk and Hill?"

"Not aboard," Doc replied without emotion. "Pick me up."

The bronze man got aboard.

"We are leaving immediately," he said.

Renny rumbled, "But, Doc! We oughta do somethin' toward finding Monk—"

"That," Doc Savage told him, "is exactly what we are doing when we leave here in a hurry."

Chapter IX. HIDE-OUT BELOW

MONK was tough. Men had knocked him completely senseless in a fight, only to see him come out of it, get up, and dive into the scrap again as if nothing had happened.

Monk sat up and tried to bust a nose which he recognized. He was, unfortunately, still tied. He looked around, at himself first. He was wet as the often-mentioned drowned rat. His clothing had leaked a big pool of water.

The owner of the nose retreated, muttering something about how "he'd be glad when the boss gave the word to turn loose the works." He was one of the mob.

Monk, realizing he was not gagged, let out a squawk which, if it did nothing else nearly deafened himself.

"Unless you enjoy doing that," said Reservoir Hill's voice, "you might as well cut it out."

"Where are we?" Monk wanted to know.

"Don't you remember?"

Monk made a face. This usually helped his thinking. "Oh, yeah!" he said. "They grabbed me and started to throw me overboard. I figured they was gonna drown me, so I tried to kick a guy's head off. Did I?"

"You did well enough," old Hill chuckled. "But another tried a rifle barrel out on your head. The barrel won."

Monk felt his head, groaned, then asked a question, by making a statement, "The air smells kinda funny in here?"

"I don't wonder," Hill told him. "We're in a submarine."

"Submarine?" Monk squinted at the old oil man. "They must've given you a bat on the dome, too!"

"It's an old submarine," Hill continued, unperturbed. "I don't think it's got an engine in it. I think it's one that was showed at a fair in Chicago, or something, then sold for junk. Only some crooks got hold of it and made it an underwater hide-out. These crooks of ours rented it from the other crooks for a while, or something."

"It's complicated," Monk said.

"I don't know about that, but getting out is going to be complicated. We're under the houseboat, I think. Anyhow, they climbed down the mooring chain. I dang near drowned."

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Monk said, "Doc will find us."

One of the men came in at that instant. He overheard Monk's remark and guffawed.

"Your bronze guy came, had a look at the houseboat, and just left," he advised.

Monk squirmed around a bit. He could not get loose. So he relaxed.

"There must be plenty of money at stake in this thing," he said.

"Not for us," the man said, somewhat sourly.

"Huh?" Monk looked surprised.

"We get a hundred bucks a day apiece for holding you," said the other, even more grouchy. "We got a thousand apiece for catching you. We're just doing a job.

Monk frowned. "You mean you're the fellows who fixed up this underwater hang-out, and you were only hired to get us? You're not members of the mob we've been fighting?"

"That's the idea," the other said easily. "Running this hide-away is our business and—"

A man put his head in the compartment.

"I think you might go up and look around," he said. "It sounded as if that plane took off more than half an hour ago."

The man who had been grouching to Monk nodded and went out.

THE fellow obviously had no love for the job ahead. He picked up a diving contrivance consisting of a mouthpiece, a nose clip and a chemical purifier. One could buy them on the market for a little over three hundred dollars apiece. He adjusted it.

The men got in and out of the submarine by a simple method. There was a hole in the bottom, near the bow. Air pressure held the water out. There was a compressor aboard.

At night, when no one could observe, they extended the periscope—it had been elongated—to the surface and pumped air down it until the compression tanks were full.

The man pushed himself down into the hole, felt for the rope which led to the mooring chain, and worked along it. The men followed that route back and forth to the surface.

The man had hardly started when he seemed to step into a gigantic bear trap. The jaws closed about his waist. Air left the man's lungs so fast that it blew the mouthpiece from his teeth. He wrenched at what was around his waist. Legs! He twisted his head.

When he saw the individual who held him, the rest of the air left his lungs.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

The man was almost drowned when Doc Savage got him up on the deck of the houseboat. It took time for him to speak.

"How many men are down there?" Doc asked.

"You—you're Savage!" the other gulped. "Damn us! I knew we shouldn't have taken this job! But the blamed submarine hide-out ain't been payin' a profit like we figured it would! Guys just seem to rather take a chance with the law than live down—"

"How many?" Doc repeated.

The bronze man's tone made the prisoner gulp.

"Keepin' my trap shut won't help us now," he said. "'there's a dozen. But, listen, we ain't nothin' but hired men! We took a job! It was to grab your man, or as many of 'em as we could! The guys who hired us, all left! They took a canoe off the houseboat, a folding canoe they could hide on shore, and—"

He broke off to emit squeaks of pain as Doc tied him. He stopped everything but nose sounds when the bronze man installed a gag in his mouth. When the prisoner could neither move nor talk, Doc went out on deck.

He donned his transparent hood again. The device was a good diving rig as well as a gas mask. He had flown only a short distance in the plane, then returned, entered the water furtively, and found the submarine.

Doc had not been sure it would be there, had acted on the theory that there must be some good reason for the houseboat having a permanent mooring in this out-of-the-way place. The muddy water had been a hint, too. It was not such a spot as a houseboat party would seek for pleasure.

The bronze man lowered himself down the mooring chain. A weighted belt about his waist evened his weight with the water he displaced. He worked outside the submarine until he reached the stern.

Ham, Renny, Long Tom and Johnny were waiting there. They had their feet dug into the muddy bottom to maintain their position. Mud on their hoods kept them from seeing much.

Doc went to each. By pressing with his fingers—long and short for dash and dot—he conveyed enough Morse Code words to apprise them of the situation.

"We will depend on a surprise attack," he finished.

Single file, they worked to the hole in the underside of the derelict sub's bow.

DOC went in first. Two of the mob were standing inside, waiting the return of their comrade. Doc's glasslike helmet, rising out of the opening, must have given them a shock. They gaped just a moment too long. Doc got hold of them.

They evidently didn't have guns. They tried to use their fists. That was a mistake. They only hurt their knuckles on the alloy mail.

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Doc pushed one man violently in the face. The fellow went back readily with the blow, not realizing the steel wall was behind him. His head hit. He fell.

The other man twisted. Muddy water on Doc's metallic hands made them slippery. The man got free, but fell down doing so. He scrambled up, saw a heavy wrench, and grabbed it. His best bet would have been to slug the bronze man in the midriff, or try to break a wrist or ankle.

Instead, he thought the helmet was glass, and tried to shatter it. The wrench only bounced off. And a bronze fist, hitting the man's jaw, didn't bounce.

Doc's four men were inside by now. They yanked out small machine pistols, weapons which they always carried, and which were usually charged with a type of so-called "mercy bullet" producing unconsciousness, instead of fatal injury.

Men in the other part of the submarine heard the uproar. They came in a rush, yelling questions.

Renny's machine pistol made a loud noise. It almost deafened them, even wearing the helmets. It was as if a titanic bullfiddle string had been sawed hard.

The effect on the enemy must have been stunning. No one fell immediately. It took a moment for the chemical in the slugs to function; then two men sank to the deck.

Monk was howling, frantic because there was a fight and he was tied up.

Doc worked through a bulkhead aperture, stepped over the two fallen foes, and sprang for a smaller bulkhead door. The moment he got his head through, a man shot at him. The bullet glanced off the helmet with a deafening impact. Doc lunged on through.

The man who had fired turned white and put up his hands. Maybe he was yellow. Possibly the unearthly apparition which Doc made in the helmet got the fellow's goat. The bronze man did look like something from some sinister astral plane.

Altogether, they were not a brave crowd. Typical crooks. A few blasts from the machine pistols, a threat to use gas, and they threw down their guns.

Doc assigned Ham the job of freeing Hill and Monk, only to discover, a bit later, that Ham had untied Hill, but was standing over Monk, sneering and reciting a choice history of what he contended had been Monk's ancestors.

It took Renny, Johnny and Long Tom to hold Monk off Ham when he was finally untied.

It was their quaint way of showing they were glad to see each other alive.

GETTING information out of reluctant subjects was a frequent need with Doc Savage. He had developed various methods. They began mildly and became more scientific.

The first treatment worked with their captives. It consisted of putting Monk in a room with them and shutting the door. Monk was not through explaining in detail what he was going to do to them when they started talking.

As the prisoners said, what was the profit in holding out? They had been caught. And they were only hired men. They did not belong to the Oklahoma mob, did not even know what the Oklahoma crowd was after. They called their employers—whom they cursed heartily—the Oklahoma crowd.

Altogether, Doc got but one piece of information. "Who is the leader of the other mob?" he asked. "Enoch Andershott," they said. "That's the name they used, anyhow."

"I ain't surprised," old Reservoir Hill growled.

Chapter X. RED MYSTERY

DOC SAVAGE left the prisoners at a Cleveland hospital. They were drugged, each in a stupor which would last until the bronze man got around to calling for them. Later, they would be consigned to a secret institution which Doc maintained for curing criminals of crooked tendencies by a brain operation and a course of training.

Johnny did not arrive in Tulsa with them. He had dropped out of sight. The others did not know where. But they suspected Johnny had remained behind to keep an eye on the prisoners in the hospital. They were not sure about this. It was just a guess.

When old Reservoir Hill had suggested that Johnny had remained to watch the crooks who had tried to turn an old submarine into a profitable hideout at so much per guest, Doc neglected to deny it.

A newsboy was crying a paper at the Tulsa airport. It sounded as if it were big news. Monk bought a paper, glanced at the headlines, started, and handed it to the bronze man:

OUTLAW TANT MEN FOUND

TWO BODIES STRANGELY

MANGLED

The heads and shoulders of two men were found in Mohawk Park this morning. Police have tentatively identified the bodies as "Muck" Orst and Lee "Leaping" Ketchum, two bad actors belonging to the mysterious Tomahawk Tant outlaw mob. Identification was difficult.

Parts of the torsos, arms and legs of the victims were missing. There was a mysterious substance resembling common lubricating grease under the body fragments.

Police refuse to explain what the greasy material is.

Old Reservoir Hill whistled softly when Monk read this aloud over Doc's shoulder.

Monk grunted, "Queer business, huh! I wonder just what is goin' on down here?"

Reservoir Hill made a snarling noise.

"Enoch Andershott can explain it, I bet!" he growled. "I'll take you to where he lives."

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Doc dropped big-fisted Renny off downtown, requesting, "Pick up what information you can on the general situation here. The newspapers would be a good bet."

ENOCH ANDERSHOTT and his partner, Alonzo Cugg, shared a home, it seemed. Both lived there when in Tulsa. It was a mansion. Old English style. And everything had been done to carry out the impression of the surroundings being a slice of old Sussex countryside.

"They musta tore down a lotta old barns to get the wood for this thing." muttered Reservoir Hill.

"Old dill pickle!" Monk told him. "Ain't there any of your fellow men that you love?"

"No," said Reservoir. "And I'd like you to show me anybody that Andershott and Cugg like!"

A metal gate across the automobile driveway was closed, but the footgate was open. Doc Savage and the others left their car and walked up the drive. They kept in a compact group without thinking.

"We'd be a swell target for a shot gun!" grunted Reservoir Hill

Doc Savage tried the door.

"It is open," he said. Then the bronze man called, "Andershott! Cugg!"

The quiet of this exclusive residential district—exclusive unless one had the money—made the silence which came from within more impressive.

Inside, the house was gloomy. Pictures of oil wells, of drilling rigs, of refineries, of filling stations, of tank trucks, hung on the walls. Over the fireplace in the big library, instead of antlers or a mounted game head, there was an old-fashioned walking-beam.

The lights of the chandelier were suspended from the rim of an ancient, huge bullwheel. Strangely enough, even the air seemed to smell of oil, but this was due to the scent of crude oil carried across the Arkansas River from the mammoth refineries in West Tulsa.

Long Tom, walking into a room to one side, suddenly emitted a yell. Simultaneously, there was a loud snarling and snapping.

Long Tom came flying back, minus almost an entire trousers leg. The huge black dog of Enoch Andershott was in close pursuit. Seizing up a chair, Doc Savage got between the dog and Long Tom.

The giant canine, frothing and snarling, leaped at Doc, but the bronze man used the chair as a shield, after the manner of an animal trainer. The dog fell back, tried to get at Monk, then at Reservoir Hill.

Doc intercepted it each time. All the while, it showed its huge fangs and kept up a grisly chorus of snarling.

"That critter!" Monk gulped, "sure must like man meat!"

Long Tom, who had recovered his breath, gasped, "The dog was sniffing at a door! I think there's something behind it!"

THE DERRICK DEVIL

They went into the room out of which the dog had chased Long Tom. The dog snarled and slavered and kept its red, evil eyes fierce.

"That's the door," said Long Tom, pointing. Instantly after he had spoken and pointed, he gave an imitation of a man doing his best to jump out of his skin.

"What's that thing!"

he squawled.

What excited him was a puddle of red, jellylike stuff that protruded under the bottom of the door.

LIGHT in the room was none too good, being discolored by tall, stained windows in a corner with about that same greenish tint which starts off putrefaction. The greenish, rough walls had been carefully decorated to give an impression of infinite age, and the result of that effort and the lighting was the feeling of an unreal, dreamland dungeon in which anything might be expected to happen.

Had the place possessed a real, an earthy feeling, it would have been easier for common sense to discount the possibility of anything eerie.

They stared, as rigid and breathless as so many solidly frozen figures, and they all could see that the red horror on the floor was in motion. It was flowing into the room, coming toward them!

"Run!" yelled Reservoir Hill. "It'll gitcha!"

Doc Savage produced an object which he carried in his pocket—a powerful flashlight. Doc planted the beam, which was like a sliver of the sun itself, upon the monstrosity oozing under the door into the room.

The huge black dog began to snarl and drool and make sounds of terror.

The instant the light was upon the horror flowing under the door, the thing stopped. There was a brief pause. Gradually, the semiliquid red mass began to retract itself under the door.

"It's afraid of bright light!" Monk exploded.

"Quick!" Doc Savage rapped. "We'll chop a piece of the thing off!"

The bronze giant hurled forward, and his speed was that of a jungle denizen leaping to the kill. Even while he was in the air, he got a knife out of his pocket, a knife with a spring-snap blade, which opened instantly.

His blinding speed was not enough. For the red mass was suddenly gone back under the door. Faster, almost, than the eye could perceive, it went.

Doc hit the door, and it was of big mahogany timbers, as solid in its wooden ponderosity as the door of a vault. It was locked.

"Blazes!" Monk yelled. "Didja see how quick that thing went! It's fast as light!"

DOC leaped backward, seized a heavy table, and hurled it at the door. A panel broke out of the door. Doc threw the table again, causing the door to fly open, revealing a room which drawn shades made almost black.

They turned on the lights, and the room became so bright it ached their eyes. The big black dog kept behind them and always it snarled and made sounds deep in its chest that were like noises which might be made by some small thing dying.

The lighted room was big, with rich wooden panels along the walls, heavy furniture and a deep rug on the floor, and the rug looked as if thousands of fishing worms had crawled over it in battalions, leaving trails of slime.

No red, jellylike body could be seen.

It was Doc who looked up at the very tall ceiling. The others followed his gaze. Without exception, they started back in horror. The black dog emitted a yammering howl that came as near making their hair stand on end as anything could.

"A man—hanging from the chandelier!" Long Tom gulped.

Chapter XI. SEIZED

THE hanging man was big, bony, and his skin was not red alone because of his hanging there, for his complexion was the hearty one of the outdoors. He had an aquiline nose and big eyes. His crumpled morning suit, striped trousers and all, failed to give him a suave appearance. One word described him. Rugged!

The hanging man was breathing with difficulty through his nose.

Reservoir Hill said loudly, "Too bad! I thought for a minute you'd committed suicide!"

"Who is he?" Doc asked.

"Enoch Andershott," said Hill.

The man was not hanging by his neck, but by his middle. He was buckled to the chain of the chandelier by a strip of leather, evidently his belt.

"I'm so stiff I can't move!" he groaned. "Cut me down, somebody!"

Doc Savage moved forward, and instantly, there was a snarling and scraping of sharp claws on the floor behind him.

"Whitey!" Enoch Andershott shrieked, feebly. "Heel! Stop it!"

The giant, ferocious black dog, which had started a charge, skidded to a stop, then slung back, dragging along on its stomach.

Enoch Andershott peered at Doc Savage. Andershott was a big man, but he seemed, somehow, dwarfed alongside the bronze man.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"They were trying to kill me!" Andershott said, hoarsely. "I don't understand it! I think they were trying to make it look as if I was guilty of something, and did not want me alive to prove otherwise!"

Old Reservoir Hill spat noisily.

Andershott continued to look at Doc Savage. Abruptly, he recognized the bronze man.

"You're Doc Savage!" he exploded. "You must be! Where's my partner, Alonzo Cugg? Have you seen him?"

"Is he supposed to be around?" Doc asked.

"Cugg was here when the red things came," Andershott said rapidly. "I jumped and hung to the chandelier. I don't know what happened to Cugg. He fled. The red things stayed on the floor, almost able to reach me.

"The last one fled just before you broke down that window—I mean, it went through that window just before you broke down the door."

He pointed at a window.

Monk ran to the window, which was open. He looked out over the sun-bathed morning landscape, then scowled at the window sill itself.

"Trail of that slime goes out here," he grunted.

"There are men," said Andershott, "who control, at least to some extent, those red things!"

IT must have been a thought that rendered every one in the room silent for a moment.

"Men!" Monk exploded. "Guiding that jelly thing!"

"Those

jelly things," Andershott corrected. "There was more than one! And I saw them—the men, I mean!"

"What'd these guys look like?" Monk yelled.

"Their faces were vaguely familiar," Andershott explained. "But it was a long time before I kinda remembered where I had seen their pictures."

Andershott had been speaking fast, and he paused to catch a breath.

"They were outlaw Tomahawk Tant's men!" he gulped. "I had seen their pictures in the newspapers!"

"Tant's men?" echoed Ham in a surprised voice.

Old Reservoir Hill reacted instantly to that.

"You're crazy!" he howled. "They couldn't have been Tant's men!"

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Every one looked at Reservoir Hill. The old man glared, then apparently realized his howled statement had sounded queer, and looked confused.

"What I mean is that this dang gollywobbler, Andershott, couldn't tell the truth if he wanted to!" he yelled. "He's a natural-born liar. He's lying now for some reason!"

Enoch Andershott drew himself up with some dignity, looked slightly angry for a moment, then shrugged.

"This old man," he said, "has held a fancied grudge against me for years. He is an old man with bile in his soul, and some persons hold the opinion that he is not quite responsible."

"Not respon—crazy, huh!" Reservoir Hill actually jumped up and down in his rage. "I'll wring your neck, or I hope to be put on a diet of carrots, than which there's nothing I like less!"

Monk told Andershott, "We were told you headed the mob of men who tried to prevent us reaching Oklahoma."

Andershott started. He opened and shut his mouth.

"Why—I don't—maybe—I've got it! That is why they tried to kill me! They used my name to guide suspicion from themselves, whoever they are! They wanted to prevent me telling different!"

Doc queried, "If you had pictures of the Tomahawk Tant mob, could you identify the men you saw here, guiding these red mobsters?"

"I could try," said Andershott.

Ham interposed. "How were they—the monsters—guided?"

"I don't know!" snapped Andershott. "I didn't see!"

Doc telephoned the police, and they promised to come at once, bringing such pictures as they had of known Tant badmen. While the officers were on their way, Doc and his men went over the grounds and the Andershott-Cugg mansion. They found no monsters. They found no Cugg, nor no pile of strange-looking grease which might have been a Cugg.

The police spread their pictures on a porch table.

"There," said Andershott, pointing. "And there, and there. That's four of them."

"Have you a picture of Outlaw Tant?" Doc asked the policemen.

"Tant is sort of a spook among badmen," one cop replied. "To tell the truth, we haven't a picture we're sure is him. But we have his finger prints."

"Mind letting me have the finger prints?" Doc requested.

They didn't mind. The bronze man pocketed the print card which they gave him.

The police heard the story of the attack of the red, jellylike things.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Queer," they said. "'Tant's men controlling the things! And this morning, two of Tant's outlaws were found dead, half consumed!"

"Probably they were carrying some of the red monsters and the things got loose on them," suggested Andershott.

THE police gave the premises a thorough going over, and it developed that they were more modern than usual, to the extent that they had an expert chemical analyst who went over the slime on the rugs and on window sills, and even on the lawn grass outside. The chemist tested this slime to learn what composed it.

"Whew!" he gulped, on finishing. "Whew!"

"What is it?" Long Tom asked, curiosity on his face.

"Digestive juices!"

"What?"

"Digestive juices!" repeated the police chemist. "Of course, these are infinitely more powerful than those in the human body. But, nevertheless, I can best explain them to the layman by saying they are powerful digestive juices. Of course, to any one with a technical knowledge, I could say they are composed of—"

Doc Savage interposed. "There's no need of going into a lengthy discussion. Digestive juices does cover the stuff."

"Thank you," said the police chemist, flattered.

Long Tom, face bewildered, said, "You mean to stand there and tell us this thing oozes digestive juices through its hide?"

No one answered.

A policeman, who had been telephoning headquarters, came into the room wearing the look of a man who has just been convinced there really are such things as ghosts.

"Listen," he said, hoarsely. "This thing is getting worse! The jelly devils have been down in the Seminole Field. That's about forty or fifty miles from Indian Dome Field. They've been seen up near Bartlesville, during the night. Somebody near Cushing saw 'em, or one of 'em. But that ain't the worst thing!"

He paused and wet his lips. Nobody spoke.

"The jelly devils got a drilling crew in the Indian Dome Field," he said. "It was at a well about three miles from the Sands-Carlaw-Hill lease, where the things were first reported. Some men on a near-by lease heard the drilling crew shouting and screaming and came over to investigate. They found a bunch of bodies! It musta been pretty bad!"

"What do you mean?" Doc asked.

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"The bodies were only partly consumed," said the policeman. "The report said there was that grease stuff where the arms and legs and like were missing, and some of the men were—well, skeletons!"

"Were any of the monsters seen?" Doc asked.

"Yes," said the policeman. "But they went away, apparently because of the lights the approaching men carried."

The police left after a time, promising to have a general search made for Alonzo Cugg.

Long Tom said, "If you ask me, we'd better find out some way of detecting the presence of these red devil things. I think I can do the job easily with a magnetic capacity balance hook-up."

Enoch Andershott looked at Long Tom, surprised, and demanded, "Who is this chap?"

"Major Thomas J. Roberts, one of my aids," Doc explained.

The telephone rang. Doc Savage, happening to be nearest the instrument, lifted the receiver. "Yes?"

"This is a filling station attendant on the Sand Sprints road," said a voice. "Something queer just happened here."

ENOCH ANDERSHOTT came over. He made no effort to take the receiver from Doc Savage, but put his head close to Doc's head so that he could hear. Over the wire came three pops, a louder pop.

"Go ahead," Doc directed the station attendant.

"All right," the fellow said. "A coupé just drove into my station for a fill-up and a quart of lube. It had a bit rack on the back, and this bit rack was full of what looked like canvas, maybe an old tent. I thought once I saw the canvas move.

"I never said nothing, on account of they might have had a dog or something in there, and anyway, one time last spring I almost got my puss shot off for sticking my nose into a car where some Tant bad boys were ridin'. Them boys just ups with a sawed-off pumpgun and—"

"Just what are you trying to tell us?" Doc interposed.

"That I found a note on the filling station drive after this coupé with the bit rack went on," said the attendant. "It was wrapped up in a ten-spot, which is probably the reason I'm callin' you so quicklike."

"Read the note!" The three pops, the louder pop, came again.

"It says, 'Tant behind whole thing. It's worse than anybody thinks yet. They're taking me to Tant hide-out, thirty miles due north of One Road Cut.' And it's signed, 'Lonny.' It's addressed to be telephoned to Mister Enoch Andershott. There's a postscript on the address which says Mister Andershott will give me another fifty dollars."

"Damned if I will!" growled Andershott.

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"Then hell with you!" said the attendant. "I always heard you were so stingy you pluck the feathers off the Indians on your pennies before you spend 'em! I've earned the ten-spot, way I figure, so hell with you!"

He banged the receiver up, just before the loud pop that was to be expected on the tail end of three lesser popping noises.

"Impertinent nobody!" yelled Enoch Andershott. Then, in the same breath, "Come on! We've got to save my partner, Alonzo Cugg! He signed that note! Lonny! That's Cugg!"

"Right!" Doc Savage scooped up the telephone book, looked up the number of the afternoon newspaper and put in a call. "A man named Renwick around there?"

"Prying around in the morgue, over by the oil editor's desk," a voice replied.

A moment later, Doc had Renny on the phone and was asking, "Find anything? You've been looking up recent developments in the oil fields."

"Well," replied Renny, slowly, "only thing I've seen concerning anybody involved in this is that Enoch Andershott and Alonzo Cugg have been selling their holdings over the period of the last year until now they own hardly anything except the lease in the Indian Dome Field adjoining the Sands-Carlaw-Hill lease."

Enoch Andershott roared, "And why the thunder shouldn't we conduct our business any way we please?"

He had come up behind Doc, and the bronze man had known he was there, but had not given any sign.

"Meet us as we pass the newspaper office on the way to Sand Springs road," Doc directed.

Renny met them.

WELL out of Tulsa, past the little city park and the swimming pool and the small bungalow, stood a filling station. It was green, and like thousands of other filling stations owned by a great corporation.

Doc drove in, saying, "This is where the call came from."

Monk exploded, "How'd you know?"

Doc pointed at a near-by oil well which was pumping. The gasoline engine operating the bullwheel walking beam pump device was one which sputtered three times, then back-fired loudly. Three regular exhausts, then a back-fire, as regular as clockwork.

"The sound of that pump came over the telephone," Doc said. "Driving along the road, I have been listening for it."

The attendant was a lean young man, with a good forehead, eyes and jaw. He peered at them, evidently decided they looked like trouble, and his hands blurred in movement—and were suddenly holding a six-gun.

"Since them bad Tant boys got tough last spring, I been practicing the draw and also how to shoot," he said. "Maybe you'd be so kind as to tell me whatcha want?"

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"The note," Doc said.

The attendant squinted into the car and seemed to recognize Enoch Andershott, for he said, "Is it a fact that you're an old meanie to the Indians on your pennies?"

Andershott yelled, "I'll have you fired! You menial!"

"If you asked my boss to fire me, he'd laugh so hard they'd have to bandage his ribs," said the attendant. "My boss knows you."

"The note!" Doc repeated.

The attendant snapped, "Ask for it like a gentleman—" and got a look at Doc Savage. He undoubtedly recognized the bronze man, but he did not look abashed.

"O. K. My mistake. I've heard of you, and I'm for you in a big way."

He handed over the note, and Doc glanced at it. The attendant had read it exactly as it was over the telephone.

Doc produced a bill and passed it to the attendant.

"I don't want *your* money." The attendant passed the bill back and nodded at Enoch Andershott. "But I'd take his right eye if I got a chance!"

THEY drove on, leaving the attendant with his six-gun in his hands and a big grin on his face.

Old Reservoir Hill fell to chuckling, and finally to laughing, and finally he said, "I think I'll go to Timbuktu some day!"

"Why?" snarled Enoch Andershott.

"To see if there's anybody there who likes you!"

Big-fisted Renny got between them, with his extremely long face more dour and sorrowful-looking than usual, as it became when he was secretly tickled.

They passed one of the big refineries in Sand Springs, heading for the canyon known as One Road Cut, in the wilder section of the Osage Hills. They were almost abreast of the big refinery gate when old Reservoir Hill barked out a demand.

"Stop here!" he shouted. "I got a friend in there who has a dang good repeating rifle in his office all the time. During his spare minutes, he goes over on the bank of the river and practices popping at floating junk."

Doc stopped. Reservoir Hill got out, went through the refinery gate, and out of sight, and the others waited in the car.

They waited a long time.

Doc sent Monk in to investigate. The homely chemist came back traveling at a wild run, and with an incredulous look in his homely face.

"Reservoir Hill skipped!" Monk squeaked excitedly. "He never went in there to borrow no rifle! He just walked through and out the other side!"

Chapter XII. BLAST TRAP

IF Doc Savage was amazed by the unexpected flight of old Reservoir Hill, he gave no sign of it, although it was a striking trait of the bronze man that only on the most unusual occasions did he show any emotion at all.

Doc put the car in motion.

Andershott yelled, "Ain't we gonna hunt the old reprobate?"

Doc said, "We are hunting your partner, Cugg."

"Of course!" Andershott nodded violently. "Let's go! To thunder with that stringy old goat, Hill!"

Renny, after keeping his chin in his palm for a time, pulled a paper out of his pocket. He tapped it.

"Editorial writer in here suggests that some nest of infernal creatures, previously unknown to man, was tapped a mile below the surface of the earth by that drilling oil well," he said.

No one spoke. The car followed the road around steep bluffs, with a river and a railroad below. Doc drove fast when he had a view of the road ahead, but slowed to an ample safety margin on the bad curves. Once they met a huge truck loaded with oil field pipe in the middle of the road. The slow speed saved them.

"That nest of strange creatures, a mile-underground theory, was advanced by somebody last night," Monk said at last.

The bluffs became very high over them. Below, fifty feet or so straight down, was the railroad, and running beside that, a giant concrete pipe running part of the time on top of the ground, sometimes on blocks, and sometimes half underground. It was a water main leading from a reservoir somewhere in the Osage.

The cliff slid down in the road ahead of the car.

The happening was so casual at first as to be ordinary. A huge mass simply settled. Then it fell to pieces, and there was noise, the roar of breaking rock, and the whoop of some kind of explosive.

As the stone mass fell to pieces, there was a great gushing of rock dust, and fragments came flying out of the mass, some hopping along the road, playful, innocent-looking things until one hit the car, which Doc had almost stopped, and completely wrecked the right-hand front wheel.

Andershott made a howling noise. Doc Savage and his aids gave almost no sign, scarcely changing their positions in the crowded sedan. But they knew what had happened.

The roar of rock subsided after a moment, although the dust continued to surge in a great gray pall over the

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mass of stone which had been blasted across the road.

"Listen to this!"

The voice came from the top of the cliff. Then something else came from the cliff top. It exploded with a deafening report and dug a considerable hole in the road behind the car.

"Dynamite!" Monk gulped.

Then the homely chemist poked his incredibly ugly features out of the car window and looked upward to see who had shouted and thrown the dynamite.

"Hy'ah, good-lookin'!" called the voice. "Get out of that iron, or we'll blow you out!"

Monk pulled his head in.

"The guy answers the description of the one who was in the plane and tried to get Vida Carlaw," he said. "Yep. It's one of the mob that finally murdered Vida Carlaw."

THEY sat very still in the big automobile. It was crowded. Doc cut off the engine, and they could then hear noises made by small bits of rock falling down the mangled cliff face.

The voice above yelled, "You honyoks can talk over the weather after you get outta there!"

Doc Savage said, "If we do not get out, they will throw more dynamite."

They got out, looked up, and could see rifles peeking over the cliff's edge at them. A man stood in plain view, with a stick of dynamite in each hand. He wore plain black gloves.

"That lad must wear gloves all the time," Monk grunted. "I'll bet his finger prints are on file somewhere, and there's plenty charged agin' 'im!"

The dust cloud still boiled around the mass of blasted rock. Somewhere beyond the rock slide and its growing cloud of dust, a car horn was honking. A rifle whanged atop the cliff, and the car horn began to blow steadily and horribly.

A rope came snaking down the cliff.

"Climb it!" the voice above yelled.

"Well," Monk said, "it don't look like they're gonna kill us right off the bat. I guess I'll climb up."

He started up.

Then Doc Savage moved. The bronze man had shifted a little apart from the others, and now he whipped into motion, off like a champion sprinter. He had covered some yards before those above began to yell and shoot. From one side to another, he pitched, still covering ground with amazing speed. He dived into the cloud of dust.

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The dust cloud was very dense, enough so at its most umbrageous point to hide him from those above. Dust would not keep out their bullets, though. Lead tapped fiercely at the broken stone.

Doc got a break. Feeling, he came upon a cranny under a great mass of stone which was large enough to protect him from lead.

He grasped a great dornick, heaved it so that it went bounding down toward the river, starting a miniature rock slide of its own.

"There he goes!" squawled a man on the cliff top, mistaken.

Doc writhed into the rock cranny. Bullets chased the rolling rock until the men realized their mistake, then began to hit all about, searching the rock slide. A machine gun, evidently a small hand one, joined in, along with six-shooters and shotguns. The whistle and scream of bullets, the thunder of the reports and their echoes from the cliff, made an ominous syncopation.

"We oughta got 'im by now!" a voice yelled. "Go down an see!"

Doc had been waiting for that. He could not wait too long, because the rock dust would settle soon—had settled dangerously already.

Easing out of the cranny, Doc felt his way downward. It was a bruising, nerve-shattering task, negotiating that mass of rock. He did not follow the slide all the way down, for it would have been impossible to keep from starting rocks rolling.

Doc gained the cliff's edge. He carried in his clothing a silk cord with a grapple hook of collapsible style affixed to one end, and he set the grapple behind the sharp edge of a big boulder, took a chance, and went sliding down the face of the cliff.

He landed on the railroad bed, ran, found a culvert, crawled into it, through it and out on the other side, into water that was over his head.

The Arkansas River was muddy, and he swam out into it, under water, and came up, projecting only his face, under the roots of a willow tree. He could hear what was happening up on the road.

THE ambushers had evidently climbed down, and none of Doc's companions had possessed sufficient agility to make good an escape in the manner of the bronze man. They were probably wise in not attempting it. The ambushers were hunting the rock slide. A profusion of profanity accompanied their efforts.

"He ain't here!" they yelled.

Doc Savage furtively left the willow roots where he lay and swam downstream. He had a plan. While they hunted him, he was going to circle, get behind them, and do whatever possible toward rescuing the prisoners.

But the man with the black gloves must have recognized that, and he lost no time. The prisoners were rushed up the face of the cliff, and out of sight. They must have had cars hidden on a trail at the cliff top, because Doc could hear the engines. The bronze man scrambled out of the river, through bushes, and raced furiously to intercept the automobiles.

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He was not successful. The cars sped away in the direction of Tulsa.

Doc ran after the machines, not because he expected to overhaul them, but because there had been a house back a short distance, and a telephone wire ran to it. Doc reached the house, found nobody home, broke in, and used the telephone to advise Tulsa police to be on the look-out for the fleeing cars.

It was not much of a chance. Doc could not identify the machines by appearance, not having seen them, but he had seen the tracks and, from a vast knowledge of such subjects, named the kind of tires on the cars. He left money to pay for the damage he had done in breaking into the house, and went back to the clifftop.

He looked over the vicinity, noting particularly such footprints as were discernible. Then he descended the cliff to the car which had honked, and which was still honking, although weaker, as if the battery were running down. It was a motor horn, and sounded dreary.

THE filling station attendant who had boasted of his shooting practice was slumped across the wheel, so that he held the button depressed with one shoulder. He was holding both hands to his neck, and when he saw Doc Savage, words came out of him that were half vibrations of vocal cords and half bubbings.

"You—great guy—read a lot—'bout you," he said, and It was with difficulty that even Doc understood the words.

"Followed you—figured—might help. Wasn't I—the big ninny!"

Doc Savage said, quietly, "I like your style, young man."

The lips twisted a smile, almost imperceptibly, under the red film that was over them.

"I'll tell—Saint Peter—you said that—and it—oughta be enough." He stopped and shut his eyes tightly. "Something to tell—you. I figured—it out—after you left."

"Yes," Doc Savage said.

"That—damn note—they left it—on purpose. I hope—that information—helps. Men in—front seat of car—knew about note."

"It helps," Doc Savage said, "a great deal."

The young man kept his eyes shut while he finished dying.

Chapter XIII. FLIGHT

ONE ROAD CUT was a canyon, and It had gotten its name back in the days when Oklahoma pioneers made their own clothes and drove ox teams, and used the handiest level going, more often than not a gravel creek bed, for a road.

The bottom of One Road Cut had been used as a thoroughfare, and at this point was wide enough for only

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one team of oxen at a time, hence the name.

Thirty miles north, the note had said Outlaw Tant's men were taking Alonzo Cugg. The unfortunate filling station attendant had said the note had been purposefully lost—the men in the front seat had known about it. That meant Tant's men had known the note was being left. Therefore, it was a fake.

A fake to lead Doc Savage and his companions into the trap on the cliff road perhaps?

It would seem a logical suspicion, then, that there was no outlaw Tant hang-out north thirty miles from One Road Cut.

But that was wrong. The hang-out was there. A ranch, old Western style, with corrals, hay barns, bunk house and ranch house of logs, and a very tall windmill and a water tank beside it.

There was no water in the tank; the staves were old and some had fallen; there had not been water in the tank for years; nor did it look as if the windmill pump had pumped for an equally long time.

Yet there was a well-worn footpath from the windmill tower to the bunk house. A crude awning of boards had been rigged on top of the windmill tower for a self-evident reason.

The windmill tower had been used as look-out point. No doubt the terrain could be seen for miles by a man with a good pair of field glasses.

Doc Savage did not call out. They would not have answered, anyway. He merely watched the place, listened, discerned no sign of life, then moved forward.

There was no one around.

Those who had been there recently had lived well, for the empty liquor bottles bore expensive labels, and the few suits left hanging were costly and tailored. They had dressed their women with a free hand, too, judging from the frocks left behind, and there were rare perfumes on the dressing tables.

Everywhere was confusion. They had taken suitcases, and had rifled through trunks, probably for the more valuable stuff. Garments too bulky, or not so necessary, had been thrown aside. A safe was open in the ranch house.

There were no guns on the place, but rags scattered here and there smelled of oil and gunpowder, and there were quite a few wads that had obviously been pulled through gun barrels by ramrods. Empty cartridge boxes were scattered about.

Doc took finger prints. He found enough to be sure that the Tant outlaw mob had used the place for a hang-out.

The outlaws had fled quite recently, in a great hurry. They had taken automobiles to the east, toward Pawhuska, and by now, must be out of the Osage.

DOC SAVAGE left the way he had come, afoot, traveling at an easy run which covered ground at, all told, a speed which a car could not have exceeded any great amount through terrain as rough and nearly impassable as this.

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The bronze man made a telephone call over the first instrument which he found, one situated in a pumping station some miles out of Pawhuska. He called a number. The noise of a mechanical, musical device was audible the instant the distant receiver came down, and a voice said, "Fujiyama Roadhouse."

"Snook Loggard," Doc requested. "Lemme talk to 'im."

The bronze man's usual cultured tones had vanished, and he had assumed the voice of a typical tough guy.

"Who wants to talk to Snook?" the distant voice asked.

"What's it to you?" Doc growled. "A pal. Tell 'im it's a little cardinal."

"A what?"

"Ne'r mind! Snook'll get it!"

"Well, I'll see if anybody named Snook is here," said the voice, obviously belonging to the roadhouse proprietor. "I ain't never heard the name.

A few moments passed.

A harsh voice over the telephone said, "Well? This ain't Snook, but I'll take a word to 'im."

"Hello, Snook," Doc Savage said.

"Huh! It's you. 'Sall right, then. I figured it might be a badge with a guy fastened to it. Whatsa wrong? Why ain't you in St. Louis? Hah! This guy said you was a little cardinal wantin' to talk to me! I gitcha now. The St. Louis ball club—the Cards—you from St. Louis—sure, sure!"

Doc Savage growled, "I'm just tippin' yuh, pallo. St. Louis ain't gonna be safe for mamma Snook's boy for a dog's age."

Snook chuckled, unconcerned. "Say, how long does a dog live, anyway?"

"It depends on how the dog lives," Doc rasped, dryly. "But you better cut St. Louis off your visitin' list for a while. Better make a connection here."

"Don't worry about me," said Snook. "I'm doin' right well by myself."

"O. K., then," Doc growled.

"Thanks for callin me," Snook said, coarsely. "I'll remember you to the next lawman I see."

He hung up laughing.

SNOOK had something wrong with one side, it appeared from the way he walked. He swung along in particularly grotesque fashion, with his left side seemingly almost inoperative. Yet he managed to travel at a good speed.

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He was bowed over to one side by his trouble, with his face twisted out of shape, and he was a particularly uninviting specimen as a whole.

He had a skin the color of a pine plank that had lain for years in the weather, and his mouth seemed full of gold teeth. His eyes rarely met any one's but when they did, there was something about them that made the other Individual turn his own gaze aside.

Snook lurched in to the bar, where stood half a dozen men who looked as if they were waiting for something and didn't know what—or such best described their perpetual alertness and nervousness. Out of Snook's pocket came a big bill off a bigger roll.

"It's all on me again!" he shouted, boastfully. "Best the house has got!"

The proprietor picked up the bill, eyed it, and blinked. It was a century.

"This hot?" he asked, sharply.

"Not by a damn sight!" growled Snook. "Say—you too good to take my money? Maybe you'd like to do somethin' about it, huh?"

The proprietor leaned casually against the bar. This put his hand on a sawed-off shotgun lying there.

On the other side of the bar, a man known as "Cackle," a lean fellow with a face remarkably like that of a chicken, slapped the bar and said loudly:

"What the hell! This is too early in the morning to get all het up! Bartender, I think I heard the hen cackle. Will you see if she didn't lay me an egnog?"

That eased the friction, and every one drank, and the talk turned to horse racing. It seemed there was a track wire upstairs, which accounted for the presence of the men this early in the morning.

A bit later, the man called Cackle drew the proprietor aside.

"What was that telephone call to him?" he asked, furtively. "You listened in on the extension, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said the proprietor. "The hombre who called him was some bird tipping him off that the law wanted him bad in St. Louis, and he'd better stay clear of that burg."

"You think he's O. K.?" demanded Cackle.

"Maybe. But I don't like his snotty manner, and if he gets tough with me again, I'll fix him up. The first shell in that shotgun is tear gas, and the second is rock salt, and when I give 'em both, they remember—"

"Did you notice his left hand when you put your hand on that shotgun?" Cackle asked casually.

"Hell, no! I was watching his snaky eyes. You can tell from a man's eyes when—"

"You better watch his hand," Cackle chuckled. "He had it full of as mean a looking derringer as I've seen in years. Keeps it up his sleeve, on that bad side, and gets it out by drawing his arm up inside in a way you don't hardly notice."

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Cackle left a deeply thoughtful roadhouse proprietor, and went over to the side of Snook.

"I think you and me has got some business," Cackle said.

THE two men retired to a corner of the room where no one was near, and they could be sure no one came near, and put their heads together. They made a perfect-looking pair of villains.

No one, least of all the erudite college professors with whom he had once worked, would have recognized the mean-mannered, boastful, vicious-looking Snook as the eminent archaeologist and geologist and Doc Savage aid, William Harper Littlejohn.

Cackle certainly had no suspicion.

"You're Snook Loggard from St. Louis, ain't you?" asked Cackle.

Johnny, playing the tough Snook to perfection, leaned back. He happened to know the real Snook Loggard was in an Ohio penitentiary, under an assumed name. Snook didn't know the authorities knew his identity, but he would find it out when they got ready to release him, for a policeman would be waiting to arrest him and take him back to St. Louis, where he probably would be hanged.

"I ain't sayin' who I am and who I ain't," Johnny said. "Why?"

"I got a connection you might be interested in."

"Yeah?"

"Tant."

Johnny registered a badman greatly impressed by the name of a worse badman. He leaned forward.

"Look, pal," he said. "I blow down here and hang around for just such a chance as this, see, I didn't expect it to come so soon."

"Tant is recruiting men," the other said simply.

"Somethin' up?"

"Yeah. Pretty big stuff. Tant needs all the men he can get. And there's a catch to this."

"Yeah? What?"

"This ain't a job. This is a fight!" Cackle stopped and moistened his lips. "It's a fight to the death between Tant and another outfit!"

Johnny said, "O. K. I come in. But I'll expect to get my cut on what comes in after this is settled."

They shook hands and had a drink, and set them up to the crowd. Cackle and Johnny got in a car and drove off. They stopped in a restaurant in Tulsa for luncheon.

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Johnny, under pretense of going to the washroom, reached a telephone. He called a number which he was to call whenever he wanted to get in touch with Doc Savage. By luck, Doc answered the telephone himself.

"Doc," said Johnny. "I've succeeded in getting into the Tant outlaw mob, just about. I'm on my way to their hide-out. I'll tip you off later about where it is."

"You have no idea yet?" Doc asked.

"I couldn't even make a guess where Tant is," Johnny replied. "I'll get in touch with you, as soon as I do. How are things going?"

Doc told him about the disaster on the cliff road, ending, "All of our crowd but yourself and myself are now prisoners."

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny said, hoarsely.

When Johnny hung up, he was so stunned by the news that Monk, Ham, Renny and Long Tom had been seized, that his usual alert eye was dulled. He failed to make an observation which would have avoided a great deal of future trouble.

Cackle, the outlaw, was standing adjacent to the telephone booth, and had overheard every word that Johnny had said.

JOHNNY returned to the dining room. Cackle stepped from the place where he had been secreted, slid out of the side door of the restaurant kitchen without Johnny seeing him, and ran to their car, which they had parked in an alley in violation of fire regulations which were not enforced anyway.

The built-in trunk at the rear of the car proved to be the container for a compact short-wave radio transmitter and receiver. It operated on telephone, or voice.

The voice which finally came over the air to the headset on Cackle's ears was crisp. "What is it?"

"Chief, I've been kidding this hombre called Snook," said Cackle. "I told him I was enlisting him in Tant's outlaw mob. The poor goop swallowed it. He thinks I'm one of Tant's men."

"I don't like the chances you're taking!" retorted the other.

"Wait and listen to this! This Snook is one of Doc Savage's men! He just reported to Doc Savage that he was on his way to Tant's hang-out, and would report its location to Doc Savage!"

The explosion of profanity which came out of the telephone receiver caused Cackle to wrinkle his eyes.

"Do you think Doc Savage suspects the truth?" asked the voice at the other radio transmitter.

"Suspects that Tant is not behind this thing at all? Naw, he ain't got an inkling of it!"

"Has he any idea of what we're after, and why we're trying to lay the blame onto Tant?"

"I dunno. I don't think so."

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Had bony Johnny, the accomplished actor, heard this, he would have bowed his head in shame and decided to give up the pursuit of excitement and go back to teaching the youth of the United States that a pyrite is a native compound rock containing metals, and not a fellow with a cutlass in his teeth.

Johnny thought he was in the company of a Tant outlaw. But it seemed the badman in question was a member of another mob, which was engaged in pointing suspicion at Tant.

The leader of this mysterious other band was asking, "Does Doc Savage know what the red monsters are?"

"I tell you, I don't know what he knows, chief," the man called Cackle replied. "All I know is that I got suspicious of this guy Snook, thought at first he was a Tant man, then got the suspicion he might be a Doc Savage man."

The other voice said, after a pause, "I think we can make use of this. We'll trick this Savage aid into trapping his boss."

A long stream of command followed.

CACKLE returned to Johnny via the front door of the restaurant. He was carrying a newspaper.

"Went out to get a paper," he said. "Waited a few minutes, so as to grab the latest edition."

Johnny glanced at the paper.

FILLING STATION MAN SHOT

FOUND IN CAR NEAR ROCK SLIDE

Police Still Investigating Mystery

Rock Blown On Road

That was all the police had given the newspaper reporters so far.

They went out and got in the car. Cackle pulled out a map, not a road map, but one of the type used by oil men, an accurately surveyed map from which the most exact positions can be secured.

Cackle pointed.

"There," he said, "Is where the boss, Tant, is right now."

They drove out of town, east, then north, then east again, and passed the airport. Beyond, Cackle drove into a filling station, saying, "Gotta get her filled up."

While the gasoline was being pumped in, and oil and tires checked, Cackle roamed into a near-by orchard and began to finger over worm-eaten fruit in search of an apple that looked worth consuming,

Johnny took the bait. He slid out of the car, scuttled into the filling station and telephoned Doc Savage.

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He gave Doc the exact location pointed out by Cackle as the whereabouts of Outlaw Tant.

"Be there shortly," Doc Savage said.

Johnny was sitting innocently in the car when Cackle returned. They drove on, and covered about two miles when Cackle pointed abruptly and said, "There's one of our hang-outs, too."

There was nothing. It was a gag, an old one, but the old ones are sometimes best. Johnny looked, and never knew about the blackjack which Cackle swung, until he figured it out hours later, after he regained consciousness.

Cackle looked at the senseless figure of the gaunt geologist and archaeologist. Then Cackle pocketed his blackjack.

"The great Doc Savage's aids!" he sniffed. "Just so much gravy! That's what!"

He tied Johnny, gagged him, then drove on. He began laughing to himself.

"The chief is sure slick!" he chuckled. "Nobody even knows what we're doing until it's almost done, and then this Tant gent gets the blame!"

Chapter XIV. MASTERMIND

DOC SAVAGE evidenced no unusual haste after he received Johnny's call—the call which Johnny had been unknowingly tricked into making, and which was to lead Doc Savage into a trap.

The bronze man had been telephoning oil field lease brokers, the gentlemen known locally as "lease robbers," and possibly misnamed, because there were those among them as honest and upright as any businessman.

"Are there any leases being sold in the Indian Dome Field to-day?" Doc asked.

"You mean the field where them damn man-eating things escaped through a casing?" the broker asked.

"That is the field," Doc admitted.

"There's been some more attacks by the man-eating devils up there," said the broker. "Drilling crews, pumpers, and even operators are beginning to get scared of the place. Almost everybody will clear out if there's many more attacks. That'll cause a lot of leases to be offered for sale, because nobody wants a field where no telling what time something out of the ground'll eat you."

"Any leases sold in the Indian Dome Field to-day?" Doc repeated.

"Yeah. One. No, wait a minute! Two! One early, and one just a minute ago. They sold very cheap, because the men who owned them got scared. One had a brother killed by the red, jellylike devils last night. You know, that drilling crew that was about half eaten up by the monsters in the Indian Dome Field last night. That lease was one that was sold, on account of the brother didn't want anything more to do with it. He got the big jitters and the willies and—"

"Who bought it?" Doc asked, sharply.

The lease broker evidently looked the name up.

"The Best Bet Oil Corporation," he said.

"Who owns it?"

"Nobody seems to know. Now if you want to get some leases cheap—"

Doc Savage seemed to consider for a moment

"Listen," he said, "this is Clark Savage, Jr."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?" the broker asked.

"Doc Savage."

The broker must have choked slightly. "*That's* different!"

Doc said, "I am making a standing offer for any lease in the Indian Dome Field. I will pay one thousand dollars more than any other offer made for any lease. Understand, I make no offer for any lease myself. But when an offer is made, I will go it one thousand dollars better. See that the word gets around, will you?"

"Will I!" exploded the broker. "Say, I'll cut my commission to five per cent! But what's the idea? You going into oil production in the mid-West in a big way?"

Doc Savage said, "I am trying to prevent one of the most gigantic extortion schemes and steals ever attempted to be perpetrated upon the oil industry. It is just starting now. If it can be nipped in the bud, now is the time to do it"

"Good night!" yelled the broker. "Give me more details—"

Doc Savage hung up on him, then called New York City by long-distance telephone, to arrange for financing his purchase of oil leases, if any.

Then he rented an automobile and drove east, then north, heading for the spot which Johnny had been tricked into describing to him as the hide-out of Tomahawk Tant.

THE region of Oklahoma popularly designated as the Osage is that section of the State, north and central, which takes in the original Osage Indian reservation and some adjacent territory. The Osage is nothing to look at. To the eye, it is just red oak brush and hills that are not very impressive.

But it is also one of the most noted hang-outs in the United States for outlaws. The fact that the era of the automobile, airplane and radio had arrived had made little change. For an automobile is of no use without roads, a plane of no use where there is no place to land, and a radio, of course, cannot catch a two-gun badman.

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Doc Savage ran his rented car into a red oak thicket about a mile off the paving, on the side road he was to follow. He continued afoot. Not on the road, either. He kept well clear of the rutted thoroughfare, and as he ran, his stride was as springy, his breathing as easy, as ever, although he had already run many miles that day.

From his manner it was plain that he was looking for an ambush along the road.

A herd of cattle galloped over a hill ahead. That warned Doc. He could tell by the way the cattle gathered, that they had been scared by something, and the fact that they did not go back curiously indicated they had been scared by men.

They had been. The men lay behind a small bush, and they had mounted a big army-style machine gun to cover the road.

Johnny, still bound and gagged, lay a short distance behind them, and they—there were six men—were holding a conference. Doc, who was a skilled lip reader, trained his compact, powerful telescope upon the group. They were squabbling over what to do with Johnny.

"He'll kick up a fuss and warn Doc Savage when he comes down this road!" a man was declaring, "I say put some lead in him where it'll keep him quiet."

"Don't be silly!" growled the chicken-faced Cackle.

"We ain't sure this mug called Doc Savage and told him the hide-out was out this way. If he didn't, we gotta make him do it. How'll he do it if he's dead?"

That seemed to be a hard question to answer. They argued about it, and in the meantime, Doc Savage drew closer.

Six of them! His hands were empty as he crouched in the bottom of a gully, twenty feet behind them. He set his throat muscles in a peculiar fashion, and his lips became positioned. A ventriloquist would have known what was going to happen.

"Hands up!" yelled a voice from the road. "You men are covered!"

It was doubtful if a single one of the men suspected that the voice was not coming from the road. As ventriloquism, it was very good, and it should have been, considering the hundreds of hours which the bronze man had practiced under some of the most skilled of living ventriloquists.

They knew something was wrong when Doc hit them.

DOC SAVAGE'S father, in training him from childhood for his unique career, had taken into account the fact that he would many times have to fight empty-handed against odds. For years, even as a small child, he had been put through a daily rough-and-tumble brawl with larger opponents, several of them, with the penalty for inefficiency a severe lacing.

The men Doc had been pitted against in these practice bouts had been paid a bonus for any blows they could land. Naturally, they had waded in.

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The result of the training was now evident, as Doc whipped to the attack. The first two were easy. They weren't expecting anything. Two fist blows disposed of them.

Doc reached for another one. He ducked, got clear. Not so good. The man at the machine gun was trying to swivel its muzzle around. Doc jumped, tripped him.

In an instant, the bronze giant and the four men were a tangled, boiling mass of arms and legs, out of which came such words as "Hep!" "Now!" "No, hell!" and "Get 'im!" This was followed with some cusswords, indicating what the four of them thought of the big one they were fighting.

Johnny was acting. He flailed into the mêlée. Bound and gagged, he could not do much, except trip combatants. He did that. A man got out a gun. Johnny kicked with both bound feet. The gun sailed away.

Doc was fighting three now. One had had his stomach stepped on. Then it was two. The remaining pair were easy, compared to what the first of the fight had been. Johnny, meanwhile, had banged the other man senseless against a rock.

Doc Savage went around and whacked each of the six men on the jaw to make sure he would remain unconscious for some time.

Johnny, when he was ungagged and untied, gulped, "I'll be superamalgamated. Is my physiognomy rubescent! In other words, is my face red!"

"They would have killed you eventually," Doc told him dryly.

"Which is no doubt what I deserved for letting myself get taken by a trick as simple as they used!" Johnny groaned. "Doc, they kidded me along! I'll never live *this* down!"

The bronze man asked, "Have they really a headquarters up here?"

Johnny shook his head. "That was all a trick to kid me, and to trap you. The only headquarters, and it's not their main one, that I heard about, is that Fujiyama Roadhouse, near Tulsa."

"We'll try that," Doc said.

"They named the place after the Japanese volcano," Johnny said. "It sure lives up to its name!"

Doc Savage now went to the prisoners and administered to each a drug mixture which would extend their unconsciousness indefinitely—until they were given an antidote chemical to awaken them.

"Don't you want to question them?" Johnny demanded, forgetting his big words in his surprise.

"No," Doc said. "We'll start them East immediately."

Johnny swallowed several times. A tremendous truth had hit him.

Doc Savage already knew all he needed to know about the mystery of the weird monsters from the depths of the earth!

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THE six men had had a car concealed near by. Doc and Johnny used it to carry the six men to a Tulsa hospital, where they were placed in a ward to be left alone. Then Doc sent a telegram to an address in New York.

The telegram merely stated that half a dozen patients were in the hospital for treatment, but it would have strange results. Shortly, a solemn-faced man would be flying to take the six East by air.

In New York they would drop from sight, eventually to wind up in a fantastic place, the unique "criminal-curing college" which Doc Savage maintained in up-State New York. This amazing institution, its existence entirely unknown to the outside world, was operated by surgeons and psychologists whom Doc had trained.

A criminal, on entering, first had his brain operated upon, so that his past memory was completely wiped out, after which he underwent a course of training calculated to instill in him the ideals of an upright citizen; but perhaps more important, he was taught how to make a good living, so that there would be no pressing temptation later.

No criminal who had ever graduated from this "college" had ever returned to crime.

The Fujiyama Roadhouse was impressive by night, with a lot of neon lights around it. The front was fixed up with neon light tubes to represent a volcano, and every few minutes the volcano erupted.

There were Negroes in white coats to open the doors of cars and hold their hands out for tips. Gambling was wide open in the place, and the dance floor was popular with a certain class.

DOC SAVAGE and Johnny looked the scene over from a brush clump, a hundred yards distant.

"If this was a roadhouse in the East, we could walk right in and nobody would have nerve enough to start anything," Johnny said. "But some of these Oklahoma lads don't know when to behave!"

Johnny habitually used small words when in the company of Doc Savage. Probably that, more than anything, indicated the gaunt archaeologist and geologist's admiration for the bronze giant.

"Queer!" Johnny remarked. "I thought that was Tant's outlaw crowd hang-out! Now it turns out it's some band trying to frame something on Tant!"

Johnny eyed Doc. He hoped the bronze man would volunteer his opinion of the solution of the mystery. Doc didn't.

Chapter XV. RAID

THERE was a great deal of bright light around the Fujiyama, and one had to know that the place was a hangout for men who preferred to see the law coming, to realize the purpose of so much light.

Half an hour had passed when a plain-looking car, of a make noted for its speed, drove into the grounds and to the rear, where it parked. It was a coupé, and the door opened just as a Negro attendant arrived.

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Bound hand and foot, a gag in his mouth, tall and bony Johnny was shoved out of the coupé. Another man in a tan topcoat and a low-yanked hat was behind Johnny, carrying him with one arm and holding a revolver with the other.

"Things have gone wrong!" the man with the gun said, sharply. "Help me get 'im out of sight! And I wanta talk to the big boss right away!"

The white-coated Negro had evidently encountered such incidents as this before, because he lent an immediate hand. Johnny was dragged into a side door, and up a flight of wooden stairs, dimly lighted. A man with a rifle appeared at the top.

"What's goin' on?"

"I'm bringin' in one of Doc Savage's men," said the fellow in the tan topcoat who was carrying Johnny. "Some things have gone wrong. Ginime a hand!"

THEY got Johnny up the stairs and into a bare room fitted with a canvas cot and two hard chairs. On the floor stood an open grip containing the latest in tear gas grenades and guns.

"We're gonna need some help!" gritted the man in the topcoat. "Where's the chief?"

"He ain't here!"

"Well, get in touch with 'im! I got some important dope for 'im!"

"He's movin' around, tryin' to get this Doc Savage out of our hair. I dunno where to find 'im."

"We're gonna need some help, I told you!" snapped the one who had brought Johnny. "How many of the boys are here?"

"I'm the only one," said the other man.

"That," said the man in the topcoat, "helps!"

And he hit the other man on the jaw, then turned and hit the Negro also, doing it so swiftly that they both fell almost together; and were caught almost simultaneously and lowered to the floor, so that their falling would not be heard below.

Johnny had hurled off the trick knots with which his wrists and ankles had been tied, something he could have done at any time. He also plucked the gag from between his teeth and grinned his biggest at the man in the topcoat.

The man in the topcoat straightened, turned his collar down and took off his hat, and by these simple actions seemed to change remarkably and became Doc Savage, giant of bronze.

In truth, this was one of the reasons Doc seldom wore a hat. People became accustomed to seeing him without a hat, and when he donned one, it worked so great a change in his appearance that it was almost a disguise in itself.

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"Supermalagorgeous!" exclaimed Johnny. "We trick our way in here expecting to have to whip the whole crowd, and we find only one!"

Doc Savage said nothing, but went to the nearest door and opened it, after which he stood on the threshold, his small, fantastic trilling sound coming into existence and persisting, so faintly as to be almost inaudible, for a little time before it went away.

Vida Carlaw was in the next room!

Johnny came and looked over Doc's shoulder. The gaunt geologist and archaeologist, despite the fact that he was not easily moved to horror, for he had seen a great many of the terrible things in the world, became slightly pale, and his lips moved a little noiselessly before he could speak.

"They must have recovered her body!" he said, hoarsely. "But why are they keeping it?"

THE room was a plain one, but it required not even a close inspection to show that the place had been built solidly, with the idea of its being as nearly soundproof as possible. The walls were obviously in layers, and since there were narrow slits of windows in the walls, there was probably armor steel between the layers also.

The slits, although filled with windowpanes, were quite plainly loopholes. This room, situated on top of the Fujiyama, was literally a fighting turret.

Shelves around the walls were laden with ammunition and a little food, as if the place were equipped for a siege. Furniture consisted of cots and hard chairs, and it was on one of the former that Vida Carlaw lay.

Johnny went over and examined the form of the girl, and amazement came over his features. He looked at Doc Savage, intently, as if trying to discern the thoughts behind the bronze man's inscrutable features.

"You knew they didn't throw her from the plane into the Ohio River!" he accused.

Doc Savage said nothing, but he gave the slightest of nods.

Johnny shook his head in a bewildered way.

"I'll be superamalgamated! But why did you go through all the motions of having the Ohio dragged for her body?"

"Smoke-screen," Doc said.

"Eh?"

"Didn't want the mob we were fighting to think their scheme was suspected," the bronze man explained. "Also, by making them believe they could fool us easily, their carelessness could be increased, thereby making it easier for us to fight them."

Vida Carlaw was tied securely, and in such a manner that it had seemed, at first, that she must surely be dead. But she was alive, and as Doc and Johnny untied her, she could move a little. Not until they worked over her for a time, however, could she speak.

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"Faith," she said faintly at last, "is the bunk!"

"Eh?" Doc asked.

"My faith that you'd find me never wavered for a minute," said the girl. "But it didn't keep me from being scared stiff ever since they decoyed me out of your headquarters in New York with that fake telephone call."

Doc Savage asked, "You were kept alive so your signature could be secured, by force, on a legal transfer of the Sands-Carlaw-Hill oil lease?"

"Right." The young woman nodded weakly.

Doc queried, "You know who the mastermind is?"

"Of course!" snapped the girl. "They mentioned him by name frequently! He's the outlaw, Tomahawk Tant!"

JOHNNY blinked, then smiled benevolently upon the young woman and said, "No, Tant isn't behind this. Tant is just being framed with the blame. The real schemer is clever enough to make it look as if Tant is behind the whole affair."

The girl tried to speak, and had difficulty until Johnny gave her some wine, a bottle of which he found among the food supplies in the room.

"Who is the leader?" she asked.

"I don't know," Johnny replied. "But Doc does. Who is he, Doc?"

The bronze man apparently did not hear the question, which was strange, considering the acuteness of his auditory equipment on ordinary occasions. Doc merely gazed out of a window at the lighted grounds of the Fujiyama.

When Vida Carlaw started to repeat the question about the mastermind's identity, Johnny stopped her with a slight pressure on one of her hands.

Johnny, the bony gentleman who ordinarily evidenced no interest whatever in the sometimes mistakenly identified gentler sex, had been holding the entrancing Vida's slender hand unashamedly for the past few moments. He continued to hold it.

"Vida," he said, gently. "Just what have you decided is behind this affair?"

"It's simple—and horrible," said the girl. "Our wildcat oil well in the Indian Dome Field drilled into a nest of strange monsters over a mile underground. These monsters are something like—well—like—"

"Amoebas," Johnny suggested.

"What?"

"Amoebas, one of the most primary forms of life, literally a mass of protoplasm without eyes, ears or skeletal framework," Johnny replied. "They secure and digest their food simply by flowing around it and covering it

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and absorbing the nutriment from the substance thus attacked."

For Johnny, these were very small words. And he was still holding the young woman's hand, and not in an entirely fatherly manner.

VIDA continued, "These men are using the monsters to start a reign of terror. They are going to stop work in the oil fields of the midcontinent. They are going to force oil operators to sell out their holdings."

"And the mob will take them over!" Johnny exclaimed.

"Exactly! Legally, of course. For instance, as a price for my life, I was to sign a legal transfer of our lease in the Indian Dome Field. It was to be transferred to the Best Bet Oil Corporation."

"What's the Best Bet?"

"The company controlled by the crowd."

Johnny indulged in what passed for some deep thought, at the same time eyeing the attractive hand he was holding.

"Er—ah—you say this mob can control the earth monsters?" he said, vaguely. "That means they can make them attack whoever they want, or get rid of them when they want to, or are through with them?"

The girl nodded, started to speak.

"Here it comes!" Doc Savage rapped, sharply.

Chapter XVI. CAPTIVES

JOHNNY was in something resembling a hypnotic state, a condition brought on by the electric quality of the young woman's exquisite hand. Doc Savage's words had the same effect as being dunked in ice water. The gaunt archaeologist sprang to the narrow porthole of a window.

From their height, it was possible to observe the surroundings effectively. They could see men, there seemed to be several of them, spreading to surround the place.

The imitation volcano of neon lights erupted on the Fujiyama, throwing a brighter glow over the region, and it was evident that the furtive men creeping upon the place had rifles and shotguns.

"Indications," said Johnny, forgetting and using big words, "point to collucative escalade—"

He did not finish his remark about it looking as if a fight were about to start. It started. A rifle whanged. It was a good shot, and it must have cut the power line supplying the Fujiyama with juice. Every light in and around the place went out.

Powerful hand searchlights began to flash on and off. They were carried by the charging men. A few shots

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whanged. The attacking men did most of the firing. A Negro ran screaming away from the darkened Fujiyama.

"Run, you Negro rascals!" an attacker yelled.

The parking lot boys, along with a few waiters, scattered like quail. The attackers turned lights on them, identifying them. One of the orchestra, a drummer, tried to run, carrying his drum. They shot the heads of his drum full of holes, but he did not drop the drum.

Women were screaming down below.

"It's the law!" somebody shouted.

"It ain't the law!" yelled an attacker. "It's Tant's boys!"

At that, the women screamed louder, and the men fell to muttering. The attackers came in, making things bright with their hand searchlights.

Doc Savage breathed to Johnny and the girl, "They've got the place surrounded!" Then he eased through doors and reached a stairway which led down to the main dance hall.

The patrons of the roadhouse were lined up along the walls, and men with shotguns and rifles menaced them. One, a burly fellow, stamped forward.

"Where's the proprietor?" he yelled.

No one answered. The burly fellow had his gun, an automatic rifle, pointed at a waiter. He calmly pulled the trigger. The scream of the waiter, shot through the stomach, drowned out the roar of the shot, almost.

"I asked you where's the proprietor?" the burly man said.

The waiter made gargling noises and pointed at the proprietor. "That's him!"

The burly leader of the Tant outlaw raiders shot the wounded waiter between the eyes.

"That," he announced, loudly, "is for not answering the question the first time!"

Two women fainted. A man began to hold his hands over his heart and to grow horribly blue in the face. His face grew more and more turgid, and suddenly he slammed down on the floor, gave a kick or two and lay very still.

A man leaned over and held his wrist. It was evident from this man's manner that he was a physician. He straightened and said, "This man is dead!"

"Damned if I ain't a tough hombre!" said the burly fellow casually. "I shoot one guy and scare another one to death!"

DOC SAVAGE, unobserved, noted all of this from the top of the stairs. This was something of an accomplishment, because one raider had his eye and his rifle trained on the stairs, just on the chance that

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some one might appear there. But he did not see the tiny periscope, the little portable instrument, which Doc Savage always carried and which he was now using.

The burly man threw out his chest and stamped across the floor, manner reminiscent of the fierceness attributed to the pirates of olden days. He confronted the proprietor.

"This is my day to kill men!" he yelled. "Where's your chief?"

"He ain't here!" gulped the proprietor.

"I didn't ask you that!" The burly man lifted his rifle.

The other man sank to the floor.

"Don't—don't!" he screamed. "I don't know where the boss is! But I can take you to the girl, Vida Carlaw!"

The burly man shoved his head forward and roared, "What was that last you said?"

"I can take you to Vida Carlaw!"

"Well, damn me!" howled the Tant outlaw. "Won't Tant be tickled to see her! He thinks she's dead! He's been madder'n a skinned cat over it!"

"She's upstairs!" gulped the frightened proprietor.

The man led the way to the stairs at the top of which Doc Savage stood. The proprietor's knees quaked, until he had to hold onto things as he passed them to keep from falling down.

Any one who had observed the entire fight would not have blamed him for his fear, either. He was in the clutches of men so calloused that they would kill for no more reason than to be doing something dramatic.

Doc Savage backed away—and things went wrong. There was a sliding noise and a *click*, and there was across the head of the stairs, with embarrassing suddenness, a panel of steel.

Attached in some way to the steps, no doubt, it closed automatically when the wrong stair tread was stepped upon. Doc knew, instinctively, which one it was—the third from the top—but it was too late to do anything about it.

He was trapped. Men below had heard the *click*.

"What's that?" the burly fellow snarled. "Get up there, you men, with lights! Keep your guns ready! Shoot anybody that moves!"

They started up the stairway, rifles ready.

DOC SAVAGE had no chance whatever against the men coming up the stairs. True, he had overcome half a dozen earlier in the evening, but that had been by taking them unexpectedly. The men approaching now were ready for trouble.

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The bronze man stretched out his arms, and was able to put a hand against each wall of the narrow hall. He stripped off his shoes and socks, stuffed them into his pockets, then put his hands against the wall, swung up, and put a foot against each wall.

By a series of gymnastic efforts, employing his tremendous strength, he climbed upward and forward until he was close to the roof of the hallway, out over the stairs.

Men coming up the stairs would naturally have their eyes on the tread and the door at the top. To see Doc where he crouched, they would have to look straight up, and they weren't likely to do that.

They came to the door, and kicked and wrenched at it.

"Oughta be back doors!" they declared, and went around to hunt for them.

There was shouting. Two shots were fired. Then Johnny and Vida Carlaw were led outside. A few shots were fired at random into the roadhouse, to keep those inside from getting brave.

Doc got down from his perch over the stairs during the shooting, and eased out.

The raiders were questioning the proprietor of the Fujiyama.

"Where's your boss?"

"I told you I don't know!"

"You better know! It's the only thing that'll save your skin!"

Doc Savage eased away from the vicinity and ran with great speed to the spot where he and Johnny had left their car. From the rear, the bronze man extracted a small fibroid box, to which were affixed two substantial thumbscrew clamps. Doc took this back to the roadhouse.

The raiders were still questioning the proprietor. They had loaded guns jammed into his face. "Where's this guy who's layin' things on Tant? Who is he?"

Doc found the cars in which the raiders had come, big, fast tourings. He approached them, his box ready, the clamps distended. He got down on all fours and reached under the nearest car, his purpose being to affix the box to the underside of the chassis, where it would not be discovered.

A flashlight splashed over him. A gun prodded him in the back.

"You don't think we'd leave these cars unguarded, did you?" a voice asked, harshly.

DOC SAVAGE lay perfectly still. Any movement on his part might persuade the gunman to shoot.

"Come out!" said the fellow.

Doc came out. It was a relief that the gunman pointed his revolver at Doc's chest, because the bronze man wore a chain mail undershirt which would keep out revolver bullets.

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"Whew!" The gunman's eyes bulged when he saw whom he had caught. He howled at his companions, "C'mere, quick!"

They came running and stood about Doc, squinting at him as if he were something new in the form of mankind. One reached forward gingerly and punched and pinched the bronze man.

"Man alive!" the fellow exclaimed. "Feel them muscles! That guy *is* made of bronze!"

The burly leader came close to Doc, but his manner was not so boisterous now. The man, however, was not all bluff; rather, he was a genuinely tough guy who knew when a loud mouth would be effective and when it wouldn't.

"This is a hell of a note!" he told Doc. "You're the last guy we wanted to catch!"

Bony Johnny murmured, "A Machiavellianism!"

"Look!" The burly man registered great rage. "He's been spouting them jawbreakers since we caught him! What's that word mean?"

"Johnny does not believe you did not want to catch me," Doc said.

"And why the hell should we want you?" roared the burly man. "You're after the guy who's trying to pull this big oil field steal, ain't you? So're we! Why? Because the mug is tryin' to frame the blame onto Tant! We're fightin' the same mug!"

Doc said, "I am also after Tant."

"Yeah, that's the trouble!" The man eyed Doc hopefully. "Why don't you just concentrate first on catchin' this other guy?"

Doc did not reply.

Johnny said, "We're ambidexterous!"

"I'll look that one up," said the burly man, "if Tant's got a dictionary around."

They searched Doc, expressing wonder when they found he carried no gun, commenting curiously over the contents of the remarkable vest of pockets when they found it, and especially exclaiming over the bulletproof undergarment.

"He let 'imself be caught!" yelled the man who had captured Doc. "He done it on purpose! I'm in favor of lettin' 'im go!"

"We'll see what Tant says."

"You gonna take 'im to Tant?"

"Think I want Tant to shoot me? Savage don't know who Tant really is."

They got their cars onto the road and drove fast. Pretty Vida Carlaw sat between two men, to whom she was handcuffed, and watched the road listlessly. There was no chance for her to talk because they had used a

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sponge gag. Doc Savage and Johnny were tied.

"We're goin' to a place where it's safe to telephone Tant," said the leader. "It's a hang-out we use sometimes. We want to find out what Tant wants done with you."

DOC SAVAGE, after a time, asked, "How did Tant get involved in this?"

The burly man scowled at Doc. "Reckon it won't hurt to tell you. Tant is a guy with a rep, see. This bird, this guy who can control them red devil things, got in touch with Tant and wanted Tant to join up with 'im. You savvy by now what's behind this, don't you?"

"The red monster method of murder is going to be used to kill off and frighten oil men," the man of bronze said, "and to cause so much trouble that the oil operators will be broke financially, or scared out, and will sell out their holdings cheaply. The plan is to buy up these leases, or take them over whenever possible."

The burly man nodded. "It don't sound so big when you tell it casual like that. But it *is* big! Take that Sands-Carlaw-Hill lease alone! It's worth a million or two the minute that wildcat well hits oil, and everybody knows it is!"

Doc Savage was silent for a time. The cars were traveling fast, and swinging wide of Tulsa, following side roads.

"If this fellow got in touch with Tant," Doc said finally, "how does it come that Tant does not know his identity?"

"The fellow was no sucker," retorted the Tant outlaw. "He used a go-between and a regular system, like as if he was mixed up in a snatch racket and contacting a go-between. Tant never got a whiff of who he was!"

The cars began to head into the Osage oil field country. They passed trucks, nitro wagons, touring and roadsters, cars ranging from big imported jobs to the smallest "whoopies." There was a lot of activity in the district. Indian Dome Field was not far distant, Doc realized.

"Them man-eatin' red jellyfish outta the ground has sure got the oil fields around here worked up," a man offered.

One fellow, in the front seat, had been prying into the box which Doc Savage had been on the point of attaching to the underside of their car.

"Whatcha know!" this man ejaculated. "This darn thing seems to be a radio transmitter! I know a little about radio. He was gonna use a direction finder to spot this radio set, and keep track of us that way. Whatcha know!"

"I know I wish you'd clam up!" he was told.

THE car was traversing a deserted-looking road. Headlights heaved up ahead, spilling light across a brush patch, and proved to be a truck with rear wheels in the ditch, and two men working around with shovels. Its load was canvas-covered.

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The truck was askew across the road, and had the thoroughfare blocked, but it was evident that the driver of the truck could back slightly and let them past without jeopardizing its own chances of escaping.

"Hey!" yelled the leader of the Tant outlaw squad. "How 'bout lettin' us past, buddy?"

The two men with shovels walked around to the front of their truck.

"You'll be asking Saint Peter that same question dang quick, feller!" one yelled. Then they both jumped behind the truck.

"Hey!" howled the Tant man. "What's—"

The tarpaulin cover slid off the load of the truck, which was nearly a dozen men, all armed with rifles.

Chapter XVII. THE TANK TERROR

A TANT man who had not gotten a good look at proceedings, because he was sitting in the back of the car, called, "Say, who do them guys think they are?"

"Imagine they know!" said the burly Tant lieutenant, hoarsely. "They ain't none of Tant's men! They ain't law! They've gotta belong to the crowd that's framin' Tant—"

A rifle whacked from the truck, and its bullet came into the car and made a small fountain of crimson come out of a man's leg. The cars were not armored, so high-powered slugs would riddle them. Bullets began to knock out the window glass.

Swearing, the outlaws piled out of their cars. They had nerve, and were not afraid of a fight. And they had plenty of firearms.

Doc rolled out of the truck with the others, on the side of the machine opposite the truck. Johnny did likewise, and the girl. It was Doc who doused the lights.

That dousing of the lights undoubtedly saved the situation. It left only the truck lights, which were pointed out over the field.

Doc rolled madly, a bit of car window glass between his hands. He located the girl.

"Still!" he directed, and tried to cut her free.

Men were charging, firing as they came, from the truck.

"Johnny!" Doc called, his remarkable voice still calm.

"I'm O. K.!" yelled Johnny. "Cutting myself loose with a piece of window glass!"

That was not exactly the truth. Johnny had a piece of glass, but he was tied in such a manner that he could not use it. Johnny wanted Doc to get clear. He held his breath, for Doc was hard to deceive. But the bronze man scuttled away in the night, carrying the girl.

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Men were screaming, dying. Guns were going off. Then some one shot holes in the gasoline tank of one of the cars and threw a lighted match.

The shooting was brisker. More men shrieked. Tant outlaws, mostly. Burning gasoline threw a light of hell over everything. Johnny fought to free himself with the fragment of glass.

The burly Tant lieutenant tried to run off across the road into the brush. Three attackers aimed their rifles, and fired together, as if all fingers jerked by the same string.

The burly man, when the three rifle bullets hit his vital places, acted like a rabbit nailed by a shotgun charge. He went up in the air, emitted a bawl of a noise, and landed flat on his back and never moved afterward.

The rest of the Tant outlaws surrendered, which was the wise thing to do, outnumbered as they were.

A man wearing black gloves came over and glared at Johnny. He was wiry, wore a plain blue suit under a knockabout topcoat, and his necktie showed bright under his chin.

Johnny knew him to be the man who had tried to seize Vida Carlaw in the plane bound for New York.

The wiry man said, "I think we'll croak you for good now, skin-and-bones!"

He swung his clubbed gun, and Johnny ducked, but not enough, and he got the dizzy impression that he was a ghost in an infinite place where there was nothing but darkness. And he had no head.

JOHNNY got around to feeling somehow that he was somewhat like the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow, except that it was infinitely dark where he roamed looking for his head, so dark that he could never see anything.

But eventually it dawned on Johnny that he had a head, although it was full of pain, and that the darkness was a blindfold. He tried not to move, and lay very still, listening to voices mutter near by.

"We're getting things in hand," the wiry man, who wore black gloves always, was saying. "We've got Tant's mob on the run. We've got all of Doc Savage's men."

This was a surprise to Johnny, who had been under the impression that Monk, Ham and Renny, along with Enoch Andershott, had been seized by Outlaw Tant's men. Apparently Tant's enemy had done the job, cleverly making it look as if the blame belonged to Tant.

"We've got this red monster business pretty well underway," the wiry man continued. "The whole dang midcontinent oil field has been swept by the news. We'll clean up in the Indian Dome Fields, and later, one at a time, the monsters will appear in the other oil fields."

"What if somebody gets wise? They're sure to."

"We'll keep our eyes open, and wipe them out. The monsters will just come along and absorb that guy, see."

"Uh-huh."

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"Furthermore, the boss has got a sure-fire scheme worked out for gettin' hold of Doc Savage and gettin' rid of him."

"That scheme of decoying him out the cliff road along the river was supposed to be sure-fire!"

"Well, hell! The bronze guy was lucky! But he can't keep it up forever. Anyway, this is a real scheme. It can't fail!"

"What is it?"

Johnny strained his ears. He wanted to hear this. But the next instant he was kicked in the ribs with painful force.

"I think this bony is 'possumin!" growled a voice.

The wiry man came over, with the one he had been talking to, and they all fell to kicking Johnny. The gaunt geologist opened his eyes and groaned realistically.

"I guess he wasn't fakin'," said the wiry man. "Even if he was, he didn't hear anything. We never talked about nothin' important."

One man gulped, "The boss's scheme to—"

"Shut up!" snapped the wiry man with the black gloves. "That wasn't discussed in detail!"

They gathered Johnny up and carried him down some stairs. They searched him thoroughly, stripping off his clothing entirely and giving him an ancient pair of soiled overalls to wear.

"Like to see 'im get away now!" a man chuckled.

Johnny was lifted and hurled into a room which had a concrete floor and was dimly lighted.

The wiry man with the black gloves came in, leaned down, and said fiercely, "In a few minutes, we're gonna let some of them jelly devils in here to eat you!"

Then he left.

Johnny rolled over, thought about the situation deeply for a minute, then groaned as—he realized an instant later—he had never groaned before.

"The noises you make sure help a lot!" complained a voice.

Johnny squirmed around and peered at a number of individuals whom he had not seen before due to the murk.

"Monk!" he exclaimed.

MONK, the homely chemist, was not alone. With him was Ham, looking less dapper than usual in a garment which consisted simply of a gunnysack with holes cut in it for his legs. Also present was big-fisted Renny, and behind him, Enoch Andershott.

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Amazed, Johnny sat up. Also in the room was a man who was about one hundred and thirty pounds of skin over wires, and who had eyes with a scare deep within them.

"I am Alonzo Cugg," said this man, reading the question in Johnny's eyes.

Only Long Tom, the electrical wizard, was not present.

Johnny asked, "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in the Osage, north of Tulsa, I think," said Monk.

"You ape, you don't know where we are!" Ham muttered.

"If I wasn't tied, I'd kick your ears so flat they'd be mistaken for crêpes suzettes!" Monk snarled.

"It's a good thing *I'm tied!*" Ham assured him.

Johnny, looking about, observed that they were all tied.

"I say," Johnny suggested tentatively, "If we were untied, would we have a chance of escaping?"

A fly could almost have been heard calling in the silence which followed.

"You mean you got a way of gettin' these ropes off?" Monk gulped.

Johnny opened his mouth. His monocle, which during his acting of the part of the crook Snook Loggard, had been concealed in his clothing, now fell out of his mouth.

"I had a heck of a time keeping it hidden there," Johnny explained. "I got it just before they searched me a few minutes ago."

Monk said, admiringly, "For once, you can say, 'Supermalagorgeous,' or, 'I'll be superamalgamated,' and I won't feel like chokin' you!"

Johnny now broke the monocle on the floor. He grasped one of the particles, moved over to Monk, and began to saw on the ropes securing the homely chemist. He got them sawed through. Monk began to untie his own hands.

A man came in the door, carrying a gun, saw that Monks hands were free, and cried out shrilly in alarm. Other men ran in, and dashed forward. They clubbed Monk down and tied him again. Then they knocked him senseless.

"Look over these ropes!" the man with the black gloves ordered. "I don't understand how that hombre got loose!"

The knots were tested. While this was being done, and to distract the attention of their captors from the tiny particles of glass lying half hidden upon the floor, Johnny demanded, "What became of Long Tom? He's not here!"

The man with the black gloves laughed harshly. "We took him out to ask him some questions about Doc Savage! He wouldn't talk!"

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"Where—where is he now?" Johnny gulped.

The man made a growling sound.

"I'll try to give you some kind of an idea what happened to Long Tom!" the fellow grunted.

GAUNT Johnny was now seized, one man taking each of his extremities, and carried out of the room and into what seemed to be a porch. They dragged him along a path. Soon, a sizable hulk loomed up in the darkness, and proved to be a small tank.

Johnny, who had not neglected the profitable oil field angle of geology, had been around oil leases enough to recognize the tank as one of the two-hundred-fifty-barrel tanks which oil from small wells is pumped into. But this one had not been used for a long time. It was a wooden tank. A hole, large enough to admit a man, had been chopped in the bottom.

One of the men threw a flashlight beam on the hole in the tank.

Johnny's hair stood on end. His eyes popped. Squirring, writhing, hideously translucent and ocherous in the light, was one of the fantastic monsters which had first been observed around the Sands-Carlaw-Hill wildcat oil well.

The thing was going into the tank. Swelling and spreading and creeping, it seemed to have no arms, legs, eyes, mouth, nose, nor anything else that an ordinary living creature is supposed to have. It was just—red, semi-transparent stuff, utterly hideous, and *living!* Back into the tank, it oozed, as if afraid of the light.

"Our little pal was out looking for more to eat," a man chuckled.

Three of the men stopped.

"I went close to that tank to take the other one!" one of these snapped. "I'm afraid of that damn thing! You can't tell what it'll do! Somebody else take this one close!"

"Hell, don't be scared!" snorted the man with the black gloves. "It's in the tank now! Anyhow, it just absorbed the other guy. Or maybe you'd say it digested him. It hadn't oughta be so hungry."

"You know darn well it ain't got no stomach like normal things!" snorted the other. "It don't know when it's hungry, because it ain't got no brain, neither. It's just—just—well, whatever it's made out of!"

"We'll draw lots," said the man with the black gloves.

They drew lots—matched coins rather. Johnny, somewhat irrelevantly, reflected that Monk would have been in his element here, because Monk carried around a trick coin just for matching.

The two who lost seized Johnny and carried him close to the tank. They lowered him beside a post.

Johnny goggled at the post. It was a stout piece of wood, and probably had been there a long time. But what interested him was the ropes around the post—and in those ropes, lying loosely, was an assortment of clothing. Johnny stared at the clothing, for he recognized it.

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The garments had been worn by Long Tom when he went to Tulsa!

The black-gloved man said, "Now we ain't trying to kid nobody. We told that other guy, Long Tom, we weren't kidding. He got his choice of either answering our questions, or we didn't fool around. He had his choice, and it wasn't nice. Now, you're gonna get yours!"

Johnny's throat felt as if a hot poker had been run up and down it, inside. He had discovered something else, something that was lying nearer the opening into the tank, within which the red horror had withdrawn.

The man said, "We want to know if Doc Savage has found out who our chief is!"

Johnny looked at the thing he had discovered on the ground. He began to feel as if he could never breathe again.

THE object on the ground might have passed for a bucketful, a small bucketful of ordinary cup grease which some one had dumped out on the ground. It was rather soiled-looking, and if it had been grease, could have taken on that tint from having been used.

Long Tom's clothes! This stuff on the ground! Johnny started hearing words as if from an infinite distance.

"I asked you if Doc Savage knows who the chief is?" repeated the man with the black gloves.

Johnny did not answer. He felt cold all over.

"Well," the black-gloved man said, and laughed carelessly. "It's your funeral!"

One of the other men said, "I wouldn't call it a funeral." He pointed at the pile of grease. "Of course, somebody might bury that stuff, which is all that is left."

The men began to walk away. They kept their flashlight beams on the hole in the tank, as if to keep the horror within at bay with the light.

It seemed to Johnny that he could hear the monster moving inside the tank which was its lair.

The departing men were saying, "We got some of Tant's outlaws alive. Them hombres ain't as tough as this Doc Savage's crowd. We'll make Tant's men talk."

"And when they tell us where Tant is hanging out, that'll be the last of the Scourge of Oklahoma, as them newspaper lugs sometimes call Tant," offered another man.

"The boss's gag will also get Doc Savage," said the one with the gloves. "This next trick the boss is going to try is a honey!"

The men halted. One of them called out to Johnny.

"You got one chance!" the fellow shouted. "Just before the thing flows over you and begins to absorb you right out of your clothes, you can let out a beller and we may be able to drive it away!"

Johnny said nothing.

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"But you better not wait too long!" the man added.

They departed, taking the beams of their flashlights off the opening in the tank.

Johnny began to hear something infinitely horrible. Sounds from the tank. The thing must be coming out!

One of the men, off in the night, said, "He'll squawl like hell when he feels it touch him! The other one, Long Tom, did!"

"They don't always beller," one corrected. "You remember Sam Sands and that driller? They didn't beller when it began to digest 'em!"

"Funny how the thing absorbs men right outta their clothes, and don't digest the cloth, too," remarked another. "I guess it only likes living tissue."

"Animal tissue," the first speaker corrected. "Say, I know one of the guys it eat up had a leather belt, and that was eaten!"

Johnny struggled. But they had tied him to the post, and tied him securely.

He could *see* the horrible jellylike mass now! It was flowing like a mucid river out of the tank! The thing was *huge!*

Johnny wondered if he would faint in time to save some of the agony. The hell of it was that he never had fainted.

Chapter XVIII. TRICKS

DOC SAVAGE sat in a chair in a Tulsa hotel and watched the morning sun whiten the rooftops and the buildings about him. There was utter calm in the big bronze man's manner, no hint of the horrors and death that surrounded him.

From where he sat, he could see out across the Arkansas River, see the giant oil refineries of West Tulsa, and since it was a very clear morning, the smoke that marked the location of Sapulpa.

Vida Carlaw sat near by. She was not calm. She held a big revolver, and her face was a pale mask.

"We were lucky to get away when Tant's men were attacked by the fellows in that truck," she said. "But I'm awfully sorry Johnny didn't escape."

Doc savage said nothing in reply.

It had not, after the defeat of the Tant outlaw by their sinister and mysterious foes, been an eventful night. Doc had attempted to follow the attackers, but had failed, because their cars had outdistanced him.

Doc Savage and Vida Carlaw had returned to Tulsa. Doc had taken the hotel suite. His next move had been to telephone the newspapers, and it looked like a queer move on his part, not only because he never sought newspaper publicity, but because when a flock of reporters had rushed to the hotel, he had merely showed

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himself, then refused to give out any kind of an interview. But even the news of his presence had made the front page this morning:

DOC SAVAGE IN TULSA BELIEVED WORKING ON MONSTER CASE

The name of the hotel was given.

The newspaper with the story lay open on the floor before Vida Carlaw, where she had flung it in something of a rage.

"That will show every one of our enemies where we are staying!" she snapped.

A knock on the door interrupted any answer Doc Savage might have intended to make.

The girl leaped up, clenching her gun, and gasped, "Don't open it! It may be Tant or some one!"

Doc went to the door, empty-handed, and opened it. He had never seen the man who stood outside before, but evidently the fellow had seen Doc, or had had the bronze man described to him, because he grinned wryly and said, "Like to talk to you alone, Savage."

The visitor was a small man of indeterminate age, and did not have any outstanding qualities apparent about him, except that his eyes were small. Neither did he look particularly weak. He was just a man who would escape notice in a crowd, which is sometimes a nice thing to be able to do.

"Only Vida Carlaw is with me," Doc Savage said.

"Tant won't mind her hearing," said the nondescript man. "Tant sent me, see. He saw in the paper where you were at this hotel. That way, he knew how to get hold of you."

"That," Doc said, "is why the news item was given to the papers."

"Hell it was!" The Tant emissary seemed surprised and a bit frightened.

"I wanted Tant to get in touch with me," Doc told him.

"Yeah? Then you're willin' for me to take you to Tant?"

"Of course."

THE small man had a car waiting in the street, and it was as unobtrusive, but as efficient in its way, as he himself.

"You wanta search me for a gun?" he asked before taking his place behind the wheel.

"Not necessary," Doc said.

"I don't believe in taking such chances!" the girl said, sharply.

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Doc Savage had long ago learned something of the futility of trying to explain a doubtful point to a young person of the opposite sex, especially a pretty one, so he did not mention that if the man was willing to be searched, he doubtless didn't have a gun on his person.

The man drove as decorously as any ordinary citizen, and fairly expertly. He did not speak, and showed no desire for conversation.

"What does Tomahawk Tant want to talk to us about?" Vida Carlaw asked.

"I can't tell you," their guide said shortly.

"Why not?"

"Because Tant would probably kick me so hard I'd be standing on my hair roots," the man grunted.

After that, they said nothing, until Doc Savage spoke.

"It might be better," he said, "if you stayed behind."

"Not me!" the girl snapped. "I'm going to do all I can to find Reservoir Hill!"

The car headed north, and once in the country, picked up speed. Trucks on the roads and numerous cars were all moving in the direction of the Indian Dome Field, or coming from the field.

Shortly, they began to pass truck after truck, all exactly alike, all painted army khaki and bulging with militia men.

"Stop," Doc Savage requested the guide. "I want to find out what these soldiers mean."

The driver hesitated, then pulled alongside a truck.

"Where you headed for?" Doc called.

"Indian Dome Field," the soldier driving the truck called back. "Governor has ordered all oil wells in the Indian Dome Field plugged with concrete or lead, so these monsters can't keep coming out."

"The oil operators in Indian Dome won't like that."

"They'll have to like it!" the soldier said, grimly. "The governor has declared martial law to stop the wild confusion!"

The Tant outlaw drove on, covered nearly a mile in silent thought, then said over his shoulder, "The governor is playin' into the hands of this other crowd!"

Doc replied nothing.

"The idea of the whole thing is to get the fields shut down so the poorer operators will get hard up and have to sell cheap," the driver added. "Somebody oughta tell the governor that."

"Why doesn't Tant do it?"

"Who'd believe Tant?"

As the car continued its course, their exact destination became evident.

"We're going to the Indian Dome Field!" Vida Carlaw exclaimed.

THE girl's obvious astonishment seemed to tickle the driver, for he chuckled, then offered, "This is one of Tant's best hang-outs!"

"But it's so public!" the girl exclaimed. "And there's thousands of soldiers around! Probably the place is flooded with State police, too!"

The driver laughed again. "Would you know the famous outlaw, Tomahaw Tant, if you saw him face to face?"

The girl considered.

"No."

"Neither would a lot of other people," said the driver.

They drove on some distance, and the scattered derricks of the oil wells in the southern end of Indian Dome Field came into view. The Sands-Carlaw-Hill lease was located near the northern end, in what was considered unproven territory, as far as oil at the deeper levels was concerned.

Vida Carlaw asked, "Will we get to see Tant? I'd rather like to have a look at him."

The driver snorted.

"Tant won't show himself. He'll talk to you from another room, or somehow."

The girl shivered. "You're sure we'll be turned loose?"

"Tant said so," replied the man.

Doc Savage interposed dryly, "If you were an enemy of Tant's, as I might be considered to be, since anyone outside the law is my natural enemy, would you take the bare word, relayed, that you would be turned loose. In other words, would you do what we're doing?"

"Hell, no!" the driver said, promptly.

Then he pulled his car up before an ordinary galvanized tin pumphouse building. It was an unromantic-looking place.

The building evidently housed one of those central pumping plants for shallow oil wells—the plant inside would consist of an engine, turning a great wheel to which was attached the ends of numerous steel rods, extending away over the top of the earth, running through guides. A rotation of the wheel gave each of these rods a push and a pull, actuating the pumps attached to the other ends.

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The contraption was pumping as the car drove up, but some one inside immediately shut it down.

"C'mon in," invited the driver.

Doc and Vida Carlaw got out of the car.

"If anybody had told me I would ever walk into Outlaw Tant's hide-out of my own accord, almost, I'd have said they were crazy!" declared the girl.

She and Doc Savage walked into the pumphouse.

It was a bare, cold-looking place with the smell of crude oil strong.

The girl peered about, then gave a violent shriek and whirled.

"Run!" she screamed. "Somebody's aiming a rifle through that door!"

DOC SAVAGE, flashing out a bronze hand, stopped her flight.

"You're on edge," he said. "Take another look at it."

The girl peered, and did not seem relieved. She could plainly see the pipe pointing at them from the small hole in the door which led into the room housing the pump.

"It's not a rifle barrel," Doc explained. "It's a piece of gas pipe."

The place where they stood, only partially lighted by the door behind them, was a grotesque-looking spot. The wheel—it was turned by a belt running into the engine room—was a huge thing. The rods extending from it made a fantastic tangle.

The pipe was there for a man to speak through and disguise his voice.

"This is Tomahawk Tant," said a voice out of the pipe.

Doc did not even try to identify the voice. There was no use trying. Coming through the pipe, it lost all character. It was hardly understandable.

"Oh!" said the girl, and started forward. "I'm going to have a look at that fellow!"

"I'd hate to have to shoot a girl," the Tant voice said.

Vida Carlaw stopped.

Tant said, "This meeting is on the up-and-up. You're out to get me. All right, but I call you here, Savage, because I think we can work together."

If Doc Savage was supposed to make a comment in the pause that followed, he did not.

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Tant continued through the pipe, "I ain't askin' anything from you, Savage. You don't even have to declare a truce. You can keep on trying to get me all the time."

Doc said, "Then this is not an effort to bargain?"

"I never had to bargain with nobody!" boomed Tant through the pipe. "If guys want to make a trade, they come to me! No matter how big they are, they come to me!"

Doc decided to puncture the fellow's ego, "Just as this mysterious enemy of yours came to you to bargain!"

NOISES coming out of the pipe sounded as if Tant were choking on the other end of it.

"That guy's why I got you out here!" Tant snarled finally. "He's running me ragged! He's slicker'n my crowd! I admit that! I need help! I also notice you haven't grabbed him off either, Savage! So you need help! Let's work together!"

Doc said, "A strange bargain! We are not to postpone our private feud?"

"Ain't necessary," said Tant. "I'll take my chances with you. But this other bird has got me worried!"

Vida Carlaw looked at Doc Savage.

"He's more scared of the other man than you!" she said, dryly. "That's not very flattering of you!"

Tant overheard her and yelled, "Savage ain't got what it takes to hogtie Tomahawk Tant!"

Doc said, "Tant, I made no promises before I was brought here."

"Watcha mean, promises?"

"Promises not to grab you!"

A gargle of laughter came out of the pipe.

Under cover of the mirth noise, Doc whispered, so only the girl could bear, "Hold your breath as long as you can!"

She began to hold her breath. Doc did likewise.

Doc also rested his head on his chest, so that his jaw pressed firmly upon his necktie. There was a crunching sound as the tiny glass balls in a cheesecloth sack broke and released their contents—an anaesthetic gas long ago developed by Doc Savage.

It was a gas producing a harmless form of unconsciousness, but particularly unusual because it became ineffective about a minute after it started to mingle with the air, so that the effects could be escaped merely by holding the breath.

The iron pipe through which Tomahawk Tant had been speaking fell with a clatter.

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Doc lunged forward, still holding his breath. He hit the door with a crash and it came open. Inside the engine room was darkness.

The man who had brought Doc and the girl here came leaping in from outside, where he had been keeping lookout. He went down senseless almost instantly. The gas had not yet dissipated itself.

THERE was more than one man in the engine room, sleeping from the anaesthetic; Doc counted. Six of them. They were armed like a mop-up squad in trench warfare.

The minute went, and Doc called, "It's all right now, Miss Carlaw."

The girl approached, stopped just inside the engine room door and stared at the figure of Tomahawk Tant. Tant was easy to identify, because he was holding the pipe close to his lips in his sleep.

The girl looked as if she were about to faint.

"He was confident I did not know his identity," Doc said. "You see, he was perfectly safe to come and go anywhere. The police did not have his picture. And he had established the identity of an honorable oil man."

The girl said nothing, only stared at outlaw Tant.

Tomahawk Tant was her partner, old Reservoir Hill!

Chapter XIX. LAST DITCH

THE men on the floor snored peacefully amid their litter of machine guns and rifles. They even had gas masks and grenades, but the masks had done them no good, Doc's anaesthetic vapor being both odorless and colorless.

"How long have you been in business with Tant—Reservoir Hill?" Doc asked.

Vida Carlaw took two steps backward and swayed a little.

"Five years," she said. Then she made vague stabbing gestures with her hands. "But why did he do it? Why did he take me into partnership? Why did—"

She fell silent, and her eyes grew wide and horrified, her luscious skin distinctly leaden in tint.

"Oh!" she gasped. "He was using me for a front! I gave the partnership a respectable appearance! I didn't know we had—had Tant—for a partner! Neither did poor Sam Sands, I'm sure!"

Doc said, quietly, "That is true, of course. Reservoir Hill, the respectable oil man, would have respectable partners, who would never be connected with Outlaw Tomahawk Tant, one of the bloodiest bandits the southwest has known."

The girl looked at Tomahawk Tant.

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"As Reservoir Hill—he was always—a swell guy!" she said jerkily. "It doesn't seem possible he could be—Tant!"

"Some people are excellent actors," Doc told her. "Tant, or Hill, was clever, or he would never have become as notorious a—"

The bronze man stopped speaking, spun and flung out of the engine room and across the wheel room. He reached the outer door, stopped as if he had slapped against something solid, and pitched back out of sight.

Big hailstones seemed to hit tin walls and roof of the pumphouse—hailstones that went through and left little round holes that leaked sunlight. But the hailstones, hitting the steel parts of the wheel, flattened and became lead. The noise the bullets made was ear-splitting.

"Down!" Doc's great voice crashed over the uproar.

Vida Carlaw raced to the big wheel, leaped between its huge spokes, and lay flat.

"Who is it?" she called.

"The man with the black gloves and his crowd," Doc told her. "Somehow, they have been tipped off that Tant was hiding out here. They're out to take him."

Doc Savage was working, keeping flat on his stomach, toward the engine room. The men in there had guns. He would have to use them, although it was his policy never to use such weapons. Indeed, he would not use them now to take life, only to stay the charge of the attackers temporarily.

The bronze man secured a submachine gun, and used it to discharge a short burst in the direction of the attacking men, who seemed to number at least two score.

The men stopped, flopped into ditches, and continued their advance more slowly. Some of them, it could be seen, carried grenades, ready to throw them when they were close enough.

DOC SAVAGE dived between the spokes of the wheel where the girl lay.

"You drove them off?" she asked.

"No such luck."

Doc, fishing expertly inside his clothing, extracted a box of metal and unscrewed the top. He poured out into his hand dozens of tiny things that might have been BB shot. Leaping erect, he ran to a spot near the door, then flung the shotlike things outside. An instant later, he was beside the girl.

"What were those things?" she asked.

"Chemical pellets," Doc explained. "After they lie there a few moments, they will absorb moisture, and become highly explosive. A slight compression will set them off."

"In other words, if they are stepped upon, they will explode," the girl said.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Right."

They lay there and waited. Bullets continued to open rents in the roof, the walls. The attackers seemed to be creeping closer.

"In a minute, they'll charge," Doc offered. "We will see what happens."

He had scarcely spoken when the charge started. With a howling uproar, the men rushed. Gun reports were a mad rattle.

Came a louder explosion. A man screamed. There was a second blast. The chemical pellets were exploding.

Doc heaved up, ran toward the door. He had left the submachine gun lying there, and it was his intention to pick it up and perhaps hurry the retreat of the attackers somewhat.

But Outlaw Tomahawk Tant—Reservoir Hill—came charging out of the engine room, swinging a heavy wrench. He leaped upon Doc Savage, striking madly.

"I'll teach you to monkey with Tomahawk Tant!" he squawled.

He was still dizzy from the effects of the anaesthetic gas, and did not know that his mortal enemy was staging an attack.

Doc sparred warily with him. The tough old fellow was fast on his feet, a dangerous customer.

Then the door suddenly filled with men. They had circled the grenades of chemicals, and were charging in. Like an avalanche, they came.

The fight that was waged in the confines of the pumphouse was a classic. Man after man dropped, and Doc seemed to become a phantom which neither lead nor human hands could touch.

How that scrap would have terminated, had the bronze man gone on with his fighting, never was determined. Something happened that stopped him.

"Get the bronze guy alive, if you can!" a voice howled.

"The chief will want to talk to 'im!"

Instantly upon hearing that, Doc Savage stopped fighting.

The men rushed in, and seized Doc Savage, all of them that could lay hands upon him. Some one brought a gunny sack, and they dragged this over the bronze man's head, then tied it.

His easy surrender hadn't fooled them.

"He figures we'll take 'im to the chief, and he'll then bust loose and mop up on the chief," a man said. "Won't he be fooled!"

They took Doc, the girl, Tomahawk Tant, and Tant's men, put them all in cars and drove away. After about an hour and a half of driving, Doc Savage's sensitive nostrils caught the odor of crude oil. The car stopped while some one got out and opened a gate, and when the machine went on, grass could be heard dragging

against the underside.

"Bring them into the room where the others are!" said the voice of the black-gloved man.

Doc was shoved through a door, and the door then slammed, making such a sound as to indicate it was a heavy and strong door.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" said the voice of big-worded Johnny.

DOC SAVAGE stood perfectly still.

"Pipe down, Johnny!" advised Monk's small voice. "We were so sure you were dead that when you talk, it still seems to me like your spook had come back!"

Doc Savage worked at the sack over his head. He got it off just in time to see Vida Carlaw, Tant—or Reservoir Hill—and the other Tant followers shoved into a great room which had concrete walls and no windows.

Glancing about, Doc saw just about every one concerned in the mystery of the red, jellylike devils from the depth of the earth. His five aids were there, all very much alive.

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, said, "They just finished giving us a heck of a scare, Doc! They took each one of us out and rigged up a fake business so that we thought they were feeding us to the red devils! The idea was to make us talk!"

Ham put in, "Monk actually fainted, he got so scared when his turn came!"

"That's a lie!" Monk yelled.

Big-fisted Renny rumbled at Monk and Ham, "Don't you two japes ever get tired of fighting with one another?"

Alonzo Cugg, sitting in a corner with no expression except the usual fear in his eyes, said, "Gentlemen, are you thinking about personalities, or ways of getting out of this mess?"

Doc finished glancing over the crowd. One was missing.

"Where is Enoch Andershott?" the bronze man asked.

"They took him off," Monk grunted. "They also took out one of Tant's men. They must've scared the fellow into telling where Tant's hang-out was, from the way they were howling around."

Reservoir Hill gritted, "So that's how they found me!"

Monk looked stunned. He leaped to his feet. "What'd my ears just do to me?"

Reservoir Hill held silence.

"Are you Tomahawk Tant?" Monk yelled.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

Since Reservoir Hill didn't answer, Doc said, "He is."

Monk opened and shut his mouth, apparently could think of nothing else to do, and sat down muttering. "Well, I hope to go on a diet of crude oil, which I'm beginnin' to hate somethin' huge!"

Men came in the door and pointed rifles at Doc Savage.

"Come out!" they ordered. "We're gonna give you some attention!"

They only wanted to search him. They did it, stripping him to the skin, and all of the time keeping him covered with guns.

They put his pocketed vest on the rickety table which stood to one side of the room. There was a telegraph key and a sounder on this table, but they did not look as if they had been used in a long time. Through the huge windows, long unwashed, Doc Savage got a look at the surrounding country. It was not what he expected.

THERE were giant oil storage tanks all around the place.

A tank farm, as these collections of storage tanks were called in oilfield parlance! Almost half a hundred of the huge tanks must surround this building, each encircled by a small dike to catch the oil should the tank spring a leak.

The tanks did not look large at this distance, but Doc knew they were fifty-five-thousand-barrel giants, that being the usual storage tank size in this area. Too, there were tiny streaks of leakage on the tanks and other indications which pointed to most of them being full of crude oil.

The tank farm seemed to be situated in a valley, with rolling hills on either side, hills of some height.

As for the building in which Doc was being held, that was a pumping station, or had been, for it was apparently not used now. The building was a substantial one of brick and concrete.

Doc eyed the telegraph instruments, once used by a gauging operator in reporting to his oil dispatcher in the head office. Too bad they were not connected, as it was plain to see they were not.

The men stood about Doc's unusual vest for a time, curiously examining the unusual gadgets therein. They turned tiny phials of chemicals in their hands, examined glass balls holding other chemicals, and peered at intricate, compact devices.

"We're gonna monkey around until we get hell blowed outta us!" a man muttered. "We better let this stuff alone!"

They slammed Doc back into the room which had no window and a stout door. The other prisoners eyed the bronze man anxiously.

"They did nothing but search me," Doc explained.

"I can't understand their holding off on us!" Monk grunted.

"They won't hold off on us for long!" grunted old Reservoir Hill.

Doc eyed him. "Mind telling us how you got involved in this, Tant, or Hill, or whatever your name is?"

RESERVOIR HILL shoved out his jaw fiercely, and became Outlaw Tant, Oklahoma Badman, as far as appearances went.

"This mastermind who's holding us prisoner—"

"Know who he is?" Doc interposed.

"No! Do you?"

Doc ignored the query and said, "Go on with your story!"

"All right," Hill growled with Tant fierceness. "This hombre got in touch with me, see? He wanted me to pitch in and help him with my mob. He explained that he had discovered these infernal red monsters coming outta the ground through an oil well, and had learned how to control 'em. He was gonna—well, you know what he was gonna do. He was starting in the Indian Dome Field. And that was the catch!"

"Your oil property was in the Indian Dome Field," Doc said. "That was the reason. The first victim was to be the Sands–Carlaw–Hill lease?"

"Listen, I got more property than my share of that lease in the Indian Dome Field! I own a dozen leases under different names! I'll have you know I'm a millionaire, I am! And nobody concerned suspected me of being Tant!"

"So you refused to take part in this other man's plot, because your own holdings were to be the first one's stolen?"

"That's the idea. Anyhow, I ain't a guy who likes to take orders from nobody. This other mug was pushing in on my territory, I figured. That kinda helped me decide to tie into 'im."

"Which was *your* mistake," some one said, dryly.

The door opened again, and the men with rifles came in. They came over and prodded Doc Savage.

"You better say good–by this time," one of the riflemen growled, "because you ain't comin' back!"

Chapter XX. THE BLAZE OF GLORY

MONK and Ham got up from the floor, where they had been sitting, and the bronze man's other aids grew tense. They were fully intent on starting to fight, despite the muzzles of guns menacing them.

"No!" Doc said sharply.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Listen, Doc!" Monk growled. "You've been searched! I've seen you do some impossible things, but you won't make it this time! These cookies are tough, and they're gonna finish you off!"

"Keep your heads!" Doc said, again sharply.

Then he added five words in a tongue which himself and his five aids used when they did not want to be understood by listeners. It was Mayan, an ancient language, lost to the so-called civilized world.

"And be ready to help," Doc said in Mayan.

Monk and the others were good actors. They showed no sign that the words meant anything favorable. Instead, they looked more worried than before, if possible, and clenched their fists and surged forward threateningly.

"Keep back!" Doc yelled at them, keeping up the deception.

Doc Savage was now hauled out of the room, the door of which was then slammed.

In the big room into which the bronze man was dragged, a number of heavily armed men stood about. They all stared at the bronze giant with great interest, and since he was weaponless and they had firearms, and also since they outnumbered him a score or more to one, they were not afraid.

On the table, far to one side, lay the stuff, which had been taken from Doc. They took pains that he did not walk near it as they marched him across the chamber and to a door which probably led to what had originally been a small storeroom. Several men sneered. One or two laughed jeeringly.

Doc Savage stopped. The men leading him tried to yank him on, but suddenly found themselves almost helpless. The bronze man did not attempt to escape; he merely turned slowly. It was strange, the effect this had. Every man in the room became silent.

Doc allowed them about ten seconds—long enough for the silence to have its effect, but not long enough for it to wear off.

"You men," Doc Savage said, "are doomed!"

His flexible voice had become deep-timbered and sonorous, and in it was a quality of sepulchral unreality. It was as if a ghostly apparition had spoken.

"Before many minutes pass, you will feel the first clutches of death!" Doc said, solemnly.

After that, he began to make his weird, trilling noise. He could, if he desired, make this consciously, although on ordinary occasions the sound came without thought. Indeed, it was sometimes a cause of embarrassment.

The trilling sound mounted and mounted, and from its usual resemblance to a wayward breeze trickling through the naked boughs of some thick forest, arose and arose until it became a banshee, hungry sound. And throughout, it held its ventriloquial quality, so that none in the room could tell for certain from whence it came.

A man broke under the strain and bawled, "Get 'im outta here!"

They hauled Doc into an adjacent room.

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PRINCIPAL item of equipment in this room was a wooden trough, which seemed to be lined with lead. It was not more than a foot deep, about two and a half wide, and seven long.

The trough was standing about half full of a vile-looking liquid, which gave off fumes that almost instantly started the eyes watering.

Several men still grasped Doc Savage. The bronze man ignored them and looked around.

Over in one corner lay several strange-looking objects.

Soft, porous slabs of sponge rubber! Stout little balloons of rubber filled with some liquid, probably water. Sheets of crêpe rubber. To some of these sheets were attached slender lengths of bamboo; to all of them were attached strings.

Red, every one of the things! The hideous salmon tint of the "monsters" from the depths of the earth!

The man with the black gloves came in, saw Doc Savage looking at the array of rubber stuff, and chuckled.

"You've probably guessed it by now," he said. "Them rubber things is what we've been using to make people think they saw monsters!"

Doc Savage said nothing.

"There ain't no earth devils!" the man rapped, sharply. "You savvy that? There ain't any! We had that wildcat well on the Sands-Carlaw-Hill lease fixed with the pipe tapped underground, so we could pull some of the rubber paraphernalia in and out. We even poured acid inside the casing so the pipe would be eaten away and people would think the monsters could even digest steel."

Doc held his silence.

The black-gloved man laughed harshly.

"We even had some stuff fixed up out of the acids and stuff that make up digestive juices!" he barked. "We smeared that along the ground to leave a trail to make 'em think the monsters were crawling around!"

Doc was looking, now, at the trough full of fluid.

"Trough full of acid," said the man. "It don't take long to destroy a body or partially destroy it! That's the monster's *digester!*"

He lifted a gun and stepped forward.

"Does your chief know you are doing this?" Doc asked, sharply.

"Sure, and why not? He's outside, hanging around where he won't be seen, until you and your men and Tant are out of the way. Why?"

"Curiosity," Doc said.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Yeah? Well, forget him. We're gonna knock you senseless and put you in the trough. When all of you is eaten up by the acid but your head, we're gonna take that in and show it to the girl and some of the others, who we're gonna turn loose. But not to any of your men, see!"

He lifted his gun.

DOC SAVAGE said, sharply. "Just a moment! Suppose you go into the other room and see how your friends are getting along?"

The black-gloved man scowled at Doc, hesitated, then snarled, "If this is a trick, it'll be too bad!" and went out.

He was back almost instantly.

"What'd you do to them?" he shrieked. "Come on! You gotta stop what's happening to 'em!"

Doc was seized and hauled back into the large room.

The men there looked as if something horrible was happening to them. Their flesh seemed to be turning a hideous purple in color, and bulging up in blisters. They pawed at themselves, muttered, occasionally groaned.

One looked at Doc Savage and yelled, "It's that bronze guy! He said—"

"Shut up!" gritted the man with the black gloves.

The man with the black gloves seemed to be having troubles of his own. He scratched himself, pinched up folds of his skin and looked at it. The better to do this, he removed his black gloves.

The reason for his wearing the gloves was instantly apparent. His hands had been scarred terribly by some accident in the past. They could be recognized instantly.

"Do something about this!" he roared at Doc.

The bronze man, showing no sign that he considered the request strange, considering that they had been on the point of killing him, said, "Monk can help you. This stuff is merely burns caused by an acid which was in my carry-all vest. The acid must have been spilled. It is really a gas with some of the burning properties of mustard gas."

Doc did not add another fact which would have astounded the man with the scarred hands—that the acid had been in tiny glass containers which could be broken by certain frequencies of sound waves.

The glass containers had a certain vibrating point; and a sound of that frequency would start them vibrating in sympathy, with the result that they shattered themselves when a certain strength of sympathetic vibration was reached.

It was the same method by which the famous singer, Caruso, was able to break wine glasses, except that in this case it had been Doc's trilling sound, lifted to great volume, which had done the job.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

"Monk can fix an antidote!" Doc yelled. Then, as if he were angry, and expressing his rage in the imprecations of a foreign tongue, he said loudly in Mayan, "Monk, the rest of you, be ready to make a break for it when they unlock the door!"

Doc's aids heard, and acted on the suggestion, it seemed, for the next instant the pump station became filled with shouting and yelling and uproar.

THE sudden burst of fighting distracted the men in the big room. Doc, lunging sidewise, smashed a fist at the man who wore black gloves to hide his scarred hands. The fellow dropped.

Doc yelled in Mayan, "Don't fight them! Run for it!"

The bronze man knew the foes, once they discovered there was nothing more serious than a bad acid vapor burn wrong with them, would fight with a will.

Doc himself dived for a door, got through it.

Glass broke to the left. It was a windowpane crashing out. Monk came into view, whirled and caught Vida Carlaw as some one heaved her out. Renny, Long Tom, Johnny and Ham followed. All were burned by the fumes.

An armed man came charging out of the big room after Doc. The acid vapor had affected his eyes, and he could see not too well. Doc hit him. The man, in falling, chanced to throw his gun in the direction of Monk and the others.

Alonzo Cugg, fright still in his eyes, was climbing through the window out of the pumphouse. He hit the ground, saw the fallen gun, and sprang for it. He got it.

"I'll finish you, anyhow!" he shrieked.

He pointed the gun at Doc Savage.

Probably he wouldn't have hit Doc, because the bronze man was weaving forward, and Cugg could see none too well. But Monk was closer, hauled off, and kicked Alonzo Cugg in the temple, then expertly caught Cugg's gun as it flew out of the man's senseless fingers.

"First I knowed Cugg was one of the crooks!" Monk gulped.

Doc's aids ran away from the pumphouse, helping Vida Carlaw to make speed.

Doc waited. Tant—Reservoir Hill—did not appear.

"Tant!" Doc called, sharply. "Come on!"

"Hell with you!" roared the old reprobate's voice. "As Reservoir Hill, I might run, but as Tomahawk Tant, me and my hombres is gonna clean house here! Then we're gonna get you yourself!"

Doc did not argue. He spun and drifted away from the pumping station with the speed of a hard-driven cloud.

HIS aids and Vida Carlaw had already reached the dike around an oil tank, and they tucked behind this barricade.

Bullets began to pass close to Doc, making whistling *snick!* noises, but he reached the bank and dived over it

"Boy, oh, boy!" Monk groaned. "Does that acid vapor burn! I feel like I'd been skinned alive!"

"You look as if you were made for skinning!" Ham said, referring slightly to Monk's furry hide.

Doc said, "Whichever side wins that fight, it makes no difference to us. They'll be after us. Come on!"

They ran around the big oil tank, got it between themselves and the old pump station, and by running madly, reached the shelter of another dike.

Monk paused to peer backward. There was shooting at the station, a great deal of it.

Tomahawk Tant was still inside the station with his men who had been taken prisoners. They must have seized weapons from their late captors. Tant could be heard squawling, and there was a mad rage in his voice which one would never have suspected, after knowing him in the garrulous personality of Reservoir Hill.

The leader of the other crowd was assembling his men outside, bawling orders at them. The figure of this fellow who had tried to foist a mythical earth monster off on the oil fields as a death device to gain control of leases, could be seen plainly.

Monk recognized this mastermind.

"Blazes!" he howled. "C'mere an' see who's got horns and a spike on his tail!"

Renny heaved up and had a look. "Holy cow!"

Doc Savage said, "It is Enoch Andershott."

"Enoch Andershott is the leader!" Renny agreed. "But when'd you guess it?"

"When he told about the monsters besieging him in his house," Doc said, quietly. "It was obvious he was lying, telling us his partner, Cugg, was kidnaped, so that they could decoy us on a fake chase after him, a chase that would lead us into a trap!"

"But you went ahead into the trap, anyway!" Renny boomed.

Doc said, with a trace of wryness, "When they laid the ambush on the cliff road, it was sooner than expected."

"Lookit!" Monk grunted, and pointed.

Enoch Andershott was leading his mob in flight from the pump station.

Tomahawk Tant and his men charged out after them.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

TWO of Andershott's men were shot down before they reached the nearest dike around a huge oil tank and popped over it. They began to shoot over the bank at Tant's crowd.

The outlaws promptly dived into a convenient ditch below the oil storage tank and began to return the fire. The whack of rifles was erratic and vicious, and bullets made fantastic singing sounds in the sky.

"Reminds me of the old days in the Great War!" grunted Renny.

Doc said, "Stay here!"

"Whatcha gonna do?" Monk yelled.

"Help whichever side seems to be losing!" Doc told him. "If we can keep them fighting long enough, we'll have more of a chance of thrashing the survivor."

But something happened before the bronze man could put his idea into practice.

Tomahawk Tant's men had been shooting with their most powerful rifles, at the oil storage tank. The bullets had penetrated the sheet steel, and oil was leaking down.

A firebrand came arching from the ditch where the Tant outlaws lay and fought. It arched over the dike around the oil tank, and fell within. It did not accomplish its purpose.

Another flaming missile was thrown. This one did better. It struck the leaking oil. Instantly, this burst into flame.

Then came what the Tant outlaws had not expected. The flames climbed up and reached gas escaping from top vents of the tank. The tank was only partially full of crude oil, so there was plenty of room for the gas to collect. The tank held thousands of cubic feet of it.

The gas went up in a titanic *zoo-m!* The tank top, falling apart as it arose, went hundreds of feet in the air. Sides of the tank split outward, disgorging flaming oil.

There was too much of the oil for the dike to hold. It sloshed over, and went pouring toward the ditch where Tant and his men lay. Great sheets of the flaming stuff sloshed over them, driven by the exploding gas.

Within the next few moments, the whole scene of the fight was flaming oil, and black smoke was beginning to arise in a cloud that would crawl like a black snake for miles along the countryside—sole monument to two mobs of men whose creed had been to take by force such things as they might want.

For both crowds, the portions of them engaged in the fight at the time, perished in the oil fire. And that meant the leaders of both factions died. There were, of course, other members of both sides, probably numbering in the scores scattered over the countryside, but these probably lost no time in fleeing Oklahoma. At least, they were never heard from again, nor could a trace be found of them, although Doc Savage had his five aids looking about for them.

DOC SAVAGE, while his aids sought outlaws and Andershott followers, attended to the final details of getting the earth monster scare quieted. It was not hard. Oil men are quick to adapt themselves.

THE DERRICK DEVIL

There was one more surprising development. Tomahawk Tant's will—to be more exact, Reservoir Hill's will.

He had left everything—including the properties he owned under other names—to Vida Carlaw.

Vida refused to have anything to do with the legacy. Doc discussed the matter with her. There was no reason why she did not have a legal right to the wealth. She was adamant, didn't want anything to do with it. They compromised by establishing with the funds one of the largest free hospitals in the world in Oklahoma.

Renny, the big-fisted engineer, went over the preliminary plans with Vida Carlaw. Renny was also something of an architect, and he had also become somewhat enamored of pretty Vida Carlaw, and volunteered his services.

In fact, he gave the young lady quite a rush—and Monk and Ham learned something. Monk and Ham had long considered themselves the lady-killers of Doc's little group. But in the present instance, big-fisted Renny left them at the post. They didn't have a chance.

Monk and Ham took their disgust out on each other. It got to a point where it really did look as if they would murder each other. Even their pets, Habeas and Chemistry, which had been in the Tulsa hotel throughout, took to eating each other at every chance.

The coming of THE MENTAL WIZARD might have kept them from actual mayhem. Certainly, the mystery of THE MENTAL WIZARD was a thing so astounding, and so startling in its possibilities that it completely occupied their attention—to say nothing of nearly costing them their lives.

It was strange, the beginning of the mystery of THE MENTAL WIZARD. A plane, a plane long believed to be lost, came flying out of the South American jungles. In it was a young man, the pilot, whom the world had given up hope of seeing alive again, years before. Riding beside him was a young woman, a young woman dressed in fantastic garments, speaking a language none could understand.

THE END