

THE METAL MASTER

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. THE SCARED OLD MAN

DOC SAVAGE'S headquarters in New York City are on the eighty-sixth floor of a ponderous midtown skyscraper. The building is in a business section. Late at night, the region becomes comparatively deserted.

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There are many dark doorways in the neighborhood.

The scared old man lurked in one of these darkened doorways.

The old man had something on his mind, something that was worrying him. He crouched in the shadowy entry and devoted his time to peering about. He was evidently very frightened, too.

It was sleeting a little. Cold. A taxicab, when it swung to the curb near the old man's hiding place, skidded a bit.

A girl got out of the cab. She was tall, in a mannish cloth coat and a felt hat that was not far from being masculine. She paid off the driver and the cab went away, after its wheels had spun for a while on the sleety pavement.

The girl walked to the darkened doorway. She had a flashlight in her hand and she turned its beam on the old man.

"Don't!" he cried out wildly. "No light!"

The girl blackened the flashlight lens. Its momentary glow had flashed more than the suit full of bones that was the old man. It had disclosed the girl's face. She was a redhead, and sweet.

"What is wrong, Seevers?" she asked. She had a voice that went with her sweet face. Full of throaty tones.

Old Seevers was plainly very scared. His teeth made a clatter that the cold was not causing.

"I've just found out an incredible thing," he gulped. "That's why I telephoned you to meet me here, Nan. You're Louis's sister."

"And you have been Louis's laboratory assistant for years, and always seemed to have good sense, or I wouldn't have come," said the girl. "Now just what are you talking about, Seevers?"

"I've learned that some people are going to be killed," said Seevers. "Murdered in a horrible fashion! And that's not all."

The girl was silent for a long moment.

"You'd better take a vacation for a few weeks," she said. "You've saved your money. Why not go to Florida for the winter?"

"I'm not crazy!" snapped old Seevers. "I knew you would think so. That's why I'm taking you along with me tonight."

"Taking me where?" she demanded sharply.

"To Doc Savage," said Seevers. "Doc Savage must believe my story."

"Oh," the girl said.

She had heard of Doc Savage. It was in her tone. Man of bronze, being of mystery, one who performed miracles: That was Doc Savage. Yet no one knew much about him. An aura of mystery hung about him. He

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shunned publicity. Yet he got plenty, because reporters have imaginations and he was a mystical, interesting figure. Because few facts about the bronze man were actually available, the legends springing up around and about him were often fantastic.

One thing the public did know: Doc Savage's unique profession. His life was devoted to righting wrongs, aiding the oppressed, meting out a queer justice to exildoers. A sort of modern knight in armor. It carried him to the far corners of the earth. And it got him into incredible scrapes.

"Look, Seevers," said the girl, Nan. "Tell me what is on your mind."

"You can listen when I tell Doc Savage," said Seevers. "You can verify certain facts that will make the story more credible."

"All right," said the girl. "I've always wanted to meet this Doc Savage. I don't believe he's half what they say he is."

Seevers took her arm in a thin claw. "Come on. I'm in a terrible hurry."

"Why?"

Seevers hesitated, peering about. "I am afraid of being killed."

"By whom?" She sounded skeptical.

"By the Metal Master, probably," muttered Seevers.

The girl gave the feminine equivalent of a snort. Plainly, she was not convinced that the old man really had anything of importance. She thought him a little mad.

"I never heard of anything called the Metal Master," she said.

"You will!" Seevers shuddered. "Don't make any mistake about my sanity. The Metal Master exists, and it is going to do some awful things to this world, unless Doc Savage can stop it!"

The girl gave her skeptical snort again.

"You sound too melodramatic to be in earnest," she said.

Old Seevers did not reply.

They passed under a street light. The girl was more than pretty. She was little short of ravishing. She was not a doll face. Her beauty was classic.

"We'll stop at this cable office," said old Seevers, pointing. "I am expecting a message, a cablegram."

The cable office was one that remained open all night. There were two young men on duty. They ogled the young woman, hypnotized by her beauty.

"Anything for Jonathan Seevers?" asked the old man.

One clerk came to life and produced a blue envelope.

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"Just came in," he said.

Old Seevers opened the message. It was from a town in South America, and read:

INFORMATION WHICH YOU CABLED ME VERIFIES WHAT I HAVE SUSPECTED STOP
IMPERATIVE CALAMITY BE AVERTED STOP GO TO DOC SAVAGE IMMEDIATELY WITH
STORY STOP I AM TAKING OFF NOW IN MY PLANE HEADED FOR NEW YORK STOP BE
CAREFUL

LOUIS

Having read the missive, the girl glanced up. She looked stunned.

"From my brother, Louis!" she gasped. "And he is flying from South America, right now!"

"Exactly!" said old Seevers. "Your brother knows just how horrible this thing is."

They hurried out of the cable office.

HARDLY three minutes later, a stranger walked into the cable office. He was a lean fellow whose clothes looked as if they had been slept in. He wore a rubber apron and a green celluloid eyeshade was over his eyes.

"Jonathan Seevers let his cablegram blow out of the window of his shop," he said. "He can't find it. He wants you to give me a duplicate."

The cable clerk was still in a coma, thinking of the beautiful vision who had just left. He riffled through the sheaf of carbons, came to the one desired, and pulled it out. Then he hesitated.

"It is customary to have identification before we deliver a message to any one other than the person to which it is addressed," he said.

"I work for Seevers," said the man.

The statement was a lie. It had that sound. The clerk frowned.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You'll have to identify yourself. Bring a note from Seevers."

The man made a snarling sound. He reached under his coat, brought out a pistol and aimed deliberately. The pistol went off twice. The clerks fell on the floor, bullet holes through brains.

The killer got the cablegram carbon and ran out of the office.

Chapter II. THE BRONZE MAN

DOC SAVAGE'S profession was trouble. Other people's troubles. He had friends, more friends than enemies by a large score. But there were plenty of enemies, and occasionally they tried to kill Doc Savage, figuring that was their only hope. Some of the enemies had very ingenious ideas about how to accomplish their ends. So Doc Savage had to take precautions.

One of these precautions was a system of sensitive alarms which registered the appearance of any prowlers near his office. A marauder did not need to break in. If he as much as walked near the door, buzzers whined and indicator lights glowed.

One of the buzzers suddenly whined. Its sound had an alarming quality.

The headquarters—a reception room first, then a library and laboratory covering many thousands of square feet of floor space—was dark, except for one light over a small germ culture table on which were experimental cultures of a spermatocyte nature. This light revealed nothing but a hand of the individual who was at the table.

It was a remarkable hand. The size did not seem especially striking until compared with surrounding objects, when it became evident that the hand was of no small size. The fingers were long. The skin had a surprisingly fine texture. But the unusual feature was the evidence that the hand possessed incredible strength. The sinews on the back were nearly as large as an ordinary man's fingers.

The hand had a skin of a remarkable bronze hue.

When the buzzer whined, the bronze hand vanished from the glow of the tiny bulb. No lights came on. The owner of the hand moved through the murk with soundless speed that was surprising. A moment later, he opened the door of the reception room.

A tall girl in a mannish coat lay on the corridor floor. A masculine hat had been knocked off her head. Her face was upturned. It was an exquisitely attractive face.

Her mouth was open. A whitish powder was smeared around it.

There was a light in the modernistic corridor, it showed the bronze man who came flinging out of the reception room. He was a Herculean figure. His hand, seen alone in the light, had seemed huge, yet it was not out of proportion. Muscles remindful of big wire hawsers were evident under his clothing.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the bronze man was his eyes. They were of an unusual flake-gold tint, and the gold flakes seemed always in motion, as if stirred by tiny winds. They were strange, compelling eyes. Strangers on the street often looked at those eyes and were so gripped that they found themselves bumping into other pedestrians.

The bronze man's features were regular. His hair, of a bronze hue slightly darker than his skin, fitted his head like a metal skullcap.

The bronze man did some fast moving. A glance whipped over the corridor showed no one else there.

He scooped up the girl and lunged with her into the reception room, through the library and into the laboratory. He did not turn the lights on. He evidently knew the place well.

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He planted the girl on a marble-topped table. He felt for her pulse. He listened for her heart.

Her heart was not beating.

MANY a famous doctor and surgeon would have liked to have been present in that laboratory during the course of the next five minutes. What happened was an example of what skill and medical knowledge can do.

Chemicals were mixed with flashing rapidity. They were administered to the girl, both as a draught and with hypos. Then she was shoved into a complicated device that was designed to start her breathing. Adrenalin was administered.

Twenty minutes of that, and the girl had her eyes open. She looked at the bronze man.

"You're Doc Savage," she said faintly. "I've seen your pictures."

"You were attacked in the corridor?" Doc Savage asked.

The bronze man's voice was as unusual as his appearance. It was deep, cultured, full of controlled power.

"Yes," breathed the young woman. "What happened to Seevers?"

Doc did not answer that.

"Was any one beside Seevers with you?" he asked.

"No."

He carried her to the rear of the laboratory room, to what resembled a solid wall. He put a palm to the wall, held it there, took it away, put it there again. He did this three times. A perfectly concealed panel opened. It had a lock that was actuated by a sensitive thermostatic combination concealed in the wall. Heat of the hand, applied in the proper combination, was enough to open the lock. It could be opened in no other manner.

The niche inside had a narrow couch. Doc put the girl there.

"Be back later," he said crisply. "You are too weak to talk now."

He brought stuff in a glass.

"If you get to feeling dizzy, drink this," he directed. "It's a stimulant. Do not make any noise."

"O. K.," she managed to say. It was a wisp of a whisper.

Doc Savage closed the hidden panel behind him. Only a very good magnifying glass would have detected the crack around it. Due to the clever construction of the place, the extra thickness of the walls could not be determined without measuring them with surveying instruments.

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DOC SAVAGE went back through laboratory, library and reception room and out into the corridor. The corridor door was of armor steel and had no locks or knobs or other visible means of being opened. It closed mysteriously behind the bronze man.

Doc Savage had scooped up, in passing through the laboratory, a rather unusual-looking metal box. It had a lense, and might have been an old-fashioned magic lantern, except that this lense was almost black in color. There was a switch on the side of the box. Doc flicked this.

A strange thing happened in the corridor. Along the floor in front of the elevators was a mat. It looked as if it were made of gray sponge rubber. It was wide enough that any one getting out of the elevators would be likely to step on it. In fact, only a spry jump would take a person over it without touching it.

This mat, when the eye of the strange lantern was turned on it, began to glow with an eerie blue luminance.

Footprints, as well, appeared on the corridor floor.

Doc Savage entered his own private high-speed elevator and rode down to the street level. There were three other elevators in operation at this time of night. He asked the attendants questions.

"Who came and went from my floor within the last few minutes?"

"Why, an old man and a girl went up," said one elevator operator. "The girl was a peach for looks, what I mean. And some men went up, too. Four."

"Before or after the man and the girl?"

"After. They came down later, with the old man. They said he had been seized with a dizzy spell."

"Thank you," said Doc Savage, and went out on the street.

He turned his lantern on again. It was, in reality, a compact and powerful projector of invisible ultra-violet light. Ultra-violet light has the strange property of causing certain substances to fluoresce, or glow. Ordinary vaseline has this quality.

The man in front of the elevators on Doc Savage's floor was soaked with a chemical mixture which was sticky and glowed with an extraordinary brightness under the ultraviolet light. It would stick to the shoe soles of any one who walked on it, and tracks would be left for some time.

Doc Savage followed glowing tracks down the street. They led around a corner. He had a little difficulty, because the chemical footprints did not register well on the sleety sidewalk.

The trail, however, was not long. It led into an alley. It was a dark alley. Doc produced a flashlight which spouted a lean, utterly white beam.

On the alley pavement was a weird blob of metal.

THE metal blob had a length of perhaps a dozen feet, and a width of half that. It appeared that a molten mixture of steel and brass had been dumped in the alley to harden.

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But there were many queer aspects to the metal mass. For one thing, had molten metal been dumped there, the pavement around about would have shown some evidence of the terrific heat. There was none.

Yet it certainly looked as if the metal had been put there in a molten state. Little streams of it had run out at the sides, just as liquid metal would do. It had filled cracks in the alley pavement.

Most fantastic of all, pieces of wood stuck out of the mass, along with bits of cloth and leather. Doc Savage examined the leather.

Automobile cushions! Not the slightest doubt of it. This molten mass had been an automobile. He saw the tires, four of which had been on the wheels, and a spare. Fire. And the wooden wheel spokes were intact.

The bronze man moved about, using his flashlight. Then he did something that was rare with him. He had trained his nerves for shocks. He rarely showed emotion.

Yet he started violently.

For the next few seconds, he stood perfectly still. And there came into being a small, weird sound. It was a trilling. It ran up and down the musical scale, adhering to no definite tune, yet definitely melodious. Much about the strange trilling defied description. It might have been the song of some exotic feathered creature, or the note of a wind filtering through a denuded forest.

A small, absent thing which the bronze man did in moments of mental stress, was this trilling. It had a quality of ventriloquism, seeming to come from everywhere, yet from no definite spot. The reason for the trilling stuck up stark and horrible in the flashlight glow.

A bony, wrinkled human hand! Projecting from the wad of metal on the alley pavement!

Doc Savage worked furiously at the mass of metal. It was solid, as if molten and poured there. The body was imbedded in it. Some other parts of it were exposed, he found after a moment's search. There was part of a leg. An elbow. The tail of the man's coat.

Strangest of all, the man's garments were not even scorched. Yet he was imbedded solidly in the mass of metal.

Doc Savage returned his attention to the hand which projected so horribly. On one of the fingers was a ring. He removed it. Identification, perhaps.

He used the ultra-violet lantern. The footprints ended here. There were marks on the sleet which indicated a car had gone away. There must have been two cars. One—something fantastic had happened to it. The other had taken away the remaining men.

There seemed to be nothing more to do. It would take hours, perhaps days, with hacksaws to free the body. Doc went back toward the skyscraper which housed his headquarters.

He carried the ring.

An elevator operator told him, "Some men went up to your floor, then came back down. I guess they found you weren't there."

"Know them?" Doc asked.

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"They were the same men who took the old man down."

Doc Savage said nothing. But he lost no time getting in the private express elevator to ride up. A moment later, he stepped out in the eighty-sixth floor corridor.

The armor-plate door of his headquarters suite was gone.

NOT gone, exactly. It was a puddle on the floor. To all appearances, it had simply melted. Yet nothing was burned.

Doc Savage studied the incredible scene. Some of the metal casing of the door had also dripped down on the floor. He touched the wad of metal. Cold.

He entered. Nothing was disturbed to any extent. But the place had been searched. A few cabinets were open. They were large enough to have held a person.

He went to the secret panel and unlocked it by operating the thermostatic combination.

The girl smiled at him. She was still weak. But her nerve was all right.

"I'm glad you're back," she said.

"Hear any one a few minutes ago?"

"Faint sounds," she admitted. "You told me to keep quiet. I did."

Doc Savage showed her the ring. There was nothing unusual about it. It was cheap; worn.

"Ever see it before?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "Yes. It belonged to Seevers. He always wore it."

Doc Savage nodded, sat down, and gave her some of the stimulant to drink.

"Now," he said. "Tell me the story."

Her voice was firm enough.

"There's not much of it," she said. "Seevers telephoned me. He was worried. Wanted me to meet him and come to talk with you. He said something about a Metal Master, and something terrible about it. But he didn't go into details. I thought he was—well, balmy. That is, until he got the cablegram from my brother. And my brother—his name is Louis—seemed to think there was something wrong, too."

"Who is your brother?" Doc asked.

"Louis Tester," the girl replied. "I am Nan Tester. We are twins. My brother is an expert on electricity as applied to chemistry. Or at least, he used to be"

"Used to be?"

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The girl drank more of the stimulant.

"I haven't seen much of Louis the last two years," she said. "He has been off in some out-of-the-way place working, where he has a laboratory."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"From where did the cablegram come?"

"South America. He is on his way North. I don't know why he was down there. In fact, I didn't know he was in South America."

"Who was Seevers?"

"He used to work with my brother. Seevers was sort of a teacher for my brother for a long time. He is a nice old man."

Doc Savage did not tell her she should have said *was* a nice old man.

Chapter III. CUBA ANGLE

DOC SAVAGE allowed the young woman to rest, after ascertaining that she knew no more than what she had told. While she was resting, he telephoned the cable company.

He learned about the two clerks who had been murdered and about the cablegram which had been taken. He got a copy of the cablegram from the central office, where it had been relayed.

"How is your nerve?" he asked the girl.

"I don't know," she said.

Doc tried her.

"Seevers is dead," he said.

Her nerve was all right. She bit her lips.

"He was a nice old man," she said.

"Do you have any idea what is behind this?" Doc Savage asked.

She considered. "I can't think of a single angle."

"You were poisoned," Doc told her. "They smeared a cyanide powder over your mouth."

"I know." She shuddered. "And after that, it was the strangest thing! I seemed to be flying through infinite

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space at terrific speed! And yet it didn't seem like it was me doing that, but some one different, some part of me that I had never been conscious of before"

"You were dead," Doc Savage told her.

She eyed him solemnly. "You wouldn't kid me?"

"That," he assured her, "is the truth."

"And you brought me back to life?"

"It has been done often before. People actually die on operating tables and elsewhere, only to be revived by the use of adrenalin and other methods."

Nan Tester did not say anything. Apparently having been dead was something to think about.

"You are going to be left here again for a few minutes," the bronze man told her.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do not make any noise in here," Doc told her, apparently not hearing her question. "The place was searched a while ago. They were probably looking for you."

Doc Savage left her concealed in the secret compartment. She had wanted to know what he planned, but he had appeared not to hear the inquiry—a small and aggravating habit which he had when he did not wish to explain his future moves.

He went to the cable office to which had come Louis Tester's cable from South America, and where the two clerks had been murdered. The place was full of police officers, investigating the killing.

Two new clerks were on duty.

Doc Savage filed two cablegrams for transmission. The first one was addressed to Louis Tester, care of the airport at Panama, Canal Zone, where his plane would be apt to land for refueling. It read:

SEEVERS MURDERED STOP YOUR LIFE MAY BE IN DANGER STOP DESIRE YOUR STORY IMMEDIATELY STOP CHANGE YOUR COURSE TO HAVANA CUBA AND INTERVIEW MY ASSISTANT COLONEL JOHN RENWICK AT HOTEL MIRMA IN HAVANA STOP TELL HIM STORY STOP ACCEPT HIS HELP STOP YOUR SISTER WITH ME.

DOC SAVAGE

The second cable was directed to Colonel John Renwick, Hotel Mirma, Havana, Cuba, and said:

MAN NAMED LOUIS TESTER WILL ARRIVE IN HAVANA FROM SOUTH AMERICA BY PLANE STOP MEET HIM AND GET STORY CLEARING UP MYSTERY OF METAL MASTER STOP HIS LIFE MAY BE IN DANGER

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Doc handed these two communications over the counter for immediate transmission. The two clerks behind the counter seemed to be nervous, which was no wonder, with the place full of frowning cops.

DOC SAVAGE now gave his attention to the policemen. They listened to him with the greatest of respect, for they knew his reputation, knew also that he was a high honorary officer in the police department, among other things.

Doc told them to go to the elevator operators in the skyscraper which housed his headquarters for a description of men who might be the murderers. Doc did not explain why he happened to make this suggestion. The policemen looked very curious about it, but did not insist when Doc failed to volunteer a full explanation.

Doc Savage also mentioned that it might be interesting to investigate the alley where old Seever's body lay imbedded so incredibly in a blob of metal.

Two officers went to see about this. One soon came tearing back with his eyes wild. He had found the mass of metal, and the body.

The police investigators now asked Doc Savage to have another look at the fantastic thing in the alley, and furnish them with any theories which they might pursue in their investigation. Doc was not unwilling. He knew very well that the police had an efficient organization, and he frequently cooperated with them.

Doc went to the alley with the policemen.

The two clerks in the cable office seemed very glad indeed to see the bronze man and the cops depart. Their relief was tempered somewhat by the fact that one cop remained behind, to see that no one wandered around messing finger prints. The clerks, pretending to examine messages, held a whispered consultation.

"This is sorta risky" one said. "We better blow. We've got them two cablegrams that the bronze guy filed."

"We better see what the chief wants us to do," the other muttered.

The man went to a telephone. The cable office phones were fitted with box affairs over the mouthpieces, so that the instruments could be spoken into with privacy. This made it simple for the man to telephone without the policeman on guard overhearing.

"Doc Savage filed two cablegrams," said the clerk, when he had his party.

"Read them to me," directed the person at the other end of the wire.

This individual spoke in a whisper. It is very difficult to identify a voice from a whisper over a telephone wire.

The clerk read both messages.

The whisperer cursed heartily, but did not forget to keep whispering.

"That means the girl got to Doc Savage," said the whisperer. "It also means that she couldn't tell him what it is all about. He's trying to get hold of Louis Tester, to learn the story. We've got to stop that."

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"Sure," said the clerk. "But how?"

THE other had quick wits. Almost immediately, a cablegram was dictated over the phone. It was addressed to Louis Tester, care of the airport at Panama, Canal Zone, and read:

SEEVERS MURDERED WITHOUT TELLING STORY STOP WANT YOU TO GIVE STORY TO MY AID COLONEL JOHN RENWICK WHO IS ABOARD SCHOONER NINETY MILES SOUTH SOUTHWEST OF DRY TORTUGAS ISLAND STOP FIND SCHOONER LAND AND COOPERATE WITH COLONEL RENWICK STOP SCHOONER IS THE TWO-MASTED VESSEL INNOCENT

DOC SAVAGE

"

Send that message, then destroy it," directed the voice. "Do not send the message which Doc Savage filed to Louis Tester, but stamp it as if it were sent, so nobody will get suspicious."

"O. K.," said the clerk. "What about the other message, to Colonel Renwick?"

"Go ahead and send it, so Doc Savage will not get suspicious," ordered the whisperer. "Louis Tester will never get near Colonel Renwick."

"Who is Colonel Renwick, chief?"

"Doc Savage has five men who are his assistants. Colonel Renwick is one of them."

"Oh!"

The whisperer commanded, "And after you get the messages sent, clear out of there before the cable company gets wise that two fake clerks are on duty there."

"O. K., chief. What about that girl?"

"I am taking measures about the girl."

"O. K. So long, chief."

This terminated the telephone conversation. The two phony clerks went about the business of sending the fake message to Louis Tester, directing him to find the schooner *Innocent*.

"

The chief will have men on the schooner to grab him, I guess," said one clerk.

They had evidently once worked in a cable office, these two, for they knew how the messages were transmitted over the teletypes. But they could have been a little more skillful.

They sent Colonel Renwick's message as Doc Savage had filed it. Then they exchanged more whispers.

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"We better blow, now," said one.

"O. K.," agreed the other.

They walked out.

"Gonna get a cup o' coffee," one told the policeman, laconically. The cop swallowed that, and let them go.

They walked boldly down the street, then turned into a side thoroughfare.

"That was simple," said one.

"Sure, it was," agreed the other. "Brother, we fooled this Doc Savage plenty!"

"The bronze guy ain't up to that reputation of his."

"Yeah. He's overrated."

Then something happened to them. It was as if the wall of the building had fallen on them. Only the hard things which struck them were not bricks, but fists. Before either could more than squawk in agony, they were battered down to the sidewalk.

To the accompaniment of metallic clicks, light steel handcuffs came to rest on their wrists. Dazed, they blinked and groaned and peered into the gloom, to see what manner of nemesis had overtaken them.

When they saw, they became so quiet that it seemed their hearts had stopped.

"Doc Savage!" one choked finally.

Doc Savage said nothing. Being a psychologist, he knew the value of silence in a moment such as this. It was much more effective than anything he could say.

After a bit, one of the men muttered a single word that was adequately expressive.

"Well?"

Doc Savage said, "You fellows are not very good actors. You were nervous."

"Anybody would be nervous," growled the other.

" *That* didn't give us away."

"But it moved me to telephone the cable company, and they said your description didn't fit the clerks they had sent," Doc explained. "You waylaid them, did you not?"

"Yes," the other admitted promptly.

"Kill them?"

"No. There wasn't no need."

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Doc Savage picked them up. He did it perfectly easily, and carried them both as if they had no weight at all. His physical strength was great.

"Whatcha gonna do?" one gulped.

"That depends on you," Doc told him. "Plenty, probably. That is, if you are reluctant about telling what you know."

"Wait a minute!" said the man hastily. "Maybe we can get together."

"How?"

"We were just hired for a job. All we get out of it is our pay. We won't get that, now that we've been caught. So what's the profit in bucking you?"

"None," Doc agreed. "Start talking."

"We were hired," said the man. "Me and my pal here. We haven't been told much. We don't know what's behind this."

"Who hired you?"

"A big guy with black whiskers. He didn't give no name. Said it wasn't necessary."

"Can you find him again?"

They hesitated. One cleared his throat. The other spoke jerkily.

"We know—where he hangs out—red—brick house in the Forties."

THE house was of red brick, right enough, and it was old, with boards over the windows on the ground floor. Doc Savage saw this from the taxicab in which he arrived with the two men.

"Get out," he told them.

"You're going to walk right in?" one demanded.

"Going to try it."

They got out. The street was deserted, for it was getting along toward morning. It was still sleeting. The feet of the two fake telegraphers skidded a little as they worked across the sidewalk.

Then they fell down. Fell slackly, heavily. But it wasn't the slippery pavement. They had been knocked down, knocked by bullets that arrived in a bedlam of noise.

A machine gun! It was firing, not from the house, but from a roof at the end of the block. Its cackle made the street hideous.

THE METAL MASTER

Doc Savage flung sidewise, hit the sleety walk, and slid. He smashed against a fire plug. That was what he wanted. A fire plug will not shelter much more than a man's head, but that was enough in this case. Doc Savage never went out without a garment of chain-mail under his outer clothing. Only the best of high-powered hunting rifles, shooting hard slugs, could perforate the mail.

The machine gun continued its gobbling. Slugs, hitting the bronze man's mail, threatened to knock him away from the fire plug.

The gun went silent.

Doc Savage lay where he was. The quieting of the gun might be a trick to see if he moved.

The two men who had been his guides were dying. One was already dead, in fact. The other was groaning his last, and raving a little.

"Trap—double crossers!" this one was shrieking. "If we got caught—bring you here—they would rescue us—Liars—intended fix us so we wouldn't talk—"

His shrieking turned to a bubbling and with a few lusty coughs that sprayed crimson over the sleety sidewalk, he turned in his checks.

By now, Doc Savage had decided the machine gun was silent because the gunner was making a get-away. The bronze man heaved up and ran for the corner.

He heard a car engine start up. The machine went away fast.

DOC turned back to the taxi in which he had come. The driver was scared. He got out and ran for dear life in the opposite direction. So Doc drove the cab in pursuit of the fleeing car, and did not get to first base, which was not his fault, but the fault of a careless motorist who had failed to put on chains to run on the sleet.

The cab skidded uncontrollably. Doc Savage's driving ability, which was considerable, did not help enough.

He did not find the car he was seeking, for the cab lost its front wheels against the curb in an effort to avoid a smash.

Doc went back and examined the machine gun. It was a foreign military weapon. Small chance of it ever being traced.

Doc searched the house in which the two men had said he would find the big man with a black beard. There was no such man; and no others in the house. Probably there had never been such a man.

Searching the two victims, Doc Savage found the cablegram which had been dictated by the whispering leader over the telephone, the one which had been sent to Louis Tester, in Panama, Canal Zone. They had been careless and had not destroyed it.

Doc Savage lost no time in getting to a telephone and trying for a land-line-radio hookup to the airport in Panama. He wanted to get hold of Louis Tester.

But Louis Tester had landed, refueled and gone on North. Louis Tester was headed for the trap.

THE METAL MASTER

Doc Savage hurriedly got a telephone connection to Havana, Cuba. He spoke, when he had his party, ancient Mayan, a language which few outside his five aids and himself spoke. He talked for some time.

Doc Savage's regular bronze features were emotionless as he headed back toward his skyscraper aerie. Whatever was involved in this mysterious affair must be tremendous.

The "Metal Master"! That was it, whatever it was.

Doc Savage knew something was wrong the moment he entered the lobby of his building. He ran to the elevators. The three attendants were inside.

They were not dead. But their heads had been thoroughly battered, probably with blackjacks. Not one was conscious. Doc ran his private elevator up to the eighty-sixth floor. He went through reception room and library into the laboratory. There, he stood still for some moments.

His strange, fantastic trilling noise came into existence and traced its eerie tremor for some moments. It was smaller, more exotic than usual, and after it faded away into nothingness, the echo of it seemed to persist, as the strains of entralling music sometimes seem to hang in the air afterward.

The laboratory walls were of steel—or had been. A bit of the steel had melted down on the tiled floor. Melted, it appeared, without any heat. A number of the secret compartments had been thus opened.

The one in which Doc Savage had left titian-haired, exquisite Nan Tester had been opened. She was gone.

Chapter IV. INTO THE TRAP

THE next development in the mystery of the Metal Master, as it came to be called, occurred in Havana harbor.

"Tops'l" Hertz, who was to act a grisly part in the matter of the Metal Master, was jumping about barking orders. He was trying to get his big two-masted schooner, *Innocent*, to sea in a hurry. He did a good deal of cursing.

Tops'l Hertz probably would not have been jumping about swearing had he known about Doc Savage. Tops'l became a cold customer when he was scared. Tops'l had heard of Doc Savage, but as far as he knew, the bronze man had never heard of him. On occasion, Tops'l had hoped he never would.

Doc Savage's name often kept gentlemen of Tops'l Hertz's brand awake nights.

Tops'l, in his lighter moments, gave play to a foxy humor of sorts. He had named his schooner *Innocent* during one of these arch intervals. The hooker was anything but angelic.

The *Innocent* had been a rumrunner back in the days when that paid, and now she was doing a bit of smuggling guns and ammunition to hopeful revolutionists in Central America and elsewhere. She was versatile; she also ran aliens and other things, principally narcotics, which latter is as evil a profession as the world offers.

Occasionally, the *Innocent* participated in a high-class murder for hire. Her forward hatch was hacked and scarred, and the crew would tell you that fish were dressed there. Naturally, they couldn't be expected to mention a human body or so that had been cut up on the hatch for the sharks.

THE METAL MASTER

Taken altogether, the *Innocent* and her crew formed a combination that could have taught Blackbeard a few things.

The schooner cast off from the fuel-oil dock and drifted out of the harbor under the thrust of her Diesels, which could, weirdly enough, hurl the vessel along at a speed that more than one coast guard cutter had failed to match.

A mile off Morro Castle, which is at the mouth of Havana harbor, a fight broke out forward. Blows. Curses. A man howling in pain.

"I may be a stowaway, but I object to being stowed away!" squawled a nondescript voice.

Tops'l Hertz hopped nimbly forward, wearing his most ominous look.

He saw one of his sailors. The man was holding a stowaway, who had just been hauled out of a deck locker.

This stowaway was not tall, and he was thin and wan and puny-looking. His clothes were in bad shape. He seemed hardly able to stand up, as if from some constitutional weakness. Altogether, he had very few visible qualities to recommend him.

Which shows how deceptive appearances can be.

"What the blarsted 'ell is goin' on 'ere?" growled Tops'l Hertz, who had a Limehouse accent, except when he desired otherwise.

The stowaway tried to straighten his shoulders, and all but collapsed. He grasped a stay to steady himself.

"I'm Punning Parker," he said. "I'm in bad with Scotland Yard and they've got a man in Havana looking for me. I heard you were a good man to go to, to get into the States."

And thus "Punning" Parker introduced himself and his puns.

HE produced a roll of bills amounting to several thousands of dollars. He peeled off a goodly number of the bills.

"I'm sort of a *billing* worker," he said. "Not that I'm any *dough*-boy."

Tops'l nearly shuddered. He hated puns. But he did not let his personal likes affect his business sense.

"Stick aboard," he said. "Hi'll take care of you."

Now this was not the snap decision it seemed. Tops'l Hertz had suddenly remembered having seen Punning Parker in Havana a number of times recently, and the word had gotten around that Punning Parker was a bad but clever one. In other words, he was a "right guy."

"What you're doing won't ever *Hertz* you," said Punning Parker.

"Come aft an 'ave a drink," invited Tops'l.

THE METAL MASTER

They went aft and had, not one drink, but several, and Tops'l Hertz listened to Punning Parker talk about things he had done in England and elsewhere, after which Tops'l Hertz became convinced that Punning was indeed all right.

The cash which Punning paid over in advance had a mellowing influence, too. Tops'l liked to think he was the kind of a guy whom people would trust.

Tops'l Hertz got around to showing his new crony a radiogram which he took from his sweaty pants pocket. It was simple and to the point:

GO NINETY MILES SOUTH SOUTHWEST OF DRY TORTUGAS TO MEET MAN IN PLANE STOP
MAN NAMED LOUIS TESTER STOP HE WILL LAND STOP KEEP TESTER SAFE AT ALL COSTS

CX

The message had, of course, been in code, and was then decoded, and the "CX" was the cryptic signature of a worthy for whom Tops'l Hertz had done a little job or two in the past. Tops'l explained this to Punning Parker.

"The landin' of you in the States will 'ave to wait until this job is done," Tops'l pointed out.

"You have your *Tester*-day today," said Punning. "Sure."

The truth was that Tops'l had never met "CX," and did not know whether that personage was man, woman or organization. Tops'l did not worry on that score, because "CX" had paid well in the past, and that was all that was really necessary.

Time passed.

A sailor crouched on the cabin top. He was wearing a telephone headset, and wires ran from this to an amplifier box, thence up the mast to a very modern aerial listening device attached to the mast top. Tops'l had installed this plane-finder, after the coast guard started using planes.

"Plane comin'!" yelled the sailor at the listener.

Tops'l Hertz stood up, listened, heard the plane with his unaided ear after a bit, and was out of the shade of the mainsail like a scared cat. He ripped orders. Preparations got under way, such as had not been made already.

And Punning Parker came ambling up out of the cabin.

PUNNING PARKER was something of a character. A stranger, looking at him for the first time, could not have seen much to recommend him. But he had a lot. He was not tall, and he was thin and pallid and weak-looking. At times, when he was just standing around, he would stagger as if he had gotten weak and were going to fall down. He looked as if he were no earthly good. He had nothing visible to recommend him.

"This must be the blarsted plane comin'," said Tops'l Hertz. "Get the bloody Vickers ready!"

THE METAL MASTER

The descriptive "bloody" was a favorite with Tops'l, but it particularly fitted that Vickers, which was a machine gun that could spray death at several hundred doses per minute.

With a gusty buzz, the plane came down in the foggy sky. It leveled out and circled a hundred feet or so above the schooner's mast tops. The masts projected above the fog, which was only a thin layer. The plane had done well to find the schooner.

The plane was a cabin job fitted with pontoons. Not a large aircraft, but a fast one.

"Get set!" yelled Tops'l.

Tops'l had a shock of white hair which stood up straight and which had given him his name. The hair did look something like a topsail.

"

Let 'er bleed!" he screamed.

The Vickers "bled." It ran red at the nose and poured out lead and noise and shook itself and shook the men handling it. Empty cartridges showered the deck, for, in the general haste, there had been no catch-bag fastened to the ejector.

Tops'l Hertz was simply taking no chance of the plane pilot getting wary and going away.

Overhead, the plane motor got sick. It gagged and popped and had spasms. The sickness was short, then it died. The machine gun burst had done something to the motor.

The plane spanked down on the sea somewhere off to port. They could see it until it was almost on the water. Then the fog swallowed it.

"Start the bloody kicker!" yelled Tops'l. Hertz.

By the kicker, of course, he meant the motor, which was hardly a fitting name for that piece of machinery. It was a Diesel powerful enough for a destroyer, and less than a year old. It had been painstakingly pitted with acid, so that it looked, outwardly, rusted and practically worthless.

The schooner *Innocent* came up on the plane, which was afloat like a crippled duck.

Tops'l Hertz leaned over the rail amidships, a pistol in hand, to finish things. Punning Parker was beside him, likewise with a pistol. Punning was assisting as a matter of professional courtesy. They took a good look at the plane.

"Who're you?" yelled Tops'l Hertz at the man on the plane.

"Louis Tester!" shouted the latter. "What're you trying to do to me?"

"You might say we have *planes* for you," said Punning Parker, punning a bit more badly than usual.

Chapter V. THE CROSS THAT IS DOUBLE

Louis TESTER stood on the cabin of the plane. He was lean, fit, red-headed. He looked as if he wanted to fight, which was not surprising. One hand was behind him.

He braced against the lively pitching of the plane. There was gasoline leaking from the tanks. The craft was soaked with it. Gasoline was running onto the water.

"Eave 'im a line!" ordered Tops'l.

Punning Parker himself did this. He heaved a line that looked as heavy as he was, and, marvelously, it didn't cause him to collapse.

The red-headed Tester caught the line and hitched it over a cleat which was on the seaplane for mooring purpose. A moment later, the plane was bobbing alongside the *Innocent*.

Tester took his hand from behind his back. He had hitched the line without showing that hand.

"I hope you get the idea," he said.

A Very pistol was in his hand. One of those things with a barrel having the bore of a shotgun, used to shoot rockets. He pointed it at the plane, which was leaking gasoline.

Tops'l Hertz and the others got the idea. The rocket in the Very could not very well help igniting the gasoline, and the plane would then blow up, and it was pretty certain the *Innocent* would be set afire.

"Now," said the red-headed man, when the idea of the situation had soaked in. "Lower your boats, get into them, and row away. Otherwise, I'm going to pull the trigger of this Very, I'm just mad enough to do it!"

"You'll kill your bloomin' self!" gritted Tops'l.

"I don't think I've got much of a chance of going living, if I come aboard," said the redhead. "I think I know whom you're working for."

"Who're we workin' for?" asked Tops'l, who really would have liked to know.

"You're mixed up with the Metal Master!" snapped Louis Tester.

This was new to Tops'l. He had never heard of the Metal Master.

"Eh?" he muttered. "Who's the Metal Master, bloke?"

The redhead snorted.

"Get in your life boats or I'm going to shoot!" he snapped.

Punning Parker moved away from the rail to comply, although Tops'l was still hesitating.

"Are our ears marooned," he murmured.

THE METAL MASTER

Punning Parker helped lower a life-boat, and they put it down on the opposite side of the ship. Punning Parker and several others slid down the davit falls to the craft.

"You next!" ordered Louis Tester, looking at Tops'l.

Tops'l Hertz's neck was red. He glared. He made grinding noises with his teeth.

"I won't!" he choked.

"Don't be a fool," said the twin of Nan Tester. "I'll give you a tow in the small boats. Maybe let you back on board, after I figure out a way of keeping you quiet."

"I won't!" screamed Tops'l.

Louis Tester cocked his Very pistol.

A shot cracked. The Very pistol flew from Louis Tester's hand into the sea.

PUNNING PARKER was in the water, clinging to the after end of one of the plane's pontoons. He had, in diving under the schooner and coming up unobserved to shoot the Very pistol out of the redheaded man's hand, executed a nice strategy. The flash of his gun had not been enough to ignite the gas fumes.

Modern pistol cartridges are, of course, not affected by temporary submersion, so Punning had been able to take his gun under the keel of the schooner.

Tops'l Hertz was not a mental sloth, although he had been caught flatfooted in the present instance. The moment the shot sounded and the Very pistol flew into the sea, he gave a froglike leap, sailing clear over the rail and landing on a wing of the plane.

His yelled orders caused his scared crew to produce guns and join the fight Tops'l was having with the red-headed Tester. Tops'l only lost two teeth, some skin and hair, before they rescued him.

The moment they were on deck, Tops'l seized a gun and aimed at the red-headed man. He was in a temper and had killing ideas.

But Punning Parker rushed up and shoved the gun aside.

"'Act in haste and repent at leisure,' they say," he warned.

Ordinarily, Tops'l took orders from no one, and was inclined to resent them. But Punning Parker had just raked his chestnuts out of the fire by that dive under the keel.

Tops'l thought it over, and handed the gun back to the man from whom he had taken it. He took a good wind-up and knocked the redhead down, also removing most of the skin from his own knuckles.

"Thanks," he told Punning. "I 'ave a bad temper."

"Look here," said Punning. "Do you know why this mysterious fellow in New York wants this Louis Tester held?"

THE METAL MASTER

"No, I don't," said Tops'l.

"Hm-m-m," murmured Punning. "What say we search that plane?"

"Can do," admitted Tops'l.

So they searched the plane. They had not known what they expected to find. But what they did find was plenty. They were in the plane cabin quite a while.

When they came out, both were slightly pale. Their breathing was uneven. Their eyes were queer. Too bright.

They looked like men who had just gazed into the cave of Aladdin.

Under an arm, Tops'l Hertz carried a small briefcase.

"So now we know all about the Metal Master," muttered Punning Parker.

"Not all," corrected Tops'l. "We know what 'e can do. But we don't know *who* 'e is."

"The Metal Master is sort of *master-aiding*," said Punning Parker.

Tops'l muttered thoughtfully. "We 'ave our 'ands on somethin' big."

"We have the goose that can lay the golden eggs, providing we handle things right."

Tops'l frowned at his companion. "You meanin' we might cut a slice of this for ourselves?"

"

Eggs-actly," said Punning Parker. "We might cut ourselves more than a slice. Why cut it at all? Why not take the whole hog?"

Tops'l had evidently been entertaining such ideas himself. The promptness with which he agreed showed that.

"Righto," he said. "But we'll 'ave to do some fast movin'."

Punning Parker nodded. "What'll we do with this Louis Tester?"

"Keep 'im until we get our 'ands on the golden goose," said Tops'l.

"And then?"

Tops'l drew his finger across his throat and made a "ge-e-e-ek!" of a noise. It was very expressive.

THEY burned the plane. They tossed a firebrand on it, and lay hove to near by until it finally blew up and sank. Then they trimmed sail and headed for the port of Havana, Cuba.

"'Ave to take on fuel oil for the Diesel, an' some bloody supplies," explained Tops'l. "We'll 'ave to do some fast sailin'."

THE METAL MASTER

"Is it safe in Havana?" queried Punning Parker.

"Sure, Mike."

Tops'l Hertz was as wrong when he said that as he had ever been in his life; but he was no clairvoyant, and didn't know how wrong he was. Havana was not safe for Tops'l Hertz, because Colonel John Renwick, aid of Doc Savage, was there.

But Tops'l did not know about Renny being in Havana, and did not know Doc Savage was even involved, so the *Innocent* sailed boldly for Havana, where the aforementioned Colonel John Renwick was ostensibly engaged in superintending the laying of a narrow-gauge railway to a sugar plantation.

The *Innocent* had an uneventful sail, and coasted past Morro Castle, which hulks over the entrance to perfect Havana harbor, under jib alone, at night. The vessel had been hove to offshore, awaiting the hour when a certain customs official of Tops'l Hertz's acquaintance would come on duty, thereby making certain there would be no difficulties about passing the examination.

Down in the makeshift brig, Louis Tester kept track of what was going on by the sounds. He saw neither hide nor hair of a customs or immigration official.

"The skipper of this hooker knows his way around," he muttered.

He listened to the anchor go down with a loud rumble of chain out of the hawsehole. Men dashed about on deck, putting stops on the sails and otherwise making things shipshape.

Louis Tester started suddenly. "Why didn't I think of that before?" he growled to himself.

An idea had popped into his head.

The guard—and there was one, of course—was keeping his ears peeled, as he had been directed to do by Tops'l Hertz. The guard had been told that if the prisoner got away, he—the guard—would be relieved of his skin while still in that condition known as living.

Directly after the anchor went down, the sentry heard a noise. It was a sound calculated to alarm him: the thudding of muffled blows. The prisoner seemed to be working, trying to escape. The sentry sprang to action.

He wrenched out his flashlight. He cocked his rifle. He shoved the cell door open, popped in light and the menace of his gun.

The prisoner crouched on the far side of the cell, working with great earnestness. Just what he was doing, the guard could not tell.

"

Caramba!" he squawled. He spoke the language of the Banana republics. "Get away from there!"

The prisoner kept on with what he was doing, which was nothing more ominous than hammering the bulkheads with the heel of a shoe which he had taken off. But the guard could not see that.

The guard squawked again, and bounded into the room. He thought himself perfectly safe, for he had his gun in his hand and a light on the prisoner, who had his back turned. But he was not safe.

THE METAL MASTER

The guard landed flat on his face, most unexpectedly. It took the breath out of him.

THE rest of the guard's breath was taken out of him as the prisoner spun from the bulkhead, came with a great leap and landed on his back. But the guard was tough. He writhed and grabbed the other's legs. He might have gotten somewhere, but he got a kick in the temple that stretched him quiet.

Louis Tester sprang over the line he had made in front of the door with shoestrings, belt and necktie. He dived out into the passage. He saw legs coming down a companionway. The noise had been heard.

Men were also coming from the opposite direction. The way to the deck was blocked.

A cabin door gaped handily. Into that, Louis Tester went, and got the door shut without too much commotion. He did not look around for a place to hide. That would have been hoping for too much. He whipped straight to the porthole, and he got a break.

The *Innocent* had portholes larger than ordinary, for they served, on occasion, to unload incriminating cargo on one side, while a coast guard cutter came up on the other side. The redheaded man got through it without difficulty, being agile.

He struck out for shore. His luck held. Havana harbor has for centuries been noted for vile water and sharks. The latter did not molest the young man.

The island schooners anchor in Havana harbor close to Morro and Cabanas castles, where they are out of the channel. The spot is a dark one late at night. The *Innocent* was anchored there. The murk helped Louis Tester get ashore.

He crawled out and ran down the beach, coming eventually to the bumboat wharf where the rickety little water taxis used by the soldiers in crossing the harbor hang out. The skipper of one of these took Louis Tester across to Havana proper, and was highly offended when his passenger ran off without paying a fare.

The bumboat man's anger made him a fountain of information when, a few minutes later, he was confronted by a gentleman with the body of a bear and an upstanding shock of white hair.

"Ave you seen anything of a blawsted red-headed guy?" asked this worthy, who was Tops'l Hertz.

The boatman cackled for a while in bad English, pointing out the direction taken by Louis Tester, after which Tops'l Hertz and his companions left in a hurry. The boatman sent curses after them, because they had not tipped him.

LOUIS TESTER knew that his wet clothing would attract attention on the street. So he ducked into a sidewalk cafe, seated himself behind palms, and ordered a drink and a newspaper.

He saw an item that interested him immediately.

COLONEL RENWICK IN HAVANA

IS FAMOUS DOC SAVAGE AID

THE METAL MASTER

The shadow of the name of one of the most unusual men ever to live has fallen over Havana for a few days. The personage in question is Doc Savage, physical marvel and mental wizard who goes to all parts of the world righting wrongs and aiding the oppressed.

Colonel John Renwick, one of a group of five men who work with Doc Savage as aids, is in Havana. "Renny" Renwick, as he is often known, is one of the world's leading engineers.

Interviewed at the Hotel Mirma today, Colonel Renwick admitted he was superintending construction of a railway to a sugar plantation and denied he was mixed up in anything exciting at the present time. He refused to pose for photographers.

"

Hm-m-rn," said Louis Tester, and managed to duck out of the sidewalk cafe without paying his bill. He made a mental note to return later and make payment, however. Tops'l Hertz's crowd had taken all of his money in searching him.

The Hotel Mirma was small, but fastidious, and not one of the flashy hostelrys catering to the tourist trade. The front of it made one think of a nice white coffin with much carving.

A clerk with varnished hair and a gardenia, a very Chesterfieldian gentleman indeed, admitted that the famous Colonel Renwick was in, and escorted Louis Tester to the latter's suite. A knock on the door caused it to open.

Louis Tester put a hand in his coat pocket, one finger sticking out rigidly. This made it look as if he had a gun in his pocket.

"Just take it easy," he said, and walked in.

Colonel Renwick was surprised. Speechless at first, he became vocal with a roar.

"Holy cow!" he said. "What's the idea?"

He had a voice that reminded one of a hungry lion roaring in a cavern. He was big, and he seemed composed mostly of bone and gristle and some rhinoceros hide. His face was long, and the sadness on it was the sadness of one going to a friend's funeral. But the sadness meant nothing. His face was just made that way.

"Thank you," Louis Tester said to the clerk.

The clerk hesitated, then bowed and went out. He had not noticed the hand Louis Tester had in a pocket, imitating a pistol.

Renny seemed to be waiting for the clerk to go away. Then he scowled at Louis Tester.

"If you've got a pistol in your pocket, it's wood," he said.

Then he stepped forward, took Louis Tester by the neck and shook him as a rat is shaken.

Chapter VI. BAD LUCK

LOUIS TESTER was too surprised to dodge. When he was slammed in a chair and released, he sat there, stunned.

Renny pointed an enormous hand at a dark, metal box which stood beside the door.

"One of Doc Savage's inventions," he said. "It works on the principle that steel entering a magnetic field will change the characteristics of that field. If you bring a gun near that box, a bulb will light."

To illustrate, he went to a suitcase and came back with a weapon which resembled an oversize automatic pistol. When this was near the box, a light glowed in the top.

"See?" said Renny. "It didn't light when you came in, so I knew you didn't have a gun. Now, what's the idea?"

"I am Louis Tester," said the aviator.

"Holy cow!" rumbled Renny. He fumbled in a pocket, brought out a cablegram and passed it over.

"I'm glad you got here," he thumped. "But how'd you get in without it being reported to me. I've got men watching the airports."

Louis Tester read the cablegram. It was the one Doc Savage had filed, asking Renny to talk to Louis Tester and get his story.

"Say!" exploded Louis Tester. "Some one must have put a fast one over on Doc Savage, and tricked me into landing beside that schooner!"

"

What schooner?"

"

The *Innocent*," said Louis Tester.

Renny waited for more information. But Louis Tester seemed to be thinking.

"All right," Renny rumbled. "Do you feel like telling me your story?"

Louis Tester looked up, studying the man before him. He noted the engineer's size. He noted particularly, Renny's hands. They were almost fantastic hands. Each seemed as large as half a dozen ordinary men's hands. They were two hard monsters which looked capable of squeezing brains out of skulls.

Those hands conveyed, all of a sudden, the idea that this big guy was nobody to monkey with.

"You bet I'll tell you!" said Louis Tester. "Then you'd better cable the story to Doc Savage. We've got to act fast, before the Metal Master gets things out of hand."

"The Metal Master?" Renny frowned. "What is that?"

THE METAL MASTER

Louis Tester leaned forward.

"Look here," he said. "You won't think I'm crazy? Wait until you hear the whole story, before you draw conclusions. At first, you're going to think I'm a nut."

"Why will I think that?"

"Because the thing is so incredible!"

"When you work with Doc Savage, incredible things begin to look pretty ordinary," said Renny. "Shoot."

Louis Tester didn't shoot, but some one else did—with some kind of a light machine gun. The weapon made a loud stuttering, and the bullets tore the lock completely out of the corridor door. The door banged open. Three men fell inside.

Another man, shooting over their heads, put a burst of bullets into the room.

THE human nervous system is an erratic thing. It has been trained by the demands of nature. In pinches, men do things instinctively.

Louis Tester's instinct was to reach the first door. There were two in the room, other than the one that had been broken down. He pitched for one, one that led into a closet.

"The other door!" Renny howled.

Louis Tester must not have caught the words. Guns were crashing, making much noise. He plunged into the closet, shut the door.

Renny would have been a fool to pursue Louis Tester, to catch him. He needed safety himself. He pitched for the other door.

A bullet hit Renny in the back. Tops'l Hertz, in the door, fired it. The blow of the slug started Renny running faster, involuntarily.

Three more bullets hit him, also in the back. The palm of a hand could have covered the spot where all struck. It was directly over the heart. Tops'l Hertz could shoot, had learned it by popping the heads off sea gulls.

Renny, headed toward the bedroom door, kept going. The door was ajar. He sloped through. A big hand banged the door shut behind him.

Tops'l Hertz and his crowd were at the door an instant later. Renny seemed to have thrown the bolt on the other side. The panel resisted. They hit it. The thing was stronger than they had expected. They drove a few bullets through. These did not find the bolt. The door still held.

"Gotta get an ax!" gasped a man. "Chop it down!"

"Get Tester!" ripped Tops'l Hertz. "Then we'll scoot!"

"But what about that big-fisted guy?"

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"Es got four bullets in 'is 'eart, unless the bloody 'eart is on the wrong side," growled Tops'l Hertz. "If that won't kill 'im, we can't do no more about it."

They got Louis Tester and dragged him down the stairs and out into the street. The clerk was on the street, bellowing for police, for soldiers, for anybody. They shot him through the neck and he laid down very straight on the pavement and died.

They had a car waiting. The driver-owner of this was a man Tops'l Hertz knew, and on whom he had enough to insure the fellow being trustworthy.

"We've pulled hell down on our heads!" a man groaned, as the car got into motion. "I've heard of that big-fisted guy. He's one of Doc Savage's aids."

"What we're after is worth pullin' 'ell down on our 'eads," Tops'l Hertz told him.

"What is it?"

"The biggest thing you ever 'eard of, my 'earty!"

"Treasure?"

"You might call hit that."

The car took a corner discreetly. It would not do to get the police on their trail.

"What's behind this all?" persisted the man who was asking questions.

"Don't be so curious," growled Tops'l. "Hit ain't best for your bloomin' digestion."

The man fell silent. He could take a hint. He was not too concerned anyway. Whatever else might be said for Tops'l Hertz, he was a lad who paid his followers off handsomely.

"Supposin' that Renny egg ain't dead?" asked the man.

"We're takin' what you might call 'measures,'" said Tops'l. "Just in case 'e ain't."

TOPS'L'S man might well have been gifted with some occult power, because Colonel John Renwick was far from dead. He was, furthermore, not seriously damaged.

His back would hurt him for days, when he moved. The chain-mail undergarment—Doc Savage's invention—which he had been wearing, had halted the slugs which Tops'l Hertz had fired at his back.

The missiles had knocked the breath out of Renny, stunning him. He had been forced to dive for the next room, lest they realize he wore armor and start shooting at his head.

He was down on the street by now. His car, a small, fast American coupé which he had purchased locally, was parked in a court back of the hotel. He got in, drove the machine out.

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The raiders had vanished by now. Renny, however, had an idea how they might be found. Louis Tester had mentioned the schooner *Innocent*. So Renny headed toward the water front.

Renny had an excellent knowledge of Havana's narrow and crooked streets. Too, Renny's knowledge of what went on in Havana would have surprised some of the locals.

Renny, as a matter of fact, was not in Havana to build a railroad. He was there as an operative of Doc Savage, investigating the various ramifications of the narcotic smuggling racket. The stuff about building a railroad was just a mask.

As he drove rapidly in the direction of the water front, Renny wished fervently that he knew where to get in touch with "Long Tom."

Long Tom was Major Thomas J. Roberts, electrical wizard extraordinary, and another of Doc Savage's aids. Long Tom was also engaged in investigation of the narcotic trade. Where he was, Renny did not know. Long Tom had been in Havana two weeks ago, then he had dropped out of sight.

It was usual that none of Doc Savage's aids knew the whereabouts of their fellows during the course of a secret investigation. In this way, if one fell into the hands of the enemy, and they forced him to talk, he could not give information that would imperil another of the bronze man's little group.

Renny reached the water front in time to observe the raiders loading into a gasoline launch. They had Louis Tester along.

Renny let them vanish in the gloom of the harbor, then ran to the bumboat wharf. At this hour of the night, there seemed to be only a single bumboat in operation. Several swarthy men were idling in it. To all appearances, the boat was loaded and about to start across the bay.

Renny got aboard. He had reasoned that the *Innocent* would be anchored across the bay.

"Fifty *centavos* extra if you hurry," Renny told the bumboat man.

"

Si, señor," that worthy agreed.

They shoved off. The bumboat engine was a one-lunger and it made a great deal of noise, sobbing and popping and rattling. Particularly loud was an occasional backfire.

Unexpectedly, one of the backfires seemed to explode inside Renny's head.

RENNY awakened from a period of unconsciousness with his ears still ringing. He had a vague impression that a number of things had happened to him while he was in no shape to prevent it. He had been moved about a good deal. He opened his eyes and peered about.

He was fastened with ropes to a chair. The chair, in turn, was fastened to the floor of what seemed to be a ship's cabin. But there was no porthole. That the ship was at sea was evident from the motion, and the swinging of the kerosene lamp in its gimbals. The boat could not be a very large one, judging from the movement. And the kerosene lamp indicated it was a sailboat. For some reason, kerosene lamps are usually

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found on sailboats.

There was no one in the cabin. So Renny opened his mouth and let out an ear-splitting roar.

A head surmounted by an upstanding tuft of white hair popped into the door.

"Blimmie!" growled the owner of the head, "That yell of your'n would make a sweet fog'orn."

"How'd I get here?" Renny rumbled.

"I 'ad some of my 'earties on that bumboat, just on the chance some blighter might get on our trail," grinned Tops'l Hertz. "They thumped you on the bloomin' noggin when you weren't lookin', an' 'ere you are."

Renny shut his eyes in disgust.

"There have been rumors of late that I'm slippin'," he growled.

"'Tain't necessarily that," said Tops'l. "You just went up against some foxy lads."

Renny took a deep breath. His bulletproof vest was gone. He did not believe he could break the ropes which held his ankles and wrists.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"'Tis very simple," Tops'l leered. "A certain party 'ired us to do a bit of a job for 'im, and we learned what this party is plannin' on doin'. It looked good to us. So we 'ave decided to take over the thing ourselves."

A new voice spoke from the door.

"It *Hertz* me to give advice," it remarked. "But you might take some, Tops'l."

Tops'l Hertz looked around. "Yeah?"

Punning Parker came into the cabin. He looked, more than usual, an insignificant runt.

"What this fellow don't know won't *Hertz* us," said Punning.

Tops'l scowled and snapped, "Quit makin' them bloody puns with my name!"

Renny was eyeing Punning Parker intently. It had just struck Renny that there was something familiar about the fellow. Renny had an idea he had seen Punning Parker's picture in a rogues' gallery somewhere. He tried to think where.

Punning Parker came over, leaned close to Renny and snarled, "What d'you know about the Metal Master, Big Fists?"

"Think I'd tell you?" Renny countered.

"Did you get in touch with Doc Savage, after Louis Tester visited you?"

Renny said, "You want to keep away from fly swatters, you organism!"

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Tops'l Hertz broke in with a roar.

"'E won't answer questions!" Hertz shouted. "'E probably got in touch with Doc Savage! Hi'm actin' on that supposition, anyway. Hi've already acted, in fact."

"What have you done?" asked Punning Parker.

"Hi've radioed to New York an' made arrangements to take care of Doc Savage 'imself," said Tops'l.

"You might as well have taken poison!" Renny boomed.

"Maybe." Tops'l frowned. "But this Metal Master thing is big. So big that I'm even willin' to mix it with Doc Savage! An' I know 'is reputation, too."

"You don't know it," Renny rumbled, "or you wouldn't start trouble with him."

"Ho, ho," said Tops'l, not very heartily. "I'm shakin' in my boots!"

"Let's hope you don't wind up by dying in them," said Punning Parker.

"What're you birds gonna do with me?" Renny demanded.

"If we must be frank," said Tops'l Hertz. "You are going to be which I call *ge-e-e-eked*."

"

And what are you going to try on Doc?" Renny persisted.

Punning Parker answered that with a gesture. He drew his finger across his throat, as Tops'l Hertz often did, and said,

" *Ge-e-e-ek!*"

"

You may get the idea," he added.

Chapter VII. THE TRICKY MAN

A NOISE in the corridor outside Doc Savage's office was unexpected and loud. It was not a hard noise to recognize: A shot. There came a second.

Doc Savage was in the laboratory, working with test tubes, acids and a spectroscopic analyzer device. He was analyzing samples of metal from his office doors, which had been so strangely melted without heat, and from the car in the alley, imbedded in which had been found the body of poor old Seevers.

Doc Savage had not found anything much unusual about the samples of metal. It was just like metal which had been melted by some terrific heat.

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The shot noises put Doc Savage in motion. He flung out of the laboratory, through the library, and across the reception room. The outer door, which had been melted down the previous night, had been replaced.

During the last twenty-four hours, Doc Savage had been able to get no trace of the girl, Nan Tester, nor of her brother Louis, nor of Renny.

Nothing had happened to give a hint of what was behind the mystery. There had been no clue to show what the Metal Master was.

In fact, the whole affair was, so far, a profound puzzle.

Doc Savage wrenched the corridor open and flashed through.

A man crouched in the corridor, a sleek woodchuck of a chap with dark hair. He had squirrel teeth in front, and his little ears stuck up. He evidently patronized a barber often, and paid a good price to his tailors.

His hand gripped a gun. He watched the stairs with a frightened steadiness. The stairs were to the left of the bank of elevators.

The woodchuck man's gun was an automatic. An empty cartridge from it lay on the modernistic corridor floor.

Doc Savage stopped. Instead of barking excited questions, he kept silent. This seemed to surprise the man with the gun. He blinked at Doc Savage.

"That man was getting ready to kill me!" he said.

Doc Savage said nothing.

The woodchuck man pointed at the stairs.

"A man," he said. "He was leaning around the corner there getting ready to shoot when I saw him. I yelled, and that must have startled him or something, because I got my gun out and shot at him. I missed him. He ran."

These words came out of the man very rapidly, as if he were a phonograph which had lost its governor. Yet his words were clear enough to be understood.

Doc Savage extended a bronze right hand, palm up.

"Eh?" said the other, puzzled.

"Your gun," Doc Savage said quietly.

The man swallowed. He handed over his automatic pistol without a word.

Doc Savage whipped toward the stairway. The gliding effect about the giant bronze man's movements was noticeable, and his speed was striking.

He descended the stairs. He found no one. He looked about. There were no suspicious persons. The floor immediately below his headquarters had been without a tenant for a long time, because it was a risky

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location, so close to the bronze man of mystery. Too many things happened around Doc Savage that might prove dangerous to a neighbor.

Doc Savage paid rent on the floor, so that the building operators would not lose money.

There was no excitement. Apparently the shots had not been heard. Doc Savage went back upstairs.

"I found nobody," he said.

THE plump man looked relieved. He had been holding too much air in his lungs. He let it out with a long *swish!*

"

I was frightened," he said, emitting his words as a machine gun emits bullets. "I was very frightened indeed. I am not a man accustomed to violence."

"Describe the man," Doc Savage requested.

"Tall. Dark. Leathery skin. Outdoors man. Nickered revolver. Fair clothes."

"Thank you," Doc Savage said. "Who are you?"

"Decitez. Napoleon Murphy Decitez."

"You were coming to see me?" Doc Savage asked quietly.

"I was. Indeed, yes!"

Doc Savage indicated that the man should enter. They went into the reception room. Doc Savage waved the man to a chair. Then Doc went into the laboratory and scrutinized a bank of instruments, which were recording devices attached to a burglar alarm system which covered all of the approaches to his headquarters. These recorders were of the type which inked a line on a moving roll of paper.

There were no wiggings in the lines in which Doc Savage seemed particularly interested.

Plump, groomed Napoleon Murphy Decitez had composed himself and put away his gun, when Doc Savage rejoined him.

"I came to you for counsel," he said.

"Go ahead with your story," Doc Savage requested.

The bronze man's quiet and powerful voice obviously impressed Decitez. He studied the bronze man, and his expression became that of an awed man.

"I have heard much of you," he said. "And even on such short acquaintance, I have not the slightest doubt that you are all they say you are."

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"All who says?" Doc asked curiously.

"The newspapers," replied the other promptly. "I have read of the marvelous scientific discoveries which you have perfected, and of your great work in the fields of surgery, electricity—"

"Go ahead with your story," directed Doc Savage.

"You are a genuinely modest man, I believe," murmured the other.

"Go ahead with your story," said Doc.

Decitez sighed.

"I think a man has pulled a fast one on me," he said. "I don't mind that so much, but I think he is also trying to kill me."

"That," Doc Savage agreed, "is bad."

"I think so," Decitez admitted. "This man came to me with a map. The map was about a treasure. The man had a gold bar. He said there were a lot more of them at the spot marked on the map. He wanted me to help finance him. He would pay part of it with the gold bar. I was to pay the rest, and we were to split. I agreed."

Decitez sighed again, more deeply.

"That was six weeks ago," he said. "The man left for South America to get the treasure. Yesterday, a bullet went through my car as I was driving in the park."

He leaned forward earnestly.

"I went to bed early tonight. A sound awakened me. It was a masked man. He had a knife. I knocked him over the head and he fell senseless. I tied him up and put him in a closet. Then I decided to come and get you to question the man."

He waited, apparently for Doc Savage to speak. But Doc said nothing.

"Will you come?" he asked.

"What is the name of the man you financed to hunt treasure?" Doc Savage inquired.

"Louis Tester," said the woodchuck man.

DOC SAVAGE'S small, eerie trilling noise was briefly audible. It had a quality vaguely different than usual. It had a faintly surprised note.

Napoleon Murphy Decitez started slightly and peered about. He had not been able to tell where the sound came from. He did not know what it was.

Decitez brought his round-eyed gaze back to Doc Savage.

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"Look here," he said. "This man I knocked out and tied up in a closet did some mumbling. He mumbled about a man named Renny, who was a prisoner somewhere and was to be killed. I remembered you had an aid named Renny. That's why I came to you."

"And your mysterious enemies followed you and tried to shoot you?" Doc suggested.

"They must have."

"Maybe they also freed the man you left tied up in a closet."

"The closet is hard to find," said Decitez. "But perhaps we had better hurry back, to see that they don't frisk the place."

"Perhaps we had," Doc Savage agreed.

They hurried out and took Doc Savage's private speed elevator to the basement, where they entered a coupé which was armored and equipped with a lot of gadgets, but which looked like an ordinary car. Among the gadgets was a concealed short-wave, radio transmitter-and-receiver.

Doc Savage switched on the radio transmitter, so that the bulbs would be warmed up for instant use, should he need to transmit. But he did not send any messages during the ride, although he left the instrument on.

During the ride, Doc Savage asked some questions.

"Did you ever hear of Louis Tester having a sister named Nan?"

"Louis Tester told me positively that he had no living relatives on whom he could call to finance his treasure hunt," said Decitez.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Seevers?"

"No."

"What about the Metal Master?"

"The what?"

"Metal Master."

"I never heard of any such a thing. What is it?"

If Doc Savage had any ideas about what or who the Metal Master was, he did not offer them. He kept silent.

Decitez said he lived down in Greenwich Village, which is a section in the southerly center of Manhattan, supposed to have an arty atmosphere. The house proved to be an ancient white brick pile on a private street. Part of the lower floor was given over to a private garage, which had a large door that slid up to permit one to drive in. Decitez suggested that, because of the lateness of the hour, Doc park his car in the garage.

Doc drove in, then got out and shut the door. Decitez got out also. He turned round from fastening the door.

He took another gun out of his pocket and pointed it at Doc Savage.

"You were easy!" he said.

A DOOR at the back of the garage opened. Men filed out—four of them. They were flabby fellows, but well-dressed. They looked like men who did not do any physical work, but who had occupations which caused them to worry a great deal. This helped catalogue them for what they were, since a modern crook has to do a wealth of worrying to keep out of jail.

They pointed guns at Doc Savage. They did it with a desperate earnestness, as if the bronze man were a dangerous lion which might do anything at any minute.

"We oughta give him the works right now!" one man gulped.

Chapter VIII. THE KEY MAN

"

HOLD it!" cried Decitez rapidly. "Don't do any half-smart thing like that! Search him!"

"Suppose your search 'im yourself," retorted the other. "I ain't gettin' close to 'im. I've heard all about this bronze baby!"

Decitez puffed out his chest like a little balloon.

"He's overrated," he said rapidly. "He's easy! You saw how I put it over on him. We can handle him."

"Them's been the last words of some guys," snorted the other.

"With five guns pointed at him, what can he do?" snapped Decitez.

"I don't know," said the other. "I ain't anxious to find out. All I know is that this bronze guy is arsenic on anybody's bush. *You* search 'im."

Doc Savage seemed to have nothing to say. He was standing still and not acting belligerently. He had his hands partially raised.

Decitez hesitated. His expression showed that he had a bull by the horns, mentally. He had said Doc Savage was easy to handle, and he was face to face with the necessity of proving it. He took his courage between his clenched teeth and stepped forward. His hands slapped over Doc Savage's person.

"

Whew!" Decitez exploded wildly. "Aim at his head! He's got on a bulletproof union suit of some kind!"

"I got a notion to resign my part in this right now," said the man who had expressed fear of Doc Savage.

"Shut up!" snapped Decitez. "Watch this fellow!"

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Doc Savage offered no resistance, as Decitez began to strip off the bronze man's outer garments. Doc's coat came off first, then his vest, shirt and necktie. A strange-looking under-vest came to sight.

The vest was covered with innumerable pockets. These held gadgets and tiny phials of chemicals. The vest was padded, so that its presence under the bronze man's clothing had not been noticeable.

"Better strip 'im," some one suggested.

"A good idea," Decitez admitted.

Doc Savage let them strip him. He had the reputation of a tiger, a name that struck fear into the souls of wrongdoers in many a far corner of the earth. But he did not live up to his fame now.

Doc Savage's tranquility and submissiveness should have warned Decitez and his men. Unfortunately for them, it didn't.

The spectacle of the bronze man clad only in underwear shorts had the effect of making his captors more uneasy, instead of relieving their minds. Somehow, just looking at the metallic giant's incredible muscles had a tendency to make their hair stand on end.

Decitez gave orders, and they forced the bronze man into another room on the same floor as the garage level.

"Now what the heck we gonna do with 'im?" a man wanted to know.

"We'll wireless Tops'l for instructions," said Decitez. "Tops'l will be mighty glad to know we've got Doc Savage. Tops'l has been keeping that man Renny alive, so as to have a club to use over Doc Savage, if necessary. But now that we've got Doc Savage, Tops'l will probably want both him and Renny 'ge-e-e-eked!' as he calls it."

Doc Savage spoke for the first time. He addressed Decitez.

"That story you told me about financing Louis Tester in a treasure hunt was a lie, was it not?" Doc asked.

"Yes," said Decitez. "It was."

"And you have heard of Nan Tester?" Doc queried.

"Yep."

"Where is she?"

"How in the devil would I know?"

"You have heard of Seevers?"

"You betcha!"

"And the Metal Master?" Doc demanded.

"You go chase a duck," said Decitez. "I ain't answerin' no more of your questions."

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There came a loud, imperative knock on the door.

THE interruption had an explosive effect. Every one jumped. Decitez seemed to sink some inches in stature, and he did not have much height to spare.

"Quick!" wailed a man. "We better blow!"

"Quiet, you fool!" snarled Decitez.

Decitez went to a window and peered furtively from it. He drew back and broke into a peal of laughter. He sneered at his followers.

"A telegraph messenger," he said.

He went to the door and opened it. Two men kept guns jabbed against Doc's face, to shoot him if he made a noise. He did not. Decitez came strutting back with a cablegram.

"From Tops'l," he said, after opening the missive.

The cable was evidently in code, for he did not read the contents immediately, but went into another room, where there was a writing desk and paper, and went to work. Doc Savage was standing some distance away, but he watched Decitez's pencil closely as it wrote.

Doc Savage knew a great deal about ciphers and codes. He used them frequently, and often had occasion to decipher some tough ones. And a pencil moves in such a manner that one who has practiced watching can get a good idea of what letters the pencil is writing.

Doc got a general key to the cipher in which the cablegram was couched.

Decitez finished with his translating. He read the result, then grinned widely, went to a washbasin, burned the cablegram and the sheet on which he had translated it and washed the ashes down the drain, a bit at a time, where no magic of modern science would ever restore them.

"It was from my partner, Tops'l," he told his men. "Tops'l has been putting the screws to this Louis Tester. They have gotten the whole story out of Louis Tester. Everything is jake with our plans. All we have to do now is grab a man named Gorham Gage Gettian."

"Who's he?" asked a man.

Decitez frowned.

"Tops'l neglected to say in the cable," he explained.

The man who had asked the question scowled.

"We're doin' too much in the dark," he said. "If Tops'l has the whole story, I'm in favor of us having it, too. Me, I want to know what I'm doin', when I tackle things."

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Decitez's expression showed that he thought the same thing. Then he remembered that, as boss of the gang, he should not allow any arguments. He put out his jaw.

"You dry up!" he directed. "Tops'l is an all right guy! I've handled the New York end of his narcotic smuggling racket for a long time and got along fine. Now that he wants my help on something else, I'm going to string along with him."

"I'll shut up," agreed the other sourly. "But I hope the pay-off in this is worth the risk we're taking."

"It is," said Decitez. "This is the biggest thing you or anybody else ever saw!"

"But I don't see it yet," said the man.

THIS was only leading back to a continuation of the argument, so Decitez assumed a forbidding look, something like that of his namesake, Napoleon. He held this ominous expression, until the other man squirmed uneasily.

"I'm with you," said the other grouchily.

"You bet you are!" Decitez told him. "We're in too deep to back out."

Doc Savage had kept his face expressionless throughout the exchange. If he was feeling any emotions, it did not show on his bronze features.

Decitez eyed his men.

"You birds stay here and watch the bronze guy," he directed. "I'll get some of the rest of the boys for this other job."

His four men did not look as if they felt like throwing their hats in the air and cheering.

"You won't have any trouble," Decitez comforted them. "Don't look so gloomy."

The one who had done most of the grousing frowned darkly and moistened his lips.

"If the bronze guy makes a move, I ain't gonna fool none," he said. "I'll give him a lead treatment."

"That's O. K. with me," Decitez said airily.

Decitez then walked to the door and opened it. About to pass through, he paused, leered at his men, then made a gesture which he must have learned from Tops'l Hertz, since it was one of Tops'l's favorite gestures.

He drew a finger across his throat, simultaneously making a " *ge-e-e-ek!*" of a noise.

"Tops'l said in his cablegram that Doc Savage's man, Renny, would be '*ge-e-e-eked!*' as he expressed it, as soon as we got hold of Doc Savage. I'm going to wire him we've got Savage. Then he'll probably radio us to *ge-e-e-ek!* Savage, too."

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He looked very bloodthirsty and fierce for a moment. Then he went out. There was something about his manner, though, that showed he had been "grandstanding" to impress his followers. He wanted to show them they had a very tough man for their chief.

Although Decitez had assured his followers that guarding Doc Savage was a task no more perilous than picking violets, they took no chances. Every one kept a steady stare on the bronze man. They even seemed afraid to blink. Two of them did sit down, only to leap erect nervously when Doc Savage drew in a deep breath.

"One move, big guy, and you're done!" one snarled.

Doc Savage said nothing. He might have been a man stunned by his misfortune. He eyed his captors. His lips parted a little. He seemed to be holding his breath.

His captors began falling to the floor. All four went down. They scarcely stirred after they collapsed.

Chapter IX. THE SQUABBLERS

MORE than one foe who had tackled Doc Savage had come to the pained conclusion that the bronze man actually could work miracles. But probably no demonstration of the bronze man's had ever come nearer to seeming a miracle.

He had been searched to the skin. None of his clothes had been returned. The nearest of his foes was distant ten feet. Doc had apparently done nothing. Yet they had all fallen over senseless.

The explanation was simple. In his mouth, the bronze man had been carrying a pair of flat, flexible capsules containing his odorless, colorless anaesthetic gas. He had simply broken the capsules.

It was remarkable, that gas. If one inhaled it, instant unconsciousness came. And after mingling with the air for perhaps a minute, the vapor became ineffective.

Doc had been prepared for capture. The reason for his being prepared would have surprised Napoleon Murphy Decitez. Doc had known from the first that Decitez was lying. Examination of the burglar alarm recorders in Doc's laboratory had shown the bronze man that no assailant had been on the stairway in the skyscraper, as Decitez had claimed. There was an alarm attached to the stairway. It had showed that no one had come up or gone down the stairs.

The reason for Doc Savage pretending to be taken in would have surprised Decitez, too. Doc had desired to see what could be learned. So he had taken the risk of becoming a prisoner. Doc often did things in unusual ways.

Doc Savage now began breathing. The minute had elapsed, and the anaesthetic gas had become harmless, having mixed with the oxygen and hydrogen in the air. Doc relieved the four senseless men of their guns.

The effects of the anaesthetic would last for hours. But, in a phial in a pocket in his remarkable vest, Doc Savage carried an antidote which would bring a victim back to his senses almost at once.

Doc searched and found the vest and his clothing. He administered some of the antidote. As his subject, he chose the man who had done most of the grumbling. To begin with, this fellow was worried.

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While the man was reviving, Doc donned his clothing. There was a telephone and directories on a stand in the room. Doc looked in a directory for the name, Gorham Gage Gettian.

There was only the one listed in the directory:

GETTIAN, Gorham Gage. . fn'c'r

7220 Drive SEaway 7-6990

The antidote revived the man whom the anaesthetic had overcome. The fellow was able to speak almost immediately.

"Well, they can't say I didn't warn 'em," the fellow growled. "I told 'em you were bad medicine."

Doc Savage said nothing. He was using the power of silence, coupled with the threat which he was able to put in his remarkable flake-gold eyes. He kept looking at the prisoner intently. The fellow did not take long to become uneasy.

"For the love of mud!" he exploded, "Whatcha gonna do with me?"

Doc Savage said calmly, "There are various ways of making a man tell what he knows."

His calmness probably affected the other more than would have an angry yell.

"I'll take your word for it!" the man gulped. "Whatcha wanta know?"

"You will talk?"

"Sure!" wailed the man. "I've heard plenty about you! When you say you can make me spill, I'll take your word for it. I wouldn't get any fun out of being worked over."

Which proved he was a sensible rogue.

"Where can I get in touch with Tops'l, as you call him," Doc Savage asked.

The man hesitated. He shuddered.

"They'll croak me for this," he groaned. "Tops'l is skipper of the schooner *Innocent*, somewhere in the Caribbean, bound north."

"

THE *Innocent* is bound north?" Doc queried.

"That's right."

"Why?"

"They're heading for Alligator Island."

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"Where is that?"

"Don't know."

"Why are they going to Alligator Island?"

"Don't know that," said the frightened prisoner.

"Tell me what you do know," Doc Savage directed shortly.

The prisoner wet his lips, then spoke rapidly.

"I work for Decitez, and he and Tops'l Hertz are partners in various crooked rackets," he said. "Tops'l was hired to grab a man named Louis Tester down in the Gulf of Mexico."

"Who did the hiring?"

"A party we call 'CX.'"

"Who is CX?" Doc demanded.

"None of us know," said the man. "Anyway, Tops'l grabbed Louis Tester, and from some papers Tester had on his plane, Tops'l learned that this CX was after something worth millions! They talked billions, but I'm discounting some. Tops'l got in touch with Decitez, and now they're trying to haze this CX out of the jackpot. They want to glom the whole thing."

Doc Savage asked, "And what is the whole thing?"

The scared man said, "Here's where you think I'm a liar."

"Let me judge that."

"I don't know what we are after."

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes bore steadily upon the man. The fellow sighed. He made a gesture desperately, pleading for belief.

"Tops'l and Decitez kept the pig in a poke," he wailed. "They don't trust anybody!"

"What about Gorham Gage Gettian, who is to be seized?" Doc questioned.

"You know as much as I do about him. I never heard him mentioned, before the cablegram came."

Doc Savage was silent, as if cataloguing the information mentally. He had received answers to all his questions. But the total information was not as much as might have been expected. If he was disappointed, he did not show it.

"Where is the girl, Nan Tester?" he asked.

"I have never heard anything about any girl," said the man.

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Doc Savage extracted a small red pill from a pocket in his vest.

"Take this," he said.

The prisoner became pale.

"What are you gonna do with me?" the man wailed. "What's that pill?"

"Take it," Doc Savage directed.

"No!" cried the man desperately. "The devil with you!"

Doc Savage grabbed the man. The fellow tried to dodge, but he had no luck at all. Doc clutched the man's throat. The fellow's mouth flew open. Doc popped the pill in, then closed the man's jaws and held them shut. The man had to swallow, because Doc stroked his neck expertly.

After he had swallowed the red pill, the man fell over senseless. Doc Savage laid him beside the other three.

DOC went to the telephone, picked up the receiver and called the cable company. He dictated a cablegram. It read:

CAPTAIN HERTZ

VIA RADIO SCHOONER INNOCENT SAILED FROM HAVANA KINDLY EXTEND EARLIEST POSSIBLE REPORT ENDEAVORING NOT WORK IN CUBAN KRONFELD ANGLE NOR DAILY TRADE EXPANSION STOP TAKE EASTERN ROUTE AND LEARN INDEPENDENTS VIEWS ESPECIALLY ABOUT TREND AND LOWEST LEVEL COSTS OFFERED STOP TRADING SLOW

Doc Savage did not sign it, for two reasons. Cablegrams are frequently not signed. And Doc was not aware of how Decitez signed the cablegrams which he sent to Tops'l Hertz.

It sounded as innocent and about as clear as the average commercial telegram. But it was in a code. The simple code which these men were using, and which Doc Savage had deciphered by watching the actions of Decitez's pencil as he translated.

You simply took the first letter of each word, and that spelled out the message:

KEEP RENWICK AND TESTER ALIVE AT ALL COSTS

It was a gesture to keep Renny and Tester alive until Doc Savage had his hands on enough information to make a gesture at saving them.

Doc Savage carried the four prisoners to a closet. He was working hurriedly now. He made sure the closet door would admit enough air for them to breathe, then closed and locked it. He went to the garage. His coupé was still there. He drove it out and headed for Drive Street, which was in the north end of Manhattan Island, near Riverside Drive.

Gorham Gage Gettian lived on Drive Street, according to the telephone directory. Just what his connection with the affair might be, was not as yet apparent. But Decitez had gone to seize Gettian. Quick action,

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therefore, was necessary.

Doc Savage adjusted the short-wave radio transmitter-and-receiver concealed in the body of the coupé. He picked up the microphone and spoke into it.

"Calling Monk or Ham," he said.

Almost immediately, a voice came out of the loud-speaker.

The voice was a wisplike thing, that might have belonged to a small and cranky child.

"What is it, Doc?" the tiny voice asked.

"Monk," Doc Savage said, "can you get hold of Ham?"

"If I do," said small-voiced "Monk," "I'll pull his left arm off and club him to death with it!"

The important thing about this remark was that Monk, who was actually Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, world-renowned chemist and one of Doc Savage's aids, was actually capable of pulling a man's arm off and beating him to death with it.

Whether he could pull "Ham's" arm off or not, was another question, however, Ham being capable of taking care of himself.

Ham was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, admittedly one of the most astute lawyers Harvard had ever turned out.

If Monk's bloody promise worried Doc Savage, the bronze man failed to show it.

"Get hold of Ham," Doc Savage said. He gave the address of Decitez's Greenwich Village house. "Go there. You will find four gentlemen who are to be sent to our up-State institution."

"Oh," said Monk. "You've gotten into a mess, eh?"

"So far, it is a question as to who is in a mess," Doc replied. "Get Ham and take care of those four men."

"I'll take care of them," Monk said. "If I get hold of Ham, I'll take care of him, too!"

"What is wrong?" Doc Savage asked.

Monk squeaked, "It's a very complicated story. It'll probably come out when I go on trial for killing Ham."

Doc Savage said, "Hurry with this."

"Sure," said Monk. "The massacre will take place as soon as I find him."

Monk was squeaking uncomplimentary things about Ham, when Doc clicked the microphone out of circuit. Doc left the transmitter turned on, however, as was the habit of himself and his aids.

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DOC SAVAGE had not given Monk any elaborate instructions about what to do with the four prisoners, because Monk already knew. The usual thing. Doc handled all of the crooks that he caught in the same way.

Doc stopped his coupé at the curb around the corner from Drive Street. He got out. It was quite dark. The streets were deserted, due to the lateness of the hour. It was colder than it had been the night before, but it was not sleeting. It had been cold all through the day. Some of the sleet, frozen, still glassed the pavement in spots.

Doc Savage walked to the corner. He did not step out on Drive Street, however. He removed an object which might have been a slim pencil from inside his clothing. He telescoped this out. It was a periscope, a tiny thing which would hardly be observed. He proceeded to scrutinize Drive Street without showing himself.

At first, Drive Street looked entirely deserted. But no! In a doorway in the middle of the block, a man lurked.

He was leaning against the side of the door, almost concealed.

Doc Savage watched for some time. The man did not move. He was most certainly upon guard.

The house bore the number listed as being the residence of Gorham Gage Gettian.

A block away, traffic occasionally whizzed on Riverside Drive.

The lookout remained at his post. He was not especially alert, although great alertness was not necessary. Had not his chief, Napoleon Murphy Decitez, explained that Doc Savage was safely a prisoner in Greenwich Village? Decitez had acted very sure of himself when he said that.

Decitez was still acting sure of himself. He had his gun in his hand and the muzzle of the weapon was against the top of a shiny bald head.

"I think I'll kill you now, Gettian," Decitez was saying calmly.

Chapter X. THE PUZZLED MAN

NAPOLEON MURPHY DECITEZ was not a dramatic man by nature. But Tops'l Hertz, who was a genuine devil, was a dramatic man, and he was also the idol of Decitez. So Decitez, who liked to ape what he considered his betters, liked to indulge in gestures. Just now, he was imitating Tops'l, doing as he felt Tops'l would do.

Decitez had no intention of killing Gettian. He was just throwing a bluff, to make it easier to get Gettian away.

"The shot probably won't be heard," Decitez snarled. "This house of yours has thick stone walls."

He ground the gun snout a little more fiercely against the bald head of Gettian. The head was slick, like a doctor's specimen skull that had been waxed. One almost expected to see the little lines of cracks in it. It was the color of a skull now, too, for Gettian was scared.

"Wait a minute!" Gettian gasped. "You must be making some mistake!"

"Your name is Gorham Gage Gettian, ain't it?" asked Decitez.

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"Y—yes."

"Then I ain't makin' no mistake," said Decitez. He jammed the automatic muzzle harder against Gettian's bald head.

There were more bald things about Gettian than his head. He was completely hairless. No eyebrows. No beard. It made him look older than he probably was. He looked sixty. He was probably forty.

He had nerve.

He looked at Decitez and said, "Most men would like to know why they are going to be murdered. I would."

Decitez scowled.

"It's because of what you know about the Metal Master," he snapped.

"The what?" said Gettian, looking puzzled.

Decitez leaned down. He put his jaw out, as he had seen Tops'l Hertz do.

"Look here," he said. "You tell me all you know about the Metal Master. If you can clear up enough of the mystery, tell me enough things, it won't be necessary to croak you."

That was the tip-off. Napoleon Murphy Decitez, foxy rogue, was trying to gather information. Evidently he did not know himself, any too much about the Metal Master.

Gettian shook his skull.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"You don't need to lie to me," said Decitez sharply. "I know a bit already."

"What?"

"I know that this Metal Master thing is big," said Decitez. "It's so big that the right group of men, under the right leader, could take over the world!"

If that was intended to affect Gettian, it did. But not in the way Decitez probably had expected. Gettian leaned back. His voice became soothing.

"Of course it could," he said gently. "But I haven't got it. However, I will be glad to take you to a place where a nice man will show you how it works."

Decitez looked very interested. But only for an instant. Then he got the drift.

"Hell's bells!" he snarled. "You think I'm nuts! A nice man! You mean an attendant in a boobyhatch! Listen, I'm not lying to you! And I'm not crazy!"

"You must be," said Gettian. "Nobody but an insane man would talk as you are. And I never heard of anything called the Metal Master."

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Decitez gritted, "Listen, you! I'm going to kill you for not talking!"

Decitez was probably bluffing, although it was never proved. It did not matter, for a hard-thrown vase of brass came hurtling from the murk of a door on the opposite side of the room. It hit Decitez's gun hand. He lost the gun.

THINGS happened. A man was in the door through which the vase had come. One of Decitez's men on guard. Startled, he ducked. He spun. He wanted to see from whence the missile came.

But he never saw. *Chug!* A sound like a circus maul against a tent peg. It seemed impossible for a striking fist to make such a sound, but it had. The guard fell half across the room. He was senseless on his feet.

Gorham Gage Gettian gave a great leap. His white skin made him look soft; his baldness made him look old. But a college grid star could not have jumped farther, faster.

He reached the handiest door, yanked it open, popped through. He yanked the door shut behind him.

Decitez was screaming by now. He had caught sight of the bronze giant who had thrown the vase. It was a sight to make Decitez scream. But he ran at the same time, bent low.

"Shoot, you fool!" he squawled.

That was for another guard. This one stood in another door. His gun was ready. He turned loose. The weapon filled the room with lusty thunder.

Doc Savage was again wearing his undergarment of light alloy. It would stop even a rifle slug. But this gunman must have known of the mail armor, for he aimed at Doc's head.

The bronze man weaved. To continue the charge would mean suicide. He doubled back, ducking away through the door. The bullets scooped plaster, splintered the door, and one painfully spanked his chain armor.

"Run!" yelled Decitez.

He and his man ran. Slamming the door behind them, they clattered down a stairway. It was dark there. A little globe glowed in the entry. There, they met the man who had been on lookout at the door.

"Run!" yelled Decitez. "Doc Savage!"

"Where's the other guy?" barked the guard.

"Savage knocked him out!"

The guard grabbed Decitez. He looked ugly.

"Say, whatcha gonna do about my pal that was knocked out?" he growled.

"The devil with him!" screamed Decitez. "Leggo me!"

But the other man had ideas of loyalty.

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"The devil with *you!*" he snarled. "Leave our buddy for the cops, or worse? Not me! How many guys are upstairs?"

"One!"

"Is that all? And you're running away?"

"That one is Doc Savage!" gritted Decitez.

The full significance of this soaked in on the guard. He changed his mind about the rescue.

"Maybe we better blow!" he gulped.

The argument had delayed them too long, however. It was dark in the house, and an ideal field for Doc Savage's operations. The bronze man was a master of stealth.

The fugitives had taken scarcely a pace in their resumed flight when lightning struck. Decitez was first to feel it. The base of his brain hurt suddenly, terribly. Then there was dullness. He seemed to go to sleep all over. He knew that he fell. Weirdly, though, when he hit the floor, he did not feel anything.

He did not realize that he was a victim of a kind of weird paralysis which Doc Savage could inflict by pressure on the spinal and cerebral nerve centers.

THE other two men stumbled back, amazed, stunned. They could see Doc Savage in the vague light of the entry. The sight caused them to decide to keep going. Out of the door, they charged. One fell down the steps, but landed, luckily, on his feet. They started to run.

"We're gonna make it!" one gulped.

"Yeah!" gasped the other. "Have we got luck?"

"You ain't all that's got it," remarked a new voice—one that might have belonged to a small child.

The shadows beside the stoop coughed out two newcomers. One of these would weigh in excess of two hundred and fifty pounds and was about tall enough to look at an average man's top vest button. He had a lot of rusty hair all over his person.

The other man was a lean wasp of a man, with wonderful clothes and an innocent looking black cane.

What followed was soon over. The hairy fellow harvested one runner in a pair of arms that might have doubled as bridge girders. He squeezed. He hooked a fist. His victim went senseless.

The waspish fashion plate did something with his harmless-looking black cane. It became a sword cane. The tip of its slender blade was coated with a sticky-looking substance.

The tip of the sword cane pricked the arm of the other runner lightly. The fellow yelped. He ran a dozen paces. Then his muscles lost their spring and he rolled over and over on the pavement. He did not move, except to breathe, after he stopped rolling.

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"Need any help, you missing link?" asked the dapper man with the sword cane.

"Don't insult me, you shyster!" growled the one who resembled a gorilla. "When I need help, you better bring an army!"

Doc Savage appeared in the doorway.

"Bring them inside," he said.

The two carried their captives up the steps and into Gorham Gage Gettian's house.

"Monk," Doc Savage said, "weren't you and Ham supposed to go down to Greenwich Village and start four prisoners for our up-State place?"

"Yep," admitted the homely anthropoid of a fellow, with a grin that threatened his ears. "We did. Then we turned on the radio direction-finder and located your car, and hurried here as fast as we could. We heard the fracas and sort of investigated."

"What happened to you?" asked the dapperly dressed man of Doc.

"Some more having to do with the Metal Master mystery, Ham," explained Doc Savage.

The bronze man gave a terse account of what had occurred, concluding with the explanation of how he had gone to the rear, mounted a fire escape, and found a roof hatch open. This had admitted him to Gorham Gage Gettian's mansion.

"Any word of where Renny is being held?" Ham asked.

"On a schooner named the *Innocent*, somewhere off Cuba," Doc explained.

"Any trace of the girl, Nan Tester?" asked the homely Monk.

"No," Doc Savage said.

The dapper Ham snapped, "Depend on Monk to be in a dither about any female who happened to be around!"

Monk glowered at Ham.

"You're gonna be in a dither," he gritted, "when I get around to you!"

"Threats of physical violence are the resort of a person with a small mind, you baboon," Ham said caustically.

Doc Savage indicated the upper region of the house.

"Let us find Gorham Gage Gettian," he suggested.

MONK and Ham shouldered the prisoners, scowling at each other the while. A bystander would have sworn that they were on the point of committing mutual murder.

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Monk and Ham were two more of Doc Savage's group of five aids. Renny and Long Tom Roberts were two more. The fifth member of the strange association, William Harper Littlejohn, nicknamed "Johnny," eminent archaeologist and geologist, was too far away to appear in the present excitement, being in Europe, excavating a cave in which a farmer had found the fossil of a prehistoric man.

They entered the room where the first fight had occurred. A series of loud, thumping noises greeted their ears.

"Somebody is behind that door," said Monk, pointing at the door through which Gorham Gage Gettian had ducked.

Doc Savage opened the door. It admitted to a closet. Bald-headed Gorham Gage Gettian stepped out of the closet.

"The infernal door has a spring lock," he complained. "I had no key; so when I jumped in there, I locked myself in."

Gettian was a vastly different-looking man, now. He was smiling. He rubbed his hands together, came over and pumped Doc Savage's hand heartily, then insisted on shaking hands with Monk and Ham.

"I owe you an everlasting thanks," he declared. "You saved my life! Yes, indeed! And I value my life."

"Why were they trying to kill you?" asked Monk, who did not believe in beating about the bush.

Gettian looked like a startled, bald pink Buddha.

"I cannot imagine," he said.

Ham snapped, "I would advise you not to start beating about the bush with us, Gettian. This is a serious matter, which has already resulted in the death by murder of at least one person."

"Shut up!" Monk told the dapper Ham.

"I'm asking the questions."

Monk and Ham fell to staring at each other with throat-cutting intentness.

Doc Savage took up the questioning.

"Do you know anything about a thing called the Metal Master?" he asked.

"No" Gettian said promptly

"How about an elderly man named Seevers?"

"Never heard of him," said Gettian.

"Or a man named Louis Tester?" Doc persisted.

"Is he mixed up in this?"

"Apparently."

"Then maybe that explains it!" Gettian snapped.

"You know Louis Tester?"

"Know him? I should say I do!" Gettian frowned. Since he had no eyebrows, his frown looked rather peculiar. "Louis Tester has one of the greatest scientific minds of any man alive today!"

Chapter XI. THE DEATH ARRANGEMENT

AT Gettian's statement about Louis Tester being a great scientific mind, Monk and Ham stopped glaring as if they were about to bite each other. Both snorted.

"If Louis Tester was a great scientist, Doc would know him," Monk said. "Or, at least, Doc would know of him. Doc keeps up on that stuff."

"Louis Tester is a rather reticent young man," said Gettian. "He has not sought publicity."

Doc Savage asked, "Could your knowing Louis Tester involve you in this affair?"

"I doubt it," said Gettian. "I think it is the little metal cash box that Louis Tester left with me that had involved me."

"Holy cow!—as Renny would say!" exploded Monk. "Now I think we're getting somewhere!"

"What about this cash box?" Doc Savage asked.

Gettian spoke with entire freedom.

"I know Louis Tester very well, and have loaned him a little money from time to time, not asking security," he said. "A few months ago, Louis brought me a little metal box and asked me to keep it. He said it held certain valuable scientific records, which he wanted in a safe place. So I put it in my safe. That is all I know about it."

Doc Savage asked quietly, "Would you mind showing me that box and permitting me to examine its contents."

"I should dislike doing so," said Gettian.

"Louis Tester's life seems to be in danger," Doc Savage explained. "We are trying to aid him, as well as his sister; also one of my associates, Colonel Renwick."

"Gracious!" said Gettian, making that mild exclamation sound like a much more violent one. "Is Nan in danger?"

"She is," Doc said. "In fact, she may have been murdered already."

"I will show you the box and let you examine it," declared Gettian. "I did not know things were so serious."

He led the way through rooms. It became apparent that Gorham Gage Gettian was a very rich man. There were priceless rugs on the floor and old masters on the walls. Much of the furniture was genuinely antique.

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Gettian reached what was evidently his study. The comfortable furniture had seen much use, but its quality was so excellent that the fittings had only improved with service.

Going to the gas-burning fireplace, Gettian touched something. The entire fireplace rolled out, swung aside, and disclosed the combination knob of a large safe. He bent and manipulated this knob. The door came open. His hand started in confidently, then jerked to a stop.

"It's gone!" Gettian gasped.

"Gone?" asked Monk.

"It is," said Gettian. "And that is very strange indeed, because I am the only living man who knows this combination."

Gettian riffled through the safe contents, which seemed to consist of some jewels, many papers, and several bundles of greenbacks of large denomination. Gettian shook his head, stood back and examined the safe door. He found it bore no marks of having been forced, closed the safe, and shrugged resignedly.

"Some one who was indeed an expert, must have gotten into that safe," he said.

They had left the prisoner in the other room. All of these were at present unconscious, but some would be reviving soon.

"We will question them," Doc Savage said. "That man Decitez should at least be able to tell us something."

They walked out.

Down in the street door vestibule, a woman screamed. It was a terrified shriek.

"Mr. Gettian!" the voice shrilled. "They are going to kill you!"

Doc Savage whipped toward the sound.

"It's Nan Tester!" the bronze man clipped over his shoulder.

DOC SAVAGE took the stairs in a series of leaps, until he reached a landing. This was halfway down. From then on, he rode the bannister. The bannister riding was not for spectacular effect. It was safer. If they shot from below, they would shoot up the steps.

But they did not shoot. They seemed bent on getting the girl out. They were struggling with her. Her gasps could be heard. Blows.

"Brain her!" a man gritted.

"Where's a gun?" another snarled. "Give her the works for that trick!"

Doc Savage hit the entryway. He knew the next instant that that was what he should not have done. He rarely got into trouble by charging his enemies. But this time he did. They were prepared for him, had it all fixed.

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First Indication of the trap was a swishing noise overhead. Then Doc felt a netting descend and envelop him. Some kind of a fish net, judging from the faint odor of the tarred cord. He could break the strands. It wouldn't hold him.

But there was more to it than the net. The net was lined with three-prong fishhooks. They grabbed him in a score of places, dug into his flesh. The chain-mail vest protected his body, but not his hands, his features.

Doc backed for the stairs. He might still have made it. But they had spread a rope on the floor, looped with a running noose, and they yanked it, got his legs. He went down.

"Savage!" a voice barked anxiously. "Behave yourself and you won't be killed."

A man who keeps his head in a fight has one advantage. He knows when he is licked. Doc Savage was in a bad way. He might fight clear, but would probably be disfigured, perhaps blinded, for life. On the other hand, if he submitted now, there might be a chance for escape later.

The bronze man stood perfectly still.

"All right," he said. "You've made it work."

There was another reason for giving up. He might discover, from the conversation of his captors, the nature of the mystery of the Metal Master.

UPSTAIRS, fighting raged. Another attack must have been launched from the back. There was no shooting. The men were wary of the noise, evidently.

Doc listened. The fight sounded violent. Monk was whooping and howling. The homely chemist invariably did that in a fight. The harder the fight, the more noise he made. This one must have been a riot.

Finally, Monk and three or four other men came tumbling down the stairs. A truckload of bricks unloaded suddenly would hardly have made more of a racket. When Monk hit the bottom, a man leaped forward and did his best to break a pistol over Monk's head. Monk leaned back against the stairs and went to sleep, with his enormous mouth wide open and scarlet leaking from it.

The battle still raged upstairs. Half a dozen men mounted. Their comrades had Ham forced into a corner. Ham's sword cane was unsheathed. Three men, made senseless by its tip, sprawled on the floor.

"Shoot 'im!" a man gritted.

"No, no!" snapped another. "Get a bunch of chairs!"

They got the chairs, and tossed them at Ham until he was finally battered back and they got their chance to overwhelm him.

Gorham Gage Gettian was also sprawled out on the floor.

Downstairs, Doc Savage was still tangled in the hooks. His ankles were held by the rope. The outside door had been closed throughout, so that not too much of the rumpus would reach the street.

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Men advanced carefully, guns ready, and Doc Savage was released. They did not take too much care with the fishhooks. They simply plucked them out.

Doc Savage said nothing, did not grimace, while they were getting the hooks out.

"Ain't you human?" a man growled.

Doc Savage did not reply. It was, as a matter of fact, agony. All the howling and groaning in the world would not make the pain less. There was a psychological reason for his stoicism, too. The mental concentration involved in trying not to show pain aided in keeping his thoughts off the pain itself.

Nan Tester came into view. Throughout the fight she had been out of sight, in a tiny cloakroom opening off the vestibule. She walked in stiffly, head back, eyes defiant.

"They tricked me into decoying you downstairs by screaming," she said grimly. "I didn't know you were here. I really thought I was warning Gettian."

One of the two burly men gripping her wrists, holding her a captive, spoke harshly.

"Pipe down, sister," he said. "It ain't your time to talk!"

DOC SAVAGE, Nan Tester and Monk were taken up to the room where Decitez and his men lay. Ham was being held tightly. Gorham Gage Gettian had come to, was getting on his feet. They were all arrayed against a wall, where they could be watched.

Doc Savage studied Nan Tester intently for a time. The bronze man's flake-gold eyes seemed more animated than usual.

"What have you learned from them, Miss Tester?" he asked.

"Very little," said the girl in her rather low, throaty voice.

"You have learned the secret of the Metal Master?" the bronze man asked.

"No," she said.

One of the men stepped forward. His face was ugly.

"Take the dame back to our hangout!" he directed. "She'll either talk too much or learn too much around here! And we don't want her to know so much that we'll have to get rid of her. We want her alive to whip that brother of hers into line, if necessary."

With that, Nan Tester was taken out. When she started to screech, a gag was popped between her lips. They dragged her downstairs and out of the house.

The man who had given the order regarding the girl's disposal, came back and stood rocking on his heels. He was a tall, well-dressed man. He did not have an evil face. The thumb was missing from his left hand.

"Wake up, you!" he gritted.

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With that, he delivered a terrific kick against Napoleon Murphy Decitez's ribs. Decitez did not even groan in his strange sleep.

"Let me revive him," said Doc Savage.

The man with the missing thumb glared at Doc. "And why do you want to revive him, huh?"

"What he says might be interesting," Doc said frankly.

"Hm-m-m." The man considered. "O. K."

Doc sidled over to Decitez. He did something to the back of the man's neck, relieving the condition of the deadened nerves.

Decitez opened his eyes. He groaned heartily.

"You dirty crook!" said the man with the missing thumb. "What was the idea of trying to cut in on us?"

Decitez was a woodchuck cornered by dogs, to look at his expression. He did not seem to be able to think of anything to say.

"We oughta kill you!" "Missing Thumb" told Decitez.

Decitez shut his eyes. He began to tremble.

"But we won't for a while!" snarled the other. "That's the chief's orders."

Decitez stopped trembling and opened his eyes.

"Who is your chief?" he asked.

"I'd be likely to tell you, wouldn't I?" jeered the other. "The chief wants you alive, so that you can help us get our hands on that double-crosser, Tops'l Hertz."

"I don't know any Tops'l Hertz!" gasped Decitez.

"You'll change that tune!" snapped Missing Thumb. "Come on, boys! Let's move 'em!"

MONK, the homely chemist, revived at that point. Monk had a good many animal qualities. Nature has equipped an animal to awaken from sleep, and sometimes to recover from senselessness, all of a sudden. That was the way Monk revived. He kicked a man's legs from under him.

Three men fell on Doc Savage instantly. They jammed guns against vulnerable portions of his anatomy. Before he could make the slightest move, they would finish him.

Monk was banged over the head until he sat down weakly. His hairy wrists were tied with a rope. Many turns were used.

The man with the missing thumb strutted about fiercely.

"That shows the chief was right!" he barked. "We can't take any chances with this bronze guy or his gang!"

He waved an arm. "Take 'em out," he directed.

He scowled at Doc Savage.

"You're not married, are you?" he demanded.

"No," Doc Savage admitted. "Why?"

"Because it's too bad you won't have any descendants to carry on your meddling work!"

Chapter XII. MURDER BY METAL

WHAT immediately followed was an indication of how dangerous was the mysterious organization affiliated with the Metal Master.

Gorham Gage Gettian had a private driveway for deliveries at the rear of his mansion. A milk truck appeared in this. It was getting along toward morning, so there was nothing suspicious about a milk truck being abroad. It was a truck with a large body.

By now, all of the prisoners were conscious. They were all bound and thoroughly gagged.

Bald-headed Gettian wailed, "Why am I included in this? I know absolutely nothing about the whole affair!"

"We just like your company," one of the thugs told him.

"And we don't like to think of what you might tell the police," said another, giving a more logical reason.

The captives were loaded into the truck.

Three of the gang, with automatic pistols and flashlights, got in to serve as guards.

The truck rolled swiftly through New York streets. There was almost no traffic now. For a long time, it was very quiet inside the truck.

Then there was a thump and a loud grunt. The men in the cab of the truck could plainly tell that there was some moving around inside the vanlike body.

"Anything wrong?" demanded a man in the cab.

"Heck no!" came a voice from the rear. "We were just kicking the slats of this big gazook who looks like an ape!"

There was no more rumpus from the interior of the truck. The vehicle rolled rapidly. It turned into a bumpy stretch of road. Two sedans were following, carrying the rest of the gang. All the machines stopped. The rear of the truck was opened, from the outside.

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"Throw Decitez and Gettian out!" a voice ordered.

A moment later, Decitez and Gettian came toppling out of the truck. Both seemed to be unconscious.

"Whatcha gonna do with 'em?" asked one of the trio who had ridden in the truck.

"Chief wants 'em alive," was the reply. "He thinks he can use 'em."

"How the heck could he use 'em?"

"Decitez can be made to lead Tops' I Hertz into a trap," said the other. "And I think the chief has got some very special use for old Gettian."

Decitez and Gettian were loaded into one of the sedans. A man remarked on the fact that they were unconscious.

"I thought these guys came out of it," he said.

"They did," somebody replied. "But I guess they fainted or something. Probably scared."

The car departed with Decitez and Gettian.

It was rather dark, due to a few clouds in the sky. The faintest of red hazes in the east indicated the sun would rise shortly. There was a cold wind.

No lights other than the headlamps of the truck and the remaining sedan were visible in the neighborhood. Close to the road loomed a line of boxlike hulks. A man turned a flashlight on them. They were steel railway cars. They were loaded with scrap iron—fragments of old automobiles, for the most part, although there was an occasional huge bulk of a worn-out industrial engine.

"This is the spot," a man said. "Get them guys out of that truck."

One by one, the prisoners were handed out of the truck. It was dark. Some one had thought to turn out the headlights, which might be seen. A man stood at the truck tailboard and kept track of the captives as they were handed out.

"There's one more," he said.

"We got 'im!" growled one of the trio who had ridden out from the city in the truck. "It's the bronze guy. We're keepin' our hands on him. We ain't takin' no chances."

"That's the old spirit," chuckled the other.

A MAN pointed a flashlight beam and said, "Bring 'em over here."

The man was indicating the ditch beside the line of railway cars laden with scrap iron.

"Throw them in there!" he ordered. "Then get back!"

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The prisoners were carried up and thrown into the ditch. The bottom of the ditch was hard, frozen. Some of the captives groaned through their noses. They were still gagged.

The man in charge of the gang growled, "Now hold it! The Metal Master is gonna show up and finish this thing."

Hardly had he spoken, when the sound of an automobile engine came from down the road. It mounted to a roar. The machine was coming at top speed. From the way it bucked over the ruts, it was remarkable that it kept on the road.

In stopping, it skidded, all but went into the ditch. It was the sedan which had gone away with Gettlan and Decitez. The door popped open. A man fell out. He got up, ran toward the party beside the railroad tracks.

"Decitez regained consciousness!" he screeched. "He says—"

The man tripped over an icy clod and fell down. He shrieked profanely. Then he got up again.

"Decitez says Doc Savage knocked 'im out!" the excited man squawled. "He says he thinks Doc Savage and his two men—"

He probably finished, but no one heard him. An explosion took place among the men at the railroad track. Blows popped. Men fell down.

"Run!" rapped the powerful voice of Doc Savage.

"Maybe we can lick 'em!" piped the childlike voice of the homely Monk.

"You can stay and try it!" said Ham's modulated tone. "We'll attend your funeral!"

There were some more blows. Guns went off. Some one turned on a flashlight, but it was knocked from his hand.

Then three men ran away rapidly through the darkness.

By now, the truth had dawned.

"Doc Savage and his two pals!" a man bellowed. "They got away!"

THERE was no light. The only flashlight, it seemed, had been broken. Men ran about wildly in the darkness. They cursed. They fired guns at sounds, real and imaginary. Fragmentary sentences, punctuated with profanity, jerked out of the confusion.

"Decitez said the bronze guy busted loose in the truck—"

A man broke in with curses, because one of the others had nearly shot him.

"Savage turned his two pals loose—they grabbed the three guards and tied 'em up—took their places—"

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A man climbed down in the ditch and struck a match. He swore heartily, having discovered the three guards there, bound and gagged. No more proof was needed that the bronze man had, with his two aids, exchanged places with the guards.

"Which way'd they go?" several wanted to know.

No one was sure. Some one found a flashlight in one of the cars and they cast about, but not very enthusiastically.

"The bronze guy and the other two have had time to blow," a man mumbled. "That means this spot is gonna become too hot, before long."

They held a consultation, after which they decided to clear out. But before they did this, they performed a blood-thirsty bit of business.

They shot the prisoners—henchmen of Decitez—lying in the ditch. They did it callously.

"That'll teach 'em to monkey with the Metal Master," one of the killers gritted.

"They're only small fry."

"Sure! But it'll be a lesson, anyway!"

Decitez saw the shooting. He became white as a sheet. He thought they were going to slaughter him, too. But they didn't.

"You done us a favor," they told him.

Decitez relaxed his fear a little. He fawned. He all but slobbered.

"I'll do anything you say!" he gasped.

The straw boss of the gang came and stood over him in the chill dawn.

"We ain't the kind of guys who don't appreciate a favor," he said. "How'd you like to throw over this guy Tops'l Hertz and take a share with the rest of us, working with the Metal Master?"

Napoleon Murphy Decitez had sense enough not to agree too hastily. It would make it look as if his allegiance were too easily shifted. He hemmed and hawed.

"It'd mean a smaller cut for me," he complained.

"Naw, it wouldn't," said the other. "You don't know what plans the Metal Master has got. Listen, do you know that with the organization and the brains we've got, the whole world is the same as in our hands? No battleship, no airplane in the world, could touch us! We can write our own ticket!"

Decitez was plainly startled. He swallowed several times rapidly.

"Is—is something like that what you're planning?" he exploded.

"It is!" snapped the other. "You string along with us and you'll go places!"

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"I'm with you!" Decitez gasped.

"Let's go," said the other.

THEY turned up, an hour later, In front of Napoleon Murphy Decitez's house in Greenwich Village. Decitez had told them about the four of his men which he had left in charge of Doc Savage, when the bronze man was a prisoner. Decitez wanted to know what had happened to them. The others, when they heard the story, also wanted to know.

They did not find out. The reason was simple. The four were gone. There was no trace of them.

"Doc Savage must have disposed of them," Decitez muttered uneasily.

"Did they know enough to tell the bronze guy anything of value?" asked the spokesman of the Metal Master's men.

"No," said Decitez. "They didn't know a darn thing, except that we were after something big."

The other man eyed Decitez intently.

"Then nobody in New York but you knew what it was all about?" he asked. "Your gang knew, didn't they?" Decitez countered.

"Outside of them. There was an old guy named Seevers who knew, because he had stuck his nose into things. But we fixed him. Now, nobody but you knows?"

"I guess that's right," Decitez said uneasily. Then he added hurriedly, "And I don't really know much about it."

"The devil you don't!" exploded the other. "I thought you knew what the Metal Master is?"

"I do," replied Decitez. "But who is he? What's his name?"

The other man laughed.

"I don't know," he said.

Decitez squinted at the other, apparently trying to ascertain whether or not the man was lying. He was unable to decide. Decitez did not press the matter. He knew this was a case where too much knowledge was not good.

They pushed another rapid search of the premises, and after that, they were convinced Decitez's four men were not there. They held a final consultation.

"Where can we get hold of Tops'l Hertz?" the spokesman asked.

Decitez countered, "What are you going to do to him?"

"Proposition him," said the other. "If he wants to join us, and take a share, it'll be all hunky-dory. If he don't, Tops'l will get his."

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Decitez sighed deeply and tremulously. He was thinking of what Tops'l would do to him if he heard about this double-crossing. But there was only one thing Decitez could do, under the circumstances.

"Tops'l is headed for Alligator Island," said Decitez.

Had a pistol gone off unexpectedly, it probably would have caused less surprise. The spokesman tried to gasp something and only made a stuttering noise.

"What Alligator Island?" he finally barked.

"The one off the Carolina coast," Decitez explained.

The other man swore hoarsely.

"How did you lugs learn about that island?" he snarled.

"Why," said Decitez, "Tops'l has Louis Tester on his schooner. He made Tester talk, and Tester told about the island."

"We gotta beat Tops'l to Alligator Island!" yelled the other. "And we gotta get to the chief! This puts the chief in a tough spot!"

"The chief is pretty smooth, if you ask me," said one who had more faith.

The doorbell rang.

THE men all looked at each other. It was not exactly a propitious time to hear a doorbell ring. It clanged out again.

"You go!" the spokesman rasped at Decitez. "Get rid of whoever it is. We'll be right behind you, and our hands won't be empty, either!"

Decitez went to the door. It was all he could do to keep from staggering. He opened the door.

"Cable for Mr. Napoleon Murphy Decitez," said a clean-faced lad.

Decitez was relieved enough to throw his hat into the air. He carried the missive back into the house. It was not really a cable, but a radiogram. He tore it open.

"Who's it from?" he was asked.

"Tops'l Hertz," Decitez admitted.

"Read it."

It read:

BEST RATING IN NORTHERN GENERAL MARKET AREA CUBA. HOPE INCREASE NOT EXTENDED IN NORTH. RETURN OVERLAND ON MARCH 7. HOLDOVER ORDERS TOTAL

THE METAL MASTER

EXCELLENT. LEAVING BENTLY ON ORDERS NOW EXPECTED.

The spokesman of the Metal Master's men scratched his head.

"Now what in the blazes does that mean?" he pondered aloud.

"Code," explained Decitez. "You take the first letter of each word."

They took the first letter of each word. They got:

BRING MACHINE IN ROOM 7 HOTEL BOONE.

"

Hm-m-m," murmured the Metal Master's spokesman. "Not bad. And what is this machine?"

"Search me," said Decitez. "It must be something belonging to Louis Tester that Tops'l has learned about."

"Let's look into it," growled the other.

Chapter XIII. SLICK!

THE Hotel Boone did not make a great show. It rarely advertised. It was an economical, homey place where some guests maintained a room the year around, although they were out of town a great deal. This was because the monthly rates were very low indeed.

"Who has Room 7?" asked Decitez.

The desk clerk, with a friendly smile, said, "Louis Tester."

"We'll go right up," said Decitez. "He is expecting us."

"I did not know Mr. Tester was back in town," murmured the clerk.

"He just got in," said Decitez, and they went up.

Outside the door of Room 7, which was on the second floor, they came to a stop.

"I've got a guy here who knows locks," said the spokesman of the Metal Master's men.

The man came forward and demonstrated that he did know locks, getting the door open almost at once.

The room had plain furniture, and there were some old suits hanging in the closet, rather good suits. Shirts and socks were in the dresser.

Under the bed was a box. At first, they mistook it for a suitcase, because it had a carrying handle. But it was of some black insulating compound, sealed airtight. To the handle was attached a tag. It read:

DO NOT OPEN

THE METAL MASTER

(Opening Will Damage Contents)

The Metal Master's spokesman lifted the strange box.

"Heavy," he said. "Must be a machine of some kind."

"Going to open it?" asked Decitez.

"No," said the other, after some thought. "I probably wouldn't know what it was, if it's a contraption. We'll take it along as it is."

"Take it along?" Decitez wet his lips. "Where're we going?"

"To Alligator Island," growled the other. "With Doc Savage on the prowl, and our chief in a jam, things are too hot here."

"What kind of a jam is the chief in?" Decitez queried curiously.

"Never mind," grunted the other man.

Merely out of curiosity, they made another search of the room. Because the room faced a court, it was rather gloomy, so they turned on the lights. There was a chandelier in the center of the room, and four lights in brackets on the walls. One of the wall brackets did not illuminate. But nobody gave that any attention.

They found nothing more to interest them.

"We might as well get along," said Decitez.

The spokesman of the Metal Master's gang unexpectedly stepped forward. He swung his fist. It hit Decitez's jaw. Decitez hit the floor as if he had been shot.

"Don't you say 'we' any more!" snarled the man who had struck the blow.

Decitez gasped, gargled, and finally got words out.

"But I'm one of your crowd now!" he whined.

"In a gnat's eye, you are!" sneered the other. "Don't you know when you're being strung along?"

Decitez gasped, "But you said—"

"We were just kidding you," jeered the other. "We wanted to see how much we could get out of you."

An awful pallor overspread Decitez's face. He began to tremble. All of his fat, rodentlike body shook.

"You—you're going to kill me?" he wailed.

"I don't know," said the other. "We'll have to see about that."

They went out, taking Decitez and the mysterious black box which was sealed, and which they had decided not to open.

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FOR some moments after they left, the room was very quiet. The men had smoked in the room, and the odor of the smoke lingered, stale. A cigarette stub, cast carelessly on the floor, smoldered, and the room filled with the odor of scorched carpet. It went out after a time. Then the door opened.

Doc Savage came in. Ham, the dapper lawyer, was with the bronze man.

Doc Savage went straight to the light bulb which had not lighted. He unscrewed it carefully, and wrapped it in a piece of paper.

"We do not want this to get broken," he said. "It is the only one we have at present."

Ham smiled widely. Ham had a sharp, aesthetic face, but it became quite handsome when he smiled.

"They are rather difficult to construct, eh?" he asked.

"Somewhat," Doc Savage admitted. "The wall of the bulb, which looks like frosted glass, is in reality a flexible material which serves as a diaphragm for the microphone which is concealed inside and connected to the terminals so that when the bulb is screwed into the socket, the microphone will be connected. It is rather difficult to construct the thing so that it will not distort the reception."

Ham asked, "Shall we reconnect the electric wires from that socket, which we disconnected and led into the other room to attach to the trick microphone?"

"No time," Doc Savage said.

Ham chuckled softly. "I hope Monk makes out all right."

"He should," Doc Savage replied.

"Monk is a great guy," Ham murmured.

Monk would have had a spasm, had he heard that praise from Ham.

Doc Savage and Ham went downstairs. Doc Savage spoke to the pleasant-faced desk clerk.

"Thank you for telling those fellows the room was registered in the name of Louis Tester," he said.

"It was no lie," grinned the clerk.

Doc Savage placed a twenty-dollar bill on the desk.

"For you," he said. "The gentlemen were completely deceived. They never got an inkling that the room had been taken in the name of Louis Tester less than ten minutes earlier, and that it was myself who rented it."

The clerk held the twenty out in front of him and blew a kiss at it.

"The first time I ever really believed there was easy money in this old world!" he chuckled.

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Doc Savage and Ham went out, got in a taxi, and the bronze man directed the driver toward the skyscraper which housed his headquarters.

Ham wondered aloud, "How soon should we hear from Monk?"

"Hard to say," Doc replied.

THE taxi traveled swiftly. The driver evidently knew the identity of his famous passenger, and was exuberant, trying to show off. He ran through a red light, and a traffic cop started over, but turned back when he got a look into the cab.

Ham had been thinking over the episodes of the last hour. He broke out in a hearty chuckle.

"We got a break when we went to Decitez's house, and that gang turned up," he said.

"It stood to reason that Decitez would go there to see what had happened to the four men he left guarding me," Doc Savage pointed out.

"That microphone that looks like a light bulb sure did its stuff there," Ham smiled. "We got just about all they said."

"Let us hope so," the bronze man said noncommittally.

Ham eyed Doc Savage. Admiration was in his gaze.

"Your stunt of getting a messenger boy to deliver that fake radiogram was a slick one," he said. "It sure tricked that gang into going to the hotel, getting that box, and taking it with them."

Doc Savage did not comment.

"I'd like to know one thing," Ham continued.

Doc said nothing.

"What was in the box?" Ham asked. "You made a flying trip to the laboratory to get it and take it to the hotel. But what was in it?"

For a long moment, Doc Savage did not speak.

"The thing may not do its work, when the time comes," he said dryly. "So if you do not know what it is, you will not depend on it in a pinch. Depending on things is very bad, especially when they do not work."

They went up on their private elevator to the eighty-sixth floor of the skyscraper. Doc Savage did not enter his office immediately. Instead, he looked at a famous picture of a Madonna in a plain frame. It was the only bit of art in the plainly modernistic corridor.

The Madonna's eyes were dark. Had they been bright—made so by a tiny light bulb connected to Doc's complicated burglar alarm system—the bronze man would have used a great deal of caution about entering the place; if he entered at all, he probably would have used one of the secret entrances, which would have

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given him a chance of surprising any skulker.

"I wish Monk would report!" Ham grumbled uneasily, after they were inside the laboratory.

Ham was frankly worried, although he knew perfectly well that the homely Monk was fairly capable of taking care of himself. Having nothing to take his mind off Monk's possible mishap, he was uneasy. He remained uneasy for an hour.

Then Monk put in his appearance. He just walked in.

Ham did not look at Monk as if he were glad to see him. Instead, he glared. Then he got a glimpse of the object Monk was carrying under his arm. Ham jumped up and shook his fists.

"You freak of nature!" he squawled. "Send you to do something, and you turn up with that Habeas Corpus!"

MONK stood in the doorway, grinned amiably at Doc Savage, then gazed at Ham as if the latter were a dead mouse which had been found in the cream jar.

"Insectivorea!" he said, that evidently being a new word he had just thought up to express his personal opinions of Ham.

Ham rarely got so mad that he sputtered. But he sputtered now. He was looking, not at Monk, but at the creature under Monk's arm.

It was a pig—a totally remarkable-looking pig, the equal of which probably did not occur in the porker strain once in an age. It had long flapping ears and legs like a dog.

The pig was Habeas Corpus, Monk's pet.

Ham ceased sputtering and began to spit words.

"You promised to keep that—that hog out of my sight!" he howled.

"What did you learn, Monk?" Doc Savage asked, interrupting the beginnings of another argument between Ham and Monk.

Monk spat in Ham's direction, put Habeas Corpus down, and spread his hands in a gesture indicating partial defeat.

"I trailed the crowd all right, after they left that hotel," he said. "They went to a field on Long Island, where they had a plane. Not a regular flying field. A farmer's field. They had the plane there, all gassed up. And they took off and left me there talking to myself."

"Who did they take along?" Doc Savage asked.

"Decitez, Gettian and Nan Tester," said Monk. "And there was quite a crowd of the Metal Master's men. It was a big plane."

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Doc queried, "Did you see anything of the black box which we tricked them into taking from the Hotel Boone?"

"Yep," said Monk. "They took the box along in the plane with them."

"They headed south?" Doc Savage surmised.

"They sure did," Monk agreed. "I guess they're headed for that Alligator Island, wherever that is."

"The island is shown on the charts," Doc Savage told him. "It will not be difficult to reach."

Monk grinned. "I take it we're going there?"

"Immediately," Doc Savage admitted.

A buzzer whined. It was one of the signals, operated by hidden contacts built into the floor, which indicated some one was in the corridor. Monk went to the door, opened it cautiously, and his jaw sagged.

Pretty Nan Tester walked in.

"

THEY turned me loose," she said.

Monk exploded. "But I saw them take you in the plane!"

She blinked, plainly surprised.

"You fellows really get around, don't you?" she exclaimed. "They landed me a bit later, down in Jersey."

Monk gave her his most pleasant grin. Monk was particularly susceptible to young women, especially pretty ones. He liked to be around them. As a matter of fact, Monk, who had a chemical laboratory in his penthouse down in the Wall Street sector, employed a secretary whom he maintained was the prettiest secretary in the city. Those who saw her agreed with him.

"I sure thought they would keep you a prisoner," Monk said. "But I'm glad they didn't."

"Why should they?" asked Nan Tester. "I have no idea of what this is all about, or at least they think I haven't."

"Then you have learned something?" Doc Savage interposed.

Nan Tester smiled at the bronze man. There was a small light in her eyes, and Monk, taking note, felt like groaning his loudest. He could recognize the signs. The pretty thing was getting a crush on Doc Savage, which meant Monk's attentions would not receive much consideration. And it meant Doc would be in for an uncomfortable time. Doc never had anything to do with the fair sex. He was woman-proof.

Nan Tester said, "I overheard the name of the man who is the Metal Master."

"

Who is it?" Monk howled.

"A fellow called Punning Parker," said Nan Tester.

Chapter XIV. THE PUNNING MAN

PUNNING PARKER, pint-sized assemblage of skin and bones, was getting along very well aboard the good hellship *Innocent*. He had wormed himself completely into the confidence of Tops'l Hertz. Punning was an ideal follower. He did not talk back. He hatched good ideas, and when Tops'l Hertz purloined those ideas as his own, Punning did not say anything about it.

"Figure as 'ow you an' me is gonna make a likely pair of blokes," Tops'l Hertz had said.

"Sort of a pair of *likely*-hoodlums, eh?" Punning had chuckled.

"Your other qualities are better'n your bloody puns," snorted Tops'l.

"Puns should be a *pun*-ishable offense," Punning agreed.

That had been some hours ago, and now Punning Parker was lounging on the forward deck, where the fisherman staysail cast a shade of sorts. Punning was not there entirely because of the shade. The spot was directly above the two tiny cubicles occupied by the two prisoners, Colonel John Renwick and Louis Tester.

Punning Parker wore a sly expression. He was watching Tops'l Hertz, who was trying to sheet in the mainsail so it would pull just right. The sly look in Punning Parker's eye indicated he did not have a great deal of respect for the intelligence of Tops'l. The look showed that Punning had decided Tops'l was not so hard to deceive.

Punning Parker was interested in something else. This was a faint grinding noise which seemed to come from below him. This was audible at times above the noise the engines were making, which was considerable, for the engines were turning over at their best, driving the schooner at a speed that would have startled a sailor familiar with auxiliary type boats. At present, the schooner was using both sail and power.

Arising suddenly, Punning Parker went below. He sought out the cubicle occupied by Renny, drew a gun, unlocked the door and went in. He played a flashlight on Renny.

The big-fisted engineer was seated innocently against the far bulkhead. Both Renny and Tester had been released from their bonds.

"You look entirely too *com-posed*," said Punning. "You're not fooling anybody."

"Eh?" rumbled Renny.

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"Just stay where you are," ordered Punning, gesturing with his gun. "Sort of keep your finger on your own pulse, as it were."

Renny sat where he was, because it seemed the wise thing to do. Punning Parker made a brief examination of the door. He found that the screws had been removed from the hinges, and carefully replaced. The work had not quite been completed.

Punning frowned at Renny.

"Let me give you some advice," he said.

"Yeah?" growled the disappointed Renny.

"Just take it easy," said Punning Parker. "Things are breaking right your way. Anyway, we're at sea. We couldn't do anything if we did get loose."

"We!" thumped Renny.

"We?"

Punning Parker grinned thinly.

"I'll leave you to kind of *we-heave* that around in your mind and see what you can make out of it," he said.

Renny scowled at the other. His vision was handicapped by the darkness in the cubicle. As a matter of fact, he never had gotten a thorough look at Punning Parker. But now, as once before, it struck him there was something queer about the man.

"Just who the blazes are you?" Renny demanded.

"I might be the Metal Master," said Punning Parker dryly.

"Holy cow!" Renny thumped.

PUNNING PARKER went out, found Tops'l Hertz, and calmly told about the loosened screws in the hinges. Tops'l did a bit of storming, and changed Renny to another cell. A guard was posted outside this one.

They went over the chamber occupied by Louis Tester—it was really a cabin with the porthole spiked—but found nothing indicating Tester had been maneuvering an escape.

Tops'l Hertz expressed his appreciation to Punning Parker for his alertness.

"You're a 'andy one to 'ave around," he said.

"I'm no *handy-cap*," grinned Punning.

They decided to have a bit of grog by way of celebration. Practically every one partook.

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Punning Parker, making himself useful, as usual, helped mix and pour the drinks. He worked rapidly. No one paid him particular attention.

It was easy for Punning Parker to drop a yellowish powder into the drinks which he served the *Innocent's* two radio operators.

Two hours later, the radio operators were sound asleep. One was in his bunk below, and the other seated in front of his instruments in the radio cabin.

Punning Parker knocked on the edge of the radio cabin door, to be sure the man was asleep. Then he entered. He went directly to the radio instruments. His touch showed that he was familiar with the apparatus. Within a few moments, he was in communication with a far-distant point.

The aerial conference was rapid, yet it occupied several minutes.

"

W-e w-a-n-t e-v-e-r-y-b-o-d-y t-o-g-e-t-h-e-r a-t A-l-l-i-g-a-t-o-r I-s-l-a-n-d, i-s t-h-a-t i-t?" he transmitted at one time.

"Y-e-s," came the reply. "T-o-p-s-l m-u-s-t a-r-r-i-v-e u-n-s-u-s-p-i-c-i-o-u-s. I w-i-l-l t-a-k-e c-a-r-e o-f t-h-a-t."

Punning Parker wore a wide grin when he finished, and carefully replaced each of the switches and dials in the positions at which he had found them.

"As I might say while acting the part of Punning Parker," he chuckled: "What they don't know won't *Hertz* them."

He whistled a tune as he strutted out on deck.

HALF an hour later, the radio operator on duty awakened. The sleeping powder which he had unknowingly taken only functioned for a short time. The operator yawned, rubbed his eyes, did not dream there was anything curious about his nap, and put on the headphones. He found a station calling him with a message.

It was a rambling message, having to do with traveling about and surveying business conditions and markets in the Caribbean, but when the first letter was taken from each word, the assembled result read:

COAST CLEAR. ANCHOR TO BUOY IN NORTH INLET OF ALLIGATOR ISLAND.

Tops'l Hertz was in high good humor, after he read that.

"That was from Decitez, of course," he chuckled. "It means everything is set for us to take over Alligator Island."

"Undoubtedly," said Punning Parker agreeably.

"Then we'll be set to make millions," grinned Tops'l. "We'll get there tomorrow morning."

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"Looks like tomorrow will be our *worth*-day," murmured Punning.

Punning Parker wandered out on deck, after a bit. He seemed to want to be alone.

"Tops'I would be burned up, if he knew I arranged the sending of the radiogram," he murmured to himself.

He went forward, and climbed out on the bowsprit. He sat there, rising and falling with the heave of the schooner, in a position where any one else would have become seasick. But the man who was using the name of Punning Parker seemed to be enjoying it.

"I've sure got the breaks in this, from the start," he chuckled.

He considered deeply for a time.

"But I wish they hadn't got that girl to spread the story to Doc Savage that I'm the Metal Master," he grumbled. "It's a lie. But some one might believe it."

He continued to sit and ponder, as the schooner surged northward in the direction of Alligator Island.

Chapter XV. TERRIBLE ISLAND

DOC SAVAGE'S big speed plane was also headed for Alligator Island. The big ship had three motors in streamlined mountings, and they were well silenced. The plane itself was several years advanced in design. The top speed of most so-called speed ships was the cruising speed of this craft. It could, in an emergency, carry enough fuel for a non-stop flight halfway around the world. It could alight on water or land.

Monk and Ham were in the after portion of the cabin. They were, as usual, about to fly at each other's throats.

"For an Eskimo nickel, I'd dump you in Chesapeake Bay, or whatever is below us!" Monk howled.

"My goodness," Ham said mildly. "Could you be addressing me? Because if you are, you hairy error of nature, I'll trim your toe nails off right next to your ears!"

Monk squawled, "You didn't need to bring along that blasted shippaneezer, or whatever it's called!"

Monk's designation of the subject in dispute at the moment as a "shippaneezer" was probably as fitting as anything. For Monk was referring so profanely to Chemistry, who was Ham's pet, lately acquired. Chemistry belonged to some species of monkey or dwarfed ape.

Ham had been without his pet for a few months, due to regulations of the United States Customs that demanded the animal be put in quarantine until it could be declared free of any contagious or infectious diseases, before being brought into the country. Ham had been pulling all the wires he knew, trying to gain release of his pet.

Monk hated Chemistry as lustily as Ham hated Habeas Corpus, the pig. The reason was simple. Chemistry looked almost exactly like Monk would look, if the ape were some two hundred and thirty pounds heavier.

Strangely enough, Chemistry and Habeas Corpus got along about as well as did Monk and Ham. They had

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just had a fight. Each owner was holding his respective pet.

Ham gritted, "You've taught your hog to molest my ape, you puzzle to scientists!"

Monk screeched, "Molest him! That insect you call an ape won't leave my hog alone!"

"Your hog bit him!"

"Hurrah!" said Monk. "Some day he'll eat 'im! And some day I'll do the same thing to you, you shyster!"

"Why put it off?"

"I don't think I will!"

Monk rolled up his sleeves. Ham unsheathed his sword cane.

Pretty Nan Tester hurried forward to the control cockpit, where Doc Savage was doing the flying.

"They're going to fight!" she gasped. "Can't you do anything to stop it?"

Doc Savage kept his attention on the flying. He had traced a line on the chart, and was following that down the Atlantic coast.

"Years ago, it became evident that the only thing that will stop Monk and Ham from quarreling is for one or the other to get killed," the bronze man said.

"Oh!" she said. "Then they've been like this on other occasions?"

"On practically *all* other occasions," Doc explained.

Back in the cabin, Chemistry and Habeas Corpus, at liberty while their masters glared and sparred, suddenly flew together, to the accompaniment of a bedlam of grunts and monkey squeaks. That broke up the other scrap. The owners had to separate their pets.

THE warfare had not progressed beyond a verbal state, when the plane dropped down out of thin, higher atmosphere and approached Alligator Island.

Doc Savage offered a few words of geographical summary.

"Not every one realizes that the Atlantic coast of the United States, south of New York, is low, swampy land," the bronze man explained. "The coast is edged by a string of low islands, some only sand bars, but some covered with vegetation. This Alligator Island is one of these islands."

"Reckon it's inhabited?" Monk muttered.

"According to the charts, no," Doc replied. "And there are no inhabited islands near them."

"But why aren't they inhabited?" Nan Tester wanted to know.

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"Because the soil is too sandy for agricultural purposes," Doc explained. "There are no towns near on the mainland, owing to the swampy country. The fishing grounds are not good. There is, therefore, nothing to draw inhabitants."

Monk fumbled in a cabin pocket and came up with a pair of powerful binoculars. He focused these ahead.

"Is it kind of a long, lean island with a bay at the north end?" he asked.

"Right," Doc Savage admitted.

"Then I see it," said Monk. "It does look kinda like an alligator, too."

It required imagination to see the likeness between the island and an alligator, but it became more apparent as they drew nearer. The island was a long smear of dark-green against the bilious-looking shoal water of the sea. The ocean, it was plain, was very shallow about Alligator Island, except at the north end, where there was a darker area denoting deep water. The little bay itself seemed to be rather deep.

"The only high ground is near the center of the island," Doc Savage said, pointing.

The bronze man slanted the plane downward. The hour was near evening. It had taken them some time to get under way from New York City, and, strangely enough, Doc Savage had evinced no great desire for haste.

More detailed features of Alligator Island came to their attention. There was a good deal of vegetation—jungle, more properly. There were many sand dunes. These dunes seemed extremely large. Doc sent the plane drifting along at a height of no more than a hundred feet.

"Aren't you afraid of them shooting at us?" Nan Tester asked uneasily.

"The plane cabin is metal, and bulletproof," the bronze man reassured her.

"But they might puncture the pontoons, so we couldn't land on the sea!" she pointed out.

"The pontoons are of cellular construction, the cells filled with a sponge substance similar to sponges themselves, but lighter," Doc replied. "The pontoons could be all but shot to pieces and still not lose their buoyancy."

Then the bronze man leveled a metallic beam of an arm.

"Look!" he said crisply.

A man was crawling through the sand dunes near the little inlet at the north end of the island.

INSTEAD of going back immediately to investigate the crawling man, Doc Savage climbed the plane, gathering altitude. Then he banked back.

He threw an intently searching gaze over the island. Nowhere was there a sign of life, or habitation. The island looked totally arid, devoid of inhabitants.

"Put on your parachutes," Doc Savage directed.

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The parachutes were convenient. Something in the bronze man's voice led the others to don them hastily. Doc already wore his.

Ham eyed the 'chutes sharply. "These are not our regular ones!"

"They are, except for slight changes," Doc Savage replied. "Fibre and thong rings have replaced the metal rings, that is all."

Ham looked, for a moment, as if he were going to ask some questions about that, but he did not, and fell to eyeing the figure crawling among the sand dunes. The form of the crawling man was becoming more distinct, for Doc Savage was sending the plane downward.

Monk, with the binoculars, said, "I believe I've seen that guy somewhere before."

"It is Gorham Gage Gettian," Doc Savage advised.

Monk's mouth came open. He was awed a little, although he had on other occasions seen evidences of the amazing faculties which Doc Savage possessed. Doc had been trained since childhood, and each day he took two hours of intensive exercises, physical and mental, calculated to keep in trim and acquire greater development.

"It looks as if Gettian had been hurt," Monk said, after another squint through the binoculars.

Gettian had seen them. He rolled on his back, and his arms described feeble gestures. As near as they could make out, he was imploring them to land on the inlet, which was not far from where he crawled.

"I don't think he's hurt so bad," Monk amended his earlier opinion. "But he seems to be afraid to stand up among those sand dunes. He must be hiding from somebody."

"The Metal Master's men can't be here!" Ham snapped waspishly. "There's no place where they could hide their plane!"

"The plane could have landed them, then gone away!" Monk snorted. "Use your head, you legal parasite!"

Ham started to say something caustic in reply. He never got it out.

Pf-f-f-t!

came a small noise from the rear of the cabin. Their equipment—they usually carried a great deal of it—was stored back there. They looked in that direction.

"Hey!" Monk squawled. "Somethin's gone wrong!"

It had. The rear of the cabin was a mass of black smoke.

THINGS happened so fast then that they had to sit down later and think to recall all that had occurred. The wad of black smoke spread, rushed at them, enveloping them, filling all of the cabin with its sepia pall. Monk recognized, then, what it was.

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"One of Doc's smoke bombs!" he howled. "Must have gone off accidentally!"

If it occurred to him that one of the smoke bombs had never gone off accidentally before, that such an occurrence was mechanically impossible, he did not remark on it.

The entire plane began to feel queer. The three motors stopped suddenly.

"Jump!" crashed Doc Savage's powerful voice. "Use the parachutes! Quick!"

When the bronze man spoke in that fashion, Monk and Ham knew it was best to comply instantly. They grabbed wildly for their respective pets. Monk grasped a hairy leg which felt natural. It was impossible to see a thing in the cabin of the plane, due to the smoke bomb. Monk found the door, tilted out into space, and yanked the ripcord ring.

He was out of the smoke which had gushed from the cabin door when the 'chute opened. Monk looked below. Quick as he had been, Doc Savage and Nan Tester had been quicker. Probably the bronze man had taken the young woman over the side to save time. They were below, almost ready to hit the water.

Then Monk perceived something which caused him to emit a howl that must have carried over much of the Carolina coast. He did not have his pig, Habeas Corpus. In the excitement, he had grabbed up Ham's pet simian, Chemistry.

Monk looked up frantically. The plane was a meteor of black smoke. It was crumpling strangely.

Then Monk heaved a great sigh of relief, for Ham had dived out of the plane, and he had the pig, Habeas Corpus, by one oversize ear.

Monk continued to watch the plane. A weird thing was happening to it. It was behaving much like a child's toy made of ice, which had been shoved suddenly into a hot oven.

The plane was *melting!*

Not the slightest doubt of it. The metal was simply turning to liquid and falling first in sheets, and the sheets scattering into drops. Within moments, the entire ship was little more than a literal rain of metal.

Monk suddenly remembered the parachute rings. Doc had taken the metal rings off and replaced them with nonmetal. The bronze man must have known they might encounter some such fantastic peril as this.

It was not the first time Monk had unexpectedly discovered that Doc Savage knew a great deal more about what was going on than it seemed possible he could know. But the bronze man's methods of operating were intricate and sometimes astounding.

Monk hit the water hard.

Chapter XVI. THE MESS

THE water was only a few feet deep where Monk came down. He slipped out of the parachute harness, tossed Chemistry in the direction of shore, and struck out swimming.

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Doc Savage and Nan Tester were already headed for shore. They had come down farther out, where the water was deep.

"You all right?" Monk called to them.

"Yes," Doc Savage replied. "When you reach the beach, be careful."

They were going to need to be careful before they reached the beach. This became evident when a little geyser arose in front of Monk's nose, accompanied by a shrill *sping!* of a noise. Monk had heard the noise of bullets before. He promptly loaded his lungs with air and sank.

To be able to swim under water is an ability that can be of great value to individuals whose lives are as perilous as those of Doc Savage and his aids. Monk had practiced it until he was fairly good. He did not come up until the water became too shallow to shelter him longer. Then he splashed out, ran for dear life, and flopped behind the first small sand dune which he reached.

A moment later, Nan Tester dropped beside him.

They lay there a few moments.

"Where's Doc?" Monk asked anxiously.

"I don't know," replied Nan Tester. "He gave me a shove through the water and told me to swim. He seemed to think they would concentrate their fire on him. That is the last I saw of him."

"Blazes!" Monk muttered. "I don't like that!"

The homely chemist squirmed a few paces and cautiously projected his head over the sand. He could see the surface of the inlet. It was still a-ripple with small waves, stirred up by the striking of the melted plane, and their own landing.

"No sign of Doc!" Monk groaned.

A bullet hit the sand with a fist-blow sound. Flying particles filled Monk's eyes. He ducked back, squawking, pawing at his face.

There was silence, except for an occasional agonized squeak from Monk. It now came to their attention that quite a wind was blowing. Not exactly a gale, but it was sufficient to pick the fine sand up and drive it like, snow. The tracks which they had made in running into the dunes were rapidly filling.

Nan Tester, showing herself recklessly, watched the surface of the inlet. Her pretty face was anxious.

"This is terrible!" she choked. "I don't see any sign of—*oh! Look!*"

Monk was in no shape to look. The sand had made his eyes feel as if they were full of needles.

"What do you see?" he groaned.

"I think it's—it's *blood*

—on the water!" gasped Nan Tester.

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THAT moved Monk to a superior effort. He held his eyes open and stared. He raked the whole surface of the inlet. Finally, he perceived the spot where the water looked vaguely scarlet.

The next instant, Monk was out of the shelter of the sand dune. He dashed forward. Rifles *whanged* out. The concealed marksmen seemed to be shooting from the other side of the inlet. Miraculously, they missed Monk.

The homely chemist hit the water, splashed a few yards, and got out where it was deep enough for him to swim under the surface. He reached the spot where the water had appeared scarlet. It *was* scarlet.

Monk dived. The water was very deep, fully three fathoms, which was deep for this shoal-infested section of coast. He found nothing. Up he came for breath, and to try again. He repeated the search.

He did not give it up until he was virtually exhausted, and sanity asserted itself. There was a strong current under the surface: the tide beginning to go out. He did not have a chance in a million of finding the bronze man's body, and his chances of getting shot were considerably more likely.

He made it ashore safely, more through luck than good judgment. Monk was notoriously a careless soul, when the going got violent. He rejoined Nan Tester.

"They killed Doc!" he choked.

THE homely chemist sprawled down in the sand, where he was sheltered, and lay there. He did not feel like doing anything more. Somehow, the will to do had all gone out of him.

"It was an incredible thing that happened to the plane," Nan Tester said finally, to get Monk's mind away from thoughts of Doc. "Just what *did* happen?"

Monk shook his head, but otherwise did not move. The wind had blown sand over his legs, his body, almost covering them.

"It was something this Metal Master devil is able to do," he said. "Either something was hidden aboard the plane that caused the metal to melt, or they shot something against the plane, or we ran into something."

"From where did the smoke come?" the girl queried.

"From a smoke bomb of Doc's," Monk replied. "The cover of the smoke bomb must have been the first thing to melt. The chemical caused the smoke the instant it was exposed to the air."

The girl seemed to consider. She shook her head.

"I didn't hear anything hit the plane," she said.

Monk grasped his belt and held it where she could inspect it. The belt buckle was completely gone.

"Just melted" Monk said. "And there wasn't no heat, either. Same way with the chain-mail undergarment I was wearing. It just melted. Some of it ran down my trouser legs. The rest is stuck about my waist. It's hard now. Probably can't get it off without a lot of work with a diamond-pointed cutter. I don't think a cutting

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torch would remove it, without burning the heck out of me."

He also pointed out some other freakish things that had happened. The eyelets had melted out of his shoes. A pocket knife, a compass and some coins which had been in his pockets were now shapeless lumps.

"But it's impossible!" gasped Nan Tester. "Metal cannot be melted by something that would not harm the human body. You're a chemist. You should know about such things."

Monk considered.

"I'm not so sure," he said. "This change is what would be called physical, instead of chemical. In other words, the properties of the metal assume their original nature after being in the liquid state. Matter is made up of molecules, which in turn are composed of atoms. These are held together by an attraction, call it *affinity*, or whatever you want, which is not too thoroughly understood by scientists. Now, if this Metal Master could have found a way to—"

Monk fell suddenly silent. He had thought of something. A new look of concern overspread his features.

"Ham!" he gasped. "What's become of him? And my hog Habeas?"

Ham had landed some distance down the beach, due to the strong wind. He had not landed in the water, but inshore among the dunes. Monk had naturally expected him to take a little time in joining them.

"We gotta look for Ham!" Monk exploded.

Immediately, he began to crawl through the dunes, toward the spot where Ham had come down. They had not gone far when there was a slight noise ahead. Habeas Corpus, the pig, appeared, big ears flying, plainly delighted to arrive. Habeas gave Chemistry, the simian, a good natured nip by way of showing pleasure. Chemistry had been squatted on the beach, behind Monk and the girl.

"Ham'll be here in a minute, I guess," Monk grunted.

But several minutes passed, and no Ham. Monk crawled forward. The young woman kept close at his heels.

Shortly, they found something that left them rigid and bewildered. On the sand lay a reddish patch, where some coagulating crimson fluid had caused the sand grains to stick together. The wind had blown loose sand away from this, leaving it elevated a little.

Near by lay Ham's parachute.

"Ham musta skinned himself when he came down," Monk muttered. "Probably walked away, and the wind blew sand in his tracks."

But the tone of Monk's voice inferred that he doubted this.

MONK stood there for a bit, watching Habeas Corpus. Long ago, Monk had discovered that he could often learn things by keeping an eye on the ungainly shote. Habeas, Monk noted, seemed uneasy. He kept sidling away, as if anxious to leave the vicinity.

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"Sick 'em!" Monk urged. "Find our pal, Ham!"

Monk gave these exhortations merely by way of experiment. But they got results. Habeas emitted a few grunts, apparently by way of indicating he did not think much of the general idea, then he set off through the sand.

Monk and Nan Tester followed. Chemistry ambled behind.

For some time now, there had been no shooting. Probably the riflemen across the inlet could not see them. The sand, seemingly as fine as flour, got in their eyes, their lungs. The wind drove it everywhere, like snow.

"Look!" Nan Tester gasped suddenly. "I think I saw something over there, partially covered in the sand!"

Monk looked. He could see nothing. His eyes still watered from the sand which the bullet had knocked into them.

"Let's have a look at the place," he muttered.

The spot seemed to be beyond a ridge of sand. They walled up this ridge at times almost waist-deep in the sand. A few bushes grew along the top. They worked through these cautiously. And disaster struck.

A blow, sudden, violent, struck Monk in the back. He was not balanced too well at the moment, and he went over. Head over heels, he flopped down the side of the dune. An avalanche of sand started, gathered, covered him in a choking flood.

In the confusion of the moment, Monk was conscious of several things, none of them pleasant.

The girl had shoved him. Shoved him without warning. But why?

The next instant, he decided he knew. Some one sprang upon him. Blinded, half buried in the sand, he could not see the assailant.

Misgivings washed over Monk coldly. The girl had tricked him! She must be one of the Metal Master's crowd. She had shoved him into the hands of foes lying in ambush. Monk, blinded as he was, was in no condition to fight them off.

Chapter XVII. SMOOTH TONGUE

THE homely chemist, Monk, was completely covered with sand at the moment. He was not the only individual in this position.

Doc Savage was likewise covered by sand. It would have been possible to walk directly over the spot where he lay, without noting his presence. Only an especially keen observer would have attached any importance to an object which resembled a grayish weed stem protruding from the sand.

The stem was a telescoping fiber tube, and the bronze man was breathing through it. The thing was one of his gadgets, actually part of his periscope device. He had unclipped the reflecting mirrors and lenses from the end.

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Doc, by breathing through the tube, had managed to swim under water to a small arm of the inlet which projected into the dunes. He had crawled out without being observed.

"I tell you, the bronze guy didn't drown!" growled a voice. "Them was his tracks we found. He's around here somewhere!"

That was the reason Doc Savage had concealed himself. He had accomplished this by digging into the base of a sand dune and starting a slide which had completely covered him. By now, the wind would have drifted his tracks full of sand—he hoped.

"Listen, I saw blood on the water where the bronze guy sank after we shot at him!" said another voice.

"Don't ever believe anything you see, where Doc Savage is concerned!" snorted the other.

That was not bad advice. Doc often had occasion to use imitation blood, and he carried a phial of red chemical in his unusual vest to serve that purpose. On the present occasion, there was no metal in the vest, and none of the gadgets therein were of metal, so the paraphernalia had escaped the mysterious influence which had downed the plane. This was further evidence that Doc Savage had a good idea, of what he was going up against, and had prepared in advance.

The searching party came close. Doc Savage—the cotton in his ears kept out the sand, but not all sound—could detect the grinding violence of their footsteps. Then they went on.

Doc waited a bit. Then he got out of the sand and examined the tracks made by the gang. As he had expected, they were spread out in a long skirmish line. Had he not hidden himself, they most certainly would have found him.

Backtracking a bit, Doc turned to the left. He made for the spot where they had seen Gorham Gage Gettian. The spot was toward the inner end of the inlet, some distance from the spot where the plane had met its weird mishap.

The bronze man had noted, from the air, the contour of the dunes. He searched now, and located one which had been near Gettian. Going to it, he changed his course and began to search.

He found Gettian almost at once.

"We'll never get away from this terrible island alive!" Gettian wailed.

GETTIAN crouched under a shrub, where he was both concealed and sheltered somewhat from the blowing sand.

"Are you hurt?" Doc Savage asked him.

"Only exhausted," explained Gettian. "I ran myself down trying to flee from them."

The bronze man nodded, and seemed to be listening for some signs of their enemies.

"This island is an incredible spot!" Gettian volunteered. "The place has some kind of fantastic power! You saw what happened to your plane!"

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"You think the *island* did that?" Doc asked sharply.

"From the way the men talked, I think so," groaned bald-headed Gettian. "There's something about the island which causes all metal to become liquid. That is the way I escaped. They had handcuffs on me. The cuffs simply turned to liquid and ran off my wrists."

Doc Savage made his small, eerie trilling noise briefly. The sound was tiny, furtive, and filled with some peculiar undertone. Surprise, puzzlement sat Gettian's hairless features for a time. Then he realized Doc Savage was the source of the queer trilling.

"Don't you think it's the island?" he asked.

The bronze man seemed not to hear. Instead, he put an inquiry of his own.

"How much have you learned?"

Gettian made a feeble gesture.

"Only that they are going to use this—this incredible thing that liquefies metals—to—use it to go out and take what they want from the world!" Gettian shuddered. "There was some talk of a first gesture, something horrible enough to show the world that they meant business. Something about bringing down a huge office building—"

"What is that?" Doc Savage rapped.

"They're going to—destroy an office building—take scores of lives—as the start of a terrorism campaign," said Gettian.

"What building? When?"

Gettian shook his head, made a gesture of running his fingers through his hair, although he had no hair and did not look as if he had had any for years.

"I do not know," he said. "You understand, I just heard them talking about this."

"What else have you heard?"

"I—I—" Gettian paused to swallow. "I think I know who their chief is. It—it's—well, incredible! I could hardly believe it! But some talk—they didn't know I was listening—this name was mentioned as the leader."

Gettian was getting his words out with difficulty, as if he found the news difficult to convey. Doc Savage waited for him to continue.

"The name of the person," Gettian groaned finally, "is Nan Tester!"

DOC SAVAGE eyed the other man intently. The lights were a little brighter in the bronze man's strange flake-gold eyes. His trilling seemed to sound, or maybe it didn't. The wind among the sand dunes was making faint wailing sounds, and maybe it was that.

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"It's incredible!" Gettian gasped. "I don't believe that—that sweet young girl could be back of such an enterprise as this."

Doc Savage said nothing. Instead he made a slight gesture.

"Let's work over to the seaward side of the island," he suggested.

"But what about your two men? And that girl? If she's with them, their lives are in deadly danger. This gang is utterly unscrupulous! They will commit murder without the slightest hesitation!"

"They will have to take care of themselves, for the time being," Doc Savage said. "Come on."

They worked through the dunes. Going was difficult. Frequently, they stumbled. Once, Doc Savage seemed to lose his balance completely, and he and Gettian went tumbling down a steep slope of loose sand, all tangled with each other.

They got up and went on. They could hear the wet smack of surf on the seaward shore.

Gettian stopped suddenly. He clapped hands over his person.

"It's gone!" he exploded. "A gun I managed to steal from the gang! A gun that escaped turning into liquid. I must have lost it!"

"Wait here," Doc Savage breathed.

Then the bronze man was gone. Moments passed. Then he drifted back, a metallic ghost gliding over the sand. He handed Gettian an ugly-looking automatic.

"It was lying where we fell down that dune," Doc said.

Gettian took the gun. He checked to make sure it was not sand-clogged; checked the bullets. All of the cartridges were in place, and all were nosed with lead. Gettian carefully blew the sand out of the mechanism.

Atop the last tall dune along the shore, Doc Savage came to a halt. He lay there for some time, flake-gold eyes straining out to sea.

"Ships don't usually pass this close inshore, do they?" Gettian muttered curiously.

DOC SAVAGE seemed not to hear. Although it was not a pleasant place to lie, he did not move. And he kept his gaze fixed on the sea.

"Where is Decitez?" Doc asked, once.

"A prisoner of the Metal Master's men," replied Gettian.

"And where are they?"

"Back among the dunes. At least, they were there when I escaped. They may not be there now. They came here to this island to get—something. I don't know what. But it is something they have to have to carry out

their infernal plans."

Doc Savage seemed about to say something more. But he fell to watching the sea more intently. He even lifted a little.

"What is it?" Gettian demanded, straining his own eyes and apparently not seeing anything.

"The schooner," Doc Savage said. "The *Innocent*."

"

Oh!" gasped Gettian sharply. "How did you learn about—her?"

"Through a certain source of information known only to myself," the bronze man said quietly.

Gettian wet his lips. The setting sun was casting a weird red light over the dunes, and the glow gave Gettian's skull-like head a strangely fiery aspect.

"How much do you know?" Gettian croaked.

"Just about all of it," Doc Savage said. "What the Metal Master is—and who."

Gettian made a gargling sound. He took his automatic pistol out of his clothing and pointed it at Doc Savage.

He made his gargling again. Then he pulled the trigger.

Chapter XVIII. THE BRONZE MAN ACTS

SMALL boys often use match heads in their Fourth-of-July cap pistols, when they run out of caps. Match heads are not very satisfactory ammunition, because they do not make much of a report.

Gettian's automatic, when he pulled the trigger, made about such a sound as a cap pistol makes with a match head. The smallness of the report startled Gettian. It horrified him. Again, he jerked trigger. Nothing happened, not even the click of the hammer dropping, for the slide had not operated to eject the other cartridge and cock the weapon.

"

Waw-w-w-w-r-k" Gettian choked, evidently trying to cry out in fear.

Then he tried to run. He might as well not have tried. Bronze hands, clamping upon him, held him entirely helpless, forced him down in the soft sand. Attempts at great screams convulsed his lungs. They did not escape, because metallic hands had closed his throat passages.

Doc Savage searched the man. The fellow had no weapons.

"The powder was removed from your cartridges after my fortune in slipping it from your pocket when bumping into you and causing that fall down the dune," Doc Savage told him.

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Bald Gettian was now pale in the gathering darkness. He looked as if he believed his hope of life were going away with the setting sun. He made a motion indicating he wished to speak, and Doc released his throat grip.

"When did you first know I wasn't—well, what I claimed I was?" he queried.

"Since before meeting you," the bronze man replied. "Your whole story—about not knowing anything about the Metal Master—was false. The tin box which you claimed Louis Tester had left in your safe, and must explain why you were involved—the box was imaginary. There never was one."

Gettian swallowed desperately, but did not try to make denial.

"I was not lying to you about Nan Tester!" he said desperately.

Doc Savage said, "You cannot tell anything which is not already known to me."

"How did you learn so much?" Gettian demanded, fear giving way somewhat to disgust.

"Through the employment of a rather ordinary trick, and a bit of good fortune," Doc Savage replied.

"I don't understand!"

The bronze man let the matter remain in the dark, making no answer.

Gettian, angered and still more of his fear gone, tried suddenly to cry out in hopes of attracting his fellows, for it was by now evident that he had a connection with the Metal Master's gang.

Doc Savage observed the bald man's intention, however, and acted enough in advance to forestall the attempt. He grasped Gettian's neck, and his cabled, incredibly strong fingers exerted that skilled pressure which brought the strange paralytic semi-insensibility.

Heaving the helpless man across a shoulder, Doc Savage set out through the dunes. He went southward, well below the inlet, then crossed over to the other side and headed north again.

He was hunting Monk, Ham and Nan Tester.

It got dark, and became rather chilly. The wind died down for a while, then a land breeze sprang up from the opposite direction. The surf, which had been pounding, decreased as the offshore breeze knocked down the seas.

There was a moon. It cast a white light, like that which might come from a distant gasoline lantern.

Doc Savage did not attempt to trail his men. Their tracks would have been covered long ago. Instead, he paused from time to time and emitted a tiny, animallike squeaking noise.

In time, Doc's strange noise gained results. There was a slight sound ahead. The bronze man stopped, waited. An ungainly, manlike creature appeared.

It was Chemistry, Ham's pet simian, answering the lifelike monkey squeaks which Doc Savage had been making. The homely, diminutive anthropoid, recognized the bronze man, bounced up and down.

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"Go find Ham!" Doc directed softly, and Chemistry set off. Doc followed silently, carrying his burden. He had gone no more than a hundred yards when he caught soft voices.

Monk was growling, "That insect Chemistry is a tort, that's what he is!"

"You don't know what a tort is, you missing link!" Ham snapped.

"It's a legal wrong!" Monk retorted. "If that Chemistry ain't a legal wrong, I'd like to know—"

Monk broke off, squeaked, and dived behind a bush as Doc Savage appeared with the unexpectedness of a bronze ghost.

"Blazes!" Monk gargled delightedly; "As Renny would say, 'Holy cow!' We figured you were dead!"

"And you rescued Gettian!" Ham exploded.

Ham sprang forward; then, perceiving the state Gettian was in and recognizing it as the paralysis which was Doc's specialty, the dapper lawyer looked astounded in the bright moonlight.

"So this guy is one of the crooks?" Ham clipped.

Doc Savage did not answer directly.

"Guard this man Gettian," the bronze man directed. "He may recover from the paralysis in the course of time, and if he does, watch him closely that he does not escape."

"When he recovers, I'll induce another kind of paralysis!" Monk grinned, and blew on a hairy fist.

Nan Tester, who had been concealed to one side, came forward.

"You were not harmed when they shot at you in the bay?" she asked anxiously.

Doc Savage told her about the breathing tube which had enabled him to keep beneath the surface. He spoke quietly, with no suspicion of her in his voice.

He addressed Monk and Ham a word of warning.

"Better not talk," he said. "It might lead to you being found."

"We got Chemistry and Habeas Corpus posted out on guard," Monk explained. "They can do a better job of look-outing than a couple of watchdogs."

Doc Savage nodded. "Had any difficulties?"

"I received a slight cut when my parachute dropped me on a thorn bush," Ham admitted. "Nothing serious."

"Not half as serious as what he done to me when he thought I was one of that gang on his trail!" Monk growled.

"That was my fault," Nan Tester said contritely. "I saw Ham behind a bush, thought it was one of our enemies with a gun, and tried to shove Monk to safety."

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Monk chuckled softly. "Boy, I thought for a minute that the young lady here had shoved me right into a trap!"

"I like that!" the girl said, without rancor. "It shows you have a lot of faith in me."

"Gee whiz, now!" Monk told her hastily. "I didn't for a minute mistrust you!"

"You," Ham told Monk sarcastically, "are a two-faced liar!"

Monk bloated indignantly at the accusation. He thought for a moment.

"What about you?" he grated.

"Me?" Ham asked primly. "I never tell a lie."

"How about you telling Miss Tester, here, that you were not married and never have been?" Monk demanded. "What about that wife and thirteen children?"

Ham made sounds, small, enraged ones. This story about his having a wife and thirteen children was a lie which Monk was in the habit of telling every personable young lady for whose affections they had a chance to vie. Monk never showed the least conscience about telling the fib.

It invariably maddened Ham, who neglected to take into account that he occasionally told even more libelous whoppers concerning Monk.

Nan Tester broke into the exchange, gasping, "Where did Mr. Savage go?"

The bronze man had gone noiselessly into the night.

DOC SAVAGE, aware that the quarrel was one which would rage, in whispers, throughout the night, or until something else came up, had eased away into the moon-shadow behind a tall dune. He traveled swiftly, his objective the arm of sand which extended out to the mouth of the bay on one side. There was little necessity for being careful where he stepped, since the sand muffled footfalls.

Reaching the outermost extremity of the sandy peninsula without incident, he paused. He kept on all fours, for the ridges of sand were low and moist here. Spray from the waves breaking on the beach was occasionally carried over him in a fine mist. Noise of the surf helped muffle any sounds he might have made.

He fixed his eyes out to sea. The seas, piling up when they reached the shoal water close inshore, made it a little difficult to get an observation.

He saw the schooner finally. She was far out, but coming in on the starboard tack. He caught the glint of moonlight on her sails.

Doc stripped off his outer clothing. When he had finished, he was clad in nothing but shorts.

He entered the water, keeping down flat until the surf mauled him about, then struck straight out to sea. He did not swim with an overhand stroke. Flashing arms might attract attention. He dived through the crests of the big breakers, to keep them from throwing him back ten and twenty feet at a time. When he was perhaps three-eighths of a mile out, he used the overhand stroke, which was faster.

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The tirelessness with which he swam was almost uncanny.

The water was black, cold. A wave broke occasionally, going sloshing past, foaming and boiling. There was, rather strangely for such chilly water, a bit of phosphorescence. A streak of phosphorescence appeared nearby, and Doc watched it intently, thinking it might be a shark.

But there came a loud, watery snort, proving it was a porpoise blowing. More of the porpoise came and swam in a procession near the bronze man, popping playfully out of the water.

The bronze giant's swimming stroke was machinelike in its regularity. He used the rapid racing kick, with many beats to each arm stroke.

From the tops of the waves, he began to see the schooner. It was the *Innocent*, undoubtedly, for she was beating in toward the inlet at the north end of Alligator Island, still on the starboard tack.

Doc Savage got in her path. He would have only one chance to get aboard. He would have to grab the bobstay, the chain which ran from the end of the bowsprit down to the waterline. If he missed it, he would be out of luck.

He lay and waited, only his face out of the water. The schooner loomed larger and larger. He could hear the sigh of her stem through the water, the slop and gurgle of seas. She was heeled a little, for she was flying mainsail, foresail and both headsails, and was sheeted hard.

If he missed that bobstay—But he didn't. The lower part of the bobstay chain was slick and foul, and only the strength of practiced sinews kept his grip. He climbed swiftly, got hold of the safety basket under the bowsprit and hung there, listening.

"We gotta point 'igher'n this to make the bloody inlet, Punning," said a voice.

"Sort of point to make our point, eh, Tops'1?" chuckled another voice.

THE two voices were immediately above. The men must be leaning against the anchor winch. That meant even Doc Savage's skill and stealth was unlikely to get him aboard at the bows without being observed.

The lee side was the dark side, and Doc Savage began to work aft, hanging to the solid rail by his hands. He moved with great caution at first. They did not discover him. He reached the section amidships.

He got a break. His feet encountered a porthole, which was open, and a moment of exploration with his toes showed how large it was. He got a foot inside, and with the grip of prehensile toes managed to hold himself until he got his hands on the porthole rim.

That porthole had been made large enough to heave through whole cases of rum at a time, along with weights to make the rum sink. Doc Savage got inside without great difficulty.

It was a stateroom with double bunks and a locker. There was no light and the door was closed. Easing over, Doc opened the door, reconnoitered dimly lighted reaches, and eased outside.

The crew seemed to be on deck. They should be, with the craft ready to make a harbor.

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Doc Savage ignored the open doors along the passage. He tried those that were closed, and rapped on the first locked one.

"Holy cow!" came Renny's rumble from within. "Can'tcha leave a guy alone?"

Renny sounded as if he were in a very bad humor.

Doc Savage spoke softly. He did not use English, but Mayan—the ancient version of the tongue. Practically no one in the civilized world outside of Doc Savage and his men spoke the language.

They used it to communicate when they did not wish to be understood by others. Moreover, it was a guttural tongue which lent itself excellently to furtive discussions. Anyone overhearing it might well think some one was having difficulty clearing his throat.

"Holy cow!" Renny exploded again from inside. Then he became furtive, and was at the door, demanding, "How in blazes did you get here, Doc? Where are we?"

Instead of replying, Doc Savage examined the door fastenings. They were simple—when one was outside. He undid them, slipped in and joined Renny.

"Hey!" gulped Renny. "Let's get outa here! I've seen too much of the place!"

"Time to talk," Doc Savage told him in a voice so low that it carried little more than inches. "What have you learned? Or have you learned anything?"

"I have," said Renny. "Louis Tester is locked up across the corridor and down a piece. I discovered he knows the Continental code. We got to tapping to each other. I gave him my story. And he gave me his. Man, it was plenty!"

"Suppose you let me have it," Doc Savage requested.

"The brains behind this whole mess is a guy named Napoleon Murphy Decitez," announced Renny.

Chapter XIX. THE SHIP THAT FELL APART

RENNY took a deep breath and began to speak rapidly. He had difficulty keeping his rumbling voice down to a wisp. It was useless for him to try to whisper. Renny's whisper was like escaping steam.

"This lad Decitez turned out to be much too sly, for his own good," said Renny. "It seems that he had been financing Louis Tester and knew all about this thing they call the Metal Master. He decided to try to steal it. Old Seevers, a laboratory assistant of Louis Tester, found out, and they had to kill him to keep him from getting to you."

Renny paused to listen a moment for some signs of the schooner's crew, then went on.

"Decitez had a gang all organized, but none of them knew he was the chief." Renny chuckled softly. "He radioed Tops'l Hertz to trap Louis Tester, signing the message 'CX,' and Tops'l did. Then Tops'l found out about this Metal Master thing and decided to grab it for himself, but he needed a helper in New York to make

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sure you didn't interfere. And who did he pick? Napoleon Murphy Decitez! Tops'l's ears will be red when he finds that out. Louis Tester hasn't told them the truth. Tester has been stringing them along."

"Why?"

"Says he figures if he could get the gang split up and fighting, they might kill each other off."

Doc Savage said nothing for some moments. Then he asked a question.

"Did Louis Tester admit developing this Metal Master thing?"

"He did," Renny replied. "Tester is an electro-chemical experimenter. He developed this process of liquefying metals without the use of heat."

"Did he say how it is done?"

"Nope," said Renny. "I asked him. But he said it was a secret."

Doc Savage was silent, as if considering what had been imparted. He did not comment. He was silent so long that Renny became impatient.

"There's a guy named Punning Parker on this hooker," growled the big-fisted engineer. "He's queer."

"What do you mean—queer?"

"I got a funny idea I've known him somewhere before. I'm not sure, because I've never gotten a good look at him."

Doc Savage asked casually, "He is working with Tops'l Hertz?"

"They're like that!" Renny crossed fingers to show what he meant. "This Punning Parker is a mean egg, what I mean! I've heard him sitting on deck telling how many men he's killed in his time, and some of the things he's done! He says Scotland Yard wants him now."

Doc Savage said, "We've killed about enough time. The schooner should be close to the inlet."

The bronze man opened the door of the improvised cell. There was no one in the corridor. They went to the door of Louis Tester's cubicle. The fastening proved to be a simple affair of a chain and a bar, and Doc Savage loosened it.

"Tester!" Renny called softly.

"Oh! You've gotten free," came an almost inarticulate gasp from within.

Then Louis Tester, red-headed, and gaunt now, appeared in the door. He blinked a little in the dim light of the passage.

He saw Doc Savage. Instantly, he did a peculiar thing.

He threw back his head and squawled at the top of his voice.

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DOC SAVAGE had developed an ability to move with lightning speed in emergencies, and this did not fail him now. One hand fastened upon Louis Tester's mouth, pinching the man's lips together, stopping the outcry. Simultaneously, his other hand made a fist and rapped the tall, red-headed young man's jaw.

Louis Tester collapsed, stunned.

But some of the outcry had sounded, had attracted attention on deck. Feet came clattering across the planking of the deck, heading for a companionway.

"Quick!" Doc Savage breathed.

The bronze man lifted Louis Tester, rushed with him into the stateroom by which he had first entered the below-decks section of the schooner. Renny followed. He slammed the door.

Whipping to the open port, Doc glanced out. The schooner was wearing off a little, driving straight into the tiny bay. The headlands were almost abeam.

"Out!" Doc rapped. "Immediately!"

Renny knew what that tone meant. He heaved up, put his feet through the port, got his body out and hung by his hands.

"Quiet!" Doc warned.

Renny hit the water without much of a splash. He stroked into the depths immediately, in order not to foul the propeller, which was not turning. The *Innocent* was stealing into the little harbor under sail alone.

Doc Savage shoved Louis Tester through the port, lowered him, then followed. There was not much commotion. But just as he went, Doc heard a howl from the passage.

The two empty cabins had been found.

Like Renny, Doc went into the depths. He kept a hand over senseless Louis Tester's mouth and nostrils, to prevent the man drowning. And for Tester's safety also, Doc came to the surface much sooner than he would have otherwise.

Renny was floating with little more than his nostrils out. Doc waited. Louis Tester began to struggle weakly. He was reviving.

"Ahoy, *Innocent!*" Doc Savage roared unexpectedly.

"What the bloody 'ell!" howled Tops'l Hertz.

"Don't go into that harbor!" Doc shouted. "They probably have a trap set for you!"

"Who the 'ades are you?" Tops'l roared.

Doc Savage did not answer.

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"Wear up!" Tops'l howled to his seamen. "Drop a 'ook!" We'll get overside an' pick them blokes up!"

The schooner was straining to come up into the teeth of the breeze, when calamity struck.

THE helmsman on the *Innocent* bawled out the first alarm.

"Something's happened!" he shrieked, utter horror in his voice. "The wheel! *It's come off in my hand!*"

"

What the 'ell!" whooped Tops'l. "You must be barmy!"

Those were the last coherent words that came from the schooner. The rest was a bedlam of incredulous, horrified howls.

Things were happening to the schooner. Strange, fantastic things. The jib and staysail suddenly came loose. The metal stays to which they were fastened had simply become a little rivulet of liquid that ran down and splashed into the salty water.

Sails fell, as the metal pins in blocks melted. Gaffs came crashing down on deck. And the decks promptly fell to pieces under the impact. Men who had found themselves standing on solid deck planking were suddenly descending along with falling wood.

The boat was coming to pieces. Nothing else described it. She had been fastened, as a matter of fact, with a bronze alloy fastening, and these had all become liquid. Brass bars over skylights melted and became puddles that rolled like quicksilver down the glass.

The stays, stout metal cables, came splashing to the decks or into the water. Boom fastenings did the same and the booms fell. Davits let lifeboats smack down on deck, and the lifeboats in turn fell apart.

There were, of course, some parts which the expert joinery of shipbuilding kept together, even though the fastenings were liquefied. But these were not enough to hold the schooner together.

In an astoundingly short space of time, the fine, fast schooner was a jumble of bobbing wreckage in which men swam and cursed.

Then, on shore, a machine gun set up a hideous gobbling uproar.

LOUIS TESTER was able to swim by now. Cold salt water is an excellent revivifying influence. Tester, indeed, had been conscious enough to understand that Doc Savage had called, just a moment too late, a warning that the schooner had best not enter the little bay.

"Swim to shore with Renny!" Doc Savage directed, and gave Louis Tester a shove.

The red-headed young man swam off and joined Renny. They stroked with great vigor for a time, heading for the side of the bay opposite that on which the machine gun was cackling so hideously. It was this side of the bay, although they did not know it as yet, upon which Doc Savage had left Nan Tester, Monk and Ham.

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After a bit, Renny and Louis Tester stopped swimming for a moment. What had happened to the schooner was so interesting they could not help watching it.

Louis Tester voiced something that was on his mind.

"That was a crazy thing, my yelling out when you fellows opened the door of that cabin," he said. "I was on edge, or something. For hours, I had been feeling as if I could not help screaming. And when I saw you, it just came out."

"Sure," said Renny. "Nervous tension caused it."

"I'm sorry," said Louis Tester. "I really am."

"Forget it."

"Thanks," said Tester. "But what I can't understand is why Doc Savage—the big fellow is Doc Savage, isn't he?—shouted out a warning to those devils on the schooner."

Renny rumbled a laugh.

"Doc has a queer philosophy of life," said the big-fisted engineer. "He doesn't believe in any one getting killed, not even those that you and I would think fully deserved it. I've known Doc to let a crook go, even when it was nearly impossible to capture the fellow any way but dead. Doc always got the guy later on, though."

"I've heard a lot about this man Savage," Louis Tester murmured.

"We'd better swim for shore," Renny said.

They saw Doc Savage, just before they struck out for the beach. The bronze man was treading water perhaps two-score yards from the floating débris of the schooner.

Doc seemed to be looking for something—or so a close observer would have decided. The bronze man's interest in the wreckage of the schooner, the men floundering about there, harassed by a storm of machine-gun lead from shore, was more than that of a mere spectator.

"Bloody damnation!" Tops'l Hertz was screaming. "Who's got a gun?"

"I had one," came Punning Parker's dry voice. "But it melted and ran out of the bottom of the holster. It looks as if we've been sort of liquidated, so to speak."

"Them devils!" howled Tops'l. "I'll fix 'em!"

"Keep your head down," Punning Parker advised, "or *you'll* get fixed."

Doc Savage turned and swam after Renny and Louis Tester. Swimming a great deal more swiftly than they, as he did, he reached the beach almost with them.

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THEY kept low among the sand dunes and ran to a point where they were not likely to be seen. Then they climbed a dune to watch the excitement.

It was a bloody business. The wreckage was floating compactly enough, and since the *Innocent* had been a sound, stout vessel, there was a large assortment of timbers of sufficient size to shelter men, even against machine-gun bullets.

Some of the seamen were not wise enough to stay in this shelter, and tried to swim to shore. They did not get far. There was enough moonlight to show their bobbing heads. Furthermore, the machine gun on shore was charged with tracer bullets—slugs filled with a compound that burns in flight, so that marksmen can tell where they are going. They leave a streak of smoke in the daytime, and are like flying sparks at night.

Four men from the wrecked schooner died before the machine gun on shore convinced them they had no chance.

"Stay 'ere!" howled Tops'l Hertz. "The tide'll drift us out to sea!"

"Sort of a *tide-away*," came Punning Parker's dry comment.

Punning Parker, whatever his other qualities, had an enviable nerve.

But Tops'l Hertz was wrong. There was a tide, but it was not taking the assorted pieces of the schooner out to sea. Rather, it was sweeping the litter of timbers, and boards closer to the shore on which the machine gun was stationed.

Tops'l's crowd of seamen had howled and cursed before, but it was nothing to their demonstration now. Desperation made them bold, and they ridded themselves of choice opinions concerning Tops'l Hertz and his ancestors back to the day when they had swung in trees by their tails.

"Sort of *tale-bearing* gentlemen," remarked Punning Parker.

A man cursed fiercely.

"I got all of them puns I can stand!" he gritted. "I'm gonna knock that guy's brains out, first chance I get!"

"That's a *knock-brained* idea," snorted Punning.

The machine gun had fallen silent, evidently while a fresh belt of ammo was fitted, and now it stuttered fiercely again. Moreover, a brilliant white light leaped out from some kind of a searchlight.

The deadly lead storm got Tops'l Hertz's nerve. He and his men had no weapons, were helpless to resist.

"'Ow about makin' a deal?" Tops'l howled.

Came silence. Those on shore seemed to be considering.

"You'd only try to double-cross us again!" called a voice which belonged to the missing-fingered Metal Master's lieutenant.

"You're crazy!" called Tops'l earnestly. "If'n I'd knowed 'ow tough you blokes was, I wouldn't a-ried nothin' in the first place!"

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There was a conference on shore.

"He's probably telling the truth at that," some one said.

So Tops'l Hertz, Punning Parker and the rest were ordered to swim ashore. They did so, rather fearfully at first; then, when they were not shot, joyfully, squealing like orphan pigs that had found themselves a new mother.

DOC SAVAGE said, "Now they will start looking for us"

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled softly. "There's a mob of 'em now. It looks to me as if we're gonna have some trouble!"

"It's possible," Doc Savage agreed.

They crept down off the dune, took the seaward beach and ran south. Then they headed inland among the dunes, and crossed the island. They went north again, toward the spot where Doc Savage had left his other aids.

They had circled their enemies, but chance of discovery was still existent, so Doc Savage moved along to the rear and a little apart from Renny and Louis Tester.

Thus it was that Louis Tester and Renny were almost alone, with Louis Tester a little in advance, when a gun muzzle came poking out of a scrubby bush.

"Get your hands up, you, guys!" growled a voice.

Chapter XX. THE PLANS THAT FELL APART

DOC SAVAGE, hurrying forward, said, "It's all right, Ham."

"Who's this fellow?" asked Ham, coming out from behind the bush with Gorham Gage Gettian's pistol, which he had reloaded with good shells.

"

Louis Tester," Doc explained.

The dapper lawyer looked Louis Tester over with great interest.

"Your sister will certainly be delighted to see you," he said.

"Nan is—here?" gasped Louis Tester hoarsely.

They went on among the dunes, and in a moment came upon Nan Tester, Monk and Gorham Gage Gettian—the latter neatly bound and gagged with his own clothing—concealed among the sifting ridges of sand.

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Instantly, Nan and Louis Tester were locked in an embrace of brother—and—sister affection. The young woman made soft sobbing sounds for a few moments, and the brother murmured comfortingly.

Monk, standing near Doc and Ham, studied Louis Tester with interest. It was the first time Monk had seen the brother. Evidently the impression was favorable.

Doc Savage said quietly, "Keep together—all of you."

"Righto," agreed Renny. "And what are you going to do?"

"Look about a bit," the bronze man explained.

With that, he made sure they were together in as good a concealment as the dunes offered; made sure also that they reached the shelter by walking in the shadow of the dunes, where their footsteps would not stand out to catch the attention of any chance passer-by.

Then the bronze man worked toward the shore of the tiny bay, where the Metal Master's followers were taking charge of Tops'l Hertz's crowd.

The crowd was still on the beach. Part of it, rather. One group had obviously departed. But there were still ten or a dozen Metal Master followers there, all well-equipped with guns, and watching Tops'l Hertz, Punning Parker and their bedraggled and uneasy companions.

Tops'l Hertz was saying, "Hi don't see 'ow in blazes you got the schooner!"

"It's simple," said one of his captors. "Have a look!"

THE man carried a pocket flashlight. He walked to a large sand dune which stood close to the water's edge, stooped and picked up what appeared to be a slope of sand. It was a curtain, cleverly camouflaged.

A box was revealed. Machinery filled the thing, apparatus that looked complicated. It was obviously electrical in nature, and there were vacuum tubes, coils, strange-looking systems of wires that might have been reflectors.

"There's another one down the beach," said the man doing the explaining. "You see, to accomplish the liquefying of metal at a distance takes two sets of apparatus and a lot of power. You'd be surprised how much power. We've got a big motor-generator set in an old barge hidden among the sand dunes, and the cables run under the sand to this spot."

"Hi'll be blasted!" murmured Tops'l.

"Each set of apparatus sends out a controlled field of combination electromagnetic and sonic nature," the man continued. "One of these fields will liquefy metal at close range, but at a distance it takes two. We focus the fields, and where they meet, any kind of metal will melt."

Tops'l swore softly.

"I went over the plans of the thing that we found in Louis Tester's plane," he said. "I got a bloomin' good idea of 'ow it works. But I still can't figure 'ow a 'uman body ain't affected by it."

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"That took a bit of experimenting," said the other. "It is accomplished by adjusting the apparatus. A man holds his hand in the beam when the thing is being tuned up. When the hand begins to hurt, he knows the thing is off a bit."

"Hm—m—m," said Tops'l in a tone which conveyed that he still did not understand.

"Look," said the man. "I'll try to make it clearer. Take a lump of ice, and you have a solid. What will melt it?"

"Heat," Tops'l declared promptly.

"Pressure, too," said the other. "In other words, anything capable of producing the proper molecular change. We have here a means of accomplishing the necessary change, in the *affinity* which maintains the atomic state, understand, rather than in the make-up of the molecules themselves. The actual technical description of how it is done is too complicated, and you'd have to study a few years on the subject to be able to understand it, anyway."

"It smacks of black bloody magic," said Tops'l.

"No, it doesn't. Take *sound*. Every one knows that the proper note sounded on a violin will cause a wine glass to break. Every one also knows that a strong electromagnetic field will actually *melt* many metals. In perfecting this device, those two facts were taken as a basis for experiments."

Tops'l snorted. "I still don't see why a blarsted 'uman ain't affected!"

The man making the explanations was patient.

"Take the sound that will break the wine glass," he said. "It don't affect a person. Take an electromagnetic field that will pick up hundreds of pounds of steel. The body don't actually feel that."

"I still don't—"

"Oh, forget it!" said the man. "This device only separates the molecules in the band which it is set to cover. We planted the devices here at the mouth of the bay as a defensive measure. Let it go at that."

At this point, a man came trotting up through the moonlight. He was breathless, but he looked happy. He came over and whispered something.

Doc Savage was lurking near by in the dunes. He had been picking up the talk, partially from what he could overhear and partially from what lip-reading he was able to do. The bronze man was an accomplished lip reader.

Doc could not hear what the newcomer was saying, but he could read the fellow's lips, because the man stood in the glow of the electric flash.

The bronze man's trilling came into being momentarily, faint and eerie and somewhat horrified. It was present only an instant, then died away, and Doc Savage himself went with it, gliding noiselessly from the vicinity.

Doc went directly to the spot where he had left his aids. He had already learned, from the lips of the messenger on the inlet shore, what he would find. The bronze man was merely verifying it.

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His aids, Nan and Louis Tester, and Gettian, were gone. Marks in the sand showed what had happened.

They had been seized.

THE bronze man required only a few moments to return to the inlet shore. The gang there was preparing to move. Tops'l Hertz, Punning Parker and the crowd off the *Innocent* were not exactly prisoners, but at the same time, they had not been fully accepted as members of the gang.

"We're stringin' along with you blokes," Tops'l said earnestly.

"And he's not *stringing* you when he says that," added Punning Parker. "It *Hertz* us to the quick to think you don't trust us."

"You," a man told Punning, "are going to be a pain in the neck!"

They walked off, bunched in a wary, compact group, heading toward the higher dunes inland.

"We've got all of Doc Savage's crowd but the bronze guy himself," said a man. "Come daylight, and we'll darn well get him!"

"Which will be a *well-come* moment, no doubt," said Punning.

"Will you stop them things!"

"

Will-ingly."

They went on.

"Over this way," said the guide.

They reached their objective. It was a large barge, which must have been washed high on shore during some violent gale of the past, and had been covered by sand.

"We found the thing, and dug the sand out of the inside and braced the top up a bit," said the guide. "It makes a neat place to build the machines."

"Sort of a work-*ship*," chuckled Punning.

A hole had been cut in the side of the barge. An electric light was glowing brightly in the interior, and men were already in there.

"Better douse that glim, or something," growled a voice. "We don't want the bronze guy to spot this place, if it can be helped."

Some one apparently hung a curtain in front of the light. The men began filing in.

"Post guards out in the dunes to watch for the bronze guy," directed a voice from inside the barge.

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There was sound of men tramping away through the sand. A burly fellow posted himself at the barge entrance, which was naturally the most desirous spot. But he was hardly stationed, when a voice growled at his elbow.

"Who's here at the door?" the voice asked.

"Snig," said the other.

"O. K., Snig," said the voice. "Boss says for you to take the top of that big dune to the north. He's sending another guy to the door."

The man muttered profanely under his breath, then walked off.

He had no way of knowing that it was Doc Savage who had spoken to him, imitating the voice of one of the gang, and that he had gone off and left the bronze man in charge of the door.

Chapter XXI. THE PLAN

THE interior of the barge had been partitioned off into rooms for cooking, sleeping, and a workshop. Nearest the entrance was a large chamber with bunks along the walls and a table in the center: the living quarters. Behind that somewhere, a motor-generator set was making a great deal of noise. Some one turned the machine off.

Tops'l Hertz, Punning Parker and the rest gathered in the bunk room. None of the others were in sight.

"Where's Doc Savage's crowd?" asked a voice.

"In the back," another replied. "Locked up."

"What we gonna do with 'em?"

"Get rid of the whole outfit," said the first. "They've caused too much trouble already."

Tops'l Hertz wanted to impress himself upon his newly acquired associates. He hoped they would be associates, and not give him what they planned to give Doc Savage's assistants. Tops'l wanted them to think he was properly bloodthirsty.

"Let's get the bronze bloke's bloody crowd out the way now!" growled Tops'l. "If nobody else wants the blarsted job, Hi'll do hit myself! Just gimme a gun, an' march 'em out!"

"Just a moment," said a voice. "There is something which must be settled."

This new speaker was in the rear, having come from one of the rooms partitioned off in the back. He did not show himself completely enough to be seen. It was gloomy inside the barge, for only a single electric bulb glowed, off to one side, and some one had wrapped an undershirt about that. There was a curtain at the door, to keep the light from being seen outside.

"Who're you?" Tops'l Hertz demanded of the newcomer.

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"That question," said the voice, "hits at the heart of a mistake I have made."

"

Eh?"

"

I am the organizer of this whole project," said the other. "I am the one who, at times, has been called the Metal Master. Unfortunately, I tried to keep my identity a mystery, even to my own men, or some of them at least, and that resulted in a great many complications."

The man paused. He had not yet stepped out where all could see him.

"I had able lieutenants in New York, however," he continued. "They carried on for me, when I was unlucky enough to be temporarily sidetracked through the crookedness and double-crossing of men whom I had trusted."

Tops' l Hertz, faintly distinguishable in the glow from the electric bulb, squirmed visibly at this last remark. He knew at whom the reference was aimed.

Before more could be said, there was movement behind the man who had been speaking and another fellow appeared. This one came out into the light. He was a minor member of the gang.

The man was carrying a large, dark box with a handle. It was the box which Doc Savage, with the fake radiogram, had tricked the crowd into bringing from New York.

"Where did this strange box come from?" asked the voice of the obscure individual who had admitted being the chief of the Metal Master gang.

One of those who had come by plane from New York spoke up.

"Tops' l radioed Decitez to get it out of Louis Tester's hotel room and bring it along," the man explained. "We figured that meant it was important, so we brought it."

Tops' l Hertz blinked. Then he shook his head violently.

"I never sent no such a radiogram!" he yelled.

"Open that box!" barked the Metal Master chief.

Men started forward to obey the command.

Punning Parker, who had been standing by, lunged suddenly and grabbed a revolver from one of the others. He jumped clear. He waved the gun menacingly.

"Everybody just kinda stop and think!" he suggested grimly.

AN electric tension held every one. It was surprise, more than fear of the gun, although any one could tell that

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Punning Parker was not fooling.

"I been playing along easylike, hoping things would set themselves so I could take charge," said Punning Parker. "But it looks like I can't wait any longer. I don't want that box opened!"

The tension began to loosen. The men in front of the gun had been in front of guns before. And they were armed. Moreover, they were too many for any one man to watch.

"I don't want that box opened!" rasped Punning Parker.

Men began to shift slightly. It was only a matter of split-seconds until one would go for a gun. Then hell would rattle.

Movement came from the entrance. The curtain shoved back.

Doc Savage walked in. He stepped boldly forward, and plucked a holstered gun from the handiest man.

"Good night, Doc!" exploded the man known as Punning Parker. "If I had known you were there, I wouldn't have rushed things."

"It had to come to a head, anyway," the bronze man said quietly.

"Yeah," muttered Punning Parker. "But I've sure put things in a crack. We can't handle all these guys at once." He was right. The fact began to prove itself an instant later. A man went for his gun.

Doc Savage made it a practice never to carry a firearm, it being his conviction that bearing one tended to cause the individual carrying it to put too much reliance in the weapon, thereby bringing helplessness when the firearm was not at hand. But his attitude did not mean the bronze man could not shoot. He had spent countless hours in practice. That preparation bore fruit now.

The gun in his hand jumped, let out noise and a spike of flame. The man who had tried to draw fell down on the floor, screaming over a damaged hand.

But that did not help much. Other guns were out. They whooped and spilled lead wildly.

Doc shot out the one light. Lunging, he crossed the room and grabbed Punning Parker up bodily. Doc carried him through the door in the rear, which gave into the partitioned-off path of the barge.

"Got to free Renny and the others!" Doc rapped.

The bronze man found doors. One was locked, and through the cracks of it a light showed. Doc shot the lock—a small padlock—off, and rammed the door open.

The prisoners were within.

Big-fisted Renny got one look at Punning Parker. He opened his big fists.

"I been wantin' to take you apart!" he rumbled. "Here's my chance!"

"Wait!" Doc Savage rapped. "Don't you recognize him?"

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"Huh?" Renny squinted. "Holy cow! No! Should I?"

"Well, I like that!" snapped Punning Parker. "When the colleagues of the eminent Major Thomas J. Roberts don't even recognize—"

"

Long Tom!" Renny thundered. "You animated corpse! And to think I kept wondering where I'd met you before!"

MONK and Ham came flying out of the room, aiding Nan Tester between them.

"Come on!" Doc Savage breathed. "We have brisk prospects ahead of us!"

That was no exaggeration. A bullet came down the passage, sounding as if a fiddle string had broken. Nan Tester gasped, ducked back, and Monk and Ham hastily got her back into the room where they had been locked.

"This is sure gonna be tough!" Renny thumped.

It became very dark as Doc Savage extinguished the light in the prison room. Then the bronze man whipped out into the corridor. He kept low, near the floor, and traveled swiftly, for these men were shooting high, to kill.

There was a good deal of shifting about and cursing in the outer room. A man got to a flashlight and thumbed it on. The next instant, a chair, hurled expertly by the bronze man, hit him and he toppled.

"The bronze devil's back in 'ere!" howled Tops'l Hertz.

Some one fell over a chair, got up cursing.

"I'm gettin' outa here!" he snarled. "I'll do my scrapping where there's some room!"

That seemed to strike every one as a good idea. There was a movement for the door, slow at first, then more animated. It became a stampede.

Tops'l Hertz, anxious to overshadow his previous shortcomings by playing the lion in this fight, howled indignantly for them to stay and fight. Tops'l, who had made the grievous mistake of harboring the deceptive Punning Parker to his bosom, knew he had a lot to make up for.

The voice of the chief of the Metal Master crew also did some profane urging to stick inside. But before long, these two found themselves shouting alone. They followed their men.

Tops'l Hertz, however, paused to do something which he thought was wise.

"Cover the door with rifles!" shrieked the leader of the Metal Master gang.

Almost instantly, he swore.

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"What're you carrying?" he demanded of Tops'l Hertz.

"That sealed box the bronze guy tricked your men into bringing down 'ere!" barked Tops'l proudly.

"And why'n the devil bring that out here?" snarled the other.

"It's probably got some of the bronze guy's weapons in it," pointed out Tops'l. "He tricked our crowd into bringing 'em, so they'd be 'andy in case 'e lost 'is'n."

"Maybe you have got a brain, after all!" barked the other. "Put it down over here where we can watch it!"

Doc Savage was at the door in the side of the sand covered barge when he heard these words. Renny, anxious to get his big fists on some of their foes, was about to start a wild charge.

Doc Savage restrained him.

"Wait!" said the bronze man.

"Huh? Holy cow! They'll pen us up in here!"

"At least we will be safe from their bullets," Doc pointed out.

Long Tom came up.

"Say, Doc, what's in that box?" he barked. "You told me, when we were communicating by radio between your place and the schooner, that you were tricking them into bringing the box. But what's in it?"

"Something we won't find it necessary to use, let us hope," said the bronze man.

"Fat chance we got of using it!" snorted Renny. "We'll play the deuce getting our hands on it, now that they have the thing!"

NAN TESTER joined them, along with Monk and Ham.

"Take her back," Doc directed.

Before the young woman could object, Monk and Ham grasped her arms and hurried her back into the rear compartments of the old barge. They, too, felt she would be safer there, especially if their enemies had any hand grenades.

Rifle and revolver lead began drifting through the door of the barge. From now on, it would be suicide for any one to attempt to leave the hulk.

Nan Tester had a healthy curiosity, which she wanted satisfied.

"Who is that little, thin-looking man with Doc Savage—the one they called Punning Parker at first?" she asked.

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"That's Long Tom Roberts, electrical wizard," Monk explained. "I guess he's proved something of an actor, too. He's one of the five guys that help Doc. He was in Havana with Renny, investigating the narcotic smuggling rackets, when this trouble started."

"But how did he happen to be on the *Innocent*?" the young woman wanted to know.

"That," Monk said, "has got me beat."

Doc Savage, who seemed to be going over the interior of the barge to see just what the place held that might be useful in a defense, spoke from near by.

"At the start of this affair, cablegrams fell into my hands indicating Tops'l Hertz was going to become involved, as you will remember," he said. "Long Tom received a cable from me, directing him to get aboard Tops'l's schooner and do what he could to worm himself into the confidences of the gang and keep me supplied with information. He succeeded, for he had already laid a foundation for the job by pretending to be a disreputable character around Havana for a few weeks, as a part of his task in getting a line on the smuggling racket."

The bronze man was silent for a moment, as if in appreciation of the help his aid had been.

"Long Tom not only kept me supplied with a full story of what was happening and what it was all about," he said, "but he also managed to start a civil war in the gang by cleverly suggesting to Tops'l Hertz the idea of double-crossing his mysterious chief, known at that time to Hertz only as CX."

"Dag-gone!" grunted Monk. "I was wonderin' how you got such a good idea of what was going on. Long Tom was the information source!"

Renny called from the entrance, "Better c'mere, Doc!"

The bronze man moved to the big-fisted engineer's side.

"Holy cow!" thumped Renny. "Listen to what they're plannin' to do!"

Chapter XXII. VICTORY IN A BOX

TOPS'L HERTZ was doing the talking, relaying orders of the man who was the real chief. Tops'l was making no effort to keep his voice down. If the bronze man and the others in the barge heard, so much the better, Tops'l figured.

"Bring up one of them metal-melting contraptions!" Tops'l was bellowing. "Not the one that works off the big power-plant in the barge, but the other one, the little one with the self-contained generator!"

Some one evidently asked what was the idea.

"We're gonna turn it on that barge!" Tops'l boomed. "It'll melt the bolts that hold the thing together, and it'll collapse, burying the gang in there under a few thousand tons of sand!"

The men outside received the solution of their difficulties, as Tops'l verbally outlined them, with howls of

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pleasure.

"Blazes!" Monk growled. "That scheme'll *work!*"

Then, unexpectedly, Doc Savage was calling through the barge door, calling a strange warning.

"The only chance you men have of escaping bodily harm is for you to stand still and let us come out and disarm you!" he shouted.

That, of course, got just the kind of a reception that was to be expected: A general hoot of ridicule.

Only one cautious soul was so brash as to dissent.

"Wait a minute!" this individual growled. "I've heard that bronze guy don't ever bluff!"

Some one swore at him.

"Knock the fool in the head!" a voice advised. "We've got Savage and his crowd cornered in there! Of course he's tryin' to bluff!"

"Bloody right!" yelled Tops'l. "Get that metal-meltin' contraption!"

Men started away. But after a pace or two, they came to a slow, wondering halt. They peered at each other. They glanced upward into the bright moonlight, and their eyes roved all about, searching.

For they were hearing a sound. It was a fantastic, mellow, musical note. A trilling, and it ran up and down the musical scale weirdly, as if it might have been the roaming of some lost soul in search of a never-to-be-found tune.

Monk and the others, hearing the trilling, knew it was Doc Savage's small sound which he made in moments of mental stress, and they were puzzled, for they could not imagine why he might be making it now. Suddenly, they were even more puzzled.

The trilling had ceased its roaming of the scales. It had settled on one note, something it had never done before. And it was getting louder. Mounting and mounting. It became a cadence which attained deafening proportions. Monk found himself cramming fingers into his ears to keep out the paean. He felt that it must be carrying for miles, so loud had it become.

Then, outside, men began to shriek out in awful fear.

TOPS'L HERTZ'S first intimation that something was wrong came in the midst of that unearthly trilling note. There was a sudden burst of cries. Men came charging toward him. They were terrified, in full flight.

"Get back!" shrieked Tops'l. "Don't run! Fight whatever it is!"

His order got not the slightest attention.

There were a number of reasons for what Tops'l Hertz did next. First, he was on edge, nervous. And the very idea that Doc Savage might escape was maddening. Moreover, Tops'l wanted to cement his position, give his

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rising star a push, by showing he had the stuff of which leaders are made. When he gave an order, he would see that it was enforced. In a jam, there was always one thing that enforced orders. He had done the thing before. He did it now.

He deliberately shot down the two foremost of the fleeing men.

It did no good. They were upon him. Something infinitely more terrible than Tops'l Hertz at his worst was driving them from behind.

But one of them had something for Tops'l Hertz.

"You fool!" this man snarled. "You just shot the big chief!"

Tops'l Hertz had a split-second vision of what could happen now. The mastermind was gone. He, Tops'l Hertz, could step in and take charge, and the whole world would be his oyster—

At that point, the bullet went through his brain. The bullet fired by the man who wanted to avenge the murder of his chief. Or he thought it had been murder, when Tops'l had only wanted to be a good fellow and stop the flight of a bunch of cowards.

The others ran on.

"It's poison gas!" one choked.

"In that cursed sealed box that the bronze guy tricked us into bringing!"

They kept running, for poison gas is a terrible thing to fear, and the wind was blowing so as to carry the stuff toward them. They reached the north end of the island, and seeing how few they now numbered, and how the wind was blowing, they swam out wildly for the wreckage of the schooner *Innocent*.

The wreckage had drifted out of the inlet by now, and was nearly a quarter of a mile offshore. A long swim for some men. And there were sharks, now. Blood of those who had died when the *Innocent* went to pieces had drawn the sea killers.

A good many men died in the sea. Among them were Gorham Gage Gettian and Napoleon Murphy Decitez, two who had been lured by the promise of the Metal Master.

Some reached the mainland, but how many, it was never known, for they took great pains never to be heard from again.

Two or three who drowned in the surf went down wondering just how the gas had been released from the sealed box.

"

IT was the trilling sound," Doc Savage said, explaining the thing to Monk, Ham and the others. "I overheard an explanation one of those fellows made to Tops'l about how a wine glass can be broken by a certain musical note. He was correct. Well, inside that box, attached to the outer covering, which served as a sounding board, was a glass phial containing an acid. The trilling sound broke it. The acid caused the case to blow open and release the gas."

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"Poison gas!" Nan Tester shuddered. "How awful!"

Doc Savage corrected her.

"It wasn't poison," the bronze man said. "It was merely a gas which produced great agony and, eventually, unconsciousness. Its odor, its effects, are almost exactly like mustard gas, with which most persons are familiar. But it does little more than cause a great deal of pain and eventual senselessness."

Monk, the chemist, said, "I perfected that gas. Made it up like mustard gas, or to imitate mustard gas, I mean, so it would scare the victims worse."

"It did a good job," Renny thumped.

"Much too good, unfortunately," Doc Savage agreed.

After a bit, when the gas had been blown away by the wind, they went out to see just how good a job it had done. The sight was not pleasant. Not that they pitied the unconscious men. They would be revived and consigned to Doc Savage's up-State New York institution for the making over of criminals. It was the lives of those who had died, that they regretted. Doc Savage and his aids never took life, if it could be avoided.

Doc Savage and Renny, the engineer, visited the boxes concealed in the dunes, which held the metal-liquefying devices. The bronze man went over these. When he was through, he stood back and shook his head.

"It is now plain why the devices were converted to criminal instead of industrial use," Doc said.

"Eh?" asked Renny.

"It *does* change the molecular structure of metals which it liquefies," Doc Savage explained. "It makes them crystalline, too brittle for commercial use. Probably the fault is one which cannot be rectified."

"Then the darn thing isn't worth so much?" Renny exploded.

"Only as a weapon," the bronze man replied. "And we will take pains to see that it does not get in the wrong hands, in the future. As a weapon, it would be almost invincible. And in the hands of crooks, well—"

He did not finish. They had been through a demonstration of what could happen in the latter case.

Going back, they were drawn by a sharp whistle, and went over to find Monk standing beside a body.

Renny looked at the body.

"Shot," he said. "That, then, is the end of the man who thought he was the Metal Master, the man who could take just about what he wanted from the world through the use of his invention."

"Tops'l Hertz must have shot him," Doc Savage decided. "Tops'l's body is over there, and his gun is beside it, loaded with dum dum bullets. The mastermind, here, was killed with a dum dum."

Monk wet his lips. He squirmed.

"But what're we gonna do about this?" he asked. "About telling—telling—"

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"Telling Nan Tester that her brother, Louis, was the real head of the infernal band," Doc Savage finished. "The girl is perfectly straight, and does not dream the truth."

"Neither did a lot of others," said Long Tom, entering the discussion. "Tops'l Hertz didn't even guess it. But I found out from the papers in Louis Tester's plane, when Tops'l and I searched it. Then I destroyed the papers which showed the fact, without Tops'l seeing me do it, figuring it wouldn't hurt what Tops'l didn't know."

Doc Savage said, "Seevers, the first man to die, didn't know, either. He must have suspected some one else, or perhaps had merely found out that the metal-liquefying secret was to be used for a crooked purpose."

Nan Tester would have to be faced, however. They put it off for a time, with excellent excuse, for the plane which had brought the Metal Master gang from New York put in an appearance, loaded with supplies, and they captured the pilot without trouble, he not dreaming, until too late, that all was not well.

After that, they had to join Nan Tester at the barge. She began asking questions.

"My brother?" she queried fearfully. "What has happened to him?"

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Monk swallowed several times.

"He was killed fighting for his liberty," Monk said.

Which was merciful, and, after all, the truth.

THE trip back to New York was made in the captured supply plane, and Doc and his men talked over the deciding action that had just taken place on the island. They were in a relaxed mood.

THE END