

## THE SPOTTED MEN

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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### Chapter I. THE RED SPOTS

THE midget racing car was about as long as the tow-headed young man, provided he had been lying down. But Tink O'Neil wasn't lying down. His long, lanky form looked as if he were trying to get it beneath the raised hood of the car. His tow head was practically out of sight.

Then the upper half of Tink O'Neil came out from beneath the hood, and he straightened. His tanned, nice-looking features were grease-smearred. Tink O'Neil looked more like a garage "grease monkey" than a clever young fellow who knew a whole lot about engineering, steel and midget cars. Tink O'Neil turned to the man sitting on the track fence, grinned and announced, "Well, she's all set for a speed trial, Mr. Mason. And you just watch; it's going to be pretty."

Later, Tink O'Neil was going to wonder why he ever made that statement. He was going to regret, almost, that he ever climbed behind the wheel of the fast-looking little racer.

Tink O'Neil fastened down the hood. The motor of the small car was already turning over with a sweet purr.

The man on the fence said, "I'll clock you around once, then open her up when you pass me."

Tink O'Neil grinned. "Hope you see me when I go by!"

The man on the fence looked like somebody of importance. He was somewhat stout, well dressed, with steel-gray hair and good features. He was probably one of the richest men in America. He was president, at least, of one of America's largest steel companies.

He was J. Henry Mason, a man known throughout the United States.

The steel millionaire said now, "Be careful, Tink. Remember, this is really a test of that new steel in the brake drums and the rear axle—not a race in which you are supposed to break your neck."

The tone of J. Henry Mason's voice said that he liked this young man a good deal. For Tink O'Neil was trouble-shooter at one of the great steel plants of the millionaire. He was a valued employee. And he was always tinkering around with cars and engines.

It just happened that his hobby was midget racing cars.

Tink was climbing beneath the wheel. He had a time tucking his long, lanky legs beneath the cowling of the small car. He pulled goggles down over his eyes.

J. Henry Mason got down from the fence. For a large man, he moved with quick, efficient steps. He added:

"Only a couple times around, Tink. Don't forget, I have an appointment to meet Molly and that girl Pat Savage. They're trying out Molly's new plane this morning. It's got that new T.3 steel in the wing construction. So I haven't much time."

Tink O'Neil nodded. He gunned the motor, and the soft purr became a roar. There was the smell of castor oil, some of which is used in all racing cars. Dust kicked out behind the small car.

Tink started up, eased through the speeds and jogged along at about fifty around the half-mile dirt track.

J. Henry Mason watched with a half smile on his features. Some lad—he thought. Smart as a whip, and slated to get to the top. He saw Tink around the two far curves, and then the young man was coming into the straightaway. He opened the car up wide.

The car came down the home stretch like a flashing yellow comet. J. Henry Mason stood ready with his stop watch. As Tink streaked past, he clocked him.

Dust blanketed over the steel king. He blinked, squinted, finally managed to see the car roaring into the first turn. Tink O'Neil was taking it wide at the start, cutting across the arc and hitting the dangerous curve on the inside rail as he got half way around.

Mason nodded approvingly. That was the way to take them, he knew.

Then Tink was in the back stretch, wide open, easing out in order to take the far curve. He went into it in a cloud of dust and spewing small stones. Almost instantly, he was out of it and hammering down the home stretch. Mason held his stop watch ready to catch the time.

But something happened.

THE car seemed to be out of control. It was swaying.

And then J. Henry Mason gasped as he saw what was the trouble.

The back left wheel was coming off!

Attached to the wheel was part of the rear axle. The thing came suddenly loose, crashed the wooden guard rail of the fence, tearing down a dozen feet of the heavy wood.

The car zoomed around in a crazy circle. It made two complete turns, half of another, shot backward along the dirt track.

J. Henry Mason cried out in horror and leaped clear. The next moment, he figured, it would go over and Tink O'Neil would be ground to a pulp. For in these midget cars there was no room for the driver to get his whole body ducked down beneath the protective cowling of the machine.

But, miraculously, the car did not turn over. It ended up, instead, against the railing with a crash. Oil smoke and dust temporarily veiled it. J. Henry Mason held his breath. Perhaps—

Then the cloud drifted away and he saw Tink O'Neil climbing from the small car. Tink's goggles were pushed back from his dust-smearred face, and where his eyes had been covered they appeared like white small saucers surrounded by grime and dirt.

Tink O'Neil said grimly, "Look, Mr. Mason, this T.3—our new steel is supposed to be tougher and stronger than any known steel—was used in the axles and brake drums, wasn't it?"

Mason nodded. "Certainly, because I supervised the job myself."

"I know," said Tink. "But do you know what happened?"

"What?" the millionaire wanted to know.

"That rear axle crystallized. I heard the whine as it let go. It snapped right in two."

"But—"

"And these brake drums. They did the same. Wait, I'll show you—" Tink was already on the ground, sliding under a part of the midget car that was clear of the track.

He continued: "I can't understand it, Mr. Mason. Every brake drum is split wide open, and I had barely started to use the brakes when I felt that rear wheel going. They've cracked open just as though they were made out of tin."

Mason looked as if he was going to choke. He exclaimed, "But T.3 is the greatest steel ever produced! It's going to revolutionize the steel industry. It's going to—"

From beneath the car, Tink O'Neil said, "What did you say, sir?"

There was no answer. Tink frowned, because the steel king's words had broken off abruptly.

He asked again, "What did you say?"

There was still no answer. And from where he was, Tink could not see the giant of a man who had stepped from the tall bushes near the track rail and seized J. Henry Mason.

AT first, not getting any reply from Mason, Tink O'Neil figured that the steel millionaire had most likely walked back down to the dirt track in order to inspect the broken axle attached to the wheel, which had come off.

So Tink went on prying at the broken piece of brake drum which he had found as he slid beneath the racing car. The brake drum had cracked, and now he had a piece of it almost free. He was quite anxious to inspect it and to learn what had happened to T.3.

As J. Henry Mason had mentioned, T.3 was the latest invention of his vast steel mills. It was a formula that was going to cause a lot of changes in airplanes, armaments and ships. Because it was the toughest and strongest steel known—and also the lightest in weight.

Mason had mentioned something about his pretty daughter Molly trying out a new plane, alone with someone named Pat Savage. Tink recalled hearing something about this from Mollie herself.

For Tink O'Neil knew Molly Mason pretty well. He thought she was just about tops. He even had hopes that some day—

Well, anyway, he saw a lot of her.

And Molly Mason had told Tink O'Neil about her new plane, which was to be ready today. A girl named Pat Savage was going to go up with her. It seemed Molly had met this other girl at an exclusive beauty salon in New York. Pat Savage owned and operated the beauty establishment. But Pat Savage, according to Molly, was the kind of girl who would rather be flying planes and getting into some sort of adventure, instead of staying in New York.

These things flashed through Tink O'Neil's mind as he crawled from beneath his small racing car. They suddenly took on a terrible significance.

Because Tink was staring at the broken brake drum which he held in his hand, and at the steel which composed that brake drum. The same kind of steel that was in the wings of Molly Mason's new speed plane.

The tow-headed young troubleshooter's mouth fell open, and he started to exclaim, "Good grief, this is—"

He stopped, staring around for the millionaire steel king. He looked back down to the track, in

order to call out the startling information to J. Henry Mason.

But Mason was nowhere in sight.

That was odd, Tink O'Neil thought. Because the dirt track was a small, private proving grounds that only Tink and the steel king ever used. It was deserted. There was an empty, small grandstand and a judges' tower across the way, inside the rail. It would be mighty easy to see anyone out there on the stretch of straightaway.

But there was no millionaire, no sound. Only the quietude of early morning and the soft rustling of birds in the trees located inside the inner fence of the oval.

Puzzled, Tink O'Neil called the millionaire's name. He put down the heavy piece of brake drum and started looking around. And he came upon the footprints in the dust not far from where his car had cracked up.

One set of prints was much larger than the other, as though they might have been made by a man with huge feet. Tink instantly knew that J. Henry Mason's shoes were nowhere as near as large as these. He frowned.

The footprints made a crooked trail inside the rail, disappeared beneath thick foliage which grew almost up to the protective guard rail of the track.

Tink ducked beneath the bushes, prowled around for fifteen minutes and found—nothing!

Suddenly, it came to him that there was something awfully queer about happenings during the past half hour. First, his narrow escape from death. And now the sudden disappearance of the millionaire steel magnate.

Again Tink O'Neil thought of J. Henry Mason's statement about Molly's new plane, and the tryout which was taking place this morning. Horror leaped over Tink. T.3 was in that new plane—and now Molly was headed toward death.

With panic seizing him, Tink O'Neil abruptly made off across the dust of the track. He changed into a fast sprint. He recalled that there was a phone booth beneath the grandstand. From there he could call Molly and warn her—

And then he remembered that he had no slightest idea as to just where the plane tryout was to take place. There was no way he could reach the girl!

And yet there was!

IT came to Tink in a flash. He recalled that this girl Pat Savage, who was to fly with Molly this morning, was a cousin or something like that of a person named Doc Savage. Tink, from time to time, had heard details about Doc Savage.

He remembered that Doc Savage—they called him the Man of Bronze—was supposed to be a mental giant, a scientific genius of some sort. Perhaps Doc Savage could get in touch with this girl Pat Savage—

Tink O'Neil reached the phone booth, found a nickel in his grease-smearred jumper and finally got hold of Long Distance. He recalled that Doc Savage had his headquarters in New York. But he had no idea just how he was ever going to explain how to reach him.

He said, "Look, I haven't any change here, operator. But it's urgent that I reach a person named Doc Savage, in New York. You'll have to reverse the charges if you can. Maybe the New York end can help you find the address of Doc Savage. Or perhaps—"

The operator's words shocked Tink O'Neil. For she said, "Oh, it's no trouble at all. I can get Doc Savage for you in a moment. Just hold the line."

Tink gasped. Apparently this fellow Doc Savage was well known to the telephone company. He must get a lot of phone calls, the tow-headed young man thought—

He heard the connection being made, and the operator talking to a man who said this was the headquarters of Doc Savage. The man wanted to know who was calling. Operator relayed the question.

"Tell him it's James O'Neil," Tink said excitedly. "But that won't mean a thing to him." He thought quickly. "Look, inform him that it's about his cousin Pat Savage. Tell him it's terribly urgent, a matter of life or—"

Abruptly, Tink paused. He listened in partial awe to the voice which came clearly and yet quietly over the wires. The voice held a strange, compelling quality, and had the clearness of a deep-toned bell despite the fact that it was miles away.

The unusual voice said, "This is Doc Savage speaking. What is it you wish to say about Pat Savage?"

Breathlessly, Tink O'Neil told what he knew about Molly Mason's appointment to fly a new plane with Pat Savage. He tried to tell something about what had happened here at the track, but he was so excited he got incoherent. And so he switched back to the girls, and yelled:

"Look, Mr. Savage, I've heard of those short-wave radios and some of the gadgets you use in your work. Well, you've got to reach them—somehow. Get hold of them and stop them from going up in that new plane!"

"Why?" The question, some strange quality of the tone, partially calmed Tink O'Neil.

"Because," Tink went on, "they're in terrible danger. You see, it's about T.3, and—"

Abruptly, Tink O'Neil stopped. And stared. Gawked in wide-eyed astonishment at the figure standing just outside the phone-booth door.

It was a man of giant size. He must have been close to seven feet tall. From the waist up, he was

naked.

For just an instant, recognition flashed across Tink's face. This giant fellow was Jeff Hanson, one of the steel workers from Open-hearth Shop No. 5, located only a mile from here.

And then, in the next moment, Tink gasped, "No! It can't be!"

For Big Jeff Hanson, for all his muscular hulk, was a quiet, plodding worker who never as much as raised his voice or showed the slightest anger. He was a brute of a man as gentle as an ox.

But this man here—

Tink drew back in fear. The man's left eye was closed, squinted shut in a peculiar manner that gave his whole face the silly expression of a lunatic. He was giggling softly, and at the same time watching Tink O'Neil.

And this was only a half of the horror of the man's appearance.

For from the waist up, where he was naked, his body was covered with livid red spots, like blotches of inflamed red pimples. The red spots were on the face as well, and added to the closed, squinting eye, they made the giant look like a painted clown.

A clown that was stark mad!

One word flashed through Tink O'Neil's whirling brain. Smallpox! The red marks made him think of the dreaded disease.

But even this wasn't half as dreadful as the fellow's insane regard. He made a movement toward Tink.

The receiver still in his hand, Tink O'Neil yelled into the mouthpiece, "He's crazy! He's crazy as a loon. And he's covered with red spots. I—"

Tink O'Neil's words ended in a gurgle as the giant figure seized him, slapped a hand over his mouth and dragged him from the phone booth.

The telephone receiver swayed back and forth on its short length of cord.

#### Chapter II. THE MADMEN

TINK O'NEIL was not a coward. And for all his lankiness, he was as hard as the steel which had been his business for several years past.

And it is quite likely that he would not have stood a chance against the giant of a half-naked man except for one thing. The menacing red spots.

Sight of the spots drove Tink O'Neil a little berserk. They scared him. And so he fought like fury.

He broke free of the giant figure's grasp, ducked low, and butted the grinning lunatic with his head. Tink O'Neil put all the steam he had into the flying dive.

It felt as though he had smacked up against a brick wall. The giant figure stood on spread feet, and his eye kept squinting and he merely grinned foolishly. He made some sort of sound like a giggle, and launched out at the young trouble-shooter again.

Startled, Tink O'Neil side-stepped, spun away from the groping, huge arms. He shuddered at sight of the hairy torso covered with the red spots. He took out at a gallop in a direction away from the giant figure.

But the madman ran after him, gobbling up distance as his massive feet slapped the ground. Tink managed to get clear of the grandstand, reached the dirt track again and went sprinting back toward where his wrecked racing car was against the fence.

He gulped in chunks of air as the giant fellow closed in behind him. Tink O'Neil's gray eyes were wide in his dirt-and-grease-smear'd face. He had to hold out another moment, because back near the midget racer there was something—

The giant, giggling man was almost on top of him when Tink reached the pile of stuff near the fence. The objects were tools which the sandy-haired young man had brought along when he drove the racer to the small track. In the pile was a heavy wrench.

Tink scooped up the wrench, whirled around and took a swing at his assailant. He missed the giant figure by a fraction of an inch.

And the fellow merely stood there, grinning, one eye squinting crazily.

Tink was aghast. He knew that if he had connected with the heavy wrench, that he probably would have brained the crazed man.

Then, oddly, the giant fellow stared queerly at Tink. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind, if you could say that he was capable of concentration.

On a sudden impulse, he jerked around and started running like mad in the opposite direction.

FOR an instant, Tink O'Neil merely stared. Then he took out after the giant figure. For as long as this fellow with the red spots had not actually seized him, Tink O'Neil was not so scared. He was determined to learn more of this crazy mystery.

Mystery of a wrecked racing car, of the disappearance of millionaire J. Henry Mason—and the appearance of a madman with red spots.

Tink was certain that the giant man was a steelworker. He most certainly looked like a man Tink knew at the open-hearth shop. And yet—

Tink abruptly yelled, "Hey!"

Because the giant he was chasing had made suddenly for the wrecked car. In passing the machine, the fellow dived down and jerked up the piece of broken brake drum that Tink had, a little earlier,

been inspecting. With the drum in his huge hands, the man leaped toward the brush and undergrowth just inside the inner rail.

He disappeared.

But Tink O'Neil was able to follow the loud sounds of his crashing feet. Tink's progress, however, was slower.

He finally emerged on the far side of the oval, and saw—some distance away—the giant fellow streaking across to a roadway that wound through woods beyond the testing grounds. Tink followed. And ten minutes later it dawned on Tink where the giant was headed. For ahead, the great line of mammoth smokestacks had loomed up in the air. There was the black smoke, the smell of the great steel mills. It was the big Open-hearth Shop No.5.

They were approaching the plant from the rear, and the road snaked in and out of the trees.

Ahead, Tink still heard the crashing of the giant figure's feet, though he only caught glimpses of the spotted man from time to time.

Finally, Tink arrived at the gate in the high steel fence that surrounded the big shops. No one was around, but he saw the marks of the giant's shoes in the dusty road. Tink put on a burst of speed, raced into the long storage yard surrounding the huge towering, smoke-blackened buildings. And a dozen yards ahead, a freight train—it consisted of five or six open cars loaded with pig iron—backed into the yard and cut off the young trouble-shooter's progress.

BY the time the slow-moving train had gone past, Tink's quarry had disappeared. He saw no signs of the giant man.

But what he did see was the excited group of steelworkers headed for the huge entrance doors of the open-hearth shop. Tink ran up to them.

He caught the excited talking, the shouts of dismay that came from the throats of the husky steelworkers. Like the giant crazed man had been, they wore only thick-soled work-shoes and trousers. From the waist up, they were naked and grimy and sweat-smearing. Obviously, the men had just come running out of another of the shops, and were headed toward the vast, vaulted length of No. 5.

Tink asked, "What's wrong?"

The workmen knew the young, tow-headed engineer. Tink had devised a number of improvements around the various steel shops. He was favored by the men.

"Wrong?" exclaimed one of the workers. "Hell, Tink, plenty's wrong! Come along."

Tink joined the excited group of men, and another said to him, "Say, maybe you can talk to him!"

"Talk to whom?" Tink asked.

"Johnson."

"What about Johnson?"

"He's cracked up! The heat's got him, Tink. He's in No. 5 here and they say as how he's stark mad!"

Shock ran through lanky Tink O'Neil. What was this damnable mystery that had so abruptly hit the steel plant? A worker attacking himself. And now another gone berserk!

He led the group of steel workers inside the vast space of the foundry. Heat—heat that was well over a hundred degrees—hit them in the faces like a blast of air from a furnace.

There was the misty, thick atmosphere of molten steel and the blast furnaces, and the roar of air being forced into the bottom of the towering cupolas. A huge crucible of molten steel hung from an overhead crane, but the crane operator was sitting in shocked wonder, unable to lower the molten steel because of the confusion on the dirt floor beneath him.

Half a hundred husky steelworkers were lined up on that floor, staring in amazement at one who was on the runway above them.

The runway was a platform in front of the line of giant furnaces. It was from here that the furnaces were "tapped" and the white-hot metal drawn off into the great crucibles. But there was no work going on now.

The single workman was moving along the platform, his eyes glazed, a sound like giggling coming from his slack mouth.

TINK O'NEIL, like the others near him, stared in horror. The man was Johnson, a worker with a long and efficient record. Johnson had never been known to lose his temper. He got along well with his fellow men. He had a wife and four kids, and he never missed a day at the shops.

But now the man was stark mad. Tink, with a start, noted that one of Johnson's eyes was closed in a squint much like that of the giant who had attacked him. And there were the unsightly red spots—the pimply, gruesome spots that had likewise been on the bared torso and face of the first crazed man.

The madman stopped his prowling along the platform, gripped an iron guard rail, and leered down at his fellow men. It was then that Tink stepped forward.

A gasp went up behind him as Tink cupped his hands around his lips and shouted, "Johnson! You come down here!"

In emergencies, Tink O'Neil had commandeered men before. And there was a tone in his words now that caused the grinning, red-spotted man to turn his head and look at the tow-headed trouble-shooter.

The man's mouth opened and a sound like a grunt came from his throat. He was trying to speak, to say something coherent. The onlookers could tell that from the strained expression on Johnson's face.

Tink O'Neil called, "It's all right, Johnson. Come down. No one's going to bother you!"

The red-spotted big man seemed to gather a little something of Tink O'Neil's words. He gave a half nod, then moved toward an iron ladder that led down from the platform.

Others moved back in fear as the perspiring, massive worker approached Tink O'Neil. Someone said guardedly, "Don't be a chump, Tink. The guy is nuts!"

But Tink O'Neil stood where he was.

Johnson came close up to him, watching Tink carefully as he moved slowly across the big floor of the shop. Then he paused, his one eye half squinting, the ugly red spots gleaming beneath the sweat of his bared body.

Tink said quietly, "What is it, fella? What happened to you?"

The man kept staring. The other workers had moved far back against a wall. Their eyes were wide. Suddenly, without warning, big Johnson let out an unholy yell and leaped past Tink O'Neil. One workman had been slower than his partners in moving back from the spot.

The man was seized by wild-eyed Johnson, hefted like a small child above the crazed man's head, and raced down the long length of the shop floor.

A man screamed. Tink O'Neil leaped to race after the madman, but even as he moved he knew he was too late.

A dozen feet from the suspended, overhead crucible of molten steel, big Johnson paused, then hurled the man he held as though the poor fellow might have been a toy.

He hurled him up into the mammoth caldron of molten steel.

LATER, the madman escaped. After his blood-chilling act, he continued his plunge through the long foundry and out a doorway at the far end. Some of the more courageous workmen followed. They searched the extensive yards of the steel plant. Five hundred men joined in, and many had clubs and weapons.

But they found no trace of red-spotted Johnson.

Tink reported the disappearance of J. Henry Mason. He did not tell this to the men in the shops. Instead, he went to a phone in a small office at one end of the big foundry. He called the front office and told the plant manager of the mystery.

He wasted little time in explanations. There was no time for that now. He had to reach Molly, who was going to take up a plane in which there was some of the famous T.3. He had to save her life!

Tink, avoiding the others, hurried from the open-hearth shop and quickly reached his small coupé, parked not far inside the gates of the vast plant. It was only a ten-minute ride to the big home of J. Henry Mason. Perhaps someone there could tell him exactly where the girl and Pat Savage had gone. For even though Tink had put through a call to Doc Savage, he doubted that the remarkable bronze man could do any good. He was too far away, to begin with.

Tink drove madly. The millionaire's palatial residence was on the main highway leading into Buffalo. Luckily for Tink O'Neil, he did not have to get into the traffic of the large city. The estate was well on the outskirts, and only a short drive from the big steel plant.

The grounds bordered the highway itself, but the rambling stone house was set far back beneath enshrouding trees and carefully-tended shrubs. Tink slammed his small car up the circling drive, jammed on his brakes before a long veranda and leaped out. He had already seen the man on the front porch.

It was Molly's cousin, Walter Mason.

Even sounds of Tink O'Neil's noisy arrival had not aroused the fat young man from a peaceful slumber in a reclining chair.

Walter Mason was more than fat. He bulged. His various chins bulged, his stomach bulged past his chest and his thick lips puffed out as he snored contentedly. He had thin, scraggly blond hair and his big head appeared to bulge out beneath that hair.

Tink O'Neil shook Walter Mason and cried, "For Heaven's sake, man, wake up!"

Walter Mason stirred. Or rather, some of him moved and the rest just trembled like jelly. He opened his eyes.

He had round, bright eyes in a round, fat face.

He murmured, "Huh?"

Then he recognized Tink O'Neil and sat up with an effort. He said, puzzled, "What the devil's wrong with you? Look like you've seen a ghost, Tink."

"Look!" Tink O'Neil gasped. "You've got to tell me where I can find Molly. It's awful. It's terrible. We've got to tell her about T.3 and that her plane might crash, and—"

Fat Walter Mason made no further attempt to get up. That would have been too much of an effort, and the lazy young man never exerted himself unless absolutely necessary.

He said with a sigh, "For the love of Pete, will you sit down and stop that shouting? Here, I'll order you a drink. You are a sight. You look like you need one—"

The fat man was reaching toward a button attached to a cord near the head of his chair. He kept pawing around with his flabby hand, attempting to locate the cord without raising up.

"Listen," rapped Tink O'Neil. "I guess I'll have to take time to tell you—" Briefly, he told about the crack-up of the racing car, of the strange disappearance of J. Henry Mason. Also of the mad workmen at the steel plant. He ended with: "Don't ask me what it is. Don't think I'm wacky. It's something terrible that's happening and . . . and we've got to reach Molly. Her life's in danger, man!"

At last, as Tink talked, Walter showed interest, and then worry. He sat up. The chair creaked beneath him. But his bright, alert eyes were now sharp.

"Grief!" he exclaimed. "Then we'll have to do something."

Tink O'Neil sighed. "That's what I've been trying to tell you! Well, where can we locate her?" Walter Mason tugged at one of his chins. "Let me see," he said musingly. "She was out long before I got up this morning. And I was just catching a little nap now. I haven't the slightest idea—" He snapped his fat fingers. "But perhaps the servants will know."

WALTER waddled off into the big house. Tink followed. And five minutes later, after questioning half a dozen servants, they knew no more than they had to start. Apparently pretty Molly Mason had told no one where she was going to try out the new plane.

But fat Walter seemed more worried about J. Henry Mason himself. He said. "But what's happened to him? Gracious, we simply must call the police or do something!"

Tink ordered, "Wait!"

"But—"

"I've already called on a man who can do more than the police. I've got in touch with Doc Savage!"

Walter Mason looked at Tink. "You mean, the Doc Savage?"

Tink O'Neill nodded. "And now, about Molly—"

But Walter was already headed toward a phone in the spacious center hallway. He said, "Gosh, Doc Savage knows J. Henry. I'm going to make certain he's going to help us."

Tink watched the fat young man. Walter was not worried about lovely Molly. Instead, his fear was for the millionaire. Tink could understand that. J. Henry Mason kept up a small trust fund for Walter. And now the fat, lazy fellow was worried about the source of that income. A day's work would probably kill Walter, Tink knew.

In a few moments, Walter was connected with Doc Savage's headquarters in New York. Tink waited until Walter had hung up, then asked, "Well?"

"One of Doc Savage's aids answered," supplied Walter. "He said that two men named Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks are seeking the girls in their plane. It seems they've already been in touch with them, and—"

Tink's eyes brightened hopefully. "Where are they?" he prodded.

"They took off from that private field out near Lake Erie, outside Buffalo. And they—"

But Tink was already headed back toward the veranda. He called back, "Then I'm going to that airport, too. Maybe I can rent a plane and locate them!"

Walter Mason sighed and wiped perspiration from his chins and sat down in the nearest chair. He looked all worn out.

Tink O'Neil was back in his car in a moment and racing out of the winding drive. He was unaware of his disheveled appearance. His straw-colored hair was ruffled; his white jumper smeared with grease and dirt of the racetrack. But his pleasant gray eyes were bright.

So Doc Savage had two of his aids in touch with the girls in the plane? Perhaps they had already told Molly and Pat Savage about the danger of T.3.

Tink felt suddenly elated. These aids of Doc Savage were said to be good. They did things in a big way, and in a hurry.

Tink eased on his brakes for the sharp turn into the highway that would take him to the airport. Perhaps he would meet these two aids of Doc Savage, be in time to help them—

But, just then, it looked as if he wasn't going to be in time to help anyone. Because the half-naked giant of a man stepped out from the nearby trees and leaped on the car's running board.

Tink drew back in horror. The man had the unsightly red spots. His left eye was closed in that peculiar grinning squint. And the man himself was giggling a little.

It was the giant of a fellow who had attacked him at the dirt track.

### Chapter III. THE BLACK PLANE

HAD young Tink O'Neil, at the moment, seen the two aids of Doc Savage who were in the plane on the way from New York, he might not have been so certain that the two men were going to be of any help.

Both men acted as though they were more interested in slaughtering one another than going to the aid of two pretty girls.

One of the two was seated at the controls of the streamlined, fast plane. He was an individual made to stop traffic at busy street corners. He often had.

As wide, almost, as he was tall, all visible parts of him were covered with bristly red hair that looked like small rusted nails. His head was flat, and he had little bright eyes sunk deep in his face. He looked not unlike a gorilla in shabby clothing.

It was exactly because of this appearance that Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair got his

nickname of "Monk."

The tall, slender man who stood in the control cockpit of the plane, glowering down at Monk, was in startling contrast to the apelike fellow.

One word described him. Dapper. He wore the smartest in daytime attire. He carried a polished black cane. He was dark and not unhandsome, with sharply defined features. He was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, but everyone called him Ham. His pet pastime was squabbling with Monk; in fact, the pair of them—really very good pals—were on the verge of a squabble right now. However, crackling of a small loud-speaker in the cockpit caused both aids to stop their argument and listen.

Shortly a pleasant voice said, "Ham, are you still on the way out here to this airport?"

Monk jumped. "That's Pat!" he said.

He referred to Pat Savage, the lovely cousin of Doc Savage.

Ham leaped forward and lifted a small hand microphone from a nearby hook. This was the second time this morning they had been in contact with Pat Savage via short-wave radio.

Ham said, "Yes, Pat, we'll be there shortly. And you girls wait right there at the airport, as Doc ordered."

The lawyer had to bat Monk's hand away as the hairy fellow tried to grab the mike.

Pat's voice came back on the speaker. "See here," she said crisply, "Molly Mason and I have figured out Doc's purpose. He hates to see me go up in planes. That was just a stunt to stop me. So we're taking off immediately."

Ham looked as if he had swallowed something containing tacks. He got white.

Monk exclaimed, "Goshamighty! Doc said they might get killed!"

Frantic, Ham clutched the hand mike. He yelled, "Listen, Pat, wings of that plane you're going up in—"

And then he paused, for the loud-speaker near him had stopped its crackling. Pat had switched off.

Monk groaned. The lawyer's hand was trembling. All thoughts of the argument which had just taken place between the two was abruptly forgotten.

For both realized how much lovely Pat meant to the Man of Bronze. Besides, they were both crazy about Pat Savage.

Monk settled down to getting all the speed possible out of the plane. He said, "Blazes! We've got to stop them!"

For once, dapper Ham agreed with his apelike partner.

"Yes," Ham breathed, and it was almost a prayer.

Both men were grimly silent as the fast plane streaked through the sky.

A half hour later Monk, still at the controls of the speedy plane, picked up the hazy outline of Lake Erie in the distance. He was soon skirting Buffalo and seeking the small airport which Pat, in her first contact with the two aids, had said they were using.

It was a clear morning, warm and cloudless, and Monk had no trouble in soon locating the airfield. He turned to his dapper partner and said, "We'll be there in a minute. Blazes, I hope those girls didn't—"

Monk paused, looking at Ham. For the lawyer, instead of listening to his partner, was staring overhead through a window above them.

Abruptly Ham commented, "That buzzard—or whatever it is—is sure moving fast!"

Monk twisted his head upward and looked also. His little bright eyes squinted. Suddenly he let out a yip.

"Buzzard, hell!" he squeaked. "That's a plane! And the blasted thing's diving right at us!"

Monk was correct.

For the black spot that looked like a large bird suddenly took on more form and became a black plane of latest design. It was diving with the rush of a plummet, directly over their heads. Monk let out a howl, sent their own ship into a dizzy sideslip as he tried frantically to get out of the way of the diving plane.

A moment later, the black plane skimmed past their nose and shot on ahead. It must have been going better than three hundred miles an hour.

Monk let out his breath. "The blasted fool!" he piped. "Must be one of them crazy test pilots. Guess he didn't see us."

But there was no relief in Ham's voice as he exclaimed, "Maybe he planned on missing us. Look!"

And almost before he had pointed ahead, they swept into the black cloud. The thick, inky smoke that had poured out from the exhaust of the plane ahead. The other plane itself had disappeared, and Monk found himself flying blindly through the stuff that was thicker than fog.

Ham yelled, "It's a trick! Pull out of this stuff!" He glanced quickly at the altimeter. "Don't dive. We've only two thousand feet. Go up!"

Monk yanked back on the stick and they shot upward through the inky substance. That is, from the angle of the plane they could tell that they were climbing steeply.

And then, suddenly, Monk's brow was furrowed and he was pulling excitedly at the gas-control arm.

"What's wrong now?" demanded Ham.



"The motor's choked! She's going dead on us. She's gonna stall!"

Ham, the lawyer, could think swiftly in emergencies. Monk was still fooling around with the gas throttle, swearing because the ship's motor sputtered and the plane refused to climb out of the surrounding black cloud.

Ham ordered sharply, "We'll go into a spin, you blasted idiot! Dive! Dive as far as you can, and maybe we'll clear this stuff."

Monk reacted mechanically. He threw the ship into a sudden plunge, opened the gas throttle wide. The motor kept sputtering, threatening to stop at any moment.

Ham was shouting, "Something in the exhaust from that plane choked our engine. Try to keep it going, and maybe we'll hit clear air again."

Next, both aids were abruptly tugging at their collars. Their faces reddened. A part of the black cloud had seeped into the plane cockpit, and apparently the stuff contained no oxygen, for they found it hard to breathe.

Behind them, the two pets were gasping also.

Monk was the chemist in Doc Savage's organization. And despite his apelike appearance, he was a good chemist. He was one of the best.

Hairy Monk, between gasps for fresh air, was sniffing now. He announced, "Smell of that black stuff tells me it is a form . . . of chemical they use . . . in planes . . . fighting forest fires. It . . . it chokes off oxygen!"

Ham's eyes were bleared. But he was staring at the altimeter. He suddenly pointed a finger at the instrument and choked out, "Look out! We've only got three hundred feet!"

Even as he said this, they cleared the black fog and shot out into bright daylight again. They had plunged another two hundred feet while Ham was speaking.

And both men saw the choppy water beneath them. Lake Erie! A moment more, and they would have plunged into it!

But Monk leveled off, the plane motor picked up again as its carburetor sucked in fresh air, and they again zoomed upward.

Both aids stared upward at the floating black cloud.

Monk snorted, "Blazes! I'm gonna find that black plane and chase that danged pilot to hell and gone! Just wait until I—"

Ham was straightening his collar. He was breathing better again, and he had been watching the sky around them.

He said, "That cloud has dispersed enough so that you can see. You aren't going to catch anyone, if you ask me."

It was true. The black plane had disappeared.

BUT both men were puzzled about the mysterious attack. As Monk said:

"What connection did that guy have with the girls? Why did he want to stop us?"

Ham shrugged. "Only thing I know is that Doc got a request from some man named Tink O'Neil, telling him about Pat going up in a plane with a girl named Molly Mason. We were to stop them, because it has something to do with a thing called T.3."

Monk nodded. Doc had told them something of the urgent phone call received early this morning from Tink O'Neil.

"And," the hairy chemist added, "this crazy guy who phoned yelled something about a giant with red spots. He musta been nuts!"

Ham's features, however, looked worried. "We'd better hurry up and locate that airport again," he suggested. "It's damned queer why that black plane tried to put us out of business."

Abruptly, the radio loud-speaker crackled again. Ham jumped to grab the microphone, so he could answer in case it was Pat Savage.

And it was.

Pat's voice came breathlessly over the speaker: "Ham! Monk! We're in trouble! Are you listening?"

The lawyer quickly tuned in on Pat's wave length. He said worriedly, "What's wrong, Pat?"

Doc Savage's lovely cousin continued: "We took up this new plane. I . . . I guess Doc was right after all. Ham, there's something wrong with one of the steering control cables!"

Monk's little eyes fairly popped. "Ask her where they are!" he said shrilly.

Ham did, and Pat's voice came back: "A small airport five miles south of Buffalo. Ham, the cable—"

There was a short silence, then Pat's frantic voice again: "We . . . we've gone into a nose dive. We can't pull out of it!"

The speaker went silent. Both aids stared.

#### Chapter IV. THE SKINNY MEN

THE plane was a cabin job with a single metal wing. Interior of the cabin was decorated in soft-toned blue, and the leather seats were of the same pale hue.

The faces of the two girls in the cockpit of the streamlined ship were also about the same color. The tall, well-formed girl at the controls had red-gold hair, blue eyes and a nice mouth. Except for one fact, she would have appeared startingly beautiful. But this beauty was now dimmed by contrast with the second girl, seated beside her.

The one at the controls was Molly Mason, one of the wealthiest girls in the United States. The second, more beautiful one was Pat Savage, cousin of the remarkable Man of Bronze. Pat had the bronze-gold hair, the golden-hued skin coloring of her famous cousin. She was also tall, slender and with the kind of figure that belongs behind footlights. Her eyes were also of an unusual gold shade.

Pat had just dropped the radio microphone. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she stared at her companion, Molly Mason.

Pat Savage cried, "Good heavens, what shall we do?"

It could be seen that the girl at the controls was frantically trying to work a rudder of the plane. The plane itself was headed downward toward the earth at terrific speed.

Molly Mason gasped, "It's . . . it's jammed. I can't work the rudder. We'll crash!"

Pat was clinging to a support. She leaned over, motioned the other golden-haired girl out of the seat and said, "Here, let me try it."

Pat Savage knew how to fly planes. Often, unknown to her cousin Doc, she had received expert instruction from various of the bronze man's aids.

The terrific plunge of the plane had Molly Mason weak and trembling. She flopped into the adjoining seat and stared in terror. She managed to cry, "That new steel-T.3—was used in the rudder wires. It's the strongest thing known. But now"—she pointed with a shaking hand out the window near her—"it . . . it's snapped! We can't work that one control!"

Pat Savage was the calmer of the two. Her lips set grimly and she worked with the controls.

Suddenly, she threw the plane over and sent it into a sideslip. Air hammered past the cabin of the hurtling ship. Pat wiggled the plane back and forth.

And abruptly the ship leveled off and went streaking ahead in a flat plane. Momentarily, its terrible plunge had been stopped.

Tense, Pat gripped the controls, and she scarcely breathed as she slowly worked the fast plane around to an easy, falling spiral.

She said tightly, "I think we can bring it down this way. Air pressure kicked the rudder around. If nothing happens—"

Molly Mason nodded, her slim body taut. She glanced out a side window, exclaimed, "We're practically over the field. This is the place where I told father to meet us. Careful, Pat!"

But Pat didn't have to be warned. She had managed to get partial control of the plane, and now each manipulation she made was done with infinite caution.

They dropped lower and lower in the long spiral, and soon the small airfield was just beneath them. It was scarcely more than a large clearing in surrounding woods. There was a single old hangar, and obviously the field was seldom in use. No one appeared on the ground below them.

But as Pat carefully straightened the plane out for a pancake landing, Molly Mason exclaimed: "There—just off to the side of the field! Father's sedan. He must be waiting for us!"

Pat was too busy to look. The field was flying up at them now. She tensed, gave a little prayer and brought the ship down.

They bounced wildly once, settled, then remained on the ground and rolled furiously toward the trees bordering the edge of the small field. For a moment, it looked as though they were going to crash the big limousine parked right at the border line of trees.

At the last moment, however, Pat sent the plane in a sliding half circle and brought it to an abrupt stop in a cloud of kicking dust. They came to a stop with a wing tip not six feet away from the waiting car, now half concealed in the dust cloud.

Molly Mason gave a quick cry of relief and jumped toward the cabin door. Her tall, graceful figure had lost its tenseness, and she said, "Pat, you're wonderful! I never could have done that!" Right behind the wealthy girl, Pat gave a relieved sigh and commented, "Gosh, this ground sure looks swell again!"

But as they jumped out to the ground both drew back in terror. For the assorted thugs who closed in on them from the sedan looked far more menacing than the earth at four thousand feet.

THERE were three men of varying sizes. One was very short and thin, another medium and also thin, and the third a beanpole of a fellow even skinnier than the other two.

But the most unusual thing about all three was the gloomy expression of their bony faces. Each was dressed in severe black, and along with the gloomy expression, the trio looked like hungry undertakers viewing the Fountain of Eternal Youth.

Pretty Molly Mason screamed. She stared toward the big limousine and called, "Father!"

One of the skinny men grabbed her. He said without expression, "Yell your head off, baby. Your old man ain't within fifty miles of here!"

Molly Mason's softly curved lips parted in horror. "But," she gasped, "he was to meet us here!"

The one holding her said gloomily, "He ain't meeting anyone, toots."

Molly Mason forced back a sob. She kicked, squirmed, tore at her captor's form. But the man—and it was the little skinny one—must have been built of whipcord and wire. He handled the tall, slender girl easily, started dragging her toward the big car.

It took the other two to manage Pat Savage.

Pat jerked free of the beanpole-looking fellow, cuffed him across the face, neatly tripped his

partner and spun back toward the open plane door. Pat's dress swirled around her trim legs. She reached the cabin door, slammed it behind her and threw the catch in place—all before the stunned men could again grab her.

It appeared that Pat was leaving her pretty friend to face the music alone.

But this was not Pat's idea at all. She knew, instinctively, that they had no chance against the skinny men. There was something about the hard, gloomy expressions on the men's faces that told Pat these fellows got what they went after.

Pat was simply trying to keep them out of the plane long enough to give her time to leave a message for Doc Savage!

The two outside were hammering on the door. Pat found her purse, kept down low enough so that the men could not see what she was doing. Perhaps Doc would never find her appeal for help. But it was worth the try. Doc had uncovered lesser clues in the past.

On a small piece of paper from her purse, she scribbled frantically:

Doc—Three skinny men have captured us. Obviously they know something about J. Henry Mason, who was to meet us here at airfield five miles south of Buffalo. Help.

Pat Savage folded the note once and tucked it down behind a seat in the plane cabin. She doubted that these men would take the plane. Doubtless they had observed the trouble Pat had experienced in landing the ship, and knew that something was wrong with it.

But if Doc found the plane later, he would naturally search it minutely for trace of the missing girls. He would most likely find the message.

Pat next whirled back to where a fire extinguisher was hooked to one wall of the cabin. This was just at the moment one of the skinny men smashed the cabin window. Pat started pumping fire-extinguishing liquid into the arrival's face.

She hoped that the men would figure she had been after the extinguisher.

THE first man—the tallest one—had managed to reach through the broken glass and unhook the door. He was inside now, spluttering and weaving around as the liquid hit him in the face.

He grated, "You danged fool! Drop that thing!"

Pat backed away and kept pumping the hand extinguisher.

It was the medium-sized thin man who made use of his taller partner's form. He ducked behind his partner, waited until they were close to Pat, then spun clear and grabbed Pat's wrist.

His steellike grip twisted the extinguisher free of Pat's grasp. Pressure on the girl's arm caused her to wince with pain. For all their thinness, these fellows were just about the toughest individuals Pat had ever run up against.

She was quickly subdued, dragged out of the cabin and thrown into the car. Next, the two girls were bound hand and foot and placed on the floor. Two of the men stood looking gloomily down at them from the open car door. The third had momentarily disappeared.

Molly Mason, frantic about her father, cried, "What is the meaning of this? Where is my father? Where's Tink O'Neil?"

The little skinny fellow looked sad. "My, my!" he commented. "How you go on!"

"If this is a kidnaping," Molly Mason screamed, "and my father is also missing, then how do you expect to collect—"

"It ain't no kidnaping, lady," said the little thin man in his flat voice. "Not that kind, anyway."

"Then what—" Molly started.

"Shuddup!" said the little man.

Pat had been quiet, listening. Now she rolled close to the other bound girl, whispered close to her ear, "I've left a message for Doc in the plane."

Molly Mason subsided then. She had heard a lot of the bronze man named Doc Savage. Perhaps Doc would soon reach them.

The third man abruptly returned. He climbed in behind the wheel of the big sedan. The other two got in the back. Gags were placed in the girls' mouths. They were left on the floor of the car, and the two sat on the rear seat in order to see that Pat and Molly remained where they were.

The car started up, bumped over the field and reached a back road through the woods. Apparently the little skinny man was the boss, for the other two addressed him respectfully from time to time. The driver said suddenly, "You know, Wart, that one dame thought she was smart."

Apparently Wart was the name of the skinny little boss.

"Smart, eh?" he queried dully. "How?"

The driver passed something back over the seat. Pat Savage, by twisting a little, was able to see the piece of paper. Dismay swept over her taut, slender body.

The driver finished: "She left this note for Doc Savage."

The leader named Wart glanced at the note. For the first time, something that resembled a grin touched his gloomy features. He said:

"I sorta figured Doc Savage would be interested in this thing. So now we'll take care of him!"

Chapter V. DEATH IN STEEL

THE skinny little thug named Wart was correct in a part of his statement. Doc Savage was interested. At noon that same day he set down his speed plane in a deserted field not far from where

Tink O'Neil had cracked up in his midget car.

The field was about half a mile from the high wire fence that surrounded the long, smoke-blackened buildings of Open-hearth Shop No. 5.

The bronze man stepped from the plane, then reached back and pulled out several large equipment cases.

Doc Savage, standing alone, did not look unusually big. But his appearance was striking.

His skin was a gold hue, as though he might have been exposed for long periods of time to tropical suns. His hair, which lay like a close-fitting skullcap against his head, was of the same rich color, only a shade darker.

Doc Savage's eyes were the most remarkable of all. They were a rich flake gold, and in their depths was a continual restless stirring. They were compelling, almost hypnotic eyes.

Any other person would have found it necessary to stand on something in order to reach into the open cabin door for the cases. But Doc hauled them out without even rising to his toes. His giant size was deceptive, and only noticeable when he was standing beside other men. This was because of the perfect symmetry of his scientifically developed body.

Each of the cases weighed well over a hundred pounds. Yet the bronze man lifted all three easily, swung them beneath his arms and started out toward the woods surrounding the deserted field.

Doc Savage moved silently through the woods until he came to a point that gave him a view of the great steel mill. He saw dozens of steelworkers sitting around the big yards, lunch pails beside them. It was the noon lunch hour.

Most of the men were divided into groups, and apparently they were discussing something important. Doc Savage had an idea what that conversation was about. For a phone call from this very plant had informed him of the mystery of the spotted, crazed worker.

The call had come through to Doc Savage sometime after the disappearance of J. Henry Mason. The informer had not given his name, but he had also mentioned the fact that the millionaire steel king had mysteriously disappeared, and under strange circumstances.

No mention had been made of the new steel formula, T.3. And yet the Man of Bronze knew something about it. Only recently had J. Henry Mason consulted Doc Savage. He had sought advice from the bronze man in regard to a part of the formula.

Doc Savage was known as a scientific genius. He had often been called in as consultant by leading engineers and chemists. Therefore it was not unusual that he had been in contact with such a wealthy man as Mason in the past.

Doc Savage considered the steel king enough of a friend to investigate his disappearance. Of course he had been somewhat worried about Pat. Pat was always getting into adventurous escapades. But he had assigned Monk and Ham to look after his cousin.

The bronze man, naturally, did not know that the two girls had been seized by the thin men. At the moment, he was interested in learning something of the mystery of the madmen with red spots, and of the disappearance of J. Henry Mason.

The bronze man now did a peculiar thing. He started taking off his clothes.

But a few moments later it was apparent why Doc Savage had done this. Working with materials from one of the heavy cases, he was soon dressed as one of the half-stripped steelworkers.

Special thin eye caps covered the unusual flake gold of the bronze man's magnetic eyes. Now they appeared as the bloodshot eyes of a man from the open-hearth shops.

His body, from the waist up, was dark with what looked like the grimy black of the shops. Shoes and trousers looked somewhat the same. Even Doc's hair was now dark. Anyone would think that he was a be-smudged worker who had just come out of the big foundry.

Doc concealed the equipment cases in the woods, moved forward and was soon strolling casually through the entrance gates to the vast steel plant. He might have been any of a dozen other men just returning from their lunch hour.

At one o'clock, when the whistle blew, he was working on the long floor of Open-hearth Shop No. 5.

New men had already been put on at the shop in order to replace several who had been stricken with the strange madness. Thus Doc passed practically unnoticed among the workers. All were strapping big men, and Doc was merely considered one of them.

The bronze man listened sharply to conversation among the perspiring men, as they worked. It seemed that several more men in the open-hearth had cracked up. They had been rushed to hospitals. One man had died. It was thought unlikely that the others would live.

Doc Savage, his body bathed in sweat now, his nostrils full of the choking heat and dust of the huge shop, worked beside a burly fellow who had charge of tapping one of the mammoth furnaces.

An overhead crane moved a ladle up to the furnace opening. The "ladle" was twice as high as Doc Savage and ten feet across. It probably weighed ten tons.

Doc's job was to loosen the plug which held back the molten, white-hot steel in the towering furnace. The plug was at the end of a long rod, which Doc gripped in his sinewed hands.

As the steel flowed out into the ladle, sparks and heat came with it. They cascaded out over Doc's head, sputtered out onto the floor around him. A tiny piece seared through the flesh of his shoulder.

Doc worked silently through the terrific heat and the choking atmosphere of the shop. He heard everything that was said around him.

There was unrest among the workers. There was talk of walking off the job. Many had seen the significant red spots on the bodies of the crazed men, and they feared smallpox.

But a number of these steelworkers were married, with families to support. They could not afford a layoff. They were the ones who talked the others into sticking to their jobs.

At two that afternoon, a powerfully built steelworker moved close to Doc Savage and whispered, "Want to see you." He motioned to a spot away from where the others were working.

Doc followed the man. It was hard to tell much about the coloring of the man's skin or his hair. He was black with grime.

The man led the way out of the shop, cut across toward a foundry that was almost as vast as the first shop.

Just outside the entrance to the second foundry, Doc paused and said, "You might explain what this is all about?"

The big, perspiring steelworker looked steadily at the bronze man.

"You're Doc Savage," he stated.

Doc remained silent. No surprise showed on his features. He had suspected someone might recognize him, regardless of his attire. Too, he had the feeling that someone knew he had been on the way here.

"Well," continued the man, "I can show you something about T.3."

Doc's features did not change. "T.3?"

The man nodded. "T.3 is the new steel," he explained. "This damned trouble started right after the first batch was run off. I think maybe I can help you."

Apparently the man thought Doc Savage was only here to find out the mystery of T.3, and why workers were going mad. No mention had been made of the strange disappearance of J. Henry Mason. As yet, men in the shops had not been told of the millionaire's sudden disappearance.

"What is it you have to reveal?" queried Doc quietly.

"Come along."

They moved into the foundry ahead. Over their heads, giant cranes moved back and forth, rumbling along on their solid tracks. Men shouted and cursed the heat. Massive rolling machines gobbled up sections of white-hot steel, passed it through a series of rollers that squeezed down like massive hands, and sent the sheets of steel, now thinner, out the other end of the long machines.

It was toward one of these that the man with Doc Savage headed.

Beyond one machine, a huge sheet of steel stood upended, supported by a hook from a motionless overhead crane. The sheet was about ten inches thick and ten feet square.

"Armor plate," explained Doc's informer. "They say no shell will ever be able to pierce it."

Doc nodded. He knew something about the manufacture of the heavy plate for battleships. He judged that this single section weighed about ten or fifteen tons.

They stood behind the massive piece of steel, and the man with Doc went on: "First, I want to tell you about something I found out just two hours ago. It's got nothing to do with T.3, and yet it also has. It's a single fact that might explain all this damned trouble. Also—"

"You might explain," suggested Doc.

"First," continued the worker, "let me show you something—" He broke off, stooped down to indicate a spot near the base of the thick armor plate.

Doc bent to see what the man was indicating.

Somewhere near them a man yelled wildly, "Look out!"

But already the huge pieces of armor plate was toppling over above them.

NOISE in the big foundry had covered the man's yell. The high, vaulted roof above them picked up sounds and sent them crashing back as heavy machinery operated. This accounted for the man with Doc Savage not hearing the cry.

But the bronze man had senses trained by years of scientific exercises. He could even detect motion before it was observed by others.

And so, in that last split second, he had caught the slow, practically invisible motion of the mammoth steel sheet as it first started to topple.

Doc leaped up. Already the piece of armor plate had moved far enough so that its great weight was sending it downward with swift, silent speed.

The bronze man cleared the giant piece of steel a fraction of a second before it struck the floor. There had been no time to grab the other man. Doc had missed death by a scant heartbeat of time.

Crash of the tons of sheet steel shook the whole foundry. The floor quivered and trembled beneath the bronze man's feet. And a man lay beneath that piece of armor plate, crushed so flat that not even an inch of clearance was between the huge steel plate and the floor.

Doc's face was grim and strained. He had just seen a man flattened to death, a man who had been going to tell him something.

Doc's eyes traveled to the big hook that hung down from the overhead crane, the hook that had held the armor plate upright. He saw that tension on the steel cable that held the hook had been

slackened. The hook had been lowered a good three feet!

The bronze man whipped around, glanced toward the control cab of the movable crane. And he saw the workman just climbing out of the cab, escaping along a catwalk that paralleled the runway tracks of the big crane.

Someone on the floor of the foundry pointed and yelled. "Look! It's another mad guy with red spots!"

A cry of horror and dismay went up from two dozen throats. Men started running out of the foundry. All feared the one who leered down at them from the crane runway above.

For a moment, no one saw the actions of the giant bronze man. Doc, with the ease of long training, leaped and caught the hook which still dangled at the end of the cable. With smooth, swift motion, he pulled himself upward hand over hand.

He reached the crane's crossbeam, swung up to his feet, then ran across the beam to where it met the supporting runway track.

Fifty feet ahead of him, the crazed worker turned and started giggling inanely. Doc Savage saw the gruesome red spots on the man's half-naked body. He caught the peculiar squint of one eye. The fellow leaped back in the direction of Doc!

From below, on the shop floor, a man screamed, "Look out, you fool! That nut will kill you!"

But Doc Savage leaped forward to meet the attack of the crazed man. His powerful hands caught the flailing arm; he pulled the wild-eyed man from his feet, lifted him into his arms and started carrying him along the narrow catwalk.

The madman twisted and clawed and fought. It seemed obvious that both men would be plunged from the narrow beam to their deaths.

The man's sweaty body squirmed in the arms of Doc Savage. The crazed fellow had superhuman strength, and the muscles of the bronze man's arms bulged like knotted cords as he fought to keep the maniac from throwing them both to destruction on the floor far below.

Then, abruptly, the man went limp in Doc's grasp. His twisted face turned toward Doc's own, and he muttered half incoherently, "They fooled you. They fooled you. They . . . the skinny ones caught the girls! They . . . they fooled that Monk and Ham!"

The man went more limp in Doc's arms. Effect of the madness seemed to have left him weak and spent.

Doc stared. Announcement of the capture of Pat Savage and Molly Mason came as a distinct shock. He had figured that his aids, Monk and Ham, had met the girls.

Also, sudden collapse of the captive's superhuman strength took the bronze man off guard.

For in the next instant, the big fellow let out an insane yell and broke free. He made a mighty swing with a closed fist at Doc's head.

Doc was knocked backward, to trip and slip from the narrow walk. But his powerful hands whipped out, caught an edge of the catwalk and held. Tendons in his sinewed hands bulged as he slowly drew himself back to safety again.

But the crazed man's swing had thrown him off balance. He toppled backward, completely cleared the narrow steel walk and plunged fifty feet to the floor below.

Wet with perspiration, Doc Savage stared downward. The man had landed on his neck. The twisted position of the man's head said that his neck was broken. Workmen yelled and slowly moved in on the broken form.

Doc Savage felt only pity for this poor devil who had been stark mad. Perhaps it was just as well that the fellow was past suffering.

And yet, in that moment of temporary exhaustion, the man had muttered something about the girls being captured, about a trick that had been worked on Monk and Ham.

And the bronze man suddenly knew that he had to go to their aid. The safety of Pat Savage meant more to him than any solution of the mystery of T.3, or of men who, without apparent reason, went mad.

During the excitement below, Doc climbed down from the crane runway and slipped from the plant building.

#### Chapter VI. MAN IN THE MASK

MONK and Ham had landed at the private airfield near the shore of Lake Erie. There were no other planes out on the field. Likewise, there was no trace of the two girls.

Monk was manipulating dials on a radio direction-finder in their plane. He glared at his well-dressed partner.

"Doggonit!" the hairy chemist exploded. "This dingus says there's no plane flying anywhere near here. Thought you said this was the field the girls were over?"

Ham glared. "It was!" he rapped. "But that's not saying they haven't cracked up some place."

Neither aid knew, naturally, that Molly and Pat Savage had landed at a field five miles south of this point.

The lawyer climbed out of the plane, commenting, "We might look around. Maybe we'll find someone who saw them."

Monk, giving up trying to pick up anything on the direction-finder, followed Ham out to the landing field.

It was then that he saw the footprints on the ground.

There were two sets of prints. Neat impressions of girls' shoes. There had been a heavy dew the previous night, and the impressions were still distinct in the half-damp earth.

The chemist's little eyes brightened. For here was proof that Molly and Pat had been at this field. Monk, with his waddling, short-legged gait, started following the footprints.

The tracks led toward a hangar to one side of the field. Twenty feet from the big metal building, Monk stared more intently at the earth. Another pair of footprints had joined those of the girls; or rather, they appeared coming in at an angle and apparently had followed along.

The hairy chemist's brain leaped to one conclusion: Someone—a man—had followed the two girls. Perhaps he had forced them to send the message about their plane being out of control. Monk was willing to bet that it was all a trick.

The footprints faded out in loose gravel that bordered the hangar. Monk circled the building once, noting that the large doors in the front were locked. But a smaller door around to the side of the building was unlocked. He went inside.

Within the hangar he saw an old crate that had gone out of flying style ten years ago. But there was space for two or three more planes, and the spaces were empty. It was quite possible that the girl's plane had been here.

Monk strolled around the old plane, looking it over carefully. If Pat and Molly Mason had been in trouble, leave it to Pat Savage to place some sort of clue.

The chemist peered beneath the wings, looked for any marks that might be on the "prop." He got up on a wing and stuck his homely face inside the cockpit of the open-type plane.

Folds of a silk parachute came out of the cockpit, made a sack over the homely chemist's head and he was knocked back to the cement floor.

Someone kicked Monk in the face.

MONK couldn't see. He tried to get untangled from inside the many folds of parachute. But the more he struggled, the more tangled he became.

Every time he gained his feet, the man kicked him down again. The fellow wasn't particular where he kicked. Face, stomach, ribs, however, seemed to be the most favored spots.

Enraged, Monk got his hairy hands gripped in the tough silk, yanked, and the stuff split like the cheapest cheesecloth. For the first time, the chemist got a look at the long young man with the sandy hair.

He took hold of the young man, whacked him against the floor, picked him up and bounced him several times off a wing of the old plane. Wind exploded from the tall man's lungs. His face got purple. When the man fell back exhausted against the fuselage of the plane, Monk gave a snort of disgust and commented, "Shucks!"

For the apelike fellow liked nothing better than a good fight. But he decided to give the young man one more bounce on the floor. He leaped forward.

The tow-headed young man gasped, "Wait! There's been a mistake."

Monk growled, "Only mistake is that you're gonna need an ambulance!"

"Look!" the other got in swiftly. "There's only one person like you in the world. You must be the one they call Monk. Well, I'm Tink O'Neil. I'm the one who called Doc Savage."

That was enough to bring the chemist up short. He squinted at the lean, somewhat grease-smearing features of young Tink O'Neil.

Monk asked suspiciously, "When did you call Doc Savage?"

"Early this morning."

"What about?"

"I informed Doc Savage about the predicament of Molly Mason and his cousin Pat."

The chemist grinned. "Maybe you shoulda told me you were Tink O'Neil in the first place."

Apparently Monk was satisfied that the sandy-haired young man was the one who had called Doc Savage early today.

Ham had come quietly into the hangar while Monk was questioning Tink O'Neil. He was without the pets. Apparently they had evaded him, and were off in the woods continuing their fight.

To Tink O'Neil, Monk explained, "In an unguarded moment, this ambulance-chaser"—and the chemist indicated smartly attired Ham—"got into the organization of Doc Savage. He's a shyster lawyer that represents husbands who kick their wives downstairs."

Tink O'Neil smiled, although he was massaging a bruised jaw. But the smile turned to a look of worry as clever Ham started questioning the young man about the strange disappearance of the two girls.

The young steel-plant trouble-shooter briefly explained about the accident to his midget racing car at the track. He told about the mysterious and sudden disappearance of J. Henry Mason.

Clever Ham took over the questioning.

"What's this business about something known as T.3?" he prodded.

"That," informed Tink O'Neil, "is the classification of a new steel which has recently been perfected at the plant. It's going to cause a whole lot of changes in the steel business. It's the greatest stuff ever invented. But something terrible's happened to T.3. And take those workers going mad, with the red spots on them—"

The young trouble-shooter made a helpless gesture. "I can't understand it."  
"What about the girls? An' what were you doing here?" Monk put in.  
Tink O'Neil, it appeared, could explain his presence at this private field. He said, "This is where they left from. I just got here when I saw you two land. I thought maybe you had something to do with this mystery, and hid here in this old plane to see what you did."  
Tink started out of the hangar. "Come on," he suggested. "There's another landing field south of here, nearer where Molly lives. I have a hunch they might have landed there."  
Outside, on the field again, they met the giant of a fellow who was running toward the hangar. THE man was a steelworker, still in his begrimed work clothes and with only an old, half-open sweater covering his massive chest. He hailed Tink O'Neil.  
"Been looking all over for you, Tink," the husky fellow explained. "I saw Walter Mason, and that fat lummoxtold me you came here looking for the girls. I was here earlier, but must have missed you."  
Tink explained his delay in reaching the airfield. "A crazed worker attacked me as I was leaving Mason's estate," he said. "He got away."  
Tink explained to Doc's two aids who the man was. He was a foreman from one of the steel shops. They were all walking toward the plane which Monk had landed here.  
The young trouble-shooter looked quickly at the man. "How's things at No. 5?" he asked.  
The big, strapping steelworker shook his head. "Bad," he said. "Some more men went screwy. And they had them red spots on them. One almost killed Doc Savage—"  
Monk jumped. Ham grabbed the speaker's arm.  
"Doc Savage was there at the shops?" the lawyer asked quickly.  
Their informant nodded. "Yeah. But he disappeared right after tangling with one of them mad guys."  
"Maybe Doc's in trouble!" hairy Monk exploded. "Maybe—"  
They were interrupted by a sound which came from the plane, beside which they now stood. Monk gave a shout.  
"That's the radio!" he yelled. "Betcha maybe it's the girls!"  
He leaped inside the plane while the others waited outside. And Monk learned that it wasn't the short-wave speaker, but the direction-finder which had sputtered. He worked a control that picked up location of the sound.  
The sound became louder in the instrument with which he was fooling.  
Monk also tried the short-wave radio again, in the hope that he might pick up a message from the two girls, or perhaps from Doc Savage. But he got nothing.  
He listened a moment longer to sound in the finder, hurried back to the others and said excitedly, "Picked up a plane. It's headed this way!"  
Ham asked, "You try to reach Doc?"  
Monk started to say, "Yep. But I couldn't get a danged—"  
And then he paused, staring. Tink O'Neil and Ham followed the hairy chemist's gaze.  
Monk was watching the powerful, sweat-smearred steelworker who had arrived from the open-hearth shop known at No. 5. The fellow had been saying, "Listen, Tink, I wanted to tell you about them girls. You see, they were grabbed by—"  
Monk exploded, "Gollywockus!" He was still watching the big man.  
RED spots were appearing on the husky fellow's face. Though it was hot, and everyone was somewhat warm, the steelworker himself was dripping with perspiration. He appeared to be struggling with some terrible force that had taken control of him.  
As everyone stared, the man's features twisted up in a half grin that left one eye closed in a squint. He started giggling softly, inanely.  
More of the hideous red spots came out on his exposed chest and broad features. He let out a mad yell and lunged at the apelike chemist. But Monk took hold of the crazed steelworker and tried to throw him to the ground. Monk could usually hurl half a dozen men flat, if need be.  
But the man spilled Monk first, picked him up and showed signs of dashing the chemist's brains out in the next moment. Ham shouted, and something appeared from his black cane.  
The object was a sword of thin, tough steel. The tip of the sword blade was treated with an anaesthetic chemical that at a slight prick, left its victims temporarily unconscious.  
Ham tried to get a jab at the powerful man struggling with Monk. Madness had given the fellow superhuman strength, and surprise showed on Monk's homely features when he could not knock the worker out.  
Tink O'Neil was also trying to help, jumping around looking for a chance to lay his hands on the fighting madman.  
But suddenly the man broke free, shaking Monk off as though he might be a toy fox terrier. With a shrill giggle, the towering steelworker went galloping down the length of the field.  
Monk was first after him, Ham and Tink O'Neil following. They had gone perhaps a hundred yards when the sharp-eyed lawyer suddenly called, "Look! There's the plane!"  
Monk remembered the plane sound he had picked up in the instrument inside the cockpit of their own ship. He paused. To both Monk and Ham, the fate of the two girls was more important than



catching the crazed man.

They watched the speck in the sky grow larger, rapidly approach the field and swoop down for a landing.

But it was dapper Ham who suddenly exclaimed, "Hey. It's that black plane again!"

He referred to the mysterious black plane that had laid down the choking smoke screen near Lake Erie.

Monk took one frantic look at the running madman, one glimpse of the approaching, low-flying plane, then squealed, "Goshamighty! Look out!"

He indicated the black snout sticking over the cockpit of the speeding plane. The roar of the motor was loud in their ears now.

Mixed with it was the firecracker sound that bullets made coming from the black-snouted machine gun—the gun that was manned by a flier in goggles and black mask.

Chapter VII. DOC DISCOVERED

WHEN Doc Savage hurried, unseen, from the open-hearth shop where a madman had just died, he returned to the hiding place in the woods where he had left his equipment cases. He quickly changed back into his regular clothes.

He was just picking up the three heavy cases to return them to the plane when he paused, looking at one of them closely.

His trained eye had noted that one case had been moved a bare fraction of an inch. And so Doc quickly went through all the equipment cases.

He found no single thing disturbed.

Doc lifted the bags, returned to the plane. But a few moments later, he returned with one of the cases again. That is, a case that looked like one of the others. Oddly, though, it was empty. He left the case at the hiding place in the woods.

Later, Doc Savage spent two hours scouring the vicinity in his fast speed plane. He located both small flying fields. The first was the one near Lake Erie where Monk and Ham had met Tink O'Neil and a steelworker who suddenly went crazy.

All Doc Savage saw as he flew over the field was the old metal hangar, tracks that had been made by a plane which had landed—though there was no plane—and a loaded hayrack off at the edge of the small private field. The wagon piled with hay obviously belonged to a farmer who owned a large field adjoining that of the airport.

Doc Savage brought his plane down low enough to make certain that no one was around on the field.

Next, he located the other landing field five miles south, the one situated near the palatial home of Molly Mason. From the air, in the distance, you could see Buffalo. Also, off to the right, the almost mile-long string of shops that belonged to the big steel plant of J. Henry Mason. From stacks of the mills, smoke came—at this distance—like tiny threads of black string.

The second landing field was also deserted. Doc, of course, did not know that Molly Mason and Pat had landed here, that they had been grabbed at this second field by the three thin and gloomy-looking men.

Neither could he have known that their plane should still be here, since the girls' captors had departed in a car.

Doc flew around the countryside looking for some signs of his two aids and the girls, or of those who might have grabbed them.

He was again high over the first field near the lake when he saw the three tiny specks bobbing around on the field far below him. The bronze man put his ship into a dive and came down for a fast landing. He noted, even as he did this, that the three specks—he now saw that they were human forms—scurried madly for the hayrack which he had observed near the field earlier. The figures disappeared beneath the hayrack.

But as Doc's plane wheels touched the ground, the three men came out from beneath the load of hay and raced back toward the bronze man's plane.

THEY were hairy Monk, Ham and tow-headed Tink O'Neil. As Doc climbed from his ship, it was Monk who gave a big sigh and exclaimed:

"Wow! Doc, we thought you was that masked guy returning again in that black plane!"

"The masked man?"

Ham told about the mysterious black plane, with the machine-gunner pilot who had almost riddled them to shreds.

"Lucky we reached that hayrack in time," explained the well-dressed lawyer. "We got underneath it and it was packed full enough with hay to stop penetration of those bullets."

Doc was introduced to young Tink O'Neil, the friend of J. Henry Mason. Questioned about the disappearance of the steel king and the girls, Tink repeated the same things he had told the bronze man's two aids. He could offer no explanation of the mystery.

They told Doc Savage about the mill foreman who had come seeking Tink, and who had suddenly broken out in the weird red spots and gone crazy.

Monk added: "And that feller musta escaped when the black plane tried to gun us down. We couldn't find him afterward."

It seemed that Monk and Ham had tried to find trace of the crazed mill foreman after the black

plane pilot had left them for dead. Not finding him, they had returned to store their own plane in the hangar nearby, where it was now.

Doc listened quietly, then suggested, "We might try finding that maniac again."

First, Doc got a couple of objects from one of his equipment cases in his own plane. One was a portable light-scanning device employing an infrared-ray principle of the bronze man's own invention. At night, the device would pick up foot tracks that were invisible to the naked eye. It was already growing dusk. In the nearby woods through which Ham said the madman had disappeared, it was dark. With the light-scanner, Doc Savage soon picked up the trail of the mad mill hand.

The trail led directly to the small landing field where Pat Savage and Molly Mason had been seized by the three thin men.

At the small airfield, the trail of the man with the red spots ended. This was because there was a small brook that passed along one edge of the field. It was at this point that the man's trail stopped. Apparently he had taken to the water, thus obliterating his trail.

"A plane was wheeled along through here."

It was Doc who spoke. The bronze man had moved on ahead, beyond the brook, at which point the woods ended. He had discovered double tire marks in the long grass growing between woods and landing field. Doc studied the tracks a moment before making his announcement.

They followed the new tracks, to learn that they ended before an old, sagging barn set a quarter of a mile away from the field. The barn was located on deserted farm land, and obviously had been in disuse for years.

The girls' plane had been hidden inside the barn.

It was Tink O'Neil who gasped, "This is the new plane Molly was to try out with Pat today!"

Doc Savage was already inspecting the modern-looking ship. He located the disabled rudder-wire in a moment. He showed it to Tink O'Neil.

The young trouble-shooter knew steel. He examined the wire closely as Doc asked: "Does this contain the new T.3?"

Tink O'Neil nodded quickly. "Yes. In fact, I watched some of this very stuff being made. It's identical to one of the new T.3 formula products. It's supposed to be the toughest thing known."

"And yet it broke," was the bronze man's comment.

Tink O'Neil had no explanation for that. He too was puzzled.

From a special equipment vest that the bronze giant always wore beneath his coat, Doc took out a pair of sharp pliers and cut off a short length of the cable and stored it away in his pocket.

Then they all searched the plane for any note or clue that might have been left by Pat or Molly Mason. They found nothing that might tell what had happened to the two girls. Naturally there was plenty of evidence that the girls had been in the plane, but little further.

Doc suggested that they might go back to the plane field itself.

There, with the light-scanning device, Doc had soon located footprints made by the two girls and the three thin men. The bronze man ordered everyone to stand back. He himself bent down and went over the ground inch by inch.

Finally he stated: "Pat and the other girl were seized by three men of varying sizes. One would be fairly small, another medium, the third taller than all but not heavily built."

The bronze man had figured this out from impressions made by the men's shoes, and from the sizes of those shoes. The one set of prints showed very large, very long shoes. This would indicate that the wearer was tall. But Doc knew that the man was not heavy or stout because impressions of the large shoes were little deeper in the earth than the others.

Next, the bronze man scrutinized the automobile tire tracks. Style and size of the tire treads told Doc that the machine had been a large one. The bronze man, in his many scientific experiments had studied thousands of types of impressions made by all sorts of things. He also measured the wheelbase of the car, then again carefully went over impressions made by the front wheels.

To Monk and Ham, he explained, "Deeper impressions made by the forward wheels show that it was a front-wheel drive type. There are only two or three makes of that kind of car on the market. But only one of this wheelbase."

Doc named a high-priced make of automobile. He repeated his comment that he thought the girls' captors were three men of varying sizes. He suggested:

"That ought to give you enough to pick up their trail. It might be a good idea if Tink O'Neil went with you, since he knows Molly Mason."

First, all returned to the original landing field, where Monk and Ham rolled their plane from the hangar.

Doc took off a moment later, ordering them to keep looking for the girls and the big, front-wheel-drive car until they had some sort of lead. Doc stated that he would get in touch with them later.

The bronze man returned to the steel mill, landed just outside the small town that had been built beyond the railroad tracks leading into the long plant.

He was in time to observe the small riot taking place in the streets of the mill town.

UNOBSERVED, Doc Savage later walked through the main street of the mill town. Before leaving the

plane, Doc had switched back to the blackened old clothes of a steelworker. His hair was black, and his features and hands lacked their usual metallic coloring.

There was just the single main street of the town. It was perhaps a mile long, and divided the plant property from the rows of similar, smoke-darkened houses of the mill-workers' families. Though the fight was taking place halfway down the length of the street, the vast mills were still in operation. Orders for products made of the famous new T.3 formula had been pouring into the plant. The bosses, therefore, were running three shifts of men each twenty-four hours. But now some of those men had walked off the job because of the terror of the red spots and the sudden madness that struck their fellow workers.

Blast furnaces sent their fiery red glow into the night sky. Smoke and drifting soot were everywhere. It accounted for the dismal-looking, drab homes of the mill hands.

Doc reached the general store where the men were arguing and fighting. One husky mill hand had climbed up on the steps of the store, vainly trying to make a speech. A few stopped fighting in order to listen to the man. Others boomed, or went on fighting with those they were trying to stop from going to work at the various shops.

Bricks flew. Some of the powerful foundry workers held clubs and sticks. A small coupé rolled down the street, parked, and two uniformed men leaped out. Apparently this was the "police force" of the small town.

The car was quickly upset; the policemen were stripped of their clubs and guns, and the crowd merely jeered at them.

Doc Savage was concealed in a doorway of a closed shoe-repair shop across from the struggling crowd. He was unobserved as he watched the husky fellow who was trying to speak. The man looked sincere in what he was attempting to do; likewise, he appeared like an intelligent sort of person. He was striving to bring order out of chaos.

On an impulse, Doc spoke. His voice carried over the heads of the fighting mob. Strangely, it was impossible for anyone to locate the exact source of that commanding, clear-carrying voice. The bronze giant had used ventriloquism, at which he was adept. His words brought the struggling men to abrupt silence. They stood in awe of the deep-toned words.

"Let your leader speak," Doc suggested. "It is more wise to reason this trouble out than to fight. Give him at least a chance."

The speaker on the store steps had no idea from where the voice had come. But it did give him the break he needed, and he immediately seized his cue.

He said seriously, "Men, we're cutting our own throats if we continue to walk off the job. It's the only living we have. Do you all want to starve?"

Someone shouted. "Of course not! But neither do we want to die like mad dogs! Like those others did when the sickness got them!"

A second man yelled approval. "Yeah! Maybe that red-spot sickness will hit all of us—our families—and then where'll we be? We'll all die!"

Yells went up from the listening crowd.

"Sure!" said one man. "Lookit Hank Miller, and Steve Clancy, an' poor Jim Daniels! They all got the grinning madness, an' now they're dead! The hell with the plant. I say let's leave town before this madness gets worse!"

More shouts of agreement went up.

But the speaker on the general store steps held up his hand. His face was strained and grim.

"Listen!" he called out. "There's something you don't know about. There's a man who has arrived in town that can stop this madness menace. He can help us. He—"

Someone guffawed. "Yah! What good did our doctors do? They can't even figure what this sickness is!"

The men all started talking and arguing again. The speaker on the steps saw that he was going to lose control of them a second time. Frantic, he yelled:

"Look here. This man I'm telling you about was seen in No. 5 today. He can help us. He is Doc Savage!"

A HUSH abruptly swept over the men.

The men started talking quickly. Abruptly, someone asked loudly, "All right. Where is this Doc Savage? Let's see him!"

Doc Savage himself was still pressed back in the doorway of the darkened shoe-repair shop. He reacted instantly to the questioner's words. His agile mind saw a picture, a gruesome picture of disorder and grief.

Men walking out of the mills. The plant itself closing down because of the trouble. Women and children going hungry. These mill hands had only one source of income. Steel!

And yet there was the other menace of the red-spot sickness, the terrible madness that had already hit various workers. Naturally, these men were thinking of their families, of this terror that might find its way into their very homes. Obviously, no one was safe; it was impossible to tell just where the menace would strike again.

Doc Savage decided that he should reveal himself. His hands worked quickly with a soft substance that he took from one pocket. The stuff was puttylike material that would remove the grime and

soot-black from his metallic features. He prepared to step from the doorway and address the men himself.

But just then the darkened door against which he was pressed back, opened with a jerk and hands that were like steel talons sank into the bronze man's shoulders. Other powerful hands gripped various parts of the bronze man's body. Something that smelled like a chloroform-soaked rag was slapped over his mouth and nose. He was dragged inside the store by at least a dozen silently moving big figures.

The door was closed quietly. Doc was quickly hauled into a smaller, rear room. The windows of the second room were covered with old rags nailed to the frames. There was a small light burning overhead.

The little thin man with the gloomy-looking face was standing to one side, watching as the bronze giant was dragged into the room. He spoke in a flat, expressionless voice.

"Nice going," he said. "Now a couple of you guys get out there, start a fight somewhere else and get that crowd away from here."

#### Chapter VIII. QUESTIONS

DOC SAVAGE lay silently on the bare floor of the small room. What little furniture had been in the place, the men had swept to one side.

The wedge-shouldered man who had been holding the chloroform-soaked rag over the bronze man's face, abruptly stood up and dropped the cloth in a can, tightly closing it up. He said with a grin: "He's out cold, Wart. Soon as the boys get that mob away from out front, we can move this bronze guy."

Wart nodded, his gloomy face expressionless. He was the same man who had taken charge of the capture of Pat and Molly Mason. His two skinny assistants, however, were not with him now. All the thugs standing over Doc Savage were burly, big men with hard jaws and grim eyes. It could be seen that several were dressed in the work clothes of mill hands, though they looked like the type who had hardly ever done an honest day's work in their lives. They started complimenting one another on what a cinch it had been to capture this fellow Doc Savage.

But little Wart spoke up. "It won't be so funny if the bronze guy wakes up. Keep your eyes on him, dopes!"

The men quieted down and stood grouped around the bronze man's sprawled form, wary lest Doc Savage show the least sign of coming out of the chloroform sleep.

One big fellow squinted down at Doc, studied the powerful form a long moment. "Criminy!" he exploded. "I think the guy's dead. He ain't even breathin'!"

Others took a closer look. It certainly appeared that the speaker's words were true. Doc Savage showed no indication of life whatsoever.

Little Wart allowed a brief smirk to cross his gloomy features. "Swell," he said. "This is going to save us a lot of headaches. That guy sure can be hell on wheels when he's on his feet."

They were interrupted by return of the two men who had been sent out to start a fight elsewhere in order to draw the mill crowd away from this locality. One of the arrivals announced:

"The van's outside, boss." He jerked his chin at Doc's motionless form. "All set?"

Thin little Wart nodded. "Pile him in the van," he ordered.

Doc was picked up by half a dozen of the thugs and carried out a rear door of the small room. The rear doors of the large van had been opened, a tailgate lowered, and then the truck had been backed right up to the door. The bronze man was carried inside and placed on the floor. Had anyone been watching, it would have been impossible to see exactly what was going on.

Apparently the vehicle was a large van for hauling horses. But stalls had been knocked out and now the inside was just one large space with some straw left on the floor. On either side of the van were windows with iron bars across. The apertures were for ventilation when horses were being transported.

Just before the rear doors were closed up again, little wiry Wart gave crisp orders.

"Half you guys go in the sedan," he suggested. "I'll be right with you. Six ought to be enough to watch this bronze fellow. We'll meet at the usual place."

So saying, Wart climbed out of the truck and the rear doors were bolted from outside. Someone outside climbed up into the driver's compartment—the driver's cab was a closed-off unit separated from the large van part by a steel partition—and then the truck started up and went rumbling off. Soon it left the single main street of the mill town and made a lot of loud noise bouncing over rough dirt road.

But Doc Savage came up off the floor of the truck without any noise.

DOC grabbed two pairs of legs of men leaning against one inside wall of the van. Blurred speed followed.

The two surprised men were hurled to the floor. The bronze man's crashing fists located two jaws. The two thugs collapsed before they even had time to yell.

But the scuffling sound had been heard by the four others who were also in the compartment with the Man of Bronze. Just a little faint night light came in through the grilled openings, and they leaped back toward Doc Savage, one man growling, "Say, what the hell's wrong with you birds?"

The man had not yet seen Doc Savage on his feet.

Doc hit the fellow once. He turned his attention to the other three while the man he had just hit was teetering back and forth on his heels before falling.

The remaining three had a slight advantage over their pals. They at least knew something was terribly wrong. They barged in with their fists up and their heads ducked down for protection. They all slammed into the giant bronze fellow.

That was their mistake. They should have tried to wear Doc Savage down.

From early childhood, the bronze man, along with his rigid mental training, had been taught the art of self-defense. This included rough-and-tumble fighting as well as the more skilled sciences of boxing and wrestling. Even as a young boy, Doc—who even then had a remarkable physique—had been pitted against two or three lads each equal to him in size. An hour every day had been spent in training Doc Savage how to protect himself. And this had been only a part of a scientific education that covered both development of his body and his brain.

Doc now demonstrated a little of what he knew.

The struggling, swaying group became something that sounded like three mountain goats involved with a swift-moving panther. There was butting and howling and cursing.

Doc said no word, merely moving with blinding speed. After a moment or two, bodies started flying away from him in tangents. Each tangent was a man, and he kept going in a straight line until he banged a wall of the van. Then each fell down and dreamed a comet had struck the earth.

Doc gazed at the six unconscious men piled around him. He recalled the voice of one thug who had spoken, and so he moved to the steel partition that separated him from the driver's compartment and started pounding on the wall.

The racket of the truck bouncing over the rough road had kept the driver in ignorance of what was taking place behind him. Doc had to knock for a while until he got the man's attention.

Then, imitating closely the voice of the one thug, Doc called, "Stop this jalopy a minute. That bronze guy is gonna wake up, and we gotta find us some rope!"

The van started slowing, its driver unaware of the fate of his partners. He would be just as surprised as his pals had been when he opened the rear doors.

For Doc Savage had not been dazed by the chloroform used back at the closed shoe-repair shop. In that first instant of being seized by many strong hands, Doc Savage had held his breath. Practice had enabled Doc to hold his breath longer than any South Sea pearl diver. And it had only been a couple of moments while the thugs dragged Doc into the rear room.

Then, after the chloroformed rag had been removed, Doc had managed to fill his lungs once with fresh air. Next he had assumed the deathlike attitude.

So remarkable was muscular control of the bronze giant's trained body, that he could appear to be lifeless for short stretches of time. This included perfect control of chest muscles, which made it seem that Doc had stopped breathing.

Doc had a purpose in mind when he let the dozen assorted thugs think he was unconscious—or dead from the drug. He had hoped to meet the leader of the gang. But now he was convinced that the skinny little man named Wart was only a stooge working for someone higher up. He hoped to find this fact out from the captives he had here in the big van.

The truck had rolled to a stop.

Doc heard the driver climb down and walk around toward the rear. Disguising his voice again, Doc said gruffly, "Hurry it up!"

The heavy tailgate of the truck dropped down. The doors swung open.

The man standing there was almost the size of Doc Savage. Muscles stuck out on his bared chest and shoulders like blocks of cement. He was grinning foolishly. He had the hideous red spots of the madmen.

He leaped into the van after Doc Savage.

NATURALLY the bronze man had expected a battle when the van driver opened the rear doors and discovered that his burly partners had all been knocked out. Doc had been ready for a fight.

But even Doc had not guessed that a madman would be the person to appear.

The fellow was built like a bull. He got hold of the bronze man's shoulders, locked his fingers like claws of steel and went into a backward fall. He figured, apparently, on carrying Doc Savage outside to the ground, where there would be plenty room to scrap.

He made a mistake. He underestimated the bronze man's capabilities. The red-spotted man himself, instead of Doc, found himself flat on his back out in the dust of the bumpy road.

Doc Savage landed on top of the man. The action which followed was furious and breath-taking. The man, for all his powerful build, was whipped around and shaken like a rag doll in a bulldog's clutch.

When Doc finally let go of him, the big, bare-chested man staggered around and goggled. It took him seconds to figure whether he was on his head or his feet.

In the meantime, Doc's fist crashed out. The light was poor and the red-spotted man did not see the fist until too late. It knocked him flat on his back again.

Doc Savage had no trouble seeing in the gloom. Because for long periods of time, the bronze man had undergone exercises to strengthen his eyes. He could see as well in darkness as in light.

He swooped down to pick up the big fellow again.

The man might have been crazy, but he still retained reason enough to know that escape was suddenly and urgently imperative. So he leaped to his feet and ran—ran into the woods surrounding the lonesome spot where the large van was stopped in the narrow roadway.

The surrounding woods was a pit of blackness. Even Doc would have some difficulty in trailing the red-spotted man.

And so he whipped to a small metal box installed on the cab runningboard of the truck. The box contained red signal flares that all trucks carry. Doc got one of the sticklike flares, yanked the cap from its end and red glare suddenly spilled out in the darkness. The red brilliance made a lot of light in the night. Doc saw the huge man's form just disappearing in the woods. He took after the man.

But fifteen minutes later, he returned to the van without his quarry. The man had vanished as though into thin air. It was quite possible that the man had been met by a car on another roadway that the bronze man located beyond the stretch of woods. Or there might be some secret hiding place near here that would take hours to locate, a place that could be easily concealed in the half-wild growth. It was more urgent that he get back to the parked van. For Doc wanted to question the six thugs he had captured.

When he returned, and climbed back inside the big van, two of the thugs were already starting to move around a little. One was groaning.

"Truck must have rolled over into a ditch!" said the dazed fellow.

The second thug who was awake scratched his head. "Maybe we got stalled on a railroad crossing," he suggested.

Then they saw Doc, and both men groaned again. They started to lie down.

Doc Savage picked the more intelligent-looking of the two and stood him up. The other he knocked out again with a short jab to the jaw. The four remaining thugs were still out.

To the only man awake, the bronze giant said, "And now we'll hear about this man Wart and where he went."

The man who was on his feet glared and rubbed at his swollen jaw. "Hell with you!" he snapped. Apparently he was not going to answer any questions, regardless of what happened to him. There was an expression in the depths of his eyes which said he was afraid to reveal any information. From a pocket of the equipment vest which Doc Savage always wore beneath his coat, the bronze man removed a shining, small "hypo" needle. The instrument contained a liquid injection of Doc's own invention.

This was a form of truth serum that Doc often used on belligerent individuals who frequently refused to talk. The truth serum was a drug affecting a certain part of the brain, so that the subject injected with it was forced to answer all questions truthfully.

Doc administered the serum.

AFTER a few moments, the bronze man asked: "Name?"

"Slugger McCoy."

"Profession?" continued Doc.

The man grinned. "I get fifty bucks a day for these," he said, displaying his big fists. "The boss sent all the way to New York for us guys."

"The boss?"

"Yeah, Wart. He's a right guy, that skinny little runt."

Doc's next question was carefully stated. "And who is Wart working for? Who is the big shot himself?"

The man shrugged. "How the hell do I know? We just take orders from Wart. As long as I get paid, I don't care if the guy after that formula is Mickey Mouse!"

Doc's eyes were thoughtful. For a moment he said nothing. Then, "Where is J. Henry Mason? What happened to him?"

The fellow's grin spread. "Brother, your guess is as good as mine. That steel millionaire might be a crook, too, for all I know. All I know is, Wart is going to get that formula, an' we're gonna scare hell out of a few guys, too!"

Twice the man had referred to the formula of T.3. But there was something in connection with the formula that this man had not mentioned. Doc said: "This madness is connected with T.3. Explain that."

Real puzzlement showed in the fellow's eyes as he replied frankly, "Listen, I'm keeping away from those mad guys. That wasn't in our agreement, and I don't know what to think. But we did cash in on it!"

"How do you mean?"

The man laughed. "Some of the boys—our biggest ones—are being fixed up to look like those crackpot steelworkers."

A suspicion that had been in the bronze man's mind became a fact. He said, "The driver of this truck was faked to look like one of them also, wasn't he?"

"Yeah."

Further questioning illustrated to Doc Savage that his captive knew nothing about J. Henry

Mason's whereabouts. He even tried to learn about the girls, Pat and Molly Mason, but obviously they had been seized by some other group working for the mysterious person who was behind this thing. One last statement came from the fellow who had received the truth serum. He said, "You know, I think Wart already has that formula. I can tell by the way he acted tonight."

Doc said quietly, "Is that so?" And then, moving with deceptive speed, he grabbed the man, used a peculiar finger pressure on certain nerves in the fellow's neck. He became immediately unconscious. He would remain that way for some time.

Doc Savage gave similar treatment to the other five men. Then, locking up rear doors of the horse van, he drove his captives into police headquarters in Buffalo, there turning them over to the police with the request that they be held.

It was morning when Doc Savage returned to the mill town. At eight o'clock, he went directly to the manager in charge of the vast steel plant during J. Henry Mason's strange disappearance. Doc's mission was in regard to accidents that were taking place wherever the new steel formula, T.3, was being produced or used.

Doc's captive in the van had obviously stated the truth when he said that skinny little Wart perhaps already had that formula.

It was quite possible that a substitution had been made, and that new steel was being made from a formula that was not the real invention of J. Henry Mason.

But later, after an examination of the steel plant's impenetrable safe located in its general offices, Doc Savage learned that the true formula of T.3 had not been seized.

#### Chapter IX. DOC'S DISCOVERY

RENNY had arrived in the mill town. He was with Doc Savage in the general offices of the steel plant when the vault was opened, and verification made that the formula was safe.

In a booming voice, Renny said, "Holy cow! This formula would be worth millions to anybody. It uses a method that no one, to date, has ever thought of for the production of a tougher and stronger steel—and yet one so light in weight in comparison to known steels."

Doc Savage nodded. For Renny was the engineer in the bronze man's organization. He probably knew more about steel than any single person in the vast organization of wealthy J. Henry Mason.

Also, Colonel John Renwick—Renny's full title—was someone to cause attention. Renny was built along the structural lines of one of the many bridges he had designed. A towering giant of a man, he stood almost as tall as the bronze man himself.

Renny and Doc had been standing in the large vault room talking to two officials of the large steel plant. One was a heavy-set, stern-looking man with steely-gray hair. He was manager of the vast plant, and in complete control during the mysterious disappearance of J. Henry Mason, the millionaire president. His name was Leidenberg, Doc had learned. He had one outstanding trait—arrogance—and he was demonstrating it now.

"You see," Leidenberg rapped, "the formula of T.3 is quite safe. This nonsense of someone trying to steal it is all damned foolishness." He waved his hand at a small, alert-looking little man standing in the vault with them. "I say we should close up the mills until Mr. Mason returns. This madness menace is something beyond our control. It's liable to hit everybody!"

The heavy-set plant manager got the last word out with a half shout. He gave a peculiar twist of his neck and shoulder, obviously a nervous habit when he was upset.

But the small man he had addressed was far from being upset. He looked like a strutting little gamecock in a hard-brimmed straw hat. In shirt sleeves and vest, he looked like the kind of go-getter who could be just about every place at once. And that was exactly his job.

Doc and Renny had learned that the alert-looking little man was Willie Watt, superintendent of the plant, and just about as hardboiled and tough as they come. He had to be, in such a business as steel.

Willie Watt snapped, "Close the plant, hell! We got a hundred orders to get out. We got a thousand hands depending upon those orders for food and clothing for their kids!" Willie Watt took one of the numerous pencils out of his vest pocket and shook it beneath the big plant manager's nose. "And listen, Leidenberg, you can't close the shops without J. Henry Mason's say-so!"

The big manager's heavy features grew red. He looked as if he might explode. But little Willie Watt kept waving the pencil and continued: "Another thing! We're just winding up that big order for the new steel pier near Atlantic City. Job's practically completed. And we have three more contracts for plates for another fleet of oil tankers on the Great Lakes. What the hell is the matter with you, Leidenberg?"

Renny shot Doc Savage a glance, for before leaving New York the bronze man had told the gloomy-faced engineer of his organization something about T.3 and the great changes it was going to make in certain phases of steel construction work.

It was because Renny had been tied up as consultant on a new tunnel job beneath the East River, in New York, that he had not been able to leave with Doc Savage. Thus his late arrival this morning. Doc spoke up. "Gentlemen, perhaps we won't have to close the plant." The bronze man indicated the thick sheaf of valuable papers on which the manufacturing formula of T.3 was contained. "Mr. Renwick, here, would like to study these papers. Later, it might be a good idea if he worked temporarily in one of your laboratories. Perhaps he will find what is wrong with this mystery of T.3

and the defects that are cropping up in it."

"Fine!" Willie Watt rapped. "I'll bet you Renwick's the man can do it!"

Both Doc Savage and Renny, the engineer, were well known to the two plant officials. Both had heard of Doc's acquaintance, too, with J. Henry Mason in the past. And Renny's name as an expert had frequently appeared in reports and papers sent out by a society of well-known American engineers. Doc had already been informed that he and his aid were to be given any sort of authority in the vast plant.

Doc now moved toward the large doorway of the safety vault. He finished, "Renny might start right now."

Leidenberg, the plant manager, smiled. He tried to pass off the comments of snappy little Willie Watt, saying, "Well, I was just thinking of the men and this terrible madness thing. Perhaps we can straighten everything out quickly." He sighed. "I hope so!"

Renny said, "I'll be back here after a bit." He looked at Willie Watt. "I'll start in the experimental lab first, if you don't mind."

Doc, Renny and the hardboiled little superintendent went out through the large offices directly outside the vault, passed along a corridor and came to the long, glass-enclosed laboratories. Here there was none of the smoke and grime that was in the big rolling mills and open-hearth shops. Behind the glass partitions, bright-looking young men in rubber aprons worked over test tubes and laboratory benches. They were the corps of engineers who were always experimenting in steel. Outside a doorway to the laboratory, the bronze man paused and handed a small capsule to big Renny. He added, "Just a precautionary measure."

He did not explain his comment, though little Willie Watt looked at him sharply. The quick-moving little "super" straightened his battered old straw hat on his head, looked at Renny and said, "Come on, then."

DOC SAVAGE went out of the building. He proceeded along the single main street of the mill town. He passed the shoe-repair shop where the attack on himself had taken place last night. Windows of the small shop were now boarded up, and the bronze man moved toward a man standing near the curb. "Has this place closed?" he queried.

The man gave a slight start as he turned and got a look at Doc Savage. A big man himself, he was surprised at the bronze giant's size.

"Yeah," the man stated. "It's up for sale. The guy who ran the place moved to another mill town two days ago."

Doc murmured, "Thank you," and moved on. He understood now why the thugs had been able to make use of the shoe-repair shop during the night. With the owner away, no one would have known that people were in the place.

Doc Savage returned to the small woods outside the smoky mill town. He proceeded directly to the equipment case which he had left concealed in brush.

For a long moment, the bronze giant stood staring at the large case before bending over to open it. His flake-gold eyes were thoughtful.

Then he flicked open the latch and opened the case so that it was spread out on the ground. It was the empty case which Doc had left here in the woods earlier. For an equipment case that was obviously empty, Doc showed great interest in its interior. A second later, reason for this was revealed.

Doc's fingers pried beneath a corner of the inside lining. There was a slight click, and next the entire bottom of the big case had flipped outward. A second, identical bottom of the case came into view. The partition which the bronze man had released was false!

And concealed beneath the false bottom and the real one, was a black, small box about as thick as a sandwich and almost as square.

A round, tiny glass lens protruded from one side of the object, and when Doc picked up the flat object it could be seen that the lens fitted neatly into a tiny hole made through the larger equipment case.

The small object, apparently, was a camera; and the heavy equipment case had been so placed by Doc Savage that the camera lens pointed upward at anyone who might have been inquisitive enough to bend down over Doc's property hidden in the woods.

The bronze man returned next to his plane, where it was still in the field not far away. Inside the cabin of the plane, Doc located the portable, small box that contained film developer and printing chemicals. He reached up and pulled down shades that could be used to shut out light from the cabin windows.

Fifteen minutes later he was staring at an image revealed in the tiny developed exposure taken from the compact camera.

#### Chapter X. TRAILED

SUDDENLY the short-wave radio loud-speaker crackled in the pilot's cockpit, forward. Doc hurried that way and manipulated various dials.

Monk's voice reached him shortly. "Doc? Are you all right?"

Doc Savage stated that he was in the vicinity of the steel plant.

"We been tryin' to reach you, Doc. We think we've located Pat Savage and Molly Mason. Tink O'Neil



says—"

"Where are they?" Doc asked.

Monk mentioned a coast town on the shore of Lake Erie. "We've trailed them to an oil-tanker shipping point here," the chemist went on excitedly. "We're gonna board one of them danged tankers and blast hell outta—"

A calmer voice abruptly cut in on Monk's—Ham's voice. "What we really need at the moment is your help. We've located a new-type oil tanker that is apparently ready to sail before long. But the thing is almost impenetrable. With hatches fastened down, it is practically impossible to board her. Tink, though, thinks the girls are aboard. You might be able to help."

The bronze man asked, "How soon do you figure this tanker will sail? And perhaps you know its destination?"

Ham, however, only had an answer to the first question.

"I'd say about dark," he replied. "And, look, Doc, Tink O'Neil says perhaps you ought to see Walter Mason, Molly's cousin, there at the Mason estate near the steel mills. Walter, Tink tells me, knows something about these tankers. Seems Mason owns some of them, and has been furnishing steel deck plates for others. Walter might know where this one is headed. Her name is the Mary L." Stating that he would be there before dusk, Doc switched Ham off.

The bronze man had heard, from one of the officials at the plant, about fat and shiftless Walter Mason.

As the official had told Doc Savage, "The fellow's no dumbbell, but he's lazy. Like the rest of us here at the mills, he's part of the family. We're all related, and we all have an interest in this business. We had a meeting the other night about the question of J. Henry Mason's disappearance, but Walter was too tired to even attend it."

And yet the bronze man thought it might be advisable to see Walter Mason, following Tink O'Neil's advice. Since Walter lived at the Mason estate, it was quite likely he knew more about J. Henry Mason's private affairs than any of the relative-officials at the steel plant. He might have some idea about the steel king's odd disappearance.

But before leaving the plane, Doc changed his attire somewhat. He was wearing an ordinary suit, but he added a hat to his dress. Strangely, this simple act greatly changed the bronze giant's appearance.

For Doc Savage never wore a hat. Wearing one, with his unusual bronze-hued hair concealed, he looked strikingly different. And at the moment, Doc had a reason for not being too conspicuous. The reason was the tiny snapshot which he still held in his fingers. It was a print of the exposure taken by the small high-priced camera which the bronze man had concealed in the empty equipment case.

Doc Savage knew that he had been trailed. He knew that someone had discovered his identity long before he had revealed his presence to just a few officials at the steel mills.

That person, as shown from the picture caught of him as he bent over the bronze man's empty equipment case in the woods, was the man in the black mask.

That much, the snapshot told.

DOC SAVAGE was trailed as he left his plane. Doc did not use his fast ship, for the simple reason that he wished to make his arrival at the Mason estate as unspectacular as possible. He did not wish to draw undue attention to himself. As always, Doc disliked publicity.

The way Doc was trailed was quite unique.

It was necessary for the bronze man to follow a side road that led past scattered farmhouses. After a while the road intersected a paved road which led close to the highway passing the large Mason estate. There were more farms, and it was a farmer driving into Buffalo who gave Doc Savage a lift and stated the way to the Mason place.

The rural mail carrier in the old flivver was the fellow following Doc at a respectable distance. The top of the battered old car was up and the driver's slouch hat was down. But a whole lot of the man was crowded behind the steering wheel.

From time to time, the rural mail carrier paused before one of the metal boxes fastened atop posts outside the various farms which were passed. He apparently placed mail in the boxes. What he really stuffed inside the boxes was editions of old newspapers, a supply of which he carried on the seat beside him.

At the entrance of the rambling Mason place, Doc Savage left the farmer's car and proceeded on foot up the winding gravel drive to the house. He passed a gardener working near the veranda, inquired about Walter Mason.

The man led the way around toward the rear of the big house and pointed down along a carefully tended terrace of green lawn. He shrugged, commented:

"Mister, if J. Henry Mason doesn't return soon, that fat walrus Walter will sleep himself to death!"

Doc moved forward along the lawn.

Walter Mason, the nephew of the missing millionaire, was sprawled out in a hammock protected by two beach umbrellas. The umbrellas had been so placed that the shifting sun would not glare in the fat man's eyes. Beside him, on a glass-topped table, was a highball glass imbedded in ice cubes

placed in a large bowl.

His stomach and his round, puffed face were the first things the bronze man saw as he approached the hammock. Then Walter Mason's eyes opened and looked like bright buttons stuck in a round pumpkin.

"Oh, hello," he said lazily.

Walter did not bother to sit up.

Doc said, "Perhaps you can answer a question for me?"

Walter yawned, seemed to think the statement over, then replied, "Perhaps."

He kept watching Doc from where he lay sprawled in the comfortable swing. Doc was aware that the man's eyes were alert enough for one so fat. For all the bulk of him, the formation of Walter's features said that he could have a pretty good brain. Doc recalled that many fat people are the most sharp-witted.

Suddenly, Walter Mason gave a start; that is, a whole lot of him started vibrating as a result of his abrupt movement. He sat up—and the hammock threatened to collapse.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "You're Doc Savage! I've seen pictures of you!"

Doc nodded, his face not changing expression. "Now perhaps you can answer the question."

"QUESTION?" fat Walter asked, puzzled. "What question?"

"Destination of one of your uncle's oil tankers by the name of the Mary L." Doc mentioned the dock where Monk had stated the tanker was tied up. "She's due to sail for some point on the Lakes before tonight. Perhaps you know where?"

Walter's small eyes were thoughtful. He said, "That stuffed shirt, Leidenberg, called me from the main office and told me about you, Doc Savage. You're trying to locate J. Henry Mason, aren't you?"

Doc nodded. "And the girls," Doc added. "Your cousin, Molly Mason, and Pat Savage."

Walter shrugged his fat shoulders. "Tell you something," he said suddenly. "That crazy Molly is always up to something. Bet you she and Pat aren't in any trouble."

Doc made no comment on that, but asked instead, "And your uncle, J. Henry Mason?"

Walter grinned this time. "Look," he went on, "old Henry is nobody's chump. I understand some crooks are after that formula for T.3, aren't they? Well, I happen to know that J. Henry has a formula down there in the vault at the main office for a new, improved steel. But it's not T.3!"

"You might explain further," suggested Doc.

"Sure, I will. The real formula for T.3 is in Uncle Henry's possession. He trusts it with no one. And I'm thinking he's just done a little disappearing act until these crooks clear out. He's taking no chances."

"And the oil tanker?" Doc repeated.

"It wouldn't surprise me none if he was on that boat. It's scheduled to sail for Chicago tonight."

Doc commented, "You don't seem very worried about this trouble."

Walter spread his fat hands. He was wearing a magnificent diamond ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. "The police have been notified. Federal men will not take any action until someone has proof that J. Henry has been kidnaped or something."

Walter got his feet up on the hammock again and gave a sigh. "If you ask me," he said, "those damned relatives, those executives at the plant, are all a bunch of crooks. Maybe they're trying to get T.3!"

After a moment, Doc Savage departed. Apparently, fat Walter Mason was going to be of little help. The bronze man did not return directly to the main highway which passed the Mason estate, though he apparently headed that way as he left the house.

But beyond a curve in the gravel drive leading up to the mansion, he cut across more green lawns and reached enshrouding trees that dotted a part of the property. He kept beneath the trees as he cut back toward the rear of the estate again.

Doc finally reached a roadway that was obviously a delivery entrance to the estate. A high stone wall formed the border of the southern edge of the estate. The roadway was beside the wall, and both wound beneath tall trees.

Doc, after studying marks in the road a moment, climbed to the top of the wall and moved quietly along its length. Occasionally he had to bend down and carefully push branches out of his way. But all the same, his movements were silent.

Doc was emerging from one stretch of branch-shrouded wall when he saw the old flivver parked just below him. At this point, the wall was perhaps a dozen feet above the winding roadway.

The powerfully built man was standing next to a fender of the battered old car, as though waiting for something. He wore a slouch hat and the collar of his suit coat was turned up about his neck.

Doc crouched silently on the wall top. The man below took off the slouch hat to wipe at the perspiration on his brow. There was little air here beneath the trees, and it was hot.

And as the man removed his hat, a part of his features were revealed. He was the one who had been dropping papers in the mail boxes along the rural roads.

Also, his features were covered with the hideous red spots.

Doc Savage came up silently from his crouch atop the high wall. Then his powerful legs shot out in a plunging arc through the air.

His form hit that of the man's standing beside the car, carried the powerfully built man to the ground. As the fellow cracked the earth, Doc Savage remarked, "It was quite obvious that someone was following me to this estate!"

Chapter XI. MAD MEN OR SANE?

WHEN Doc Savage had been in the farmer's car he had glanced back from time to time. It was the bronze man's habit always to check on anyone who might be following him. And thus Doc had observed the fake rural mail carrier, for at each mailbox the man had thoughtlessly paused, to stare ahead at the car in which Doc Savage rode with the farmer. Too, the man had speeded up between stops, in order to keep Doc's car in sight. This slight error, so quickly observed by the bronze man's sharp eyes, was reason for the fellow's predicament now. Doc's surprise leap had not taken the big man completely unawares. But he hardly had sufficient time to jump out of the way of the bronze figure's diving form. And so, as he fell, he rolled-scrambled beneath the old flivver with Doc Savage sliding after him. The man kicked up enough dust to momentarily blind the bronze giant's eyes. Then the one with the gruesome, red-spotted features came to his feet on the far side of the machine. Doc Savage was right after him, a scant six feet away. But the gun in the big man's fist brought the bronze man up short. His metallic features grim, he stood like a motionless statue in bronze. "This," grinned the red-spotted fellow, "is gonna get me a nice bonus!" He fired point-blank at the bronze man's chest. Doc Savage swayed backward, turned a half circle and sank slowly to his knees, his bronze-hued hands pawing the dust around him. He gave a choking cough. Gun now dangling from his hand, the big man closed in. He threw back his head and roared. "Damned if that wasn't the easiest kill I ever made!" he gloated. Throwing back his head was the man's error. Because Doc swung up from the ground and his great fist crashed out. The gunman was lifted from his feet, sent in an ungraceful arc to land in a heap among brier bushes alongside the narrow roadway. His gun went flying in an opposite direction. Doc stepped to where the gun had fallen, dropped it in his pocket. Next he picked up the big man as though he might have been a big sack filled with straw. He dumped the man in the rear seat of the old flivver. The man's eyes had opened, but he was too dazed to even move or talk. He merely goggled at this apparent apparition that he had just shot in the chest at close range. The bronze man's only comment was, "You should have aimed higher!" IN times of danger, Doc Savage wore beneath his clothing a chain mail garment made to stop bullets. Hairy Monk frequently called it the "iron underwear." But it had saved the life of Doc Savage more than once. The bronze giant found an inner tube lying on the floor of the car. With a penknife, he quickly cut strips of the inner tube and used them for bindings. Doc's strong hands were able to pull the rubber thongs tight enough so that they did not stretch even a fraction of an inch. With the big fellow finally helpless on the back seat, Doc himself climbed behind the wheel of the old car and set off down the roadway. The route circled through the woods, finally emerged on the highway again a little distance beyond the main entrance to the Mason estate. Doc followed the highway until he came to the less traveled route that led back to the vicinity of his plane. The big man on the rear seat was groaning. Finally he blurted, "What's going to happen to me?" "That depends," said the bronze man. As he drove, he was taking a side glance at a substance which was on one of his hands. The helpless man in the rear whined a plea. "Lookit," he asked, "If I didn't shoot you, the boss would have shot me!" Doc had set the rear-view mirror so that he could keep his eyes on his captive. He glanced now at the mirror and said, "The boss? You mean Wart?" There was just the slightest hesitation before the man in the rear replied. "Yeah . . . Wart," he then said quickly. Doc Savage knew that the man was lying. But he made no comment. Later, he would administer truth serum to his captive and learn the real identity of the one who had employed this fellow painted up to look like one of the madmen with the hideous red spots. For paint it was, as Doc Savage saw from the substance on his hand. Doc continued: "You're not a steelworker. A number of you are merely using this red-spot business to throw a scare into the workers." The man behind Doc gave a short laugh which sounded as though every part of him still ached. "Sure," he said. "It's just a gag." Doc Savage said nothing further on the trip back to his plane. There, he quickly placed his captive in the cabin of his ship, tied him more securely and placed a sponge gag in his mouth--so that the man could make no outcry. There was no time now for further questioning of the fellow. It was imperative that Doc get to the oil tanker at Lake Erie, the one which both Monk and fat Walter

Mason had mentioned.

But first, locking the door of the plane behind him, Doc Savage hurried off to make a call to big Renny, the engineer.

There was something urgent which Renny could take care of.

Doc called from a farmhouse not far away, finally located Renny in one of the laboratories of the steel plant.

THE bronze man named several addresses in New York City. He requested that several phone calls be put through. The tone of his remarkable voice told Renny that a lot depended upon what was learned in those calls.

Doc mentioned that he was going to the aid of Monk, Ham and the two girls. There was need for haste. He spoke briefly about the phony red-spotted man in his plane.

Just before hanging up, Renny said worriedly, "Doc, what's happening here is no fake. Five more mill hands cracked up this morning. Crazy mad, they were! One dived into a rolling machine and was mashed to bits. The others were taken to hospitals, and they've all died!"

Doc suggested, "You might take a look at them."

"It's too late!" explained Renny. "They've already placed those poor devils in sealed caskets and removed them for immediate burial. The whole town fears some kind of madness epidemic. There's no gag about this."

"I'll be back soon as possible," finished Doc, hanging up.

But on the way back to the plane, in order to hurry to the aid of those who meant so much to him, Doc's flake-gold eyes were grimly thoughtful.

Crooks had planted phony madmen around the steel shops. Doc himself had tangled with a couple of the fakes. And yet mill hands themselves were going mad. The madness was something that hit unexpectedly and without discrimination. It was a thing that could bring stark terror to a community of hard-working people who depended upon steel for a living.

Two questions burned in the bronze man's thoughts:

Why were workmen going mad?

What person or thing was responsible?

Chapter XII. DEAD MEN NEVER SQUEAL!

THE captive in the plane of Doc Savage might know a part of those answers. Doc found that the man was still safely bound hand and foot upon his return. Later, after he had gone to the assistance of Monk and Ham, Doc would question the fellow further.

The trip to the port on Lake Erie, which hairy Monk had mentioned, took only a quarter of an hour.

From the air, Doc Savage soon picked up the long, dark outlines of the oil tankers. They were sturdy, block-shaped vessels which rested low in the water.

There were a number of the tankers tied up at a wharf along the lake front. Beyond the wharf loomed huge oil-storage tanks. There was also a railroad siding.

A city fire ordinance probably prohibited building of the oil docks close to the town, for the village itself was about a mile from the spot.

Doc brought his plane down to a point close over the water, throttled his motor and swung almost soundlessly over the tankers. He saw no one. There was no indication that any of the vessels was ready to sail.

Also, there was something about lack of activity along the wharf that made the bronze man cautious.

He knew that Monk's radio message might have been intercepted. Crooks could be using a short-wave radio themselves. Perhaps a trap had been set for Doc to enter.

Because of the deathlike quietude down beneath him, Doc Savage realized there might be trouble waiting for him below.

He flew past the spot, banked, circled and came back for another look. It was then he saw the ship far off on the horizon, ship apparently headed his way. It was barely visible against outline of water and sky.

A moment later, Doc's sharp gaze flicked to the ship again and discovered that what he had seen was not a ship, but a plane moving down on him with surprising speed. In a matter of moments, it was close enough for Doc to see that it was a completely black plane of speedy design. And apparently the pilot, whoever he was, was intent on crashing the bronze man's monoplane!

Doc Savage's next movements were smooth and rapid-fast. There was no change in the calm expression of his metallic features, though death was rushing down at him with dizzy speed.

The bronze man sent his plane in a speedy sharp climb, managed to get above the other ship. He got one good look at the pilot in the open cockpit of the single-winged plane.

It was a man in a black mask. Heavy goggles concealed his eyes. His right, black-gloved hand rested on the solid handle of the machine gun that he was trying to swivel on the bronze man's own plane.

Doc saw these things as the two ships passed like zooming plummets. And the bronze man knew that the other's intention had not been to ram him. That would have spelled disaster for both. For even as Doc pitched upward, the other pilot flung his ship downward beneath Doc's fast ship.

The bronze man's thoughts raced as the two ships were momentarily clear of one another. Doc had no machine gun. Whatever weapons he carried would be useless against the fast black plane. But he himself, obviously, was going to be shot down.

Thus Doc Savage reached a sudden decision. Setting the controls for a moment, he whipped back to the cabin and from one of the equipment cases, pulled out a peculiar-looking object. He was back in the pilot's seat in a moment, fastening the device on.

THE thing was like a glass bowl inverted over Doc's metallic features. Transparent, it fitted close against the bronze man's shoulders.

In conjunction with the peculiar mask, was a harnesslike pack which strapped to the shoulders. The pack was a breath-purifier that supplied oxygen to the bronze man's lungs.

Doc got the contrivance on just as the speedy black plane ripped toward him again. The speed of the other ship said that it was just about the fastest thing made. There would be little chance of outdistancing it in a race. And so Doc dived.

Close behind came the black ship, a stream of tracer-bullets belching from the muzzle of its menacing machine gun. The eyes of the pilot behind the black mask were dark with hate.

Doc flipped his plane around a scant dozen feet above the water and temporarily confused the trailing pilot. The fellow's ship went streaking past. But the bullets from the machine gun did not. They ripped along the fuselage of Doc's ship. The bulk of the bronze man's plane was of a metal construction made to deflect ordinary bullets. But the ammunition the masked pilot was using apparently was a type of armor-piercing shell. Holes appeared like black raindrops on various parts of the bronze man's ship.

Next, as some distance beyond the masked pilot was circling in preparation for a new attack, Doc Savage hit the water and skillfully managed to keep his amphibian from turning turtle. It settled down and bounced about on the short, choppy waves like a mammoth cork.

Doc flung back toward the cabin. He had already cut the motor of the amphibian, lest a machine-gun shell penetrate the gas feed line.

Moving across the small cabin, Doc swooped up another object from an equipment case and then bent down to slash loose his big captive's bindings.

For Doc Savage never killed a crook needlessly. Though this man was an enemy, Doc would make every attempt to save him from the death which was swooping down upon them again from the sky. Already, the motor roar of the returning plane was loud in the cabin.

Doc shoved his hand toward the freed man. What he handed the fellow was a diving device made of a mouthpiece, nose clip and chemical purifier. Then Doc swung open the cabin door and indicated the water. He was giving his captive a chance to escape death.

But, without warning, the big fellow hauled off and swung a massive fist at the bronze man's glass bowl-inclosed head. The knuckles of the big man's hand bounced off Doc's protective hood, and the freed man stared at his bruised hand a second in puzzlement. He could hardly have known that the helmet was a form of shatterproof glass.

In the next moment, machine-gun bullets whined a death dirge as they ripped through the length of the plane. Doc Savage leaped out the open cabin door. The gas tank of the amphibian took fire and at the same moment leaped into flame.

The freed thug still delayed. He gave a shout. "I know that guy. He won't bother me!"

Doc Savage didn't wait to find out. He was already in a plunge through the water. Down. Down—

The helmet of glass was also a diving apparatus. Using it, the bronze man could stay beneath the surface for reasonable periods of time. He sank deep now.

And above him, as he stared upward through the transparent glass of the protective bowl, he saw the blurred redness that must be his ship afire on the water.

Doc maneuvered quickly to get away from the spot above him. He felt the crashing impact as machine-gun slugs tore into the water somewhere up there. But they were immediately deflected and did him no harm.

Later, perhaps a half hour later, Doc Savage came to the surface somewhere close to shore. Silence was all that met the bronze man's ears as he took off the protective glass hood and climbed out on an old dock. Night was settling over the lake front.

But out on the water a bit of charred wreckage still floated, a part of Doc Savage's burned and machine-gunned plane. Sprawled across that wreckage in death, was the big form of the man whom Doc had tried to drag away from the masked pilot's attack. The man who had apparently known the sky raider's identity, and who therefore figured himself safe.

Doc's captive might have been able to identify the masked pilot. The bronze man had hoped to use truth serum on his captive to find out.

Perhaps the masked pilot had guessed something of the same. But Doc's captive had been too confident to see this, or to let the bronze man save his life.

Thus he lay sprawled in death, his body torn with the gunner's slugs and his features a charred, gruesome mask.

The black plane had disappeared.

THE messages which Monk had left for the Man of Bronze had disappeared, too, and yet, later that night, Doc Savage found the first of them.

The first message was written hastily on what was left of the broken windshield of a big car parked near the long wharf. The wharf was one adjoining the old dock where the bronze giant had climbed from the water.

What first attracted Doc's attention to the large car was its style and make. The bronze man made a brief examination of tires, wheelbase and other details. The car was the one Doc had suggested Monk, Ham and Tink O'Neil try and locate in order to trail the girls.

Added to this, the machine looked as though it had been the storm center of a furious fight. Cushions were upended. Blood was on the doors. Besides the broken windshield, other windows in the car looked as though they had been exposed to various sorts of bricks and anything that could be thrown. The entire machine seemed to have been in a cyclone.

There was only one person who could create such havoc. Monk!

Thus it was that Doc Savage looked for some clue that the battling chemist might have left behind. It was in the course of his examination of the car that Doc looked closely at the remaining piece of broken windshield.

There was nothing visible to the ordinary eye. Yet Doc removed a small box from his equipment vest. The rubber-lined pockets of the vest were waterproof, and the powder which was in the small box was still dry.

Doc Savage sprayed a little of the powder over the section of remaining window glass. Writing on the windshield became immediately visible. The message said:

Doc-You were right. This was the car you said to look for. Those skinny guys and some others got away, but we think they've got the girls. Look for the new tanker.

The message was signed, "Monk."

Often, when the bronze man's aids found it imperative to leave messages for one another—messages that they did not want to be seen—they wrote the words with a colorless chalk of the bronze man's invention. Writing made with the chalk could not even be discerned with a magnifying glass. But when it was sprinkled with the chemical powder that Doc had just used, the writing was quite clear. Rays from the small spring-generator flashlight that Doc used made the words distinguishable.

Doc Savage left the car and moved quietly along the lengthy wharf. It was quite dark now, and there was, besides the dampness caused by the nearby water, a hint of rain in the air. A number of long, gloomy-looking oil tankers were tied up beside the dock.

Large round pipes ran along the wharf, and it could be seen that they had connections for hooking to massive rubber-hose lines from the tankers. Yet it was obvious that many of the boats were in disuse. The side plates of the vessels were rusted and old.

Monk had mentioned a new tanker. And so Doc Savage kept moving out the long length of the wharf in his search for the vessel.

Silence hung like a shroud over the water-front spot.

Far out on the end of the big wharf, Doc inspected the last of the string of moored tankers. Even this last one in line was an old vessel, and apparently not in use.

It was on a deck plate of this last tanker that Doc found the second message from Monk. This time, the chemist had not taken time to use the special chalk. Obviously he had wanted to be certain that the bronze man found his words.

Written in large, scrawly letters in white, visible chalk, they read:

Doc-Molly Mason escaped and has reached us. She knows whereabouts of Pat and that steel king, Mason. She says they are being held on—

Whatever Molly Mason had said was left unfinished. Apparently Monk, for some reason, had been given no time to complete the hurried message.

BUT Monk had plenty of time, it seemed, to hear more of the girl's comments now. He was saying with a broad grin, "Lookit, Molly, I'm gonna take care of them guys who grabbed you and Pat. I'm gonna blast their hides all over—"

The scene was a spot close to the shore of Lake Erie, at a point several miles above where Doc Savage was examining the old tankers. Information that Molly Mason had given to Doc Savage's aids had brought them here. In the distance, along the stretch of beach, could be seen the dark outlines of what might be a wharf for the docking of boats. But the overcast sky made any observation uncertain.

Monk, Ham and Tink O'Neil had located the girl tied up in a small cabin aboard one of the old oil tankers. This was at the first wharf where Doc Savage had found Monk's message.

First, Monk had come upon the car, and later had surprised the two skinny men returning to it.

The chemist had been in the midst of a grand battle when other thugs closed in. But the men had escaped before Ham or Tink O'Neil could come to the chemist's assistance.

But they had found Molly Mason, and the girl had breathlessly told of overhearing a conversation that indicated Pat Savage and Molly's father were being held aboard the new oil tanker, the Mary L; and that the vessel had been moved to an obscure wharf five miles farther down the lake shore.

The small group was close to that point now. Monk had paused to talk with lovely Molly. The expression on the apelike chemist's homely features said that he could think of nothing nicer to

do—unless, perhaps, it was getting into a fight.

Ignoring Ham, Monk went on, "Did anyone ever tell you, Molly, that your eyes are like the sky at dusk, or that your sweet mouth is a rainbow of—"

Tow-headed Tink O'Neil put in sort of coolly, "We might get going, Molly. Your father is in grave danger—"

The girl's slim fingers flew to her mouth. She gave a startled little gasp. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "I forgot. Let's hurry!"

The part of the beach which they were traversing made a long sweep out to a point. It was out near the tip of this point where the bulky outline of what could be a wharf was located.

Molly Mason was saying, "That must be it. From what I overheard those terrible men saying, the Mary L is tied up there. That's where they're supposed to be holding father and Pat Savage." The girl stiffened, pointed. "Why, there! You can see it now. It is an oil tanker there at the wharf!"

She was correct in her statement.

The new-type oil tanker was a city block long and rested low in the water beside the wharf. Apparently its holds were full of oil. Most of the vessel was a flat expanse of steel deck only a few feet above the water's edge. But at one end of the tanker was a superstructure made of more steel. Here were located a small cabin, bridge and quarters.

The ship was in darkness. No one seemed to be around.

But Molly Mason pointed to a name on the side plates, barely clear of the water line.

"It's the Mary L!" she cried. "That's the boat they're holding father and Pat on!"

Monk stuck out his hard jaw and led the way aboard from the dock. "What the heck!" he growled.

"Then I'm gonna find out!"

The others followed, lanky Tink O'Neil explaining, "This is one of the vessels for which we furnished steel. It's a type that can be quickly converted in time of war."

Monk looked at the young steel plant troubleshooter. "War?"

Tink O'Neil nodded. He shot Molly Mason a peculiar glance, but Monk disregarded it. Tink went on: "Yes. These deck plates are made of the new T.3 formula steel. They'll withstand any kind of bombing from the air. One of these tankers can be quickly converted to be used as convoys or even to attack any enemy merchant ship in our waters. They are practically indistinguishable in the water, and guns can quickly be mounted on their flat decks. This is one of the first for which we've supplied the heavy armor plate."

Monk stared at the deck beneath his feet. It was steel, and looked as solid as that of any battleship.

"Gollywhockus!" he exploded. "Betcha you couldn't go through this stuff with a torpedo!"

They kept prowling around the long, dark tanker.

Cabin and crew's quarters forward were deserted. But there were indications that men had been recently living aboard.

On deck again, it was Molly Mason who pointed aft and exclaimed, "Look! Back there! One of the hatches is open!"

The tanker, mostly, was built with pipeline connections that led into sealed holds. But there were a few hatch openings. At first, it had appeared that most of the hatches were closed and bolted.

But now the tall, slender girl was correct. Far aft, in the gloom, could be seen the dim outline of a steel cover that was flung back. Monk led the others quickly that way.

When Monk reached the hold opening, he got down on his hands and knees and squinted below into gloom. Then he got out a flashlight and took a better look.

But before he could use the light, the sound came up out of the hold. It was a groan, followed by a half-muffled plea.

"Help!"

Monk roared. He leaped toward the hatch opening. "Goshamighty!" he exploded. "It must be Pat and Molly's father!"

Molly Mason, her slim hand at her throat, pleaded, "Monk! Hurry! Help them!"

The drop into the hold was perhaps a dozen feet. Monk hung by his hands a moment from the edge of the hatch, then dropped. Ham and young Tink O'Neil quickly followed.

Monk, on his feet in the gloom, said to Ham, "Let's have that light again. I'm gonna—"

What Monk was going to do remained a question. For the piece of pipe cracked his skull in the next instant. Ham and Tink O'Neil were likewise slugged.

And as the three got down on their hands and knees and tried not to go to sleep, the terrified cry came from above.

It was Molly's cry for help.

Chapter XIV. TANKER TRAP

APELIKE MONK was the first to wake up. He was immediately aware of the throbbing of the tanker's Diesels. The vessel was under way, and how long it had been so Monk could not tell.

But he did see that a light had been turned on in the hold where they had been slugged. And revealed by the light were the various grinning thugs who stood nearby, looking at their three

helpless captives.

Monk muttered something to himself. The size of his small bright eyes in his homely face was such that these fellows had not realized the hairy chemist was awake.

And Monk was a tough fellow. Often he had been beaten into unconsciousness, only to soon climb to his feet again and start all over in a fight as though he hadn't been touched.

He swung up on his feet now and took a hefty poke at the nearest crook. The chemist's blow would have been perfect, except that it landed three inches short of the man's jaw. And Monk landed in a heap on the deck, with the startled thought that his leg had suddenly been seized in a bear trap. The trap was a length of heavy chain padlocked to a ring in the deck. Monk's ankle was fastened to the chain.

He glared at his captors. There were six of them, four of the six just about as tough-looking as they come. They kept grinning at Monk, which didn't help Monk's murderous thoughts.

The other two were the medium-sized and the tall, beanpole-looking skinny men who had helped seize Pat Savage and Molly Mason, with the aid of tough little Wart.

Monk stared around. He yanked at the heavy chain with his foot, but merely succeeded in taking more skin from his already bruised ankle. Several feet from him he saw the limp forms of Ham and Tink O'Neil. Both men were still unconscious, and Ham's sword-cane was flat on the deck beneath him. There was no sign of the pets.

Monk wished he could reach the cane, but the distance was too great. So he sat and glowered, reminding himself that hereafter he was always going to carry with him a saw made to cut through steel chain.

His captors apparently forgot about him. Some sort of discussion was taking place among the six. One snapped, "Well, I'm tellin' you Wart is gonna take things in his own hands. If you ask me, Wart has been tricked like nobody's business."

"What are you gettin' at?" another prodded.

"That formula Wart was supposed to get. The big shot fooled him, I'm thinkin'. From something Wart said today, I betcha he didn't get the real formula at all. What he has is a fake!"

The men seemed to think about that for a while.

Then one said, "You mean, Wart is gonna walk out on the big shot?"

"Yeah! Wouldn't be surprised if he hasn't already done it. We'll probably take things over ourselves."

Monk sat hooked to the length of chain and listened. He was just on the verge of asking a question when someone spoke from the hatch opening above.

"Hey, you guys! There's a plane flyin' out to meet us. Guess it's the big boss himself!"

Monk squinted up to get a look at the man who spoke, but he could not see very well. The sky was a little brighter—it must be close to dawn, the chemist figured—but it was still dark enough to make things vague. And it was raining. The rain came down through the hatch opening and made puddles near Monk's feet.

Monk went to work trying to pull the heavy ring from the deck. Rage filled his thoughts, and he decided just what he was going to do to this crowd when he got loose.

He caught the words from the six men already leaping toward a rope ladder that dangled down into the hold. One said: "The boss, eh? Now we'll settle this business once and for all!"

"Yeah," another agreed.

They all climbed out.

Five minutes later the first bomb hit the deck plates of the sturdy oil tanker.

Monk felt the impact that was like a giant wave smacking the sides of the ship. The vessel heeled over, leveled off again. Light in the hold went out. The Diesels stopped throbbing.

In the darkness near Monk, Ham muttered, "Wh-what happened?"

The lawyer, apparently, was now awake. A moment later, young Tink O'Neil stirred and sat up.

In the half-gloom, Ham and tow-headed Tink O'Neil were now on their feet. Ham exclaimed, "We've got to get out of here. There's no time to lose!"

Monk snorted, "That's a swell idea. Only hitch is I'm chained to the deck!"

Ham groaned. He stooped quickly to see if he could help his homely partner. After a second's feeling around at the chain and deck ring in the darkness, Ham said worriedly, "You couldn't open this padlock with an ax."

Monk ordered, "You two get outta here. Save your own hides. Or maybe you can grab some of them guys up there and get a key!"

Both were reluctant to leave Monk, but finally young Tink O'Neil jumped toward the rope ladder.

"That's an idea," he said.

It was a good idea, but in the next moment the plane swooped down over the oil tanker again and then another bomb exploded on the decks. There was a tearing and rending of steel. The vessel was soon listing badly. A chunk of metal smashed down into the hold, missing the three by inches as it crashed against the deck.

Tink O'Neil was forced to leap clear of the hatch opening.

Monk commented in disgust, "Them sure must be great deck plates, that new armor steel you told us about, Tink! Sounds like it busted to hell and gone!"



The ship listed farther. Up on deck there was yelling and confusion, and mingled with it was a man's terrified cry.

Someone rapped, "The dirty devil! He musta heard about Wart walkin' out on him, and now he's gonna eliminate any clue to who he is!"

Just then, someone appeared above and hurled something down at the three below. A voice yelled, "We're giving you a break, guys. We hate to see you drowned like rats. So now you can swim, instead. It's only twenty miles to shore!"

Ham cried, "It must be a key!" and started feeling around in the darkness. Every moment the vessel was listing more badly, and the lawyer had a time staying on his feet. Monk had slid along the smooth deck, his leg stretched taut at the end of the chain.

By the time Ham located the padlock key, the sound of the plane which had attacked the tanker had faded out.

A moment later, Ham had crawled to Monk's side and unlocked the chain. Movement on the slanted deck was difficult. There was little to hold to. But shortly all three were climbing the rope ladder to the top deck. All stared at the damaged, listing tanker. Already water was pouring in over one side. It would only be a few moments until the vessel sank.

It was Tink O'Neil who pointed off through the rain and said, "Look! They've escaped in a powerboat!"

It was true. For a quarter of a mile away, the small motorboat was fast disappearing in the rain and ground fog that hung over the water. The shore line, if any, was invisible.

Monk suddenly ripped off his shoes and coat. He said determinedly, "Hope you two guys aren't in a hurry for breakfast."

He dived off the side of the oil tanker that was already dipping beneath the waters of Lake Erie. Ham and Tink O'Neil, likewise coatless and shoeless, followed. The lawyer's sword-cane, which he was never without, was tucked beneath his belt. It made swimming, for him, more difficult.

Up forward on the bridge, there was a chattering and squealing. A second later, the two pets leaped into the water too!

The three men swam away from the sinking oil tanker just about as fast as they could. Ten minutes later there was a great gushing of water behind them, as the tanker went under.

Then there was only the rain and the tendrils of settling fog, and an invisible shore line miles away in a direction they could not even guess.

The three swam without speaking. All were excellent swimmers. Yet the grimness of the situation was only too real. For a slight breeze had sprung up and there was indication of a real storm. And a storm on any of the Great Lakes can be worse than any at sea.

It was about a half hour later that the plane appeared out of the sky, circling and dipping down over them. It passed close over their heads. Monk let out a whoop. "Doc!" he shouted.

Doc Savage brought the amphibian down, landed smoothly and taxied the plane up close. Shortly the giant bronze man stepped out on a wing.

He called out to Monk, "Lucky you left this ship near where I found your last message!"

#### Chapter XV. HORROR IN STEEL

TWO hours later that morning, Doc Savage, with Monk, Ham and young Tink O'Neil were searching the dead man they had found back on the wharf where the string of old tankers were tied up.

First, of course, Doc had rescued the three from Lake Erie. Monk and Ham, since they always carried extra supplies with them in their plane, were able to locate shoes and dry clothing. They even found some clothes for lanky Tink O'Neil, though the sandy-haired young man sort of stuck out either end of pants and coat, and the shoes were too tight.

Doc had told about his own loss of his plane, together with much valuable equipment. They had returned to the original wharf where Monk had left the messages, in the hope that they might find some clue to Molly Mason or the others—Pat Savage and the millionaire steel king.

And instead, they found—this dead fellow in a shed on the dock!

The man was fairly well dressed, stockily built and with black hair. He had been shot in the back.

Doc went through the dead man's clothing. He found a sheaf of papers, read them over quickly, passed them to the lawyer and Tink O'Neil. Monk, curious, stuck his homely face past Ham's shoulder and read also.

Doc said, "Apparently they are some sort of reports, and they were written by this dead man. They describe the exact movements—wherever possible—of anyone in authority at J. Henry Mason's steel plants. This included all his relatives who are in executive positions at the mills."

"Yes," Tink O'Neil said. "All these people mentioned have an interest in the business. Mr. Mason always has tried to keep control of the vast plant within his own family."

Abruptly, as he looked at another paper, Tink O'Neil gasped.

"Look!" the latter exclaimed. "All these reports are some sort of an investigation made for a single person. And that person is Willie Watt, superintendent at our plant!"

Doc nodded. His metallic features were calm. "It appears that way," he said.

Tink O'Neil, his gray eyes wide, went on, "That means Willie Watt must be the person behind the mystery. He's seeking control of T.3. Why, I . . . I'll bet he's the one responsible for some change

in the original formula that has caused these flaws in the new steel!"

The bronze man made no comment. Instead, he looked at his two aids. He said, "Ham, you and Monk had better notify the nearest police authorities about this murdered man. Then get in touch with me at the steel plant. Perhaps Renny has learned something."

Doc explained how he had left Renny at the plant, then added something else of significance.

"It appears," he said, "that a climax to this mystery is coming fast. The real villain is killing off all who might point a finger at himself. He is going to work quickly from now on."

Tink O'Neil exclaimed, "You mean Willie Watt?"

Doc Savage shook his head. "Willie Watt is hardly the real brains behind this," he said.

Monk looked puzzled. He indicated the papers which had been turned over to young Tink O'Neil.

"Golly!" the chemist protested, "it must be Willie Watt, Doc. All them reports are for him, an' they show that Willie Watt is danged interested in knowing what everyone of the other relatives is doing!"

Hairy Monk was pointing at something else on the papers. "Whoever this dead guy was, he signed himself 'S. E. C.'"

Doc said, "I think Renny is going to have some information about this S. E. C."

Without further explanation, Doc Savage hurried off. A few moments later, the bronze man's aids heard the amphibian take off from a field nearby.

But Doc Savage did not immediately return to the steel plant south of Lake Erie. He brought the plane down in a pasture outside a small town somewhere west of Buffalo and proceeded to the nearest highway filling station. From here, he put through a call to New York.

Doc called a corporation listed as Brown & Brown. He identified himself, and was immediately connected with an official.

The executive said, "Mr. Savage, we were able to get that information for you. The data that Mr. Renwick asked for."

For several moments, the man at the other end of the line talked rapidly.

Doc's eyes stirred with interest as he listened. Finally he said, "Thank you. What you have done is a fine piece of work." He hung up.

Then he put through a call to Renny, whom he had left in a laboratory of the big steel plant.

There was a little delay until the big engineer of Doc's organization was located. Then Renny's voice boomed over the wire.

"Doc! There's hell to pay here. Ten more mill hands went nuts this morning. Five of the shops are shut down, and more men are walking out every minute. Willie Watt, that superintendent, has disappeared. And there's something else!"

"Yes?" Doc Savage said.

"I got this thing figured out. I can tell you who's behind it and what causes this madness trouble. Just a moment ago I got wise to the set-up. . . ."

Doc Savage interrupted quickly, "Wait until I get there. It might not be advisable to mention names over the phone. The trip should only take about ten or fifteen minutes."

Doc hung up, hurried back to where he had left the plane in the pasture. He took off immediately for the small woods outside the mill town.

Doc arrived, a little while later, at one of the many entrances to the mile-long steel plant.

Much of the smoke that ordinarily formed an overhanging dark haze in the sky was missing. It was plain that several of the shops were closed down.

But some were in operation, and the bronze man saw smoke coming from the furnaces of Open-hearth Shop No. 5. He also saw something else.

Men running toward the open-hearth shop. Some were yelling and shouting to others who joined in and followed along.

The bronze man moved quickly in the same direction. He caught up with one of the husky mill hands and asked a question.

"What's wrong?"

THE big fellow turned and looked at Doc Savage. The man's face was dripping with perspiration caused by the intense heat of one of the shops still operating.

He stared a moment at the bronze man, then exclaimed, "Say, aren't you Doc Savage?"

Doc nodded.

The man looked questionably at some of his fellow workers. Then he stared back at Doc.

"Well, about that man Renwick. He's a fellow in your organization, I understand. Well, Renwick's just gone mad. They've chased him into No. 5."

For a scant instant, Doc remained motionless. Perhaps he was thinking of what Renny had told him over the phone only a few minutes ago. That he knew what was causing the madness!

The bronze man, without a word, leaped ahead of the others running toward the huge open-hearth shop. He arrived inside the high, steamy, smoke-filled building just as a horrible yell went out from many men's throats.

Through the haze caused by the terrific heat, Doc Savage saw a massive, ten-ton ladle which rested on the floor midway down the length of the vast room. Men stood far back from that ladle of molten steel watching in horror as a crane operator spilled it over. They jerked still farther back

as red-hot steel that was like crawling snakes spread over the floor. Fire and sparks raised in every direction. The heat from the stuff was skin-searing. Then the crane operator worked a lever that raised the emptied ladle upright again. The crane lifted the huge bucket, carried it well down the length of the shop and set it down again. It was once more turned on its side.

Workmen rushed toward the empty ladle with long steel rods, in their hands. They started poking inside the ladle with the poles.

Doc, by now, had circled the spot where the molten steel had been spilled. He arrived at the emptied ladle and questioned a man.

"What happened?" asked the bronze man.

"A guy with the madness dived into the ladle!" explained one of the mill hands with the long, poking rods. "There ain't a danged thing left of him!"

"Wait a minute!" cried another. "Look at this, will you!"

The man had worked something from the empty ladle with the long steel rod. He pushed it across the floor.

Doc Savage bent down to stare at the small object. It was a thing that had withstood the white-hot fire of molten steel. It was all that was left of what had once been a man.

It was a peculiarly shaped diamond from a ring that Renny, the engineer, had occasionally worn!  
Chapter XVI. AND NOW YOU DIE!

THROUGHOUT that afternoon, the giant bronze man moved through various huge buildings of the steel plant in grim silence. He made no comment about Renny's death.

Developments at the plant changed with breath-taking speed.

A hundred more men walked off their jobs. A rolling mill where a huge order of government armament material was being rushed to completion shut down. There was something wrong with the formula of T.3. The armament material had proved worthless.

Ten more mill hands appeared with the red spots. There was nothing phony with the men's twisted, grinning expressions. They were not part of the mob that was trying to cash in on the terrible sickness. Because the ten men were stark, raving mad!

Before they could be caught, they killed two dozen mill hands who tried to stop their mad dash through the single main street of the town. It was only when the crazed workers were brought down with guns that the terror temporarily ceased.

But a new form of trouble cropped up. This happened when arrogant and domineering Leidenberg, the plant manager, closed the remainder of the mills at six that night.

Though hundreds of men had already quit their jobs because of the red-spotted madness, others still wanted to work. They were willing to take the chance. They needed the money for support of their families.

And so men fought in the streets and stormed the closed gates of the huge plant. At dusk, crowds roamed through the town carrying flares and clubs. They sought out any who might be afflicted with the madness. Everyone so crazed would be killed. A desperate, mob-frenzied attempt was being made to stamp out the terrible menace.

Word reached the town that another of J. Henry Mason's steel plants in Pennsylvania had also shut down. The madness had somehow reached there, too. This was a plant at which the formula of T.3 had also been introduced, and from which was being made girders for government bridges.

When darkness fell Doc Savage was in the general offices of the great plant. A meeting was being held in the board room, and all the officials and relative-executives of J. Henry Mason were there. Even fat Walter Mason, the lazy, indifferent cousin of pretty Molly Mason, was there also.

Apparently the fat fellow considered it to his advantage to finally learn what was going on. But it was little, hard-boiled Willie Watt and the big, steely gray-haired manager, Leidenberg, who did most of the arguing. The others only put in a word or two.

Cocky little Willie Watt pounded his fist on the table and yelled, "Hell with you! We've got to keep the shops going! The company will go broke if we don't!"

Leidenberg, the manager, drew his big form up arrogantly. "Sure!" he bellowed. "And we'll all die. I say, keep 'em closed. I'll lose just as much as the rest of you—more, perhaps. But that's better than letting the madness get us!"

A quiet little man who had been sitting down near one end of the board table, spoke up. "Me, I'm selling out!" he put in. "I'm taking what I can while I can!"

"Me, too!" added another stockholder.

While the heated word battle was taking place around the table, an office boy came into the room and stepped quietly to Doc's side. He said softly: "Phone call for you, Mr. Savage. You can take it outside in the anteroom, in the booth."

The bronze giant moved silently out of the room. He stepped into a glass-enclosed booth in the anteroom, lifted the receiver and said, "Yes?"

The booming voice said, "Doc? This is Renny."

STRANGELY, Doc Savage showed no surprise. He merely stated quietly: "I figured something like this, Renny."

"Thought you would," Renny said. "I noticed this morning, in one of the laboratories, that my own

ring was missing from my coat pocket for a while. Later, Doc, some guys grabbed me and gave me a shot of stuff. They expected me to go mad, and when I didn't they doped a fellow about my size—then spread the word that I had gone crazy."

"Yes," Doc said. Then Doc went on: "That capsule perhaps saved you. The drug they are using is a rare one, but the counteragent I used was enough to offset it."

"Then you know what the madness stuff is?"

"Yes."

"But—"

Doc went on swiftly. "The showdown in this thing is coming fast. It will be tonight, because the real villain is now forced to cover up as quickly as possible." The bronze man mentioned the last-known whereabouts of Ham, Monk and Tink O'Neil. He also gave the location of the plane. "You might try to find them and return here to the plant as soon as possible."

"But why here?" prodded Renny.

"Because I have reason to believe that Pat is somewhere in the vicinity of this steel plant," finished Doc.

He hung up, returned quietly to the board room. Men were just rising from their chairs. The meeting had ended with a vote to close the plant indefinitely.

Ponderous Walter Mason met Doc as he came back into the room. He said, "I have my car outside, Savage. If there is anything I can do—"

Doc immediately picked up the fat young man's suggestion. "Yes, there is," he said. He drew Walter Mason to one side.

"You probably know the layout of this entire plant fairly well?" the bronze man questioned.

Walter nodded, his fat chins jiggling. "Certainly. I've lived around here long enough to know every corner of the place."

"Then you might be able to help," said Doc. "We might get started."

They went out.

WALTER'S car was something that was built along the lines of himself. It was massive. But it was also about the fastest thing on wheels.

Paved ribbons of cement wound through the spreading property of the now silent steel plant. Off beyond the shops, in the distance, there was a muttering sound, however, that came through the gloom. A red glow reflected against the sky.

Walter explained as he drove, "More men fighting. Willie Watt was all for calling in the militia tonight, to stop the trouble, but I convinced him it would be advisable to wait until morning. Told him I thought you might clean up this mystery tonight."

Doc remained silent a moment, making no comment.

Then he asked, "Where would you suggest there might be a hiding place where Pat Savage or any of the others might be held near here? That is, a place that has been completely overlooked so far?"

Walter Mason's small, bright eyes were thoughtful in his moonlike face. Suddenly he snapped his fat fingers.

"The river!" he exclaimed. "What I mean is, on one of the old ore barges tied up down there. Down here at the far end of the plant, there's a stream that winds in from the lake. It's been dredged deep enough so that our supply barges can be brought almost into the plant. We get our scrap and pig iron that way. But with the shops closing down, the stuff has accumulated and some of those barges have been tied up a week. It would be a logical place that was overlooked."

Shortly, Walter Mason had swung the big car out through a gate, across the main street of the mill town, and through another street that formed the very end of the town. He followed a byway that led down to a small river. Here, close to shore, a freight siding swung in from the main line leading into the plant proper.

They bumped over tracks, passed darkened storage sheds and red-painted buildings used for the safekeeping of inflammable paint materials and chemicals.

At last they drew up beside a string of wooden barges tied up at a big water-front unloading platform.

Walter climbed out, puffing because of his bulk. He said, "Wait. I'll go ahead and see if there is a watchman around."

Doc waited. In the night, his remarkable flake-gold eyes stirred with an unusual restlessness. Ten minutes passed. Then Doc moved forward in the direction the fat young man had taken. Walter Mason, on leaving, had gone toward the first of a string of darkened barges.

Doc headed that way. And just as he was approaching the unloading dock edge, his foot hit something soft and yielding. The bronze man stooped down quickly.

IT was the big bulk of a man. Walter! The fat young man groaned, managed to gasp, "Hurry! They went in that supply shed just beside us. There might be time to—"

Doc straightened, noted the large corrugated metal building close by. He leaped that way.

A sliding door was partially open in the side of the big shed. Slipping through soundlessly, darkness and the odor of chemicals and paints met the bronze giant's senses.

Doc went forward carefully, not using a light, but depending upon his acute senses to show him the way. He reached a cleared space in the center of the big supply shed. There was the vague,

bulking outlines of steel drums and carboys of chemicals piled high near him. Sensing some other presence besides these inanimate things, Doc tensed. And the powerful, overhead floodlight, blazed on and splashed blinding, brilliant light over the bronze man's form. The big light hung low enough so that it cast a twelve-foot circle of brightness around him.

Doc Savage was the central point of that revealing circle.

But into the circle's outer edge moved the dozen men with guns. Doc was carefully covered, and a voice rapped:

"All right, bronze guy! Start taking off your coat and vest. Place them carefully on the floor. Any tricks, and—"

The speaker patted his automatic to end the sentence.

All Doc could see was the men's legs, bodies and menacing guns. Faces were invisible where they were just beyond the circle of light.

Slowly, he started stripping off coat and vest.

"Careful!" the same harsh voice warned. Obviously, these gunmen knew something about the gadgets which the bronze man carried in his trick equipment-vest, and so they were taking no chances on Doc exploding a small gas bomb or something.

"Strip to your waist!" the voice ordered further.

Doc followed the instructions. There was little else he could apparently do.

When his great chest was bared from the waist up, when the encircling ring of men could see that Doc held no tricks up his sleeve, the voice said, "And now, Savage, you meet the boss!"

There was a scuffling of feet. Doc saw several of the men move back a little, leaving one side of the circle open.

Another, much smaller overhead light came on. It was just bright enough to reveal the figure seated at the table. The distance from the bronze man to the figure behind the table was perhaps two dozen feet. Doc noted that he was still carefully covered by the dozen or so gunmen.

His gaze went again to the seated figure beneath the light. The size of the person was hard to figure, for the concealing cape the man wore was entirely of black. As was the loose hood over his head, the hood through which gleamed a pair of intense eyes.

It was the man in the black mask.

Chapter XVII. FIEND IN BLACK!

JUST about this moment, at the other end of the mill town, a small group of grim-faced figures were swinging into the main street. They were Monk, Ham, tow-headed Tink O'Neil and pretty Molly Mason.

The tall girl was saying to Monk, "Heavens! It's a good thing I escaped from those awful men and found you again. Perhaps we're in time to stop this riot!"

Riot it was. Men were fighting in the street, their faces strained and grim in the torchlight glare. Clubs struck heads. Brickbats flew. A man went through the glass window of a store.

It was Molly who pointed and exclaimed, "Look! There's tough little Willie Watt. He's the one behind this!"

They saw the small, thin, wiry fellow leading a group of perhaps twelve men. Big, powerful fellows with clubs in their fists. But the group was not closing in on the rioting fighters; instead they were coming directly toward Monk, Ham and the others.

Abruptly young Tink O'Neil drew up short and stared. He grabbed Monk's massive arm and explained, "That's not Willie Watt the superintendent. It's a crook named Wart. And those guys with him—" Monk swung to so inform the girl.

But tall Molly Mason had disappeared!

In the next moment, Monk, Ham and Tink O'Neil were attacked by Wart and his mob. Monk let out a howl and jumped into the wedge of approaching thugs.

The big men's faces were scarred and hard. Ears were flattened. They looked like a bunch of gorillas from the East Side of New York.

Monk grabbed the solid arm of the nearest man, and bellowed, "Hey! You ain't no mill hand!"

The big fellow roared, "Brother, you said a mouthful!"

He started wrapping a heavy piece of pipe around Monk's head.

Ham whipped his sword from its slender black sheath. Tink O'Neil started proving that he knew how to use his fists. The swaying, tangled mass of fighters worked their way across the road.

Skinny little Wart got outside the fighting men and threw the small object. It was a glass capsule about the size of an egg. It quickly broke beneath the men's feet and a white, vaporish cloud spread upward. Men started falling down in their tracks.

It had been a form of knockout gas that Wart used.

Next he motioned to several big men hovering back in a nearby doorway. He called, "You still got the truck?"

Someone said, "Yeah!"

"Then start loading these mugs in!" ordered skinny Wart.

Later, the truck left there with its load of helpless victims. It proceeded through the main street of the town, no one paying attention because of the smaller fights that were taking place up

and down the thoroughfare.

Wart, seated beside the driver in the cab of the truck, said, "Well, this about cleans up the Doc Savage crowd. The big boy himself had already captured Doc. And the other captives are down there now, too. So now we'll go there."

"It sure worked swell," said the driver.

"Listen," continued Wart, "what we're gonna work now is even better. We're gonna grab the big boy, too!"

"Don't get you," the driver mumbled.

"Look," said Wart. "Our organization in New York paid the big guy a million bucks for the formula, didn't they?"

"Sure."

"And besides, we grabbed the millionaire, and his daughter Molly and that Pat Savage. We did a whole lot of things to help the big boss get what he wanted. We planted those phony mad guys in the shops, and had others working in the mills jimmy up different runs of new steel."

"Sure, but—"

"An' we were supposed to get that formula for T.3 for all this."

"That's right," agreed the truck driver.

"Well," rapped Wart, "we didn't get T.3. We got a phony. That big boy pulled a fast one on us for his million fish!"

The driver whistled.

FACING the masked man—the "big boy" himself—in the storage shed, Doc Savage said quietly, "And so you were not so clever. Your method of creating this madness menace has been discovered, and destroyed."

The man behind the mask chuckled. "Yes," he said, "I happen to know that you found those tablets mixed with the regular salt tablets in the dispensing machines this afternoon. You ordered every machine emptied and its contents destroyed."

The masked man laughed. "But now you are going to die, and other methods will be used to keep up this madness trouble if necessary!"

Doc stood watching the speaker, his brain sharply alert.

What the masked villain referred to was the dispensing machines located in the various heat-filled open-hearth shops, rolling mills, wire shops and other buildings of the plant. The machines dispensed a salt tablet which the workers used.

Salt must be continually used by mill hands working under terrific heat, where salt is fast lost from the body by continual, excessive perspiration. Formerly, the men had just obtained the salt by scooping up some from buckets placed in handy spots around the various shops.

But now the dispensing machines were a modern improvement. It was in these machines that the other tablets containing the rare drug had been placed. The drug that caused madness and which also contained something that made its victims allergic to heat, causing the hideous rash of red spots. Doc had suspected something of this at the very beginning. Thus Renny had made the tests for him, and it was this report that Renny had explained in one of his phone calls.

Renny had not been affected by any drug. The capsule Doc had given the big engineer was a counter agent devised to offset any effects of the drug.

Doc, if he lived, planned to use this counter agent on any other workers who had been exposed to the menace.

If he lived—

Doc said, stalling for a moment's more time, "You didn't seek the formula of T.3. You didn't need the formula. What you've wanted is shutting down the plant. You've worked things in such a way that stock in the company has plunged to almost nothing. And so you've been buying it in at your own price, later to reopen the plants and make a fortune all your own. You were clever enough to buy the stocks through a fake corporation, which was yourself—"

The masked man brought his fist down on the table before him. It made a ponderous thud. Even the hands of the masked one were covered with loose black gloves.

He said gratingly, "You're a clever fellow, Doc Savage. It's too bad you must die. And now—"

Doc was standing with his bronze hands hooked into the belt at his bared waist. He was tense, ready to—

A door opened somewhere behind the group of encircling gunmen and a hard voice rapped, "What the hell!"

It was the voice of tough little Willie Watt.

And then a second voice boomed, "Doc!"

That was Renny, the big engineer!

In a strange voice, Doc called out something that was unintelligible to the men with guns. The sound might merely have been a worried yell.

But the words Doc spoke were taken from a long-lost tongue. Mayan! It was a language that Doc and his men used in moments when they did not wish to be understood by others.

What Doc had called to Renny was, "Shoot the belt!"

And the bronze man whipped the belt from his waist and flung it into the air. Renny fired from

somewhere beyond.

The explosion that followed was a blinding glare which left everyone momentarily stunned.

RENNY, who had been concealed back in the darkness, had understood what the bronze man meant.

For the lining of Doc Savage's wide belt contained a number of small, explosive pellets. The pellets could be set off by a sharp, hard concussion.

And so Renny had used a machine pistol, which all the aids of Doc Savage carried. Doc, himself, seldom carried a gun. But Renny, himself an expert marksman, had caught the belt in midair with a fast, sure aim. Thus the explosion had followed.

The force of the explosion broke the two overhead lights. Men were struggling about on the floor, climbing back to their feet. Momentarily, they could not see. Besides, there was the blackness all around them.

And so confusion reigned, and making use of it the one in the black mask and cape moved with a fair amount of safety. There was yelling and fighting, as Renny and hardboiled little Willie Watt jumped into the room.

Almost immediately, more voices shouted and more men piled into the tangle. These were the ones who had arrived with little Wart and the truckload of stunned thugs and Monk, Ham and Tink O'Neil. Over the sound of the confusion, there was a bellow that might have been made by a bull. It came from inside the truck itself. Then there was a crash, rear doors of the truck split wide and Monk came leaping out, followed by Ham and Tink O'Neil.

The men had regained consciousness, including the thugs who had been knocked out also. Skinny little Wart screamed:

"Hell with the Doc Savage crowd! Get that blasted masked guy!"

Gunfire followed. A shot struck a drum of chemical, and a moment later flames were licking over other supplies in the big storage building. Paint stuff and other inflammable material took hold rapidly. A red glare overspread the confused, fighting mob.

And within it, Monk went around joyously cracking skulls. Ham and Tink O'Neil were at his side. Ham, swinging his sword-cane, called worriedly, "Where's Doc? And where's that masked guy I heard somebody mention?"

But Doc Savage had disappeared. As had the real villain he sought!

Chapter XVIII. ONE MAN'S FOLLY

DOC SAVAGE, moving with blurred speed through the night, left the fighting men behind him.

Through a small window of the storage shed, licking red flames showed. A man came hurtling through the window. Another followed. There was the sound of Monk's gleeful yell from somewhere within the building.

Doc, however, followed what was just a vague glimpse of a hazy, dark shadow. The figure had appeared to head toward a small tugboat tied up near the ore-filled barges at the river front. And then, suddenly, the bronze man realized that he had been deceived by the black-cloaked figure, and that he had lost it in the night.

Carefully, Doc Savage prowled along the dock. He spent ten minutes looking for the masked man. Behind him, the entire storage shed had burst into flames. A slight breeze was blowing the fire toward the water—and also toward the tugboat that was tied up there.

The girl's muffled cry came from the tug!

Doc Savage leaped from the dock down to the narrow deck alongside the small cabin of the sturdy-looking tugboat. Already, flames from the burning storage shed were working their way across the dry planking behind him.

The bronze man flung past the cabin, jerked open doors of the crew's quarters strung out along the narrow side deck. He moved through an open doorway and down a short iron ladder to the engine room.

Pat Savage, her lovely face pale from hours of being tied up hand and foot, her mouth covered with a gag, lay on a bench in the room.

Doc moved swiftly. He got the gag from Pat's mouth. He stood his tall, bronze-gold-haired cousin on her feet and untied her bonds. He helped rub circulation back into her numbed wrists.

Pat gasped, "Doc! Walter Mason found Molly in here just a few moments ago. He was hurt, but he managed to carry her out. She was gagged like myself, and she had no chance to tell him about me!"

Doc said swiftly, "There's no time for words just now!"

He helped his pretty cousin from the boat. Flames were dangerously close. The storage building itself was a ball of red fire, parts of it already starting to tumble.

Past the building ran men, pulling a small, two-wheeled and portable fire truck. Perhaps, after a fashion, they could check spreading of the fire along the dock.

Doc, with Pat at his side, raced toward the big truck that had been parked near the building. A man was just leaping in behind the wheel.

"Where are the others?" Doc asked.

The big fellow was a steelworker that Doc Savage had seen around one of the shops. He was not one of Wart's crooks.

"They got the tip-off that the masked guy was headed toward the open-hearth shop!" the man said.

"The mob's all gone that way, including your men!"

Doc ordered, "Move over!" and got behind the wheel. Pat and the mill worker squeezed into the seat beside him.

The bronze man sent the heavy truck hurtling up the single main street. They passed groups of mill hands running in the same direction they were headed.

Men were yelling in the streets, "Go to No. 5! That masked man went to that shop!"

Doc Savage swung in beside the long, towering open-hearth shop several blocks ahead of the running mill hands. Another car had stopped just ahead of Doc's.

It was the big machine of fat Walter Mason, and the young man was just climbing out.

HE ran up to Doc Savage and said, "I've found my sister. I've got her in the car. But I had to rush here. They say the masked man is in No. 5!"

Walter hurriedly led the way back to his big machine. Both men lifted a tall, slender girl from the seat and went to work untying hands and ankles that had been well bound. The gag was taken from the girl's mouth.

Molly Mason swayed on her feet a moment. It seemed she was going to faint. Her lovely blue eyes, however, focused on the bronze man again, and then swung to her friend Pat Savage.

Molly threw herself in Pat Savage's arms and let a sob escape her curved lips. She was as tall and as slender as Pat herself.

Walter was saying worriedly, "Come on, Savage!"

He led the way into the towering open-hearth shop. The entire length of one side of the building was lined with the massive blast furnaces. Heat, blinding heat still came off the rising, hot sides of the furnaces.

For the plant itself had only been shut down a matter of hours, and molten metal within the giant furnaces was still at white heat.

Doc's men and the others were standing on the floor looking upward toward a long catwalk that faced the string of giant furnaces. The others who were watching were mill hands and some of the plant officials. Also included were a number of Wart's mobsters.

Strangely, the thugs no longer fought Doc's aids. All were intent on watching the cloaked, black-masked form that moved along the catwalk in front of the charged blast furnaces. A figure that seemed to be flirting with death itself.

It was Ham who saw Pat Savage and lovely Molly Mason. He leaped toward the two girls. The lawyer exclaimed:

"Molly! Where did you disappear a while ago?"

Molly Mason stared at Ham. "I don't understand—" she started.

Doc interrupted with, "Monk, take the far end of that catwalk. Hurry!"

The bronze man himself started toward the stairs leading upward nearby. Stairs that ended at the narrow platform and walk before the row of great furnaces.

But just then, there was a yell from behind the crowd watching the masked figure in the center of the long runway. Someone called: "That crazy mill mob is almost here. They'll wreck the—"

It was Willie Watt, standing with big Renny, who yelled, "Some of you run outside and close the doors. Lock them, if necessary. We aren't going to let this masked guy get away now!"

Everyone except Doc Savage had turned as hardboiled little Willie Watt yelled out the orders.

When they swung back toward the line of furnaces, a yell of horror went up from men's throats.

For it was not the masked figure that Doc Savage was leaping after. It was the fat, huge form of Walter Mason!

FOR one so bulky, Walter Mason had gone up the ladder with surprising speed. He was running along the catwalk ahead of the bronze man.

But even as Doc Savage closed in on Walter Mason, the fat man's hands reached the first of the control levers to the big blast furnaces.

Doc Savage yelled a warning, "Get back! Get back, all of you!"

But Walter Mason had already yanked a lever. The lever controlled openings by which the massive furnaces would be tapped. Steel-white-hot, molten steel started flowing down the troughs which ended out in the air high above those below.

Ordinarily, the ten-ton ladles carried by the movable cranes would be placed there to catch the stream of white-hot metal. But now there was—nothing.

Nothing to stop the molten stuff from dropping onto the heads of those below, or else—if they could manage to leap clear—to splatter on the floor and run off in a hundred directions, to trap the feet of those locked in this open-hearth shop.

Walter, giving a horrible laugh, leaped down the runway and toward another series of levers and another furnace. Already, molten metal running down the trough of the first furnace stopped the bronze man's advance. For flame and blinding sparks leaped up from the trough, forming a wall of hell-fire.

Doc paused only a moment. Then his arm flashed in the red glare. An object—a piece of foundry casting that the bronze man had seized as he flung toward the ladder—smashed through the air.

The heavy piece of metal caught fat Walter Mason in the back, between the shoulders. It sent him forward in a sprawling heap—to fall into the very trough of running, molten metal that he had just released in the next furnace.



Walter's face went down into that gutterlike trough of white-hot steel. His fat hands flung outward and beat at his sides for horror-filled moments. And then movement of his bulky body and his hands stopped.

DOC SAVAGE quickly moved levers that shut off the flow of the molten steel. Those below were cringing back against the far wall of the shop, barely clear of the flesh-eating stuff that had slopped to the floor.

Carefully, the bronze man worked his way toward where fat Walter had fallen. He picked up the hideous corpse and carried it below, where a coat was quickly thrown over what had been the man's moon-like features.

There was stark, breathless silence—until a yell broke the thickness and Monk let out a whoop from far down the shop. He came running up with the masked form in his arms. He set the figure down, ripped back the hooded mask and exclaimed:

"Blazes, Doc. Just look what I caught! It's a dame, and—"

Suddenly, the chemist paused and stared from Molly Mason, still at Pat's side, to the girl he had just unmasked.

Molly Mason, too, stared at her apparent twin!

But the one in Monk's grasp ripped her arm free and said in a harsh, nasal voice, "All right, you ape, take your paws off me!"

Doc said, "Perhaps Wart, there, can explain."

As everyone stared at the little crook leader, Doc gave young Tink O'Neil and Willie Watt a nod.

They stooped down and started dragging away from the group the covered figure that had been Walter Mason.

Little Wart was staring at Doc out of worried eyes. "Look," he exclaimed quickly, "I'll talk—only don't let that mob in from outside!"

Sounds of clubs could be heard striking the locked, heavy steel doors of the shop. It was the angered mill crowd, intent on reaching crooks who had fooled them.

Doc said, "You don't have to talk. We know what happened."

Monk was scratching his head. "But, Doc," he protested, "we found that dead guy by the lake, with the reports for Willie Watt. And I thought Willie Watt was the one—"

Doc said, "You thought the dead man's initials were S.E.C.?"

Monk nodded, remembering the statement he had made.

Doc explained, "Those initials stood for Securities and Exchange Commission. The dead man was an investigator out of New York, employed through the insistence of Willie Watt into strange manipulations that were taking place in this company's steel stock."

Doc indicated the limp figure that had been dragged to one side of the room. "Walter was buying up that stock at bargain prices. He didn't want the formula of T.3. He wanted the plant." The bronze man's calm gaze swung to skinny little Wart again. "And you and your crowd were his fall guys. Your organization in New York paid Walter a million—and got a fake formula."

The bronze man nodded toward the big locked doors, then again spoke to Wart's men. "Which do you prefer, arrest or—that?"

Wart and the others spread their hands hopelessly. Most of them had already had all fight taken out of them by hairy Monk and the others.

"All right," Wart said as spokesman. "We'll take the rap instead of letting that mob get at us."

Later, Doc Savage spoke to the angered mill hands outside the open-hearth shop. He explained briefly and clearly about the real mystery of the crazed men. He told about Walter Mason.

The tone of the bronze man's vibrant voice calmed the men. They listened. And they all agreed to follow Doc's instructions.

Wart's mobsters were taken out one at a time, to be turned over to police. Later, the men would be sent to the bronze man's criminal "college" in upstate New York. It was at Doc's college that crooks underwent delicate brain operations, that removed all memory of their shady past. In time, they would become useful citizens again.

BUT the girl that Monk had on his hands worried him. He was still holding her when the bronze man returned.

"A very good actress employed by Wart, to throw you off the trail," explained the bronze man. Doc indicated the girl's somewhat harsh features, more distinct beneath the bright lights of the shop. He indicated her hair.

Doc said further, "A little dye and some make-up can do strange things to women!"

He looked at Tink O'Neil, who stood with his arm around the real Molly Mason's shoulders. With the girls together, it could be seen how much more delicate were the features of Molly Mason, as compared with her impostor.

Doc said to Tink, "I think you suspected this girl was not Molly Mason?"

The tow-headed young man nodded. "Yes. But I played along, saying nothing to Monk or Ham, hoping that I could get some sort of lead to the whereabouts of J. Henry Mason and—"

Monk jumped. "Say!" he exploded. "Where is Mason?"

Doc indicated his lovely cousin Pat. "Ask her," he said quietly.

Pat looked tired. But she smiled and said, "When J. Henry Mason first disappeared, he was brought

to where Molly and I were being held. I got a chance to speak to him a moment alone. I told him if he got any chance at all to escape, to go to Doc's headquarters in New York and stay under cover until Doc got this mystery straightened out. And he did. He managed to get away from them, though we were held!"

Doc put in, "I've called New York. J. Henry Mason is safe with Long Tom and Johnny."

The two men mentioned by the bronze man were the others in Doc's small organization.

It was big Renny who put in, "But holy cow, Doc! I went through those formula papers again up in the vault. They are phonies. I missed it at first--"

Doc looked at Pat. "Perhaps you can explain that one, too."

Pat flushed slightly, put her slender hand down the front of her ruffled dress and pulled out a sheaf of papers. She handed them to Doc.

Pat explained, "J. Henry Mason slipped them to me when he was brought to the first hide-out up near the lake. No one suspected that I would have the formula of T.3."

Everyone but Doc stared. Then someone turned and looked toward the silent, covered body of Walter Mason across the room. Other eyes followed, and it was Ham who asked:

"Doc, how did you know--"

The bronze man said, "He was first suspected when a picture of him was developed. The picture was made by a special camera installed in one of our empty equipment cases."

Doc referred to the case he had planted in the woods.

"Walter must have trailed me," Doc went on. "He bent over the case, touched it, and released a trip that took an exposure. I had a perfect picture of the masked man."

"But if he was masked--" Ham started to say.

Doc finished, "Walter wore a large diamond ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. As he reached toward the planted equipment case, it was revealed in the snapshot taken. Later, it was on his hand at home."

Doc looked at Molly Mason. "Walter had a black plane?"

The tall, pretty girl nodded quickly. "Yes. He kept it about a mile back on the estate, in a small hangar down there."

Doc nodded. "At all times, Walter was able to practically go and come as he pleased. No one thought to check up on him. Thus he made the fast trips out in his plane whenever he saw a chance to eliminate someone who was in his way."

The girl in Monk's bearlike grasp gave a short, crisp laugh. "The louse!" she flared. "He got me to wear that mask and cape after he escaped from you back there at the storage shed. Told me he would cut me in for plenty if I led the rest of you away from him. But that devil was going to kill all of us!"

Doc Savage said quietly, "The only mistake we made was in overlooking that Walter Mason could move fast, when necessary. He almost fooled me, though I knew his identity in the mask and strung along until he played his hand tonight."

Someone remarked, "Nonetheless, Doc, you stopped him!"

Doc Savage said nothing. He stepped toward the one person who meant so much to him. Pat Savage. He led Pat out of the place, for in Pat's eyes was an expression that said she had had enough excitement for a while.

THE girl in Monk's grasp started clawing and scratching at the homely chemist's face. Monk let out a howl.

"Ham!" he squalled. "Give me a hand here!"

The dapper lawyer stood to one side and grinned coolly at his partner.

"I thought," he said icily, "you knew how to handle women, you flat-footed misfit!"

Now that both were out of danger again, their endless brawl threatened to get started in earnest.

Holding the struggling, clawing girl with one hand, Monk made a swing at his partner with the other.

THE END