



THE GOLD OGRE

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed
by Tom Stephens*

Chapter I. THE BULL-VOICED MIDGET

If anyone had wanted to find the most gentle and most level-headed man in Crescent City, they correctly could have selected Thomas Worth as the individual.

And if they had wished to pick out the man who was least likely to claim that something unbelievable had happened to him, they could have taken Thomas Worth. Gentle, middle-aged Thomas Worth had told very few lies in his life.

This helped make the matter particularly terrifying.

If Thomas Worth had been a lying man, or a drinking man, or even the least bit of a half-wit, people would have been able to understand it. And they wouldn't have taken the matter so seriously. And in that case, Doc Savage might not have learned of the mystery until it was too late to do any good.

Thomas Worth was also a poor man. The fact that he was crippled had a good deal to do with his being poor, although even before a piece of heavy machinery fell on his leg, he had never been able to make more than day wages. He was a poor, honest toiler; he just seemed never to be able to get anywhere much in life. He deserved success. God knows, he deserved it. He was thirty-eight, and looked fifty.

He had a wife who was nice, and a son who was in his teens. The son was a good boy—he was named

Don Worth, and he was already a little too serious for his years, and worked a little too earnestly. At least, the boy was more serious and worked harder than other boys of his age.

The poverty of Thomas Worth probably had very little to do with the incredible thing that happened, except that it accounted for his being employed as night watchman at the airport.

Thomas Worth's job was to hobble around the Crescent City airport at intervals each night, and stick the beam of a powerful flashlight into dark spots. Usually, he didn't have any trouble. He never even carried a gun. Once in a while, somebody would try to pilfer light bulbs out of the field border lights, but that was about all. It was simple work, not difficult, and honest Thomas Worth was deeply grateful for it.

He religiously made his rounds of the airport at hour intervals—first at eight o'clock, when he went on duty, then at nine, at ten, at eleven, at midnight, and so on.

Thomas Worth was making his midnight round when he met the little golden dwarf.

Later, it became reasonably certain that this was the first time one of the public had seen a gold ogre.

FIRST, there was a voice in the darkness.

"Be careful where you're going!"

Thomas Worth jerked to an astonished stop. It was very dark. He had not been using his flashlight for a few moments; often he needed to use both hands on his cane, so he frequently kept his flashlight in his pocket when not in use.

"What?" he said.

"You almost stepped on me," said the voice.

It came from Thomas Worth's feet. It was a small voice, but very hoarse and harsh. It reminded Thomas Worth of the way a bull would sound, if the bull was about a foot high.

"Say!" said Thomas Worth. "Who in blazes are you?"

"Never mind that. Just don't step on me."

Thomas Worth decided it was either a tramp or an intoxicated man, both of which types were sometimes seen around the airport, and occasionally were found sleeping in secluded spots. He leaned on his cane, dug out his flashlight and pressed the button.

He got the big shock of his life.

It was a hideous little gold man. A man who looked to be not much more than two feet high. The fellow had a wide thick-lipped mouth, small pig eyes, and two holes for a nose. His face was not hairy; the rest of him was. Long, scraggly, golden-colored hair that looked like gilded moss.

The little golden ogre was naked except for a loincloth. This was brown, rather than golden, and looked as if it was made out of muskrat fur. His sandals were made of some kind of tree bark, held on by thongs which ran up between his small gnarled toes and tied around his hairy golden ankles.

A club was gripped by the little ogre. The club wasn't gold either; it was made of a dark wood and studded with large thorns. The small golden ogre—he resembled a miniature caveman—gripped the club

with both hands, and there was an expression of bestial ferocity on his face.

Thomas Worth took a long look—and wondered if he had gone crazy. He had been feeling all right lately; he hadn't done more than his usual amount of worrying—it wasn't likely his mind had slipped.

Another possible explanation for this apparition occurred to Thomas Worth.

"What carnival did you escape from?" he asked.

"Carnival?" said the golden midget. "What's a carnival?"

"Maybe it was a circus?"

"What is a circus?"

"What are *you*?" Thomas Worth demanded.

The small man did not answer at once. His eyes had become accustomed to the light, and he was staring at Thomas Worth. Judging by his expression, he was just as flabbergasted as the bigger man.

"Yah, yah!" the little man said suddenly.

"What?"

"Yah, yah!" repeated the ugly golden midget.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say—"

The ogre struck Thomas Worth with his club. It happened with surprising speed. The club struck Thomas Worth's serviceable leg and the bigger man cried out in involuntary pain and fell to the ground.

It was as if electric sparks had struck Thomas Worth's leg. The feeling spread; a kind of tingling agony rushed through his body until it reached his brain—and made Thomas Worth unconscious.

THE Crescent City airport remained open day and night, as befitted the flying field of a metropolis such as Crescent City, which was a manufacturing city of some consequence located on the shore of one of the Great Lakes. Several men were on duty during the night, most of them young fellows, and all of them nice. They liked Thomas Worth, and pitied him while at the same time respecting him. For Thomas Worth was a man who was struggling along and supporting a family against tremendous odds.

They soon missed their watchman that night at the airport.

Between one and two o'clock, they began looking for Thomas Worth. At first, two mechanics and a pilot waiting for duty made a casual search. Before morning, everybody was looking, and all the giant floodlights around the airport had been turned on, making it even brighter than it was after daylight came.

They did not find Thomas Worth.

Of course, they sent messengers to Thomas Worth's home—the Worth family was too poor to afford a telephone—and learned that the father had not merely gone home.

Thomas Worth's wife, Mary, was home, and she naturally became quite alarmed, particularly since she knew of no reason why Thomas Worth should disappear. Her son, Don, was away from home, working

at a summer camp for boys.

"It is not at all like Thomas to go away without a word," Mary Worth said. "I am sure there must be a good reason."

Later, she said, "Please, couldn't we keep my son Don from learning his poor father had disappeared? Don is working his way at summer camp."

The summer camp authorities cooperated, so Don Worth did not learn anything about the mystery just yet.

The airport men were convinced there must be a reason, too. But what was it? They didn't know. They couldn't find any clues. No abandoned wells, or old cisterns or anything like that.

Two days passed and everybody got worried.

The police had taken up the matter, and teletyped a description of missing Thomas Worth to every place where they thought it would do any good. The police were also keeping a sharp lookout for bodies that might float up in the lake, and the State troopers were giving tramps close examinations.

The vanishing of Thomas Worth got in the newspapers in a small way. The missing man was not an important person, so the story was a mere paragraph in a few of the metropolitan papers, to which it was carried by the wire services. Probably if Thomas Worth had been a night watchman for anything but an airport, his vanishing would not even have seen print outside Crescent City. There is still something romantic about airports, and everything connected with them.

The news item about Thomas Worth landed on the desk of Doc Savage.

It did not do any good, which was too bad. Doc Savage's assistants merely kept a clipping file of anything that seemed unusual. This clipping was one among many. It merely looked like the case of a poor man who had skipped out and abandoned his family—judging from the clipping's mere statement that an airport watchman named Thomas Worth had disappeared in Crescent City.

So Doc Savage showed no interest in the Thomas Worth matter at this point. Doc Savage was a remarkable individual, a man of astounding abilities, and also a man who followed one of the strangest of careers—but he was no clairvoyant. He was not superhuman. He didn't know that Thomas Worth had met a little gold ogre of a caveman in the darkness near the Crescent City airport.

So Doc Savage just went on about his business, which was a very strange business indeed.

FOUR days later. Not midnight this time, but rather close to it. Ten minutes after eleven that night.

Mary Worth, the wife of missing Thomas Worth, heard a rasping sound on the front porch. Mary Worth had been sitting, hands clasped lightly, waiting without knowing what she was waiting for. She sprang up.

"Who is it?" she demanded nervously.

The dragging sound was repeated, followed by a low whimpering noise. It might have been one of the neighbors' dogs lying down on the porch and whining, but Mary Worth opened the door anyway.

Mary Worth immediately fainted.

The Worths could barely afford electric lights, and they had to burn twenty-five-watt and thirty-watt

bulbs to save money, and these did not give much light—but enough to show Mary Worth what made her faint.

Later she regained consciousness—how much later it was, she didn't know—and she dragged what she had found on the porch into the house, without knowing how she managed that, either. It was all confused and terrible. She must have sobbed the whole time, because she realized later that her face was wet.

It was her missing husband she had found. At last he opened his eyes. He seemed to want to speak, but restrained himself, as if afraid to say what was in his mind.

Thomas Worth drank of a broth his terror-stricken wife made him; obviously he'd had nothing to eat for some time. He rested, waited for the broth to give him strength, in the meantime letting his wife bathe and dress the strange wounds on his body.

"Mary, do any of the neighbors know I have come back?"

Those were his first words.

Mary Worth shook her head. She had been too flustered to call the neighbors.

"Don't tell them," Thomas Worth said weakly, "until you hear my story. And maybe we had better not tell anyone my story."

"Not tell anyone!" Mary Worth gasped. "Why?"

Thomas Worth muttered, "Wait until you hear it, and you will understand."

He stirred a little, then groaned involuntarily. The flesh was cut deeply in circles around his wrists, and his hands were badly skinned, as if he had been bound, and had torn himself free. There were many other cuts and abrasions on his body. But the bruises were the worst. He was bruised from head to foot, not large bruises, but hideous ones; many of them had started to fester.

"What happened to you, Tom?" his wife asked with tense anxiety.

Thomas Worth lay back on the pillow, clenched his fists against the pain, and began his story.

"This will sound utterly insane, Mary, so please just sit and listen until I finish," he said. "I was making my midnight round at the airport, and I found a hideous little gold man in the darkness. He wore no clothes except a loincloth, and he carried a club. He looked like the pictures of old-time cavemen. In height, he reached only a little above my knees. The gold-colored dwarf struck me with his club and I became unconscious instantly."

Thomas Worth shut his eyes and shuddered.

"When I regained consciousness," he continued, "I was in a great stone cavern of a place. There were many of the little golden ogres present. I was a prisoner. I was tied. I don't know how many of the hideous dwarfs there were, but there must have been a lot of them, although I never saw over a dozen together in a group at any one time. They tortured me."

He saw that his bewildered wife was about to speak, and he shook his head at her.

"The gold ogres beat me with their clubs," he said. "It was horrible. They could speak English, although I could hardly understand some of them. They were going to do something horrible to me. I was to be

beaten for days, first, then their medicine man was going to put some kind of terrible spell on me. I don't know what they meant by the spell."

Thomas Worth suddenly shoved himself up tensely on the cot. His face was a picture of horror.

"Mary—that wasn't all!" he gasped. "They planned something hideous! Against Crescent City. Against everybody living here! I don't know what it is! I just heard them talk."

Thomas Worth shuddered again, then turned over and buried his face in his hands,

"I escaped," he said, "before the medicine man got around to doing whatever he was going to do to me."

THE quiet of the night was very still in the modest home of Thomas and Mary Worth. The alarm clock had stopped, as it had a habit of doing, and once in a while the kitchen faucet dripped with a distinct splatter of a sound. In the neighborhood somewhere, a radio played, and a dog began barking furiously, then stopped.

Thomas Worth said, "Mary."

"Yes?"

"Now you understand why I didn't want the neighbors to hear my story."

Mary Worth nodded miserably. "They wouldn't believe it."

"Worse. They would think I was crazy."

"What about telling the police?" Mary Worth asked uneasily.

"Do you think they'll have me committed to an insane asylum?" Thomas Worth asked.

Mary Worth began to tremble; suddenly she burst into tears and buried her face in the worn cover which she had spread over her husband.

"Oh, Tom, Tom! What horrible thing is wrong? What *did* happen to you? Think, Tom. *Think!* Try to tell me what really *did* happen to you!"

Thomas Worth shuddered.

"See," he said. "Even *you* don't believe me."

There was no answer except his stricken wife's uncontrollable sobbing.

"Does Don know I was—was gone?" Thomas Worth asked.

"No. They kept it from him at the summer camp."

"It was very kind of them, because Don would have worried."

His wife's reaction to his fantastic tale had a distinct effect upon Thomas Worth. She was the one person in the world who was most likely to believe him. Obviously, she thought he was suffering hallucinations. What would the police think? He visualized himself committed to a mental institution, and broke out in an agonized sweat.

Thomas Worth thereafter refused to talk. Perhaps he was off mentally. Time after time, that suspicion had struck him during the course of his incredible experience. What was happening was something that *couldn't* happen. Thomas Worth realized that.

When the police came, Thomas Worth only muttered incoherently. The doctors explained that he was delirious from suffering, which was what he wanted them to think. He didn't tell them a thing about the little golden ogres. He was afraid to.

So the newspapers carried a short item, saying Thomas Worth had returned home, apparently suffering from exposure and a beating at the hands of persons unknown, probably enemies he had made in the course of his duties as a night watchman.

This item was clipped and found its way to Doc Savage's desk, where it was filed with the article about Thomas Worth's disappearance. And that was that. Nothing to arouse Doc Savage's interest.

It was unfortunate that Doc Savage saw nothing in the matter that required his attention, because the Man of Bronze, as the remarkable Doc Savage was known, might have prevented what happened next.

Thomas Worth disappeared again. There was absolutely nothing to show how or why. He just disappeared.

This time, the news was sent to the missing man's son, Don Worth.

Chapter II. FOUR FRIENDS

IT was doubtful if there existed a more pleasant summer camp for boys than Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh. The camp was named after the cliff-bordered lake cove, on the shores of which it was situated. How the cove got the name was a mystery, but many an Indian brave probably laughed with delight when he first saw the snug cove in which great fish leaped all night long and the towering cliffs, and the little brooks that raced over the edge and fell sheer, tuming into sparkling spray so that, during all hours when the sun shone, one could see at least one rainbow and often many, no matter in what part of the cove one stood.

Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh was composed of a number of cabins and larger buildings, all made of logs, and surrounded by a stockade, after the fashion of forts in the frontier days. Picturesque was a word that hardly did the place justice. An array of birch-bark and canvas-covered canoes rested on racks along the lake shore.

The parents of boys who sent their sons to Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh found it rather expensive. Consequently, there was a goodly number of sons of wealthy parents.

There were other boys, however, who worked their way through.

Don Worth was one of the working boys.

As yet, Don Worth had no inkling that anything mysterious had happened to his father, poor crippled Thomas Worth, who was airport night watchman in Crescent City.

Don Worth was at one of his tasks, chopping wood for the camp fireplaces.

His ax flashed, hissed and bit off great chips. He was almost a giant for his age—although still a youth, there were muscles cabled across his shoulders, and coiled inside his coat sleeves that made him more

than a physical match for most fully grown men. Other boys were frequently amazed at big, quiet, serious Don Worth's muscular strength. He was a young Hercules.

Don Worth had a will power that was stronger than his big muscles, although you didn't realize that until you knew him well. He was a very gentle young man who never forced his ideas on anybody; also he was extremely ambitious. He was going to make a success in life, no matter how much earnest work it took. He got up early and went to work, and he labored industriously until dark, then usually could be found studying. Most busy bees were loafers compared to Don Worth.

Because he was so serious about life, Don Worth was kidded a lot. He took the razzing good-naturedly, and everybody liked him. Now and then some bully mistook his quiet seriousness for cowardice, so that Don Worth occasionally had a fight. The fight usually consisted of Don Worth's taking hold of the bully, and after he'd had hold for a moment or so, the opponent was invariably howling and glad for a chance to run.

The camp chief approached Don Worth and handed him a telegram. Don opened it and read:

SOMETHING I CANNOT UNDERSTAND HAS HAPPENED TO YOUR FATHER. HE DISAPPEARED, THEN CAME BACK LOOKING AS IF HE HAD BEEN TERRIBLY BEATEN. NOW HE HAS VANISHED AGAIN. TRY NOT TO WORRY.

YOUR MOTHER.

Don Worth was shocked and mystified.

"But this is the first I knew of anything wrong!" he exclaimed.

"I know," the camp chief said. "Your mother asked us to keep it from you at first, so you would not be worried."

The camp chief then handed Don Worth a sheaf of clippings from the Crescent City newspapers. Don read them, and began to get a feeling of deep bewilderment and uneasiness.

He went looking for B. Elmer Dexter.

He was not at all surprised when he found B. Elmer Dexter concocting a new get-rich-quick scheme.

B. ELMER DEXTER was about the same age as young Don Worth, and they were pals. They had just two things in common. Both owned poor parents, and both were determined to make a success—but B. Elmer Dexter had no intention of working for it. Work? Not for B. Elmer. Not while he had so many swell ideas for getting rich in a hurry.

B. Elmer was surrounded by sheets of paper, a borrowed typewriter, and enthusiasm.

"I'm writing letters to companies that make diving suits," he explained rapidly. "You know how many ships loaded with coal and iron ore have sunk in the Great Lakes? Dozens! Hundreds! I'm going to start salvaging them all. We'll raise the ships and get the cargo. We're young fellows, so the newspapers will play it up. Give us a lot of publicity. The companies will furnish us the diving suits free because of the publicity. Like companies furnished stuff to Admiral Byrd for his South Pole exploring. There's millions in it! Millions! And it won't cost us a cent! I'm gonna let you in on it, and Mental Byron, and Funny Tucker. We'll all make so much money that— Say, what's the matter with *you*?"

"Read this," Don Worth said, and passed over the telegram and the newspaper clippings.

B. Elmer Dexter read swiftly. He did everything swiftly. He was a slender fellow with dark hair, snapping eyes, more conversation than a radio announcer, and a personality that whizzed like an electric dynamo. He was almost completely the opposite of big, serious, placid Don Worth.

"Blazes!" said B. Elmer, waving the telegram. "What does this mean?"

"I do not know," Don replied seriously.

B. Elmer jumped up, waved the telegram and the clippings again.

"Let's see what Mental Byron thinks of it," he said. "Mental knows everything."

Don Worth nodded. The opinion of Morris (Mental) Byron would be worth while. Everybody respected Mental's brains and thinking powers.

They found Mental Byron, as they expected, seated comfortably against a boulder on the lake shore, cogitating. The boulder was his favorite spot, for it afforded one of the most inspirational and beautiful views around Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh. Mental could sit for hours and contemplate something beautiful. He was a dreamer. And no mean philosopher, either.

"Hello," Mental said placidly.

No one had ever seen Mental any other way than calm.

He was a long youth with a rugged face—in fact, he looked remarkably like the picture of Abe Lincoln.

"We've got trouble," B. Elmer explained.

Mental Byron smiled slightly and said, "Don't be too worried when you stumble. Remember, a worm is the only thing that can't fall down."

Which was a typical piece of Morris Mental Byron's philosophy.

"Give the brains the telegram and clippings," B. Elmer told Don Worth, "and see what he thinks."

Mental took the message and examined it thoughtfully. From his manner, one would have guessed him as much older, whereas he was exactly the same age as Don Worth and B. Elmer Dexter.

"This is very strange," he declared. He looked at Don Worth. "What is your thought about this?"

"My first impulse was to hurry home," Don said.

Mental nodded. "Being on the right track is a very good thing. But if you just stand there, you'll likely get run over."

Don asked, "You mean I should go home?"

"Exactly."

"And we should go with you," Mental Byron added. "If two heads are better than one, think how good three heads would be."

"NOW look here," Don Worth said uncomfortably, "I can't burden you with my troubles. You're having a swell time here at camp, and you don't really want to go back to Crescent City. Thanks a lot. I appreciate it, but you fellows wouldn't have a good time going with me."

"I think we would," Mental said.

"Why?"

"We like excitement. And this sounds exciting."

As if this dismissed any chances for further argument, Mental arose from the rock and said, "I'll have my bag packed in ten minutes."

"I'll have my bag in *five!*" B. Elmer yelled. He started to dash away, stopped, shouted, "Say, maybe we can solve this mystery, then make it into a story and sell it to the movies for a mint of money!"

And he was off after his bag.

"B. Elmer can see a get-rich-quick scheme in everything," Don chuckled.

Mental nodded soberly. "If you go around firing a shotgun in the air long enough, you're bound to hit a duck eventually. Some day, one of B. Elmer's ideas will click."

Don Worth was secretly delighted at the idea of his two pals accompanying him, but he did not want them to miss out on the fun of Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh, so he was earnest in his protestations that they were working a hardship on themselves. Mental only smiled.

They went looking for their third pal.

"Where do you suppose Funny Tucker is?" Don pondered.

"Did you notice the luncheon he ate? Probably he'll be in his cabin repenting."

Leander (Funny) Tucker was in his cabin, all right, and he was full of repentance. Funny Tucker, if he didn't watch out, would soon be as wide as he was tall—but there was scant possibility of his watching. Funny liked his food. Also his laughs. Funny Tucker was a roly-poly joy boy without a care in life. His fund of gags, both his own and those purloined from the radio and movies, was unlimited.

Funny was holding his stomach.

"If the bravest are the tenderest," he complained, "the steer that provided that luncheon steak was sure a coward!"

"What you feel is probably the humiliation of the steer at finding out one boy could eat all of him," Mental advised.

"I didn't eat the whole steer. Only seven steaks."

When he heard of their plans, Funny Tucker forgot his indigestion.

"Excitement!" he exclaimed. "Hot ziggety!"

The four of them caught the midafternoon launch that brought the daily mail and provisions to Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh. It was with regret that they watched the camp, where they'd had so much fun, apparently sink into the sun-jeweled waves as the launch carried them away. They caught a train at

the village where the launch landed them.

By dark that evening, the four young fellows were in Crescent City.

MORRIS MENTAL BYRON and Leander Funny Tucker were—unlike Don Worth and B. Elmer Dexter—the possessors of fathers who had a great deal of money. So Mental and Funny staked the crew to a taxicab in which they rode from the station toward the rather poverty-stricken district on the edge of Crescent City, where the Worths lived.

The four had gotten to talking about mysteries, and people who were famous at solving them. Don Worth took little part in the conversation while it referred to the G-men, Scotland Yard, Sherlock Holmes, and others.

Suddenly Don spoke up.

"What about Doc Savage?" he asked. "Isn't he one of the greatest mystery-solvers of all time?"

"You mean the individual they call the Man of Bronze," Mental said thoughtfully. "I once read a book on psychology and philosophy that he wrote. It was amazing."

"Doc Savage does a lot of things besides write books," Don explained. "He is an astounding fellow. He was trained by scientists from childhood, until now he is a kind of combination of physical marvel and mental wizard. He has five assistants, and each one of these helpers is a famous expert in electricity or chemistry or some such line. But Doc Savage knows more about those things than any one of his assistants."

"What does he need assistants for?" asked Funny Tucker.

"To help him in his strange life's work."

"Strange?" B. Elmer asked.

"Work of any kind seems strange to me," announced Funny Tucker.

Don explained seriously, "Doc Savage goes to the far corners of the earth, righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, and he takes no pay for it."

"No pay," said B. Elmer, "makes it strange indeed."

Mental Byron said thoughtfully, "You seem to know a great deal about this Doc Savage. Ever meet him?"

"No, I never met Doc Savage." Don Worth colored with embarrassment. "You see, Doc Savage just happens to be the man I admire most in the world, next to my father."

They arrived at the modest Worth home.

Mary Worth was well acquainted with Don's four companions, and she greeted them with a flicker of hope. Don was shocked at his mother's worried expression—it seemed to him that much more horror lurked in her features than was warranted by the fact that his father had disappeared. The feeling that much more was wrong than appeared on the surface oppressed Don all through the tasty dinner which his mother prepared for them.

"Mother," he said quietly, "there is something more that you haven't told us."

Mary Worth nodded miserably.

"What is it?" Don asked.

Mary Worth looked at the boys. She knew them well enough to be sure that they would not spread the impression that her husband had gone insane.

"Your father told me an incredible story," she said, and gave them the tale of the little golden ogres.

DON WORTH and the other three were rather close to speechlessness after the tale had ended. Telling ghost stories had been a favorite evening pastime at Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh, but none of those hair-curlers quite equaled this one.

Without finding anything much to say, they went to bed. Because the house was small, they all bedded down on pallets in the living room. Mrs. Worth slept in the bedroom. The kitchen was the only other room in the small house.

Finally, Mental Byron spoke. "Don."

"Yes."

"Has there ever been any insanity in your family?"

"No," Don said, shuddering. "There hasn't."

Mental reached over and put a hand on Don Worth's shoulder. There was something that Don found definitely comforting about his touch.

"I've got a feeling in my bones, Don, that there isn't anything in the least wrong with your father's mind," Mental said earnestly.

Don couldn't have explained why, but the other boy's reassurance made him feel a great deal better. Still, however, he was not able to sleep, and he judged from the squirmings that the others were having the same trouble. They did not hold a long conversation, something they ordinarily would have done; probably the weirdness of the story which Mrs. Worth had told them held them to silence.

It must have been after midnight when Don—he was rather more than half asleep by now—realized that Mental was getting up. To a whispered query, Mental responded that he couldn't sleep and he was going out on the porch to sit and contemplate stars.

Don watched Mental move silently outdoors. It was a moonlight night, except at intervals when slinking clouds made it very dark. It would have been a quiet night, too, except for one thing—the snoring of Funny and B. Elmer. They were furnishing a goose-and-bumblebee duet, one doing the honking and the other buzzing accompaniment.

Came a moment when the clouds made it very dark. The interval of sepia lasted for at least five minutes, then it was suddenly bright moonlight again outdoors.

Abruptly, Mental whisked in from the porch. He moved silently, reached Don's side, and sank down.

Don realized with a start that Mental was trembling.

"Don!" Mental breathed. "I just saw a little golden man who wore a breechcloth and carried a club!"

Chapter III. THE OGRES AND THE BOYS

DON WORTH jerked upright, would have exclaimed aloud had Mental not pressed a hand over his mouth.

"Sh-h-h!" Mental whispered. "The little gold fellow is poking around the outside. He might hear."

"Show him to me!" Don ordered, as quietly as he could manage in his excitement.

The two of them crept to a window, and stood looking out in the moonlight. Mental pointed.

"There!" he breathed. "And I'm glad you can see him, too! I am afraid people would think I was crazy."

Don Worth stared.

"Great Gulliver!" he gasped.

His eyes had some difficulty distinguishing the little gold-colored man on the lawn. Then the midget figure stepped out into brighter moonlight, and it was more clearly visible.

The head of the little golden ogre would not reach to the belt of even Funny Tucker, whose belt was closer to the ground than any of the others. The dwarf was naked except for a brown fur loincloth and sandals, and his hideously gnarled hands gripped a club.

The tiny one trotted across the lawn and disappeared into shadows.

Don Worth gripped Mental's arm.

"We've got to follow that . . . that—whatever it is!" Don gasped.

"Well, we know now that your father wasn't crazy," Mental said tensely.

They awakened Funny Tucker and B. Elmer Dexter. It was no task to arouse B. Elmer silently, but they had the good judgment to jam a pillow over Funny's head and sit on it until he understood what it was all about. Funny's awakenings were something like a bull walrus having a spasm.

As swiftly as possible, they crept out into the night. All four were Boy Scouts, and Crescent City was in a forest section, so they all had some experience at woodcraft. Moreover, the art of trailing a quarry silently had been practiced in games at Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh.

"Say, an Indian couldn't do a better job than this," whispered Funny Tucker.

They came upon the little golden dwarf so suddenly that they almost gave themselves away. Flattening their bodies in dew-wet grass, they watched.

The small ogre was obviously conducting a search. He was squatting and peering, giving particular attention to the vicinity of a stone fence. He began picking up rocks and peering under them.

Suddenly they heard him give a small, unpleasant grunt. He had found something under a rock.

"Maybe he's hunting his supper," Funny Tucker whispered.

But it was no fat grub or cricket that the little fellow had found. It was a paper, as nearly as the watchers could tell. Nearby was a corner street light, and the dwarf carried the paper to this, where they saw him

peer at it for some time.

Another unpleasant grunt came from the weird creature.

He picked up a stick, poked around, found a soft spot, and carefully buried the paper. They watched him scatter the débris over the spot to cover his handiwork.

Acting satisfied, as if he had completed his night's work, the small man strolled away.

Don Worth scuttled swiftly to the spot, and aided by Mental and Funny, dug up the paper. They could read, by the street-light luminance, the words scrawled upon it.

THE GOLD OGRES HAVE SEIZED ME. THEY WERE AFRAID I COULD LEAD THE POLICE TO THEIR CAVERN.

Don Worth gasped, "That's my father's handwriting!"

None of the four boys were slow-witted. The significance of what they had found became plain to all of them at about the same moment. Mental Byron voiced it.

"They must have carried your father away, and he managed to leave a note by the stone fence. They seem to have found out about the note, and one of them came back to hunt it. He found it, and buried it where he thought nobody would ever locate it."

Don Worth nodded. "That's what it looks like. But how come they didn't find out about the note immediately?"

Mental gave his theory of the explanation reluctantly. "Your mother said that your father claimed he had been tortured."

"You think they've made dad tell about the note?" Don asked.

"Maybe."

Don shuddered.

"This is such an impossible thing," he said. "It's plain fantastic. I wouldn't believe such stuff, even in a book."

B. Elmer Dexter groaned. "Wish I had a camera and photoflash bulbs."

"Camera?"

"Think of what the newspapers would be willing to pay for pictures of that little golden man!" B. Elmer explained. "Boy, I'll bet I could sell the picture for a thousand smackers."

"Come on," Don growled. "We'll follow him. Maybe he'll lead us to my father."

Their quarry was not exercising much caution, so they did not have difficulty following him.

The forest that bordered Crescent City on three sides—the lake made the fourth side—came close to the city limits at some points, and this was one of them.

The dwarf plunged into the woods, and immediately it was hard to follow him, for it was very dark. The four stuck close together. Each of them would have been reluctant to admit it, but the night was giving

them a large case of the creeps. They were modern boys of the twentieth century, and nobody could have told them that something like this could happen. But it was happening. They had stepped, literally, into a fairy story.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see a goblin in here," B. Elmer whispered, feeling his way in the forest blackness.

"There're no such things as goblins," Funny Tucker told him.

"There're no such things as little golden cavemen, either," B. Elmer retorted.

"Sh-h-h!" breathed Mental Byron. "Look!"

They strained their eyes in the shadows.

"Two of them!" Don exploded.

The dwarf they had been following had joined another, and the two were standing in the moonlight glade, leaning on their clubs and conversing.

Don and Mental crawled close enough that the guttural little voices were understandable. They watched the two little ogres—one of them was pointing with his club at something in the distance.

"Yah, yah," the midget said.

"Yah, yah," agreed the other.

Funny Tucker crawled up behind Don and breathed. "Quite a vocabulary."

The midget continued to point with his club—and Don craned his neck to see what the club indicated. He saw a man—a fully grown man clad in disheveled garments—stumbling through the woods, some distance away.

The poor man was weak, hardly able to travel. His progress was a series of stumbling runs from one tree to another.

"My father!" Don exploded.

Don Worth was as quiet and patient as a mountain—but he was the kind of mountain that could turn into a volcano. He erupted now.

In a wild rage, Don leaped up and charged at the dwarfs.

DON thought only of what had happened to his father, what these little horrors had done. He wanted to seize them, punish them severely, put them where they could not harm anyone else.

Both dwarfs ran. Vanished into dark underbrush. Don plunged after them. He cornered one, launched a football tackle for the fellow. The midget dodged. He walloped Don's head with his club. The blow was stunning. Don saw assorted pain-lights.

Funny yelled, "There goes the other! I got 'im!"

Judging from the noises, Funny got more than he bargained for. They all began to get more than they

bargained for.

Don heaved up—only to have a terrific blow send him sprawling. He crashed into a thorn bush. In spite of himself, he yelled in pain. He clawed out of the tangle. Hands grabbed his ankles. He went down. He was struck several blows—with a fist, he thought—that were agonizing.

More desperate now, Don floundered around. His big, strong hands found a limb as thick as his wrist. He flailed with the huge club, striking random blows at the smothering darkness.

It was intensely dark. He could not see what he was hitting.

Abruptly, the club was wrenched out of his hands with incredible force! Don was very strong. But the club was yanked from him as if he was a child.

He could tell from the struggle and confusion in the shadow-blackened underbrush that his three friends were faring as badly as himself. They were, in fact, getting whipped! If this kept up, the little gold dwarfs would capture them all.

Moreover, they weren't fighting two midgets. There must be at least a dozen!

It was Don Worth, the quietest one of the four, who made their decisions in the emergency.

"Beat it!" Don barked. "We've bit off more'n we can chew!"

"Wait!" B. Elmer Dexter yelled. "I wanna catch one of these dwarfs! I could get rich showin' him in a sideshow!"

Then B. Elmer howled painfully. He must have gotten a whack that discouraged his collecting instincts. In fact, B. Elmer thereafter took the lead in the running.

The four boys ran headlong until they decided they had outdistanced their pursuers. Then they stopped for a sheepish conference.

"Fine bunch of heroes we turned out to be," Don Worth said grimly.

"Don't they say that he who fights and runs will be around to fight another day?" Mental asked dryly.

Funny Tucker produced a flashlight and started examining himself.

"What gave you that black eye?" B. Elmer asked him.

"It wasn't any gift," Funny groaned. "Boy, I fought for it."

Don Worth said soberly, "I formed a suspicion during that fight, fellows. I wonder if any of you formed the same idea."

"All I felt forming was knots on my head," Funny Tucker said. "What do you mean, Don?"

"We had more than two foes in that fight," Don explained. "And I got the idea that some of them were perhaps grown men."

"Grown men—I got the same idea," Mental said. "Somebody had me by the neck for a while, and I'll swear it wasn't any dwarf."

"You guys," said Funny, "wouldn't be making excuses for our failure?"

They weren't sure. It had been very dark, and the excitement furious. Whether they had fought some grown men, they couldn't tell.

"What about my father!" Don Worth said impatiently. "We've got to find him!"

They went looking for the man they had glimpsed dimly, staggering through the moonlit open spaces in the woods. They found him, sprawled in a clearing.

"Dad!" Don Worth shouted, and dashed forward.

But it wasn't his father.

Chapter IV. SPELL OF THE OGRES

THE man was short, much shorter than Don Worth's father, and he was rather wide. He had a swarthy, but not unpleasant face, with a wide mouth that was twisted by suffering. Recently his suit had been excellent, but now it was mangled until it seemed remarkable that it stayed on him.

He had a small club. He clutched this menacingly.

"Take it easy, mister," Don Worth said quickly.

"Whosa you fella?" the man demanded.

Mental Byron let out an exclamation.

"Hey, it's Tony Bandorra!" Mental said. "Tony is the head mechanic for one of Mr. Marcus Gild's truck lines!"

Tony Bandorra was obviously about to pass out from injuries and exhaustion.

"What happened to you, Tony?" Don asked.

Tony said quite a number of words in a foreign language, to express his feelings.

"I notta crazy!" he insisted unexpectedly.

"Nobody has said you were—"

"But you gonna say so when you hear what I tella you," Tony said grimly.

He hesitated, then gave his explanation.

He had been walking home from work late two nights ago, and a hideous little golden dwarf had leaped out and struck him with a club. "He's mucha ugly bambino," Tony described the midget. Tony had become unconscious. He had awakened in a cavern, a great unpleasant place, which was, "Plumb fulla them ugly bambinos—"

Don Worth interrupted excitedly, "Did you see my father?"

"Who'sa bambino you?"

"My father is Thomas Worth," Don told him. "Did you see dad?"

"They have buncha fella that place. I notta see 'em all."

"You mean," gasped Don, "that the dwarfs have a number of prisoners?"

"That'sa right."

The four listeners were dumfounded. They stared at each other in the moonlight.

Tony Bandorra said, "Whatta mat' with you bambinos? You no thinka I'm bats in the belfry?"

"No, Tony," Don said. "We believe you."

"Yousa crazy, then. She'sa story nobody shoulda believe."

"How do you account for what happened, Tony? Why were you seized?"

"Boys, you guess as gooda as me. They make me drink of some stuff what she no taste good."

"Made you drink something?"

"No taste good. Then they turna me loose."

Surprised, Don asked, "You didn't escape? They *freed* you?"

"That'sa right."

A cloud passed over the moon, and sudden darkness pounced like black animals, causing it to occur to all of them simultaneously that they didn't like their surroundings.

"We're not out of the woods yet," said Funny Tucker, "and no joke intended."

"Hows about you bambinos helpa me home?" Tony Bandorra asked.

The four exercised their woodcraft, made a stretcher out of two poles and their coats, then took turns carrying. It probably wasn't as long as it seemed before they got Tony Bandorra home to the pleasant little cottage where he lived alone, a bachelor.

They gave Tony first aid, then called a doctor, and the medico assured them they had done all they could. The doctor was naturally puzzled, but they decided to let Tony Bandorra explain matters.

There seemed nothing else to do, so the four headed for Don Worth's home.

"They made him drink something, then turned him loose," Mental Byron pondered.

"Mysterious," Don Worth admitted.

"I still bet we can sell the story to the movies for a pile of jack," said B. Elmer Dexter.

THE next morning, Funny Tucker got up early—getting up early was unusual for joy-loving Funny, very unusual—and went out to get all the newspapers that had been issued in Crescent City and vicinity during the past several days. Funny came rushing back in a sweating excitement.

"You act," B. Elmer told him, "as if you had ants on you."

"Yeah. Cold-footed ones," Funny gulped. "Here, look at these papers!"

The others gathered around. Funny had used his pencil to mark several different items in his assortment of newspapers. All of these articles were similar.

"There's six items," Don Worth said, "and they're all about alike."

Funny Tucker pointed. "Here's a typical one."

They read:

Mrs. Rose Moritz appeared at police headquarters yesterday afternoon and asked officers to conduct a search for her husband, Moss, who disappeared two days ago.

Having read that item and others of a similar nature—about the only variation was that different persons were concerned—Don Worth, Mental Byron and the other two could not help seeing something unpleasant.

"Whew!" Mental exclaimed.

"It looks," Don said, "as if there has been an epidemic of disappearances in Crescent City."

Astonished, they gave the papers a more thorough examination.

"No doubt about it," B. Elmer said. "There's a lot of people getting missing."

Mental nodded soberly. "Crescent is a small city," he pointed out, "and while now and then someone disappears—it never happens on such a scale as this. Why, at least six persons have vanished in the last few days. Too many to be coincidence."

Don Worth went to the window and frowned at the bright morning sun. His mouth was grim. They hadn't found his father. They had only learned that something incredible seemed to be afoot. Don clenched his teeth. Terror, like a dark animal, was skulking in the corners of his mind, and only his determination not to be afraid kept it from leaping out.

"There wasn't," he said, "a word in the paper this morning about Tony Bandorra."

"Queer, too," Funny said.

"Tony Bandorra apparently didn't tell the police what he told us."

"Either that," Mental pointed out, "or the police thought the story was too goofy to be true."

Don reached for his hat.

"Thing for us to do," he said, "is go get Tony Bandorra and the police together, and make the police believe the story. The officers should realize that something incredible and terrible is really happening."

The others nodded approval.

"Maybe we can make a lotta money," suggested B. Elmer, "by organizing a detective agency and finding these missing people."

THE moment they reached Tony Bandorra's house, they knew something was wrong. People stood on

the sidewalk, staring at Tony's neat little house. Neighbors, evidently.

"What's wrong?" Don demanded.

"Fellow lives there is acting funny," a man explained. "Somebody came to visit him, and he started screeching and throwing things."

Don and the other three exchanged knowing looks. Funny said, "The guy is probably scared stiff is all. He'll feel better when he sees us."

They strode onto the porch and knocked—and nothing happened. Not for some time. B. Elmer muttered, "Funny," and went over to a window and tapped on it and called, "Hey, Tony! It's the fellows who helped you last night."

Tony Bandorra opened the door then.

Don Worth felt a bite of uneasiness. Something he couldn't have worded. Conceivably it was the expression on Tony Bandorra's face—a *difference*.

"Why, it's a bambinos!" Tony said heartily. "Come ona in!"

Tony was bandaged. He wore a neat dark suit, evidently his Sunday suit, and a clean shirt. His necktie was loud. His grin was big. Big and a trifle strange.

Don's uneasiness began growing.

"How are you, Tony?" he asked.

"Feela fine as silk," Tony said.

"Didn't you tell the police what happened?" Don asked, getting to the point at once. "The newspapers had nothing about it."

Tony's grin collapsed, then came back again. "Whata you talk about?"

"You know—the golden-colored dwarfs who seized you. Everything. Didn't you tell the officers?"

Tony had large teeth. All of them showed in a weird, foxy grin.

"Bambinos, you come to basement," he said. "Tony showa you something."

Tony led the way to a door that led down into the basement of his bungalow. He stepped back, gestured for them to go down.

"She's a somethin' down there you like to see," he said.

Mental Byron started down the steps, trailed by Funny Tucker.

Don Worth made a move to follow, got as far as the first step. His uneasiness burst up, like a flame of warning. He grabbed at Mental and Funny.

"Wait!" Don barked. "Fellows, there's something wrong here—"

He never finished. Tony Bandorra screamed. He emitted a shriek that Don Worth heard for a long time, in nightmares. And he whipped out a piece of gas pipe which had been hidden under his coat.

B. Elmer Dexter for once wasn't preoccupied with a scheme to get rich quick. He dived for Tony. B. Elmer was a fairish football player; he made good use of his skill. Tony went down.

Don pitched for the gas pipe. He got a blow on the shoulder; it shocked his whole side. But he fastened both hands to the pipe. He was stronger than Tony, although not one person in a thousand would have guessed it. Don wrestled furiously, got the gas pipe. He stumbled back with it, a little surprised. He was always astonished at the results of his strength, being inclined to underestimate his muscular power.

Funny and Mental leaped back up the stairs, sprang for Tony. But Tony rolled, struck B. Elmer, managed to kick Funny's well-fed midriff—and got away. He was up and out of the door with astonishing agility.

Tony Bandorra ran away from the bungalow making weird giggings and snarling.

Chapter V. THE SPECIALIST IN MYSTERY

FUNNY TUCKER held his middle and gasped, "Let's get outa here."

"Wait," Don said grimly.

He went down into the basement, holding the piece of gas pipe ready. He saw a switch, poked it; the place flooded with light. There was nothing except the things that should be in a basement.

Don went back upstairs. He found the others waiting, looking as if he had gone barehanded into a lion cage.

"Nothing," Don explained. "We'll look over the house."

They looked. There was nothing out of the way.

"But he was going to do something terrible to us!" Mental croaked.

"Let's scam," Funny said earnestly. "This place makes me feel as if caterpillars were crawlin' all over me."

They went home. They were very quiet. Funny Tucker didn't think of a single gag, and B. Elmer didn't suggest even one way of getting rich. Something terrible was going on.

The afternoon newspapers showed just how real the terror was.

CRAZED EMPLOYEE SLAYS

FELLOW WORKER, ATEMPTS

TO KILL MARCUS GILD

This afternoon, Tony Bandorra ran amuck and clubbed to death Albert Lain, a fellow worker, then attempted to reach the office of Marcus Gild, Crescent City financier. Bandorra was screaming that he was going to kill Marcus Gild. Police seized Bandorra.

It is stated that doctors are unable to explain Bandorra's strange mental condition.

"That is awful," Mental Byron said hoarsely.

There was a great deal more to the story—particularly about Marcus Gild—but nothing that shed any light on the mystery.

The entire last column of the story was devoted to explaining how important was Marcus Gild, information which everyone in Crescent City knew. Half the people in town worked for Marcus Gild. He owned the leading bank, the light plant, the telephone system, the three leading factories, and so many small businesses that probably no one knew the number but his manager-secretary, a remarkable and efficient young woman with amazing red hair, named Vee Main. The news story mentioned that Vee Main's alertness in barring the door of Marcus Gild's office had probably saved the moneybags' life.

"Hah!" said Funny Tucker. "Small loss if he'd gotten old Marcus Gild!"

"That's an awful thing to say," Don said.

"I don't care," retorted Funny. "That old money magnet, Marcus Gild, is the meanest man alive. Everybody knows that."

"And Marcus Gild don't seem to care," Don admitted.

"I wish I had his gift for decoying dollars," B. Elmer said, and sighed.

"Even if Marcus Gild is rich and a miser—"

Funny snorted. "Miser! That old rip is so stingy that he goes out to lunch before his appetite comes on, so he'll save money!"

B. Elmer sighed again. "I still wish I had his hypnotic power over money."

Mental grinned philosophically. "Oh, well, some men are born great, some achieve greatness—"

"And some grate on your nerves," Funny Tucker said. "Hey, Don! Where you goin'?"

Don Worth said seriously, "We're going straight to the police and tell them about the little golden ogres."

Funny snorted. "Wait'll I call my mother and tell her to send my supper to the local insane asylum."

THEIR interview with the police was as bad as Funny Tucker had predicted it would be. It was worse. They were laughed at. Very heartily.

"You boys run along home," the police sergeant advised, "and give your imagination a rest."

"Little gold cave men!" a cop chuckled. "Say, this is good!"

Another officer suggested, "Maybe we'd better lock them up for dangerous lying."

There was nothing the four friends could do except march out of the police station, which they did with silence and what dignity they could muster.

"What I expected," Don muttered.

"I'm not surprised, either," Mental admitted.

"There's going to be some red police ears," Funny Tucker said, "when they find out there really *are* little ugly gold dwarfs."

They stopped on a corner in the business district, waiting for a traffic light to change. All four had formed the prudent habit of waiting for the green light.

Across the street towered the First Bank of Crescent, a skyscraper that was as impressive as any in New York, even if it wasn't as tall. The bank was owned by Marcus Gild, Don Worth thought—and an idea hit him.

"Blazes!" he exploded. "Something has been stumbling around in my mind! And I just remembered!"

"Remembered what?" B. Elmer asked.

"Something I had heard about Marcus Gild."

"Wasn't nothing good, I'll bet," Funny said.

"Was it anything about how he makes his money?" B. Elmer asked hopefully.

Don set out with a grim expression. "Come on. We're going to Marcus Gild's home."

Marcus Gild lived in the coldest and grimmest-looking house in Crescent City. Measured by a pure masonry standard, it was also the greatest house in town; it had taken a good-sized quarry to supply the bleak stone blocks from which it was constructed.

First, there was a wall, very high, warded at intervals with turrets. Behind that was the house itself, supposed to be castlelike, but really more of a tomb aspect. One looked at it and did not think of rooms; one thought of dungeons.

A grim-looking gateman finally admitted them as far as a forbidding hallway in the vast house. Here, they were allowed to chill their heels for a time. The hall was long, high, and almost as vast as the Crescent City opera house.

Finally, a woman appeared.

"That's Vee Main, the old reprobate's secretary-manager," B. Elmer whispered.

It was the first time any of the boys had seen Vee Main at close range. She was, they all realized, strikingly beautiful for a young woman as capable as she was reputed to be. She was tall, well-shaped, and had all the good points, not the least of which was a wealth of striking flame-colored hair.

"Boy!" Funny Tucker whispered, "if I was a little older, I could go for her!"

Vee Main smiled at them.

"Marcus Gild probably won't see you," she said. "What do you want?"

Don Worth said, "We want to see Marcus Gild's collection of little statues of men made out of gold."

ASTOUNDED silence gripped the other three young fellows. A dropped pin would have sounded like a gunshot. Funny Tucker and B. Elmer swallowed several times. Only Mental Byron looked as if he understood. Mental had remembered.

Marcus Gild was supposed to have a hobby for collecting small statuettes of solid gold, and statuettes only of men. During a political campaign, about the time the government was calling in all gold, a politician

had made quite a point of demanding to know why the government didn't collect Marcus Gild's gold statuettes. That the politician had been defeated, and later forced to leave the city, was beside the point, although it did indicate Marcus Gild's power. Marcus Gild was undeniably the Czar of Crescent City.

"You look like nice young men," Vee Main said. "I'll ask Mr. Gild."

She didn't need to tell them what Marcus Gild said. They could hear him. So could the neighbors for blocks around, if there had been any neighbors, which there weren't, because this grim castle stood on a hill by itself. Marcus Gild said, "Har-r-rumph!" and it sounded as if a donkey had brayed.

"Throw 'em out!" Marcus Gild yelled. "Sick the dogs on 'em!"

Vee Main said, "But Mr. Gild—"

"Throw 'em out! They're thieving urchins!"

Don Worth was a placid, retiring young man, but he was not without a temper—and certainly no one had ever accused him of a lack of determination to accomplish anything that he started. He had come here for a purpose. He intended to succeed.

Don stepped into the room, past surprised Vee Main.

"Mr. Gild," he said, "we want—"

"Get out!" Marcus Gild squalled.

If a baby elephant was to be supplied with pants and shirt and carpet slippers, have his face revised somewhat and sit in a chair, the result would have been a striking resemblance to Marcus Gild. Instead of a trunk, Marcus Gild had a round and rather plum-shaped nose, and two eyes that might have been small purple grapes. His ears stuck out from his head until it was possible to hang a hat upon either one.

The whole effect of Marcus Gild was surprisingly like that of one of Snow White's dwarfs, except that there was nothing small about him. As Funny expressed it later, "He's fat enough to tilt a battleship!"

"Beat it!" Marcus Gild howled. "I don't like people. I don't like *you!* The more you dislike me, and the sooner you get out of here, the happier I'll be!"

The sentiments were returned, Don thought heatedly. But he kept his temper, having learned that, while you could lose your temper and get it back, at the same time you almost always lost something else that you couldn't get back.

"We want," Don said, "to see your little gold man-statuettes."

The effect of that on Marcus Gild was surprising. He let out an astonished breath. His mouth fell open. His little round dark eyes regarded them with sudden intensity.

"Eh?" he said.

"We remembered," said Don, "that you have a collection of small gold statues of men. We just wanted to see them."

If Marcus Gild had been gunpowder, he would have exploded. As it was, he beat the arms of his chair.

"What do you know about my gold men?" he yelled. "Who stole them?"

"Stole them?" Don gasped.

"The whole group of cavemen!" Marcus Gild got up out of his chair ominously. "How'd they get out of their exhibition case? Where are they?"

"Cavemen?" Don gulped.

The interview wasn't making sense.

Marcus Gild snatched at a knobbed cane leaning against his chair. It was evident to Don and the others that a quick retreat was advisable.

They didn't exactly flee. They just walked out in haste.

"Tell the police," old Marcus Gild howled at Vee Main, "to investigate these four fellows!"

THE four walked rapidly until they had left the castlelike house of strange old Marcus Gild well behind.

"One thing you can say about this," Mental Byron remarked grimly, "there's no lack of mystery."

"You heard what he said," Don muttered.

"About his gold cavemen?"

"Yes."

"But the ones he meant were made out of metal," Mental reminded. "Real gold. I've read about them. And they're not even a foot high. Smaller than these—these—cavemen we've been meeting."

The quartet, gripped by the same eerie sensation, stopped and stared at each other. It was a quiet street, almost a tomblike silent street. The sun had gone behind a cloud.

"If you're thinking what I'm thinking," Mental Byron told the others, "we're all crazy."

"You mean that Marcus Gild's gold statuettes of cavemen couldn't have come to life and escaped from their exhibition case?" B. Elmer demanded.

"So we *were* thinking about the same thing."

Don said firmly, "A thing like that *couldn't happen!*"

"All right," Mental said. "I agree with you."

"We all agree on the point," Funny Tucker muttered. "But the fact remains that we all saw little gold-colored dwarfs that were dressed like cavemen. *That couldn't happen either.*"

They returned to the Worth home and sprawled in the shade of the big maple tree in the yard and discussed the matter. It looked more ridiculous the longer they considered it.

Later, they made a foray into the woods and endeavored to follow the trail of the little golden cavemen. They had no success, but they did find little prints of gnarled bare feet which sent chills up and down their back.

They got back in time to read the last edition of the evening newspaper.

Another missing man had returned to his home. He was acting strangely. The news article stated merely that the authorities were doubtful of the story which he told.

"If it's a story about gold ogres seizing him," Mental said, "no wonder they're skeptical."

That night, the returned man ran amuck and shot down the president of the First Bank of Crescent, the bank which Marcus Gild controlled. He wounded two others before he was captured.

Doctors who tried to ascertain what was wrong with the man were baffled.

Don Worth said grimly, "If you ask me, fellows, something pretty awful is going on."

THE next day, a bricklayer named Jim Weaver, who had disappeared, came back—and the newspapers printed the story of what Jim Weaver claimed had happened to him.

So the story of the little gold ogres found print for the first time. The police said Jim Weaver was having hallucinations; in reality he had probably been out on a binge somewhere.

Then the store clerk, Harry Topping, came back, and also claimed little gold cavemen had captured him.

The newspapers began to go to town on the story.

Bricklayer Jim Weaver tried to drop a hod of bricks on Vee Main.

Grocery Clerk Harry Topping put poison in some groceries intended for Marcus Gild's table, and Marcus Gild's cook became very ill as a result.

Gold ogres were now in black headlines four inches high on every newspaper.

A fresh horror struck.

The victims of the gold ogres puzzled doctors; physicians could not explain the malady which affected them and made them want to kill people.

The malady was contagious!

This developed unexpectedly—persons who came in contact with the victims began losing their minds, and attempting wild acts.

Almost before the authorities realized the truth, fully a score of persons in Crescent City were victims of the strange affliction.

Horror began to march over the city like a ghastly army.

Don Worth and his three friends held a conference.

"I've thought of something," Don said, "that I should have remembered before."

"What?"

"Doc Savage."

"The Man of Bronze," Mental muttered.

"Exactly," Don said. "Doc Savage makes a profession of solving mysteries, righting wrongs, and punishing evildoers."

"There's plenty of work for him around here," B. Elmer muttered.

"Maybe he won't come," Mental hazarded.

Don said, "We'll soon know. How much money you fellows got between you? Enough for a long-distance telephone call to New York?"

They didn't have, it developed. "Wait until I get back," Mental Byron said, and must have gone to see his wealthy father, because he returned with ample funds for the telephone call.

Soon a voice in New York was saying, "Doc Savage speaking."

"We've got some trouble here in Crescent City," Don explained.

"What kind?" Doc Savage asked.

The voice of Doc Savage, was remarkable, even when heard over hundreds of miles of telephone wire. It had power and quality, also a controlled vibrance that indicated it was a voice that could perform remarkable feats when necessary.

Don Worth gave a brief and complete summary of the mysterious situation in Crescent City.

He ended, "I realize that the whole thing sounds like a piece of wild imagination."

"But it is the truth?" Doc Savage asked quietly.

"It is."

"We will be in Crescent City," Doc Savage said calmly, "in five or six hours."

"Gosh!" said Don. "Five or six hours."

"If you wish, you can meet my plane at the Crescent City airport," Doc Savage added.

That ended the conversation.

It did not end the interest of a man who had been eavesdropping on the Worth telephone line.

THE wire-tapper was hardly as tall as a ten-year-old boy, but much wider. In fact, he was so thick that he was almost distorted. He sat hunched, swathed in a black blanket. He wore a black skullcap over his gold-colored hair, and his club reposed on the floor beside him. He looked like a darksome little he-witch.

His wire-tapping contraption was an extremely modern scientific device. It could be connected to the wire and its presence not be detectable.

The dwarf put down the headset with which he had been listening.

"Damn the luck!" he said.

He was in a hurry. He whisked his dark blanket tighter about himself, then shoved up the round steel

manhole over his head and peered out cautiously.

He was hiding inside a manhole which was used by the telephone company to give access to a connecting box for all the lines in the neighborhood. It was an excellent hiding spot.

Outside, there was dusky night. The dwarf climbed up, carefully replaced the manhole lid, and scuttled away through the gloom. He had a definite destination, and he was in a hurry to get there.

Fifteen minutes later, the ugly little fellow eased up alongside a cabin in a tourist camp. He gave the cabin door a mighty kick.

"This is Fiddle," he said.

"Yeah, and this is Faddle," said a voice inside. "What the hell is this, anyway?"

The little man gave the door another kick.

"Open up, you fool!" he snarled. "I'm Fiddle."

A large bull-necked man opened the door, looking angry. But his rage collapsed.

"Blast it, I didn't know it was you," he said apologetically.

The little man poked the bigger one in the chest with a forefinger.

"Doc Savage is coming here."

"*What?*"

"In five or six hours, he'll be here." The dwarf swore fiercely. "Those blasted kids called Doc Savage on the telephone. It was lucky we kept a tap on their phone wire."

The bigger man whirled into the cabin, dived for a telephone, made a call, and gave the news in wild haste. Then he listened. He hung up the telephone with a grim grunt.

"We'll have a reception committee waiting for this Doc Savage," he said. "He'll never leave the Crescent City airport."

Chapter VI. TERROR AT THE AIRPORT

DOC SAVAGE did not like publicity. It might make stars out of actors, and governors and presidents out of politicians, but it was the kind of stuff that could land Doc Savage six feet underground in a pine box. Publicity would tell enemies too much about his movements.

But a great many people knew that Doc Savage maintained headquarters on the eighty-sixth floor of the most impressive skyscraper in New York City. Few had entered the place, however, fewer had gotten beyond the reception room into the great library containing thousands of scientific tomes, or the vast laboratory which was one of the most complete in existence.

Of late months, Doc Savage himself had rarely been seen. That was because he had installed a pneumatic tube-car from the skyscraper headquarters to his private waterfront hangar-boathouse, which masqueraded as an innocent old warehouse on the bank of the Hudson River.

Doc Savage was aided by five assistants in his unusual career of going to the far corners of the earth, righting wrongs and punishing evildoers.

Three of the assistants—Colonel John Renny Renwick, noted engineer; William Harper Johnny Littlejohn, learned archaeologist and geologist; Major Thomas J. Long Tom Roberts, electrical wizard—were not in the United States. They were serving as consulting specialists for foreign governments.

That left two of Doc's assistants in the United States.

One of them was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Monk Mayfair. He claimed to be the homeliest man in the United States. Other people claimed he was the best chemist alive.

The second man was Major General Theodore Marley Ham Brooks, who claimed to be the best-dressed man, and didn't limit his claim to the United States. Ham Brooks was also the pride of the Harvard law-school graduates.

These two gentlemen had gone to the Maine woods, claiming they were going to hunt bears. Actually, they were probably going off to have a long uninterrupted quarrel with each other. From such a quarrel, they should return greatly refreshed. Squabbling was their recreation.

So Doc Savage left his headquarters alone, by stepping through a door into a padded cartridge of a car. He jerked a lever; there was shock, then roar for some moments, and he stepped out in the great hangar-boathouse on the Hudson.

Doc Savage's appearance was deceptive. When he was not standing close to anything to which his size might be compared, he seemed a man of average build. But put a man of average build near, and it was at once evident that Doc Savage was a physical giant. Not only was he of Herculean stature, but the cabled sinews visible in his neck and on the backs of his hands indicated he owned fabulous strength and agility.

Actually, his size was the least impressive thing about Clark Savage, Jr., or Doc Savage, or the Man of Bronze, as he was known. Most striking, probably, were his eyes—strange, compelling eyes that were like pools of flake gold being always stirred by tiny winds.

But the abilities of Doc Savage, the things he could do, surpassed anything unusual about his appearance. As a great many had learned.

Of several modern planes available in the great warehouse-hangar, Doc Savage chose a small low-wing speed ship that seemed composed mostly of motor. A plane that was faster than any military airplane in existence.

Five hours later, his ship circled for a while above the Crescent City airport. Then the plane went into a long, gentle glide, its air-speed slowed by the scientific wing flaps.

The plane made a rather bumpy landing at the far end of the runway, rolled toward the hangars and administration buildings and came to a stop. It sat there, motor idling, for a moment; then the motor stopped.

Doc Savage had not yet gotten out.

The motor of another plane suddenly began roaring. This ship was an old one; it had landed only three hours before. It raced across the ground—straight for Doc Savage's plane. A man sprang out of the cockpit of the crate. He ran.

The old plane hit Doc Savage's ship. Instantly, there was a terrific explosion. Windows broke for hundreds of yards in every direction.

HALF the airport personnel were knocked off their feet, including Don Worth, Funny Tucker, B. Elmer Dexter and Mental Byron, who had come out to meet Doc Savage.

When they picked themselves up, they saw that the air around the two blasted planes was full of hissing fire. The blast site itself was one great ball of flame from which smoke poured.

Airport attendants dashed for the mangled planes. Frightful heat drove them back.

"Thermit!" Mental Byron gulped.

"What's thermit?" Don demanded.

"Stuff the army uses in incendiary bombs," Mental explained. "It burns with terrific heat."

Don groaned. "Doc Savage never had a chance!"

Half a dozen persons had seen the pilot jump from the bomb-plane. A search was started for the fellow—but he had disappeared.

By now it became generally known around the airport that the destroyed plane belonged to Doc Savage, and that the Man of Bronze had never been given a chance to step from the cockpit. The word spread as fast as newspaper men could dive to telephones.

Doc Savage was dead!

Few inhabitants of Crescent City had dreamed of the importance of the bronze man—now they began to get some idea. Long-distance calls began to pour into Crescent City from every major newspaper office in the country, and from many foreign countries, because Doc Savage had a worldwide name.

In the meantime, the pilot of the bomb-plane was skulking his way to safety.

The Crescent City airport, like the flying fields of most moderate-sized cities, was situated on the outskirts of town, and was surrounded by weed-grown fields, as well as some woodland. The pilot had reached this shelter, and was working his way cautiously along ditches and through patches of brush.

He was a large bull-necked man—the same fellow to whom the dwarf, Fiddle, had rushed with the news of Doc Savage's coming.

Once, a bush rustled sharply nearby. The man flattened, whipped out a gun, waited. He heard no further sound. The man began to crawl again.

Almost at once, he found the steel box that contained the money.

The box lay in the man's path. It was about a foot long, four inches wide, not quite as high. It was green, but there were ventilation perforations in the top. The man picked up the box curiously, peered through the perforations.

"Hell!" he exploded.

Money! He could see paper money inside the box. There must be a great sheaf of it, because the

topmost banknote, the one he could see, was jammed against the top. It was a twenty-dollar bill.

"Talk about luck!" the man chortled.

He tried to get the box open. It was stronger than it looked. His best prying efforts failed.

He ended up by tucking the box inside his clothing, and hurrying away.

That was as far as Doc Savage followed the man, for the time being.

DOC SAVAGE materialized with eerie silence from behind a tree, stood for a while listening to the quarry go on—then the bronze man went back toward the airport. There was stealth of a wild thing in his movements, and absence of sound that indicated how he had managed to follow the pilot of the bomb-plane without being discovered.

Don Worth and his three companions were standing disconsolately beside a hangar.

"Good evening, young men," Doc Savage said.

They jumped, particularly Don Worth, who had heard the bronze man's remarkable voice over the telephone, and recognized it.

They stared at Doc Savage unbelievably.

"Great grief!" Mental exploded. "You're not *alive!*"

Doc Savage, who usually wore a rather noncommittal expression, smiled pleasantly.

"Sorry," he said. "It was not feasible to get in touch with you fellows and tell you of my plan to come down some distance from the city by parachute, then bring my plane in to a landing by radio control—"

"There was nothing but a radio control in that plane!" Mental exploded.

"That is all. No one was in my plane when the bombship exploded."

B. Elmer gasped, "Say, if you've got a radio control that can land a plane that well, I'll bet I could sell it for a million—"

"B. Elmer doesn't see anything but dollars," Mental explained. "Anyway, radio control for planes has been used experimentally for years."

"Where's your parachute?" Funny Tucker asked curiously.

"Concealed near here, with the radio-control device," the bronze man explained.

Young Don Worth had been thinking—and something unpleasant had occurred to him. He stared at the bronze man.

"Gosh," he exclaimed anxiously, "I hope you don't think we had anything to do with setting that trap for you?"

"Not at all."

"They must have had my telephone line tapped and heard us call you," Don Worth surmised.

"Probably," Doc Savage said. "Suppose we find a private spot and get the whole story."

They walked to a nearby patch of brush, and seated themselves on the ground near the bundled silk of a parachute and an apparatus which was obviously the radio-control transmitter. There were also four light metal boxes which, the bronze man explained, contained other equipment.

Don Worth began with the disappearance of his father, and told the whole weird story of the little golden ogres, and the hideous malady which they seemed to be communicating to their victims.

He finished, "We know that it's all unbelievable. But that's the story."

Doc Savage asked, "You have no clues?"

"Well, there's the mysterious fact that Marcus Gild claimed his collection of little gold statues of cavemen had disappeared from his collection case."

"That is rather fantastic."

"I'll say!"

Funny Tucker, who was a realist, and didn't believe in pixies, fairies or little gold dwarfs, whether he saw them with his own eyes or not, said, "Nobody is going to tell me that Marcus Gild's gold statues came to life and got out of the case."

"All right," B. Elmer grumbled, "don't try to get us more bewildered than we are."

"Since we have no other clues," Doc Savage said quietly, "we might as well trail the man who blew up my plane."

"Trail him!" young Worth exploded. "But he disappeared!"

"The police and everybody are looking for him!" Funny added.

"Nevertheless," the bronze man said, "we might be able to trail him."

Chapter VII. THE MEAN MARCUS GILD

THE four boys had already been greatly impressed by Doc Savage. They had heard some remarkable stories about the bronze man, yarns they had taken for granted were exaggerations, but they were beginning to realize that the truth about Doc Savage went a lot further than any fiction they might have heard.

Open-mouthed, they listened to Doc Savage explain that he had managed to trail the pilot of the bomb-plane. They heard Doc describe how the man had picked up the tin box and carried it away.

"Actually, the box contains a tiny short-wave radio which is sending out a continuous signal," the bronze man informed them. "The box can therefore be located with a conventional radio direction-finder."

"Whew!" B. Elmer said, dumfounded. "But what if he throws the box away?"

"Would you be likely to throw away a box that you thought was full of money?"

B. Elmer grinned, shook his head. "But is there really much money in the box?" he asked curiously.

"Only a few notes on top."

They now watched Doc Savage open one of the metal equipment cases which stood beside the parachute, and put the radio direction-finder in operation. The device was no larger than a midget radio-receiver, and resembled one, except for the loop aerial.

They listened to a series of dots come in over the apparatus, heard them grow louder when the loop was pointed in a certain direction.

"We merely keep going toward the point where the signals are loudest," the bronze man explained.

First, however, Mental and Funny Tucker rented a car with money which Doc Savage supplied. It was thought advisable that Doc himself not rent the machine, since he was supposed to have died in his plane.

The terrific heat of the thermit bomb which had destroyed the plane had also, the airport attendants and police had concluded, consumed the bronze man's body completely.

"If the enemy thinks I am out of the way," Doc Savage explained, "it might help."

They rode in the car, following the direction-finder's loudest signal. It was merely a matter of driving through streets.

Before long, Doc stopped the car. The signal was very loud.

"Close," the bronze man explained.

They were near a cluster of neighborhood grocery and drugstores. They kept watch.

"There he is!" Mental breathed.

The bull-necked man had come out of a drugstore. He entered a taxicab, and the machine drove off.

"We might see what he was doing in the drugstore," Doc Savage said. "B. Elmer, suppose you do that."

B. Elmer Dexter was back soon.

"The guy did some telephoning in the booth, the clerk said," he advised.

Doc Savage nodded. They drove on, still trailing their quarry by means of the radio direction-finder. The chase did not last long.

"There," Doc Savage pointed, "is where he went."

"Marcus Gild's house!" Funny Tucker exploded.

DARKNESS was gathering. They parked nearby and waited, on the chance that their quarry would come out of the Marcus Gild castle. Later, Doc Savage made a circle of the great place, just to ascertain that the pilot of the bomb-plane was still inside.

"I don't see how they got the place to look that ugly," muttered Mental, who liked beautiful things.

"We might as well go in," Doc Savage said.

Don Worth advised, "We went in once, and the reception we got wasn't so hot."

"This time," the bronze man said, "we may not meet anyone, if we can help it."

It became apparent that the bronze man was going to scale the wall silently in the rear.

It also was apparent that every one of the four boys was determined to go along—which began to apprise Doc Savage of one outstanding fact about their characters. One thing that all four had in common. They liked excitement. Adventure, to them, was like a fire to a fireman.

"Now look here," Doc Savage said earnestly, "we cannot have you getting into danger."

That appeared to be exactly what each was determined to do.

They compromised on Mental and Don Worth accompanying the bronze man. Funny and B. Elmer would remain outside, to give an alarm, in case one was needed, or summon help, which might be a more likely necessity.

To scale the high stone wall, Doc Savage used a collapsible alloy grappling hook on the end of a long silken cord that was knotted for climbing. They ascended.

Doc Savage carried the radio direction-finder, too—he had converted it, he proved, by turning a knob, into a supersensitive detector which would indicate the presence of electric wires carrying even the slightest of current changes.

"In case the place is wired with burglar alarms," the bronze man advised.

"Say!" Mental breathed. "You've got a gadget for every situation, haven't you?"

They reached the yard inside.

The bronze man opened a recess in the radio and brought out another attachment, a supersensitive parabolic microphone, which he plugged in. This, with the help of the radio amplifier, would detect sounds that even Doc Savage's highly developed hearing could not catch.

"To help locate any movement near us," he explained.

There were scrawny, leafless trees in the castle yard, and a quantity of starved shrubbery. The grass looked as if it needed fertilizer, water and mowing.

Having caught no alarming sound over the listener, Doc Savage switched the radio back to the direction-finder circuit, and carefully took bearing on the note given out by the little transmitter hidden in the tin box that apparently contained money. He changed position, took another bearing.

Unexpectedly, a weird sound became audible. It was a trilling, so faint as to be hardly detectable, a sound that possessed some fantastic quality that made it seem to come from everywhere in the surrounding darkness. It was as exotic as an arctic breeze circulating through ice pinnacles.

"What on earth!" Mental gasped.

The sound stopped. Doc Savage did not explain. He made the note unconsciously, as a peculiar habit, whenever he was under stress, or when he made a surprising discovery. This time, it was a discovery.

The tin box was buried under a rosebush in the courtyard of Marcus Gild's strange mansion.

FOR the time being, the trail had ended. They were stumped. There seemed nothing they could do. Eventually, of course, the man would return for the tin box, which he supposed contained a large sum of money. But they would have to wait for that.

Doc Savage said, "I will talk to Marcus Gild before we leave."

"But I thought," Don Worth whispered quickly, "that you wanted our enemies, whoever they are, to think they had killed you?"

"I will let only Marcus Gild know I am alive," Doc explained.

"But—"

"And if the enemies find it out, we can reasonably suspect that Marcus Gild told them."

The good sense of that strategy appealed to Don Worth and Mental Byron. They walked over and gave the pull of Marcus Gild's doorbell a jerking.

Rather to their surprise, Marcus Gild himself appeared at a small, barred aperture in the door and peered out at them, looking remarkably like a small elephant inside a cage. He batted his small eyes.

Doc Savage made a mental note that the aperture in the door was closed with a glass that was undoubtedly of the bulletproof variety, and also that the door appeared to be made of armored steel, likewise bulletproof.

"Go away!" Marcus Gild snarled.

His voice came through small slots below the glass panel. Doc Savage folded one of his business cards—a rather striking card of plain bronze tint, with lettering of a bronze slightly darker than the rest of the card—and shoved it through one of the door slots.

Marcus Gild glanced at the card.

"Humph!" he snorted. "Doc Savage, eh? Don't make no difference who you are. Go away!"

"We want to talk to you," Doc Savage explained.

"Humph!"

"There is a matter of little gold men which we are investigating—"

Instantly, Marcus Gild flew into a violent rage.

"You get away from here!" he screamed. "Beat it! You may not believe me, but I got these premises piped with poison gas, and I'll turn it loose on you if you hang around!"

Doc Savage's answer was to grip the doorknob and give it a violent tugging, at the same time drawing a dime from his pocket and clicking it against the lock, as if he were using a key or picking the mechanism.

Hissing came from assorted points in the darkness about them. It had a serpentine quality, menacing.

"The gas!" Mental Byron exploded.

"He wasn't foolin'!" Don Worth yelled.

Both boys would have run wildly had Doc Savage not gripped their arms. The next thing they knew the

bronze man was putting metal clips on their nostrils and inserting a mechanical device between their teeth, a contrivance that made a rather large mouthful.

"Filters," the bronze man advised. "Breathe through them."

Doc Savage used one of the filters himself, and they retreated. The gate in the outer wall was locked from the inside, but they got it open. They dashed for some distance through the darkness with more haste than dignity. Their eyes were smarting and leaking.

"He tried to murder us!" Don Worth blurted when they were clear.

Doc Savage said, "He was exaggerating about the gas being poison. It was tear gas."

"Old Marcus Gild is sure acting queer."

Doc Savage said, "Did you notice that the bulletproof door looked as if it had been installed very recently?"

That fact had escaped the notice of both boys, but they agreed that it might indicate Marcus Gild had very recently acquired a case of fear.

Funny Tucker and B. Elmer Dexter joined them, and their mouths stayed open while they listened to Don Worth and Mental explain what had happened inside Marcus Gild's home. The fact that Doc Savage had been able to produce protective devices against the gas amazed them as much as anything.

"I don't see," B. Elmer muttered, "how you manage to prepare against every emergency."

"Gas is not an uncommon means of defense," Doc Savage explained. "Banks have used it for a long time as robbery protection. Experience in this sort of thing has taught me what one is most likely to run up against, so I merely carry a kit of devices to take care of most emergencies."

Mental Byron, having reviewed the situation mentally, voiced a conclusion.

"It looks," he said, "as if Marcus Gild was mixed up pretty deep in this mystery."

FOR the time being it was impossible, Doc Savage pointed out, to trail the pilot of the bomb-plane, since the man had buried the tin box containing the radio device in Marcus Gild's castle yard. Until the fellow dug up the box, there was no more trailing they could do in that direction.

"The thing to do," the bronze man advised, "is to keep the direction-finder tuned in on the little transmitter in the box. It is possible to rig a device on the direction-finder which will cause an alarm bell to ring if the tin box is moved any appreciable distance."

The group returned to Don Worth's home, where the bronze man rigged the direction-finder with the alarm. They placed the device in the attic of the Worth home, out of sight, but still easily heard.

It was obviously a good idea for Doc Savage to remain at the Worth home during his stay in Crescent City. The Worths had been victims of the first convolutions of the weird mystery, when Thomas Worth disappeared. Since then, Don Worth and his three companions had been more closely involved with the mystery than anybody else.

Furthermore, the boys pointed out, Doc Savage could accomplish more if he could remain where he had willing young assistants. All four boys were enthusiastic about helping the bronze man.

So Doc Savage established himself at the Worth home in a small rear bedroom, with windows that gave out on kindly Mrs. Worth's flower garden and rosebushes, and honeysuckle arbor. In this the bronze man placed the baggage which he had landed by parachute from his plane—his metal equipment cases.

Next morning he broached an idea.

"Mind showing me to the spot to which you trailed the gold-colored dwarf that night?" he asked.

The four were perfectly willing. There was a possibility that Doc Savage might pick up a trail of the little gold ogres.

The woods furred the side of a great hill that was almost a mountain. Walking through the trees, they got rather impressive glimpses of Crescent City below, and a rather inspiring panorama of the lake spread beyond. The clouds were white, looked as peaceful as lambs; the sky itself was full of beaming warmth. Even the birds made happy noises.

The scenery was all the pleasure they got out of the morning. They did find a few little man-tracks, but nothing else.

Lack of success depressed the four boys, although Doc Savage's features remained inscrutable.

B. Elmer Dexter borrowed Doc Savage's compact collapsible telescope and held it to his eyes to see how powerful it was.

"Gawd!" he said.

"Go on!" Funny Tucker said. "The lens ain't that strong."

"Well, it's a good telescope, anyway," B. Elmer declared. "I bet somebody could make a lot of money manufacturing and selling these."

They went back to the Worth home, and found more mystery.

THEY were sitting on the Worth front porch, and Don Worth and the others noticed that Doc Savage straightened abruptly. Something had caught his interest.

"What is it?" Don asked.

The bronze man made a small gesture indicating they should lower their voices, then asked, "Smell anything?"

Don sniffed. So did the others.

"Well, there's kind of a flower smell," Don said. "I hadn't noticed it before."

The bronze man nodded. "The odor is the same as that contained in a number of small glass capsules which are scattered over the floor of my room. Any stranger prowling in the room is almost certain to step on them, break them, and release the odor. I scattered the capsules last night. I have trained myself until the presence of this particular odor will arouse me from a sound sleep."

"Which means," Don Worth whispered excitedly, "that someone is in your room!"

"Unless your mother entered the room this morning to tidy it up. I asked her not to."

"I haven't been near it," Mrs. Worth said nervously.

Doc Savage beckoned, indicating Don Worth and Mental should remain with Mrs. Worth, while Funny and B. Elmer accompanied him. There was shrubbery in the yard. They took to that, crawled a few yards.

The bronze man pointed.

"Know her?" he asked.

The rays of the morning sun slanted through the window of the bedroom in the Worth home which had been assigned to Doc Savage, and disclosed a red-headed young woman who was doing an energetic job of searching the bronze man's metal equipment cases.

"Vee Main!" B. Elmer exploded.

"Marcus Gild's secretary-manager?"

"Exactly."

They watched the young woman finish hunting, then give attention to a number of papers and documents which she had collected—an assortment of police and military commissions, which assured Doc Savage of official coöperation.

Vee Main climbed out of the window—obviously, she had entered that way—and crept away through the shrubbery.

At the same moment, Don Worth came from the front of the house.

"Man to see you," he told Doc Savage. "He says it's very important."

"What kind of man?"

"A swell-looking young fellow," Don said. "And he seems mighty worried. And it's about the little gold ogres. He said so."

Doc Savage made, briefly, the low and exotic trilling sound which was his characteristic reaction to a mental impact.

"Think you young fellows can trail the girl?" he asked.

"If we can't," said B. Elmer, "it won't be because we didn't try."

"All right. Go ahead. Report back from time to time to Mental, who will stay here."

Doc Savage produced a metallic article, shaped like the innersole of a shoe, small enough to fit inside almost any man's shoe, and rather thick.

"Put this inside your shoe," he directed Don Worth. "It is not likely to be found there."

"What is it?"

"Something to use in case of a jam."

"Oh."

"Merely take the shoe off, remove the gadget and tear loose the little metal ribbon you will notice on one side of the thing, and throw it from you. *But throw it outdoors*. Not under trees, or inside a building, or in any other close place. Outdoors, you understand."

They nodded.

The three boys then set out after Vee Main.

Doc Savage went to the front of the Worth home.

He was met by a large, light-haired, blue-eyed, distinctly handsome and manifestly upset young man whom he had never seen before.

"I am Vick Francks," the young man said nervously.

"Yes?"

"I'm here," said Vick Francks, "to show you where you can find some little gold-colored men who go almost naked and carry clubs."

Chapter VIII. THE SHADOW OF A GIRL

DON WORTH, Funny Tucker and B. Elmer Dexter felt rather proud of the job they did following Vee Main, for they had presence of mind to send B. Elmer racing off to get a taxicab, which was a fortunate move indeed, because Miss Main had a car waiting, an expensive roadster which was composed mostly of shiny hood.

"Follow that spiffy roadster," Funny Tucker directed.

Their driver looked around, scowling; his humor changed when he saw B. Elmer exhibit a bank note, one of several which Doc Savage had furnished for expenses. After that they kept in close touch with the flashy roadster of Vee Main.

Shortly thereafter, the young woman entered the Crescent City Public Library. She went to the room that contained the files of out-of-town newspapers.

After reading newspapers for a time, she went to another room and got a volume on contemporary famous men.

She became very preoccupied at reading. Also, her expression was that of a young woman greatly impressed.

Funny Tucker reported their whereabouts to Mental at the Worth home.

B. Elmer took a chance and sauntered past close enough to glimpse what their quarry was reading.

"She's reading up on Doc Savage," he reported.

"It looks," Don Worth decided, "as if she is finding out all she can about the bronze man."

"Reckon old Marcus Gild gave her the job?"

"If he did, he's gonna be more scared of Doc Savage than ever when he gets her report."

"You think it's Doc Savage he's scared of?"

"You guess."

Guessing, if any, was postponed when Vee Main left the library; the number of admiring male glances which followed her was some indication of her beauty.

"You can't tell me," said Funny Tucker, "that a girl as pretty as that can be a crook."

The young woman stopped, made a telephone call in a store, then drove on.

They were puzzled when Vee Main left her roadster in the Crescent City park, and strolled away along a tree-bordered path.

"Looks like she's going for a walk," Funny opined.

"Or going to meet somebody and tell 'em what she's learned," B. Elmer offered.

So they followed the young woman. But not for far. Only until three grim-looking men stepped out suddenly, grabbed them, and pinned their arms. They struggled, naturally, but with no luck. They were thrown, and found strips of adhesive tape plastered over their lips, so they could not cry out.

Pretty Vee Main came out of the shrubbery and stood watching.

"This," Don Worth thought, "is the result of that telephone call she made. We weren't so slick. She learned we were following her."

The biggest of the three men had seized Don, who was the strongest. The man was big enough to assure Don being helpless.

"Better tie them," Vee Main said.

The boys were bound.

Vee Main examined the bonds, then nodded approvingly.

"Marcus Gild picked three good men when he sent you in answer to my telephone call."

"How long have they been following you?" one of the men asked.

"We'll learn," she said. "I first noticed them just before I got to the library."

The young woman came over and looked down at the three boys.

"You young fellows," she said, "have just made the mistake of your lives. I'm afraid none of us are going to like what is to happen next."

DOC SAVAGE had driven, in the car he had rented, for some time, and now the young man at his side muttered and pointed, and Doc stopped the machine.

"You satisfied no one will overhear us here?"

Vick Francks, the large, light-haired young man, had been watching behind the car steadily during the long interval while Doc Savage had been driving. He nodded.

"Furthermore," he said, "I'm sure no one is following us."

Doc Savage said quietly, "You have behaved very strangely. Suppose you get your story started."

"If you were as scared as I am," Vick Francks said, "you'd act queer, too." He gave the bronze man a close appraising glance. "I don't know whether you would either, at that."

"Go ahead with your story," Doc said.

Embarrassment seemed to mix with Vick Francks' fright. He squirmed, rubbed his square jaw and clawed and squared his hat around on his hair, which was about the color of well-cured hay.

"I'm glad the newspapers have been printing the stuff," he said grimly. "Otherwise, I'd be going to a psychopathic ward instead of coming to you."

He gave his surroundings several stabbing glances.

"It's about the gold dwarfs."

"What about them?"

"I was one of the men seized by the little devils. I escaped before they got through with me—before they did whatever infernal thing they are doing to the minds of their prisoners."

"How did you escape?"

"Just broke loose. Ran. You got no idea how fast those little fiends can chase a man, either."

Doc Savage had been waiting for the man to voluntarily explain what seemed to be an important point, but it appeared that the fellow was going to neglect it. So Doc put a question.

"How did you happen to come to me?" he asked.

"Why," the man said, "I just happened to be going past that house—the Worth home—and saw you: I recognized you from your pictures."

Doc Savage nodded. "Do you know of any reason why you were singled out and seized by the dwarfs?"

"No. I think they were grabbing men at random. Their idea is to seize the fellows, turn them loose—and as they are turned loose the men become carriers of some kind of hideous malady."

Doc Savage asked. "Where did the little men hold you?"

"In a cavern. A great, weird place."

"Know where it is?"

"I can take you there," Vick Francks said.

The man raised up in the seat, turned his head slowly and surveyed his surroundings. He put a hand inside his coat.

"But I won't show you," he added.

He took a knife out of his clothing and rammed it into Doc Savage's chest.

The knife was razor-sharp, needle-pointed. It made a sound something like two pieces of sandpaper being rasped together hard when it hit the fine alloy metal mesh of the bulletproof garment, fashioned something like an undershirt, that Doc Savage wore. The man made a snarling noise, tried for the bronze man's throat with the deadly blade.

The whole character of Vick Francks had changed instantly. His eyes distended, his teeth showed, wild desperation was in his manner.

Doc Savage got the knife wrist. He twisted, shoved the blade away. He threw his weight against the other man, mashed the fellow into a corner of the seat. The man's body had a hard, well-muscled feel. The car door burst open and they hit the pavement.

It was not exactly a fight. It was more of a straining of powerful sinews. Vick Francks began to make sounds like steam escaping, and these turned to puppy wailings.

Doc Savage threw the knife into the ditch. He went through Vick Francks' pockets, jerking them inside out, even felt of seams in the man's clothing, but all he found was the sheath of the long, sharp knife.

The sounds that Vick Francks made became more and more inhuman. Spray flew from between his teeth, saliva ran from the corners of his mouth. His manner was altogether mad.

Holding the man—it was not easy—Doc Savage stripped off the fellow's coat, his shirt.

There were a few bruises across the man's back—bruises that might have been made by the beating of small clubs such as the ugly little dwarfs were supposed to carry.

After that the bronze man did nothing but hold Vick Francks. He put the man back in the car, forced him in the seat, made him remain there. It must have been five minutes before the man's mad twitching and frothing subsided, after which Vick Francks spoke, with fair coherence.

"I lied to you," Vick Francks said. "Now you know that."

"You remember what you just did?" Doc asked.

The man shuddered. "Yes." He grabbed his head with both hands, and made a sobbing sound. "What . . . what . . . is wrong with me?"

"What do you think?"

Vick Francks did not answer immediately. His behavior was that of a man completely crushed by horror.

He said shakily, "I lied when I told you that those little devils didn't get to finish with me. I didn't escape before they were done. It was after. They—well—they made me drink something like they made the other prisoners. I got that—whatever it is."

"Why did you try to kill me?"

"I don't know. Something just—happened to me."

Doc Savage's remarkably regular bronze features had not changed expression a great deal during the last few minutes. His manner was calm, his voice unexcited.

"Will you resent," he asked, "having your wrists and ankles bound?"

Vick Francks swallowed. "I think it would be the best thing for everybody," he said.

"Anything more about this mystery that you care to tell me?"

Vick Francks fell to shuddering again. "I don't know anything more."

"The cavern where the dwarfs held you?"

"I lied about that. I don't know where it is."

When Doc Savage drove up to the Worth home some time later, Vick Francks rested in the back seat of the car, ropes holding his wrists and ankles securely, but not uncomfortably. There was resignation on the young man's handsome face, and a trace of something that looked like relief.

Mental Byron came out. He looked a little worried.

He reported, "Last time Funny, Don and B. Elmer reported they were in the public library. No word from them since."

"How long ago?" Doc Savage asked.

"Not long enough to worry about," Mental admitted, "but I am worried anyway."

Chapter IX. TROUBLE HAS A LOUD VOICE

FUNNY TUCKER was worried—and it was only a very tense occasion that could get him worried about anything. Don Worth and B. Elmer Dexter were in not exactly a placid frame of mind, either. However, they were keeping quiet about it Funny wasn't—he had managed to work loose the tape which had been plastered over his lips.

Funny then addressed the man seated on his ample midriff.

"I'll knock your ears down," Funny advised, "so that people will have to talk into your pocket to make you hear!"

The man seated on Funny's midriff, exhibiting a knowledge of anatomy, reached down and gave Funny's elbow a tap.

"Ow-w-w!" Funny squalled. "You hit my crazy bone."

"You should ache all over then," the man advised dryly.

"Your jokes," Funny said indignantly, "are like income taxes—no laughing matter."

The man sitting on Funny snorted and looked at his companions. "Hey, guys, we've got us a practical joker."

Pretty Vee Main said, "You'll have a lot of trouble, too, if you don't put that gag back on him. Suppose he howls and the police hear?"

The gag was plastered back on Funny again and he was jammed down on the floorboards beside Don Worth and B. Elmer Dexter. They were in a milk-delivery truck, there were several wire baskets filled with milk bottles setting on the floor of the truck; these kept up a jingling and clanking. The truck interior was spotlessly clean, smelled of disinfectant. Vee Main was driving, and the three men who had seized the boys in the park were back in the body of the truck with the prisoners. Besides the one astride plump

Funny Tucker, a man gripped B. Elmer and another, the largest one, held Don Worth. They had been driving for some time.

All three boys knew very well that the truck was far out in the country—the difference in the air told them that. The smell. The strong pleasant tang of the woods was in their nostrils.

The car turned off the blacktop pavement—they could tell it was blacktop because of the absence of joint bumps, such as would have been in concrete pavement, as the car rolled along—after which the machine bucked, swayed and squeaked its springs over a rutty road. Branches scraped the sides and brush whacked the underparts. Finally the car stopped.

"Unload them," the girl directed. "They can yell their heads off here without anybody hearing them."

When the three were dragged out of the milk truck, they saw that they had been taken to a sawmill deep in the woods. The sawmill was not in operation, but it did not look as if it was entirely abandoned. There were logs on the piling ground, more logs in the water storage pond—and the power plant, fuel house, refuse burner, kilns and planing mill were in good repair. The loading platform looked sturdy, and there was lumber in the "rough-dry" and "finish" storage sheds. There was not, however, anyone in sight except their party.

"Take them to the timber dock," Vee Main directed.

NO one could live in Crescent City for long without getting acquainted with lumber terminology, so the three boys knew what a timber dock was—simply a large storage shed, a double decker. When the mill was in operation sawn lumber was fed into the timber dock by a long row of live rollers.

The captors had tossed them in a three-wheeled buggy—the carts used for handling sawmill lumber—and they had been wheeled past the big circular head saw, the band-head saws and one sash-gang saw. It was a large plant, they decided. Also they had gotten a glimpse of the name of the mill.

MARCUS GILD NO.7

It meant, of course, that the sawmill was one of the large number owned by the bad-tempered moneybags of Crescent City, Marcus Gild.

The three boys were lashed to beams inside the timber dock.

"Do not tie them so tight they will be uncomfortable," Vee Main said.

"Hell, they ain't kids," one of the men growled.

Vee Main's expression indicated that she did not entirely approve of her assistants. She waited until they had tied the three boys, then came over and tested the tension of the ropes. She made the discovery that all of them, particularly Don, had been tied with agonizing tightness.

The young woman stepped back, stared coolly at her assistants, and there was an unexpected steel in her manner. "Do the job over," she ordered coolly, "so that they will be comfortable."

"Aw hell!" one of the men snorted. "Be reasonable, sister—" The man stopped, swallowed twice and unconsciously took off his hat. He began to look like a fellow who had just escaped from a stroke of lightning.

A few minutes later, he got a chance to whisper to one of his companions. "Say," he breathed, "did you see that look in her eye?"

"I was wondering," the other said, "how long it would take you to learn that she's the wrong kind of a person to cross up."

The boys were retied, and although they were in less discomfort, there seemed to be extremely little chance of their escape. Vee Main ordered their gags removed. This was done.

"Use your judgment, fellows," she advised. "If you start yelling, you will be gagged again."

"What are you going to do?" Don demanded.

"Ask questions."

"Let's have them."

"What," said Vee Main, "do you know about this whole mysterious business?"

"You kidnaped us and brought us out here to ask that?" Don inquired wonderingly.

"It happens to be very important to myself and some others."

"By some others—you mean Marcus Gild?" Don asked.

The girl did not answer that. She said, "Come, come, how much do you know?"

Don thought it over—there didn't seem to be a good reason why he shouldn't admit that they really knew precious little about the mystery of the sinister golden dwarfs. He asked the others what they thought; they agreed.

So Don Worth told the story, complete, of what had happened to himself and his companions.

"And that," he finished, "is the truth."

"This Doc Savage—why did you call him?" Vee Main demanded.

"Why, his business is solving mysteries such as this—and helping people out of trouble."

"If we let you go, would you stop tinkering around with the mystery?" Vee Main asked.

Don Worth looked at the young woman levelly. "No," he said, "I wouldn't. Have you forgotten that my father is still missing? That is why."

Vee Main seemed pleased, rather to their surprise.

"I don't blame you," she said.

"Are you going to turn us loose?" Don asked.

"That," Vee Main told him, "depends on how strongly we believe your story."

One of the men said sourly, "I don't believe this kid. It sounded like he was lying, to me."

"Shut up," Vee Main said, "and let's do some telephoning."

THE young woman and the three tough men walked off and left quiet and the odor of new-sawn lumber behind. The boys were still, so still that a porcupine that had been balled up in the shadows of the lumber dock uncoiled itself, let nervous quills lie down, and departed for a less-disturbing spot.

"It looks," Don Worth said gravely, "as if they seized us for the sole purpose of finding out what we know."

B. Elmer said, "That leaves us two guesses. First, they may be as puzzled as we are about the whole thing, and doing detective work, like we were."

Funny Tucker thought of the other possibility—and gave a tremendous shudder.

"Or they're tryin' to find out if we know enough that they'll have to—to— Whew! Oh, my!"

"Kill us, you mean?" Don asked grimly.

"Whew!" Funny croaked. "Don't talk about such things!"

That unpleasant idea froze their voices for a few moments. There was a scratching and pattering sound on the roof, and they listened carefully, until they realized it was nothing but a curious squirrel.

Don Worth said, "We've been too excited to think of something."

"Eh?"

"That metal innersole," Don Worth said, "that Doc Savage gave me to wear in my shoe."

"That idea," said Funny Tucker, "is kinda like a rainbow."

"How do you mean?"

"It didn't come around until after the storm was over."

"It isn't over," B. Elmer put in. "Don, see if you can reach that shoe with your hands."

"Out of the question," Don assured him.

However, it was possible to use one foot and literally force the shoe off the other foot. Don was perspiring freely before he had that done.

He said, "You think you're a baseball player, don't you, B. Elmer?"

"I'm good enough," said B. Elmer with typical modesty, "that some day I'm gonna manage a big league team and get rich."

Don said, "I'm going to kick this shoe toward you. Think I can do that. You catch it—because if it falls clear, it's gone."

"Kick it straight," B. Elmer warned tensely. "I can only move my hands a few inches."

They were tied a short distance apart, a few feet, but it seemed a hundred yards. Don got set half a dozen times, only to decide he had better practice kicking without the shoe a few more times. Finally—

"Hot dog!" B. Elmer exploded. "Got it!"

"Open it," Don directed, "and get the innersole out and pull the ribbon loose, as Doc Savage directed."

Before B. Elmer had managed that, he was sweating, too. He pulled the metallic ribbon loose—it was something like the sealing around a sardine can.

Frightful-smelling vapor began coming out of the interior of the innersole gadget.

"Throw it out of the lumber dock," Don said. "Pitch it as far as you can."

B. Elmer stuck out his tongue, clamped it with his teeth, and threw. The gadget fell far out in the sunlight, in the middle of a pile of rusty bull chain, and lay there giving out its strange odor.

"That smell," Funny Tucker gasped, "should make something happen."

Chapter X. AIR TRAIL

THE passing of several hours had done two things for Doc Savage, neither of them pleasant. First, he was more and more impressed with the gravity of the situation in Crescent City, and its probable future repercussions.

Terror. Terror was growing. Fear of the nameless and impossible malady that distorted minds and sprang from the victims who had been seized by the little golden ogres—the fear was spreading. Knots of people gathered everywhere on the streets, at first—but now there were no gatherings, and people hurried along with handkerchiefs pressed to mouths to keep out germs, if there were germs. Hospitals were besieged—not so much by the stricken, as yet, although their numbers were growing, but more by people with imaginary attacks. It was a fiesta day for every crank in town with an ailing, imaginary or not.

The newspapers had played up the terror in giant type. Now they were realizing their grisly mistake. They were printing bare facts, embellishing not at all. They were urging the populace to be calm, to look at it sensibly.

There was no sensible way of looking at such an insane thing as little golden dwarfs seizing people and inoculating them with an unknown malady that made the victims want to kill. That wasn't sense. There was no way of making it sense.

The bus companies began to find themselves booked up solid with tickets out of Crescent City. So did the railroads. The companies that moved household furnishings by truck began to get a lot of calls.

It was very much past the laughing stage.

Somehow or other, word got out that Marcus Gild's collection of little golden man-statues had disappeared from their case. Ordinarily, that would have been considered a mere theft. It wasn't this time.

At noon, when Marcus Gild left his office in the First Bank of Crescent, a small mob threw brickbats at his car. Except for the fortunate and unexpected fact that the financier's car turned out to have bulletproof glass, the crusty old dollar-magnet might have been brained.

The newspaper carried that story. It turned attention toward Marcus Gild. Nobody liked Marcus Gild, and he had always gloried in the fact, which didn't help matters.

What the frightened people of Crescent City needed was a common object they could all blame for the

terror. Marcus Gild was a first-class object. They began blaming him. Within two hours, it was so bad that the police had a special guard around old Marcus Gild's castlelike home.

And another thing bothered Doc Savage. His three young helpers—Funny Tucker, B. Elmer Dexter and Don Worth—had not been heard from.

Doc Savage called the Crescent City airport

"Sorry, no chance to rent a plane," someone told him. "Every ship has been hired. A lot of people are leaving Crescent for a little vacation."

Doc Savage had his call transferred to the commercial airline which served Crescent City, made his identity known, and was assured:

"Any plane you want will be warming up in two minutes, Mr. Savage. But we thought—"

"No one must know I am alive," Doc said.

"Why—yes. Yes, of course. No one will know."

Doc Savage happened to be on the board of directors of that airline, and it was largely money supplied by the bronze man that had started the line. Doc Savage had a secret source of fabulous wealth in an unknown valley in the Central American mountains, and during the depression, he had used much of this wealth in starting new enterprises and refinancing old ones, in order to give innumerable men new jobs, or enable them to keep their old ones.

"Expect us," Doc said, "in five minutes."

MENTAL BYRON was puzzled when they arrived precipitously at the airport. Mental also watched the strange young man, Vick Francks, who had tried to kill Doc Savage, and who seemed ashamed of it, and claimed he might try it again if they turned him loose.

Vick Francks had been a model prisoner, except that at intervals he had violent spasms during which he gibbered and snarled and tried to tear himself free.

"We'll load him in the plane," Doc directed.

This caused Vick Francks to have one of his spells. He didn't want to get in the plane, he screamed, and he fought violently.

"I'll kill everybody for this!" Vick Francks screamed.

Doc Savage gave him a drug that put him to sleep within a few moments.

The bronze man then donned a long coat, a wig of white hair which fitted over his bronze hair, and a wide-brimmed black hat, after which he looked like a senator. A fake mustache and a cigar completed the disguise.

They loaded sleeping Vick Francks into the plane.

"Poor fellow," Mental muttered.

The plane was a transport ship, a regular passenger liner, and Mental took one look into the cockpit and

began to doubt that anybody could fathom such a conglomeration of instruments. He held his breath while Doc Savage was taking the ship off.

"Boy, that was something!" he gasped.

Back on the flying field, several pilots said, "Boy, that was something!" too, and wondered who the pilot was who had taken the big ship off so perfectly.

The plane was equipped with a mechanical device, a robot pilot, to take some of the strain of flying off the pilot. Doc connected this. Then he opened another one of his equipment cases.

The article which Doc Savage brought out of the equipment case resembled a pair of binoculars with fat lenses that were almost as large as alarm clocks; there was a switch on these, which he threw.

He produced an exactly identical device for Mental. The contrivances were equipped with straps which held them over their eyes.

"What do I do?" Mental asked.

"Just look down at the earth."

"What do I look for?"

"A deep-purple patch, rather small. The patch will have a glowing, phosphorescent quality, and a purple color different from anything you ever saw before, probably."

Mental stared at the ground, said, "Say, everything looks different through these!"

Doc Savage gave a word of explanation.

"These gadgets through which we are looking," he said, "are sensitive to infrared wave lengths of light and, more than that, convert the infrared which is invisible to the unaided human eye, into light that we can see."

"And?"

"The container inside Don Worth's shoe," Doc said, "held a chemical which turns to a vapor, and the vapor will settle on its surroundings, making a smudge which becomes quite visible as a purplish smear when seen by infrared light."

Mental nodded. He was something of a scientist himself. "The infrared rays are in the sunlight, right?"

"Exactly. If it gets dark before we find what we seek, we will have to rig a very powerful infrared projector, which will be difficult."

"And of course," Mental reminded, "we may fail even then, if Don Worth hasn't managed to drop the chemical in a place where it can be seen."

Twenty minutes later, Doc Savage brought the big plane down on the sandy beach of the lake.

"We going to take him?" Mental, asked, pointing at Vick Francks.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Doc Savage appeared not to hear—which introduced Mental Byron to another of the strange qualities of this unusual man of bronze. It was not the last time in the course of their association that the bronze man appeared not to hear a question which he did not wish to answer, for one reason or another.

DOC SAVAGE himself shouldered Vick Francks, and thereafter Mental marveled at the way the bronze man handled the burden without apparent effort.

"We've got about three miles to walk," Mental warned.

"Through timber country," Doc agreed.

"You sure," Mental persisted, "that the purple smear we saw in the middle of that unused sawmill came from the chemical that you gave Don Worth? The sawmill's a doggone long way from Crescent City."

"Only fools are ever *sure*," Doc reminded him.

"That's right," Mental admitted.

They left the sandy beach where waves crawled up and broke white and sighing, and plunged into primitive wilderness where dark, cool silence was populated by birds, and an occasional owl hooted belligerently. Mental, who pretended never to consider his physical condition, but who in reality took regular exercises, was rendered breathless several times, and they had to rest, before they came to the cut-over land which had fed the sawmill that was their destination.

"I don't see," Mental puffed, "how you managed to carry that guy and still not get winded. I'm tuckered out."

"Good time," Doc Savage said, "for you to watch Vick Francks while I go ahead and scout."

Mental nodded gratefully—then he thought of something.

"I'm not going to miss some excitement?" he demanded anxiously.

"Let us hope there is no excitement, as you call it," the bronze man told him.

A somewhat doubtful Mental Byron remained behind to guard Vick Francks—whom they gagged as a matter of safety, although he still slept from the drug—while Doc Savage disappeared into the shrubbery.

Mental had been astounded by the bronze man's lack of fatigue, but he would have been amazed at the increased pace with which Doc now moved. Embarrassed, too, because Mental had thought they were making very good time. Doc Savage traveled at several times the rate they had been managing. Furthermore, when the bronze man came to a point where the woods turned into an almost impenetrable jungle—the kind of a tangle which he would have had to circle cautiously if accompanied by Mental—Doc Savage grasped a tree bough, swung, landed on his feet atop the bough, remained there an instant, then pitched through the air and his metallic hands clamped another tree limb.

His progress thereafter was an uncanny exhibition of strength and agility—it was circus aerialist stuff, but without the benefit of practice and timing. A jungle anthropoid could not have moved through the treetops with greater skill, or silence. From time to time, he stopped to survey surroundings and listen.

The long-legged, long-armed man was lying on the ground. Lying beside a rifle that was also very long and incased in a green cloth covering.

The prone man wore olive-green overalls that blended with the moss and grass on which he lay, and made him almost indistinguishable. Even his hat was olive green, and his gloves. He had tied strands of moss around his waist, other strands around his legs at intervals, to heighten the camouflage.

He was watching the sawmill.

He turned on his back, pursed his lips, and imitated a bird with startling realism. He gave the bird whistle three times, left an interval, gave it again.

An identical answer reached him from the distance.

There was enough breeze to make tree leaves shuffle against each other with some sound, and under cover of this noise, Doc Savage sank through the tree boughs to a spot a few yards above the man. Gathering branches together to make a thick cluster of leaves, the bronze man remained concealed behind this.

More men joined the one below.

They wore disguising olive green, carried guns wrapped in dull-green cloth. So perfectly did they blend with their surroundings that they might have been drifting shadows.

"Everything set?" the first man asked the newcomers.

"All cocked."

"You think we had the situation guessed right?"

One of the newcomers nodded. "Marcus Gild sent the girl to grab the boys, and bring them here. They've been questioning the three kids."

"To find out how much they knew?"

"Obviously."

Another of the men growled, "Well, whether they know anything, or whether they don't, their luck is going to be just as tough."

"Boss wants it that way, eh?"

"He does."

The men began to unwrap dull-green cloths from their firearms, an indication they were preparing to attack the sawmill, which lay in a valley below them.

"Those boys," said one man grimly, "are mighty young to be dead."

"So are a lot of other people," growled another, "who may get that way before this strange business is over."

"That outfit in the sawmill comes first."

"Don't worry. We've got enough men in these woods that we could take that place if it was a blockhouse."

Chapter XI. BRONZE MAN DEAD

DOC SAVAGE waited for a breeze to come rustling through the woods; one came, and made enough noise to cover his furtive departure from the spot. The bronze man moved swiftly, straight for the sawmill.

The place was surrounded. That was obvious. There was to be a raid—deaths afterward. The deaths of Funny Tucker, B. Elmer Dexter and Don Worth, at least.

Who the raiders were, Doc Savage had not been able to ascertain.

There was no time to waste getting information—the urgent thing that needed doing was to get the three boys out of the sawmill, enable them to escape the raid which was imminent.

Doc Savage dropped to the earth, put on speed, carrying as he went a cluster of leaves that helped him blend in with his surroundings. He reached a fence that surrounded the sawmill. It was high, of wire almost as thick as a lead pencil. Doc Savage grasped the bottom, wrenched slowly, and by a display of terrific strength, lifted the fence sufficiently to roll under.

He made straight for the lumber dock, outside which they had seen the purplish chemical smudge from the plane.

There was no smudge when he passed the spot—it was only when seen through the infrared scanning device that there was a visible smear.

"Doc Savage!" Don Worth exploded.

"Sh-h-h!" the bronze man warned. "Who brought you here?"

"Vee Main, and three men."

"All right," Doc said. "Get down out of sight as soon as you're free."

He cut them loose. Instantly, they flopped under cover. Funny was the last; he was stiff, and he couldn't seem to straighten out.

"Boy," he puffed, "I feel like my monkey ancestors must have felt after they roosted all night in trees."

"You believe in evolution?" B. Elmer asked him.

"Not me—where I come from don't bother me," Funny told him. "It's where I'm goin' that interests me."

Where they were going became the main thing for all of them—because the attack started before they could creep clear.

There was a terrific explosion. The green-garbed men had crept clear—one had thrown a grenade. It knocked down a pile of lumber.

Yells followed. The green-clad men leaped into sight. Three of them pitched more grenades at once. The fence jumped into the air, a tangle of wire and posts. The men charged through. Guns smacked.

"This," Funny said, "is no joke."

"Come on," Doc directed quietly.

THE boys—they were frank, and would have admitted it—were scared. The bronze man's calmness reassured them—as much as anything could bring reassurance with bullets going past with sounds like fiddle strings being broken.

They raced for the fence. Doc Savage hoped to get them clear, send them on. As he ran, he told them where they would find Mental Byron and the prisoner, Vick Francks.

"Down!" the bronze man rapped.

They went down behind logs. Rifles whacked. Bullets came past—enough lead hit the logs to make them roll a little.

"This won't be any wedding," Mental gulped.

"Nope—here we don't know who'll lose the fight," Funny Tucker said with shaky determination.

The fact that Funny could manage a somewhat doubtful gag under such circumstances was a tribute to his courage. Doc Savage tossed several metallic objects along the course they wanted to pursue—the articles were smoke bombs, and they hatched great black blobs.

Instantly, however, the attackers began pouring a storm of lead into the smoke.

"Too dangerous to try that way," Doc warned.

They remained low.

It might be too dangerous to try it any way, they began to realize. Doc Savage searched for routes out of the sawmill. One way seemed open. But it was in plain view.

Just one route. And that in sight of many men, a number of whom seemed to have submachine guns.

The bronze man hurled several smoke bombs, scattering them. Their smudge spread, made a pall.

"While their attention is drawn," Doc said, "you fellows make a sneak for it."

"What'll draw their attention?" Funny asked.

He saw in a moment. For Doc Savage left them, showed himself boldly, made a dash for a big slasher saw leaning against a stump. He made it. Bullets made the slasher saw ring like a Chinese gong.

The three boys began to crawl. The smoke helped, possibly. But most help of all was the fact that attention had been distracted by Doc Savage.

Vee Main and her three men seemed to be barricaded in the planing house, a sizable structure which contained a mass of machinery used in finishing sawed lumber. Their guns whacked occasionally.

Doc Savage moved again—exposing himself. This time, a larger storm of bullets greeted his appearance. More slugs than he had expected. He wore body armor, but if a bullet hit his head— He dived for the handiest cover, a single log near the edge of the water storage pond.

"Circle that log!" a voice howled. "Get that bronze guy! It's Doc Savage!"

The gunmen rushed to cover the other side of the log. Doc had to move. He knew that. He had only one smoke bomb left. He let that one ripen into a cloud of black.

The bronze man then took a running leap through the smoke and landed in the water storage pond. He went down among the logs.

The attackers rushed up, began tossing hand grenades in among the logs.

THERE were over a dozen raiders, all in the strange camouflaged green coverall outfits. Most of them had knapsacks of grenades.

"Blow that pond dry!" shouted the man in charge.

Grenades fell in the water. Geysers jumped fifty feet and more, mushrooms of foam. Huge logs hopped out of the water, swapped ends, fell back again. Echoes blasted back from the surrounding hills in bumping thunder.

The water storage pond was fed by a stream which was larger than a creek, and still not a river, although doubtless it ran frothing and furious in the springtime.

Above the storage pond, the river was wide, shallow and rocky. Below the pond, it was more narrow and deep.

"Get on that lower side!" the leader barked. "Watch it!"

The men rushed to that point. But it was instantly obvious that no man could swim that far without showing himself.

"Hell, nothing short of a submarine could make it!" a man growled.

They kept sharp watch, nevertheless.

The bombing of the water storage reservoir continued. Fish, killed by the concussions, became floating white spots here and there. Bark and foam coated the water, and logs jumped and spun and bumped against one another.

"Out on those logs! Shoot at every suspicious spot! Keep heaving in grenades!"

The men advanced onto the logs. Meantime, part of their group kept a steady fire on the planing house, forcing Vee Main and the others to keep out of sight.

At least fifty more grenades went into the storage pond, and many rifle bullets. The water was boiling with mud. Split and shattered logs were everywhere.

The men came ashore at last.

"If Doc Savage is alive now," he said grimly, "he can't be killed."

"Some remark like that was made at the airport, after the planes burned," growled the boss.

The other was still confident. "He couldn't have gotten away this time."

"You sure?"

"Sure enough that I'll give you a free shot at me if Savage shows up again."

"There was blood in the water over there," a man advised.

"Fish."

"Dead man, too, maybe."

The man in charge seemed satisfied. He issued a few terse orders. His men advanced on the planing house. They threw two grenades. One side fell out of the planing house.

"You can come out," the man in charge yelled, "or do what you damn please."

It did not take long for pretty Vee Main and her three associates to decide. Their weapons sailed into view. They followed, arms up.

More than one raider eyed Vee Main admiringly.

"Brothers," one said, "I'm hoping already we can keep her around for a while."

The leader was not so impressed—or he had something else on his mind.

"Those kids," he snapped, "are next."

They looked, found no trace of Funny Tucker, B. Elmer Dexter and Don Worth. There was profanity. Also running around.

"They got away while Doc Savage was drawing our attention!" the leader yelled. "Hunt them!"

Chapter XII. QUARRELSOME HELP

THE howled order of the chief of the raiders was probably understandable at least half a mile away. Funny Tucker, B. Elmer and Don Worth were not far distant, and they heard it distinctly.

"At this point," B. Elmer said grimly, "we should all feel like running."

Don protested, "But Doc Savage—"

"They killed him," B. Elmer said.

"I know. We saw it. But—"

"Doc Savage lost his life giving us a chance to escape," B. Elmer reminded. "He would want us to go on. Particularly since we can't whip those men without weapons."

"Or with weapons, either," Funny muttered. "You see how many there was? At least a dozen."

They ran. They had all come out for school track teams, and in Camp Indian-Laugh-And-Laugh, but this running was something else again. It was deadly serious business. And it wasn't on any prepared cinder track, or smooth sand beach. It was through some of the thickest brush, and over the roughest hills that they had ever met.

Funny, who could hardly be constructed in a more ample fashion, was soon puffing.

"Boys," he gasped, "remind me to go on a diet."

They tried not to make noise. Evidently they were successful enough, because they were able to get away, make a circle, and come upon the spot at which Doc Savage had explained that he had left Mental

Byron and the prisoner, Vick Francks.

They found Mental concealed up a tree. He had managed to pull Vick Francks into the treetop and tie him there, where they were concealed.

Mental appeared suddenly, and the others gave violent starts.

"All these surprises," Funny complained, "are liable to give me heart trouble."

"What about Doc Savage?" Mental asked anxiously.

The boys exchanged tense glances. It was hard for them to bring themselves to admit what had happened.

"Dead," Don mumbled finally. "He dived into the log storage pond to give us a chance to escape, and they blew the pond to pieces. He couldn't have lived through that."

"Who blew it to pieces?"

"About a dozen men. I don't know who they were. But they attacked the place, and after killing Doc Savage, they seized Vee Main and her three men."

"Who was holding you prisoner?"

"Vee Main and her three men."

B. Elmer explained, "It's all kind of mixed up. I don't make heads or tails of it."

"It hasn't got heads or tails," Funny said. "All it's got is mystery and a bunch of things that just couldn't happen in real life."

They got Vick Francks down out of the tree.

"Who is this guy?" B. Elmer demanded.

"One of the victims of the little gold dwarfs," Mental advised. "He's all right at times."

"Why is he tied up?"

"On account of the times he isn't all right. He tried to kill Doc Savage in one of his spells."

They started away, trying to carry Vick Francks, but the latter proved considerable of a load for four young fellows who were in the biggest hurry of their lives to leave a spot.

"Untie my legs and I'll run with you," Vick Francks suggested. "You can leave my wrists tied, if that'll reassure you—and I believe it's best."

They untied Vick Francks.

But they had covered no more than a hundred yards when Vick Francks whirled, and went diving away in flight.

VICK FRANCKS was faster than any of them suspected. They failed to catch him.

"Blast it!" Mental gasped. "We've got to overtake him."

"Why?"

"Because Doc Savage wanted us to keep him, for some reason."

"What reason?"

"Now you've got me," Mental admitted.

"And he's gotten away," said Funny. "Fellows, that Vick Francks is running right back toward those men in the green outfits. I move we go the other way."

"Motion seconded," said B. Elmer and set out.

It was getting late in the day, the sun having dropped until the cone-shaped tops of evergreen trees on the distant hills seemed thrust into the hot copper solar disk, and the birds that had been abroad during the day were seeking roosts among the boughs. They stopped to listen, and at first heard only the uncouth honking of some water bird far out on the lake.

But pursuit sounds came to their ears. Yells. A shot. More shouts.

"They got Vick Francks," Mental groaned.

They listened—to other sounds that began coming speedily in their direction.

"Yes, and they're chasing us!" Don Worth gasped.

Their pace had been slow to the one they set now. Even Funny Tucker miraculously discovered a second breath and not only held his own, but took the lead at times.

"The plane!" Mental puffed.

"Who will fly it?"

"I've had some flying lessons," B. Elmer admitted, "in a glider. You guys want to take a chance?"

"Not me," Funny assured him. "I'm taking too many chances as is."

When Mental Byron explained that the plane was a big transport with complicated controls, they realized it was foolhardy to think of getting the craft off. Making mental notes to learn to fly the first chance they got, they changed direction and headed for another spot on the lake shore.

Dusk arrived suddenly as the sun dropped behind the hills, and when they came out on the lake beach, the waves were touched with faint purple on their crests, and the hollows were crawling in dark shadows.

"Nothing to do but run down the beach," Mental said.

"After this," Funny groaned, "I'll never run again."

They waded out into the shallow water, where the waves would wipe out their footprints, and went on as rapidly as they could. Their legs were growing rubbery, and every one of them had the impression that there was a bonfire in his lungs.

They found the boat within a mile. It was an old boat, drawn up on the beach near a cabin that was evidently used by someone for a hunting lodge, and was deserted. There were two oars in the boat, and

they found two canoe paddles—one whole one and one broken almost in half—in the cabin.

"Shall we take the boat?" Don Worth asked.

Funny Tucker assured them, "It's either that, or a hearse for me. I may be able to use my arms to paddle, but my legs are sure going on strike."

They rowed out on the lake, making as little noise as possible, and the increasing darkness swallowed them.

"We made it," Mental Byron said gratefully.

B. Elmer looked around, groaned, and said, "Yes; but there's sure a lot of water between here and Crescent City."

"And just think," Funny told him with reviving cheer. "You can only see what's on top."

LATE in the night, in black darkness, they bumped the old boat against piling of the Crescent City municipal wharf, and climbed out. Their arms, they were convinced, were more exhausted than their legs.

"What do we do now?" B. Elmer asked.

"Go to the police."

It dawned on Don Worth, while they were enroute to the police station, that their spirits had fallen very low. He made an effort to revive them.

"Has anybody noticed," he asked, "that it's been some time since B. Elmer thought of a way to make a million dollars?"

"I've had other things to think of," B. Elmer retorted. "My neck, for instance."

They got more attention than they had expected at the police station. An officer was on duty who remembered that the boys had been among the first to come to the authorities with the fantastic story of the little golden ogres.

"Boys, I'll apologize," the policeman said. "The story wasn't as crazy as we thought."

"We've got another story tonight," Mental assured him, "that is almost as fantastic."

The officer heard them through. Immediately, a squad of State police were dispatched for the lumber camp, owned by Marcus Gild, where the fight and the death of Doc Savage had taken place.

A telephone call was made to Marcus Gild about the matter.

Marcus Gild's angry answer was loud enough to rattle the telephone receiver and carry to the ears of the four young fellows.

"I've got a hundred lumber camps!" howled the old dollar-magnet. "How the hell can I be responsible if a gang of thugs moves in on one of them?"

"But your secretary-manager, Vee Main, kidnaped these boys and took them there."

"That's a lie!"

"And Vee Main was seized by the strange men who raided the camp."

"You're crazy!" Marcus Gild screeched, and hung up.

The policeman looked thoughtful after he replaced the receiver.

"You know something?" he muttered.

"Marcus Gild sounded scared," Don Worth ventured.

"So you noticed it, too?"

Don Worth nodded grimly, and pointed out, "Don't you think there is evidence enough to warrant calling Marcus Gild in for questioning?"

The cop did not fancy that idea. Marcus Gild was the Mikado of Crescent City politics, and considerably more than a prince in State affairs. He had more money than almost anybody knew about, and power to match. Anyone who stepped on old Marcus Gild's toes was lighting matches in a dynamite bin.

"Have a heart, boys," the cop said.

"Don't you realize that terror is sweeping Crescent City?" Don asked. "What kind of a heart has anybody got, to let poor people suffer, possibly just because they're afraid to question a rich man."

"Who's afraid?" the cop demanded indignantly.

"Who does the shoe fit?" Funny Tucker suggested.

The officer got red and bloated, but finally let his breath out with a sheepish *whoosh!*

"O. K.," he said. "I'm scared of old Marcus Gild. I don't give a damn who knows it."

The officer punched a buzzer, summoning subordinates.

"Send a squad of detectives out and arrest old Marcus Gild and bring him in," he ordered.

"You supplying the harps and wings, too?" the other demanded.

"Eh?"

"You know what old Marcus Gild will do to any cops we send around there."

"He'll get me, too," said the first policeman grimly. "But the more I think about this, the more I'm convinced old Marcus Gild knows more than he's told anybody. *Bring him in!*"

A squad of detectives set out to arrest old Marcus Gild.

Thirty minutes later, they were back.

"Marcus Gild has disappeared!" they reported.

THERE was indignation around the police station, and a word-brew of accusations and denials, until it all finally cooked down to the bare truth as first reported.

Marcus Gild had indeed vanished. The disappearing had occurred between the time the crusty old financier was called by the policeman in the presence of the four boys, and the time the squad of detectives arrived to arrest him. Where Marcus Gild had gone, no one knew—his servants had no idea, they'd claimed.

All anyone could tell was that Marcus Gild had snatched his hat, coat and a handbag, and dashed out of the house, looking as if he had discovered the place was haunted.

"He's been actin' as if he'd seen a spook," an officer explained, "for the past several days, according to the servants."

"Worried, eh?"

"Yes."

"We'll give him more to worry about!" Now that old Marcus Gild was on the run, figuratively, the cops seemed to have more heart toward pursuing him. "Take a squad out there and search the place. Look for those spooks."

This was done, and some frightened butlers, maids, gardeners—it was somewhat amazing to realize that gardeners spent time tending the terrible castlelike garden—and various chauffeurs were dragged into the police station and raked with questions.

Marcus Gild had left in haste. Concerned and flustered. That was all.

"What about the little gold images that disappeared?" There were uneasy looks and lip licking. Enough that the cops were loudly suspicious. The truth finally came out.

Marcus Gild had threatened every servant with penitentiary, hanging, and everything else—trying to learn if one of them had stolen the images. They hadn't. They were insistent on that point.

Don Worth described one of the little gold-skinned ogres that he had seen.

"Did the statues look like *that*?" he asked.

"Well, sort of."

"What the blazes you getting at?" a cop yelled. "*Those statues came to life*—you can't mean that! It's impossible."

Don Worth colored uncomfortably, because that wasn't what he'd had in mind.

"What significance," he countered, "did the disappearance of the statues have? That's what I'm trying to get at."

"Significance?"

"I don't know about that," said another officer, "but I know what *effect* they had."

"Effect?"

"It's got the Crescent City public ready to lynch old Marcus Gild if they catch him."

Don Worth looked speculative.

"Maybe that," he said soberly, "was the purpose of the theft."

Mental Byron nodded thoughtfully at that.

BEING tired, the four youths went to Don Worth's home—just how tired they were, they realized when they tried to relax. Their arms, their legs, were stiff with extreme fatigue.

"Like sticks," Funny complained. "Boy, I never want to see another rowboat."

Sleep was out of the question—particularly since there had been no report from the squad of State police who had been sent to the lumber camp where, as the boys had explained, Vee Main and three helpers had been seized, and Doc Savage had been killed. Don Worth went on the telephone repeatedly to ascertain what the troopers had found.

In about an hour, Don learned. He replaced the receiver with a shocked expression.

"They catch the guys in green?" B. Elmer demanded excitedly.

Don shook his head. "No. They were all gone."

"Escaped?"

"Yes."

"And what about Doc Savage's plane? Did the police find that all right?"

"Gone, too."

"What?"

"Stolen by the men in green, they think."

A barrage of questions brought from Don Worth exactly what the police had said over the telephone, but it added nothing to what he had told in his first half dozen sentences. The raiders had disappeared without a clue. With them had gone Doc Savage's plane. That was the size of it.

When he had explained everything, Don Worth got up and began putting on his coat.

"Come on, fellows," he said.

"What's the idea?"

"I've thought of something."

They left the Worth home, the others puzzled, Don grim and purposeful. Suddenly, Don began to run. He sprinted, the others pounding in his wake, until he had passed under a bright street light and into the shadows beyond—where he stopped. They crouched there, listening. The others began to realize the meaning of their companion's somewhat strange conduct.

"Nobody following us, apparently," Mental hazarded.

"We'll make darn sure," Don said.

They took a taxicab, changed suddenly. They got onto an assortment of streetcars, and off again. They

parted, and met again at a prearranged point.

"All right, nobody is watching us," Mental decided. "What's up, Don?"

"Mental," Don said, "you have an amateur radio station, haven't you?"

Mental Byron nodded. He had become a radio ham at a remarkably early age, and still had the bug.

They went to Mental Byron's home—a surprisingly palatial place, because Mental's parents were wealthy—and shut themselves up in the privacy of the attic room which Mental had rigged up as a radio shack.

"I want," Don Worth explained, "to contact an amateur radio in the State of Maine who can find two hunters named Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair."

"What good will the army do us?"

"These men aren't the army," Don said. "They're worth several armies, if what I've heard about them is true."

"Do you know whereabouts in Maine we're likely to find these two one-man armies?"

There was a map of the United States on the radio shack wall. Don studied it, then pointed out a small town deep in the Maine woods.

"That's swell," Mental said. "I've got CZ cards from a bunch of hams around there."

It took four hours.

A small, squeaky voice, a childlike voice that obviously didn't belong to a child, finally reached the ears of the four youths clustered about the electro-dynamic speaker in Mental's radio shack.

"Blazes," said this pip-squeak of voices, "what's the idea of busting up our hunting trip? This is Monk Mayfair talking."

"And showing your usual good manners, you homely missing link," said another voice. "Get away from that mike and let a civilized man do the talking. . . . This is Ham Brooks talking."

Both of them proceeded to talk—to each other. The second voice, that of Ham Brooks, was a large and pleasant one, full of persuasion, like a salesman's, or a lawyer who'd had plenty of experience trying to make juries think black was white.

Judging from the sounds, the pair were about to start breaking the furniture on each other.

"You overdressed shyster lawyer!" the small-voiced Monk told Ham.

"You hairy pretense of a chemist!" Ham said.

"I wouldn't throw you a rope if you were drownin'!" Monk assured him.

"And I wouldn't touch it if you did!"

"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" Don Worth put in anxiously. "Doc Savage is dead."

Monk's voice, infinitely shocked, said, "*What did you say?*"

Don Worth explained—began with the disappearance of his father and continued with the whole chain of incredible events. The fact that, after the fashion of amateur radio conversation, he repeated each salient fact, made the story take on even greater feeling of starkness.

Monk said, "We'll be there by morning."

Ham snapped, "Before morning, probably."

Don Worth asked, "You do not, by chance, have a seaplane?"

"We have one that will land on water," Ham told him.

"Better land on the lake near Crescent City," Don Worth advised. "We will have fires lighted in the shape of a letter D, at a good spot."

That signed off the radio conversation.

Before they left Mental's radio shack, Don Worth looked at them speculatively.

"You've probably guessed by now," he said, "that Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks are two of the group of five assistants who work with Doc Savage regularly."

They had guessed that.

Chapter XIII. THE FOXES AND THE TRAP

ALTHOUGH he wasn't fat, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett (Monk) Mayfair probably came as near as any man who ever lived to being as wide as he was tall. His arms were so long that he had been accused of being able to tie his shoes without bending over. The arms were the size of fence posts, and there was more hair on them than should be. His mouth was very big, and his eyes were very small, like his voice, although his voice became something like a combination of the *Queen Mary's* foghorn and a wild cat with its tail caught in a trap, when he was aroused.

Monk was famous for three things. First, he was a renowned chemist. Second, he was a claimant for the title of homeliest man of the generation. Third, he had a pet pig.

The pig was named Habeas Corpus, to irritate Ham Brooks, who abhorred hogs, pigs, pork, sausages, and who had even been known to wash his hair after discovering he had brushed it with a hog-bristle hairbrush. Habeas Corpus, the pig, had long legs, oversized ears, a snout built for inquiry, and brains.

Ham Brooks also had brains. They had made him one of the greatest lawyers in the land—those, and his gift of gab.

What had made Ham Brooks the most famous fellow in the land was his clothing. No roster of best-dressed men was ever issued without Ham Brooks' name, and usually it was at the head of the list. It was an oft-repeated fact that tailors frequently followed him down the street to see clothes being worn as they should be worn. Whenever there was a new fashion for men, the chances were that Ham Brooks had set it.

Wherever people stood in gap-jawed amazement along Park Avenue, the chances were it was Ham

Brooks out walking with Chemistry, his pet chimpanzee—or ape, or baboon, or runt gorilla, or whatever Chemistry was. Authorities disagreed about Chemistry's ancestry.

Monk called Chemistry that blankety-blasted what-is-it, whenever he called Chemistry anything that made fit hearing. Chemistry could not speak English, so he was confined to squeaks, wails, clacks, grunts, hisses and a marvelous Bronx cheer. Monk maintained Ham had taught the animal that Bronx cheer—to express his opinion of Monk.

Monk and Ham quarreled. Habeas Corpus and Chemistry quarreled. The men didn't like each other, and they couldn't stand each other's pets—they maintained.

As a matter of fact, Monk and Ham had been known to save each other's lives in the past.

This squabbling quartet arrived at Crescent City in a seaplane that was small and fast enough to give a Schneider cup racer a run for its money. They sighted the fire signal lighted on the beach, and came down, the plane floats hitting the tops of waves like a glancing bullet.

Monk and Ham were impressed by Don Worth, Funny Tucker, Mental Byron and B. Elmer Dexter. If the four boys were not impressed by Monk and Ham, they were polite enough not to say so, although it was a fact that Monk and Ham did not look like two world-beaters, nor did they sound like it, for most of the noises they made were belligerent, and aimed at each other.

They listened to a repeat of the incredible story of the golden ogres.

"Either you boys are the biggest prevaricators we ever heard," Monk said, grinning, "or this is something mighty mysterious."

Monk and Ham then reached a decision.

"We'll go," Ham declared, "to the Worth home, and get some sleep." He flourished the sword-cane which he carried.

The boys were flabbergasted.

"But my home may be watched, as we've discovered," Don explained.

"Nevertheless—and despite the way I hate to agree with Ham—to the Worth home we go," Monk said.

So they went to the modest Worth residence, and a little golden ogre saw them.

THE ugly dwarf was in the most unsuspected of spots—in the chimney of an abandoned house that was near the Worth home, but not too near. Age had made the chimney crooked, and the little fellow had removed some loose bricks to make peepholes. It was a fireplace chimney, rough on the inside, and it could be climbed.

Getting down the chimney was more of a job than getting up. The dwarf fell the last few feet, landed in a cloud of soot.

"Damn whoever got that chimney idea!" he snarled.

He looked at himself, saw that he was more soot-black than gold-colored, and decided the hue blended with the night; so he did not clean himself off.

He left the old house, took to the weeds, and ran until he reached a cabin in a tourist camp that outwardly appeared not to be open for business. He gave the tourist-cabin door a kick.

"Open up!" he barked.

"Who the hell is it this time, Fiddle?" a voice inside asked.

"It's Diddle, Fiddle's brother," advised the little man grimly.

The large, bull-necked man opened the door with weary patience and not too much respect.

"This business of serving as an information booth for you damned freaks is gettin' on my nerves," he complained. "What is it now?"

"Two of Doc Savage's assistants, the ones named Monk and Ham, just hit town. You better find out the thing to do about it."

The thick-necked man came to life, dashed out of the cabin, was gone some time, and came back panting.

"They'll send help," he said. "We'll trap this Monk and Ham. They probably don't have any suspicion of the truth as yet. We'll get them before they smell a thing."

"If they do smell the truth," said the dwarf dryly, "they're gonna be plenty surprised."

"And you're gonna be surprised," the other assured him, "when you hear your part in this trap."

"My part?"

"Bait."

"Eh?"

"You show yourself. They trail you. You lead 'em into our trap."

"The hell I will!"

"The hell you won't. Them's orders."

The dwarf threw his club on the floor and swore like a mule-skinner.

"Lucky—that's me!" he snarled.

HABEAS CORPUS, the pig, was the first occupant of the Worth home to glimpse the ugly little gold-colored midget who was to serve as bait. Habeas came sailing into the Worth living room, practically using his ears for wings, and looking as if he had indeed seen something.

"Ps-s-t!" Monk warned. "Habeas is scared."

"Maybe he found a mirror," Ham suggested dryly, "and got a look at himself."

As a matter of fact, Ham had almost as much respect for Habeas as had the pig's owner, Monk, although Ham would have let an arm be burned off to the shoulder before he would have admitted of any feeling toward Habeas that was kinder than an intense desire to see breakfast bacon made out of the

hog.

They went outside, very quietly, after making a great business of hemming and hawing and yawning to give the idea they were going to sleep. For a while, they made their eyes ache, straining them to see anything suspicious in gloom that was soon going to turn into daylight.

"There!" Monk breathed. "Over there! *A little man!*"

It certainly was a little man—at least a man much smaller than Monk or Ham had expected to see, even if they had gotten beyond doubting that they would see any golden dwarfs at all, doubt being the only sensible reaction to this kind of story. But there the golden midget was.

He carried his club over his shoulder, crossed an open space in the lawn, and waited for a while in the shadow of a tree. They heard him cough. It was a human-enough cough, although a small one.

Once, a bird made the faintest of fluttering sounds off to the right, and the little man whirled instantly.

Later, the midget sauntered away.

"There he goes!" Monk said. "Well follow him."

"Sh-h-h, stupid!" Ham hissed. "He'll hear you!"

Monk put on a big grin, and watched the midget golden figure attentively. The dwarf did not seem to have heard. Monk's loud voice had not been an accident. It was deliberate. The weird little man had heard a bird rustle the bushes a few moments ago—but now he couldn't hear Monk's voice, which was louder.

"Worth thinkin' about," Monk said.

"Eh?"

"He knows we're followin' him, and it don't excite him," Monk explained. "Therefore, he *wants* us to trail him. Which leaves a conclusion."

"Leading us into trouble." Ham nodded soberly.

Ham then leaned down, picked up Chemistry, the chimp, and pointed out the midget to the animal with his sword cane, after which he replaced Chemistry on the ground.

"Go get him!" Ham directed.

Chemistry shot ahead.

The swearing the dwarf did when the chimp seized him was a classic. To the little man, Chemistry probably seemed as large as a good-sized ape. He howled, squalled. Evidently he struck some good club blows as well, because Chemistry made distressed sounds himself.

Monk rushed upon the scene, seized the little golden man by a leg, and held him aloft.

"Now," Monk declared, "we've got hold of the mystery."

THE dwarf still held his club—he swung it, and connected with Monk's head, and Monk fell down. Ham

pounced upon the midget when he would have scampered away, and for a while there were grunts and dust in the air. In the end, it came out all right, with all of them in a ring around the midget, who was about to run out of profanity. Finally, he did run out.

"Ar-r-r!" he said. "Nuts to all of you!"

"For a pint-sized edition of a prehistoric caveman," Don Worth said thoughtfully, "he speaks a remarkably modern brand of English."

The little man scowled at them.

"You think I am dumb?" he demanded. "Think I am not smart enough to learn simple thing like the English language?"

"If you aren't smarter than you look," Funny Tucker said, "you're plenty knot-headed."

Reflection on his intelligence seemed to enrage the little man. He sputtered rage.

While he was sputtering, Monk got out a small metal case which could have held cigars, but held instead a hypodermic needle and some bottles containing a supply of stuff for use in the needle.

"Truth serum," Monk explained.

The boys looked at the hypo needle and the chemical, and Mental Byron said, "I've heard of it. Drug affects the conscious thought processes, so the victim can't think up lies."

Monk agreed, "Yeah. That's a general idea of how it works."

The homely chemist now seized the little golden dwarf, and prepared to thorn him with the hypo needle. The midget didn't like the idea.

"You're gonna stick me with that stuff?" he yelled.

"Yep," Monk said.

"What'll happen?"

"You'll feel something like being unconscious."

"How long," the midget asked wildly, "before I'll know anything?"

"Aren't you," Funny Tucker put in, "hoping for too much from the serum?"

The little man glared at Funny, snarled. "Fat boy, we've got plenty of smarter men than you in the cavern! And before this is over, you'll be there, too!"

Funny sobered.

"Let's hope not," he said.

The midget beat his chest, stuck out his miniature plowshare of a jaw, and bawled, "We're the next masters of the world—we little men are! And don't think we aren't!"

"Just how," Monk asked him curiously, "do you figure to do the mastering?"

"We've got Crescent City in terror, haven't we?" the little fellow howled. "They're scared

now—everybody is! They'll get a lot more scared! And the only way they can save themselves is to move out of Crescent City and turn everything over to us!"

"That's how you'll take Crescent City?"

"That's how!"

Monk grabbed him and got the hypo needle ready again.

"Wait!" the dwarf gasped.

"What for?"

"If you stick that thing into me, it'll *make* me tell the truth?" the little man snarled questioningly.

"That's right."

"Which means that I'll tell you where our cavern is?"

"Yep."

The dwarf took in a deep breath and swore some more.

"I'll show you the cavern," he said, "without all that trouble."

THE little man led them out of Crescent City.

The sun was rising, birds were coming to life, and it was that time of day when the mill whistles of Crescent's industrial district should have been blowing—but on this morning the majority of the city's plants were not opening, having been closed, as schools are closed during an epidemic, in a hopeless effort to prevent spread of the weird malady which was causing such horror.

"You're smart," Monk told the midget, "because this truth serum is really dangerous stuff, and we might give a little guy like you an overdose, which would make him very dead."

"Humph," said the midget.

His gold-tinted complexion—there wasn't enough daylight as yet, particularly since they had entered the forest, to give them a good look at his skin—was quite pronounced. The little man was very homely, and his homeliness was a type that seemed to grow more repulsive on longer acquaintance, his body being gnarled and puffy, and almost of altogether distorted aspect. There was something horrible about him, as if a Cupid had become old and evil without ever growing up.

"You didn't expect us to grab you, did you?" Monk asked him. "You thought we would follow you?"

"I'm not giving you any information," the little man snapped.

"Remember," Monk said threateningly, "what I said about that truth serum maybe being fatal. We'll use it on you if you get tough."

The small ogre swallowed.

"I wanted you to follow me," he admitted.

"Into a trap?"

"Yeah."

"We were too smart for that," Monk said. "We saw through your scheme."

They came to a particularly dense and deserted thicket of woods.

The dwarf stopped.

"You weren't so smart," he said.

"Huh?"

"This

is the trap!" snarled the dwarf.

And men began coming out of the thicket. Little men and big, full-grown men. There were plenty of guns, plenty of ugly expressions. All of the full-grown men wore green coverall outfits that would enable them to move about in the woodland with a minimum chance of being discovered, although it was apparent, from glimpses of neckties and collars inside the coveralls, that they wore civilian clothing beneath. Not many words were spoken.

"Up—everybody!" one man said.

There was no doubt about what he wanted up. Their arms. There was also no doubt that it was sensible to comply with the command. All arms lifted.

The prisoners were searched, then their wrists were bound tightly, and they were gagged.

After the binding, the dwarf named Diddle strode over and kicked Monk until he was both exhausted and satisfied, despite the threats which Monk tried to snort around his gag.

Habeas Corpus and Chemistry had not been seized.

"Shoot those two animals," the spokesman ordered.

Both Monk and Ham made, wildly, certain gestures which they had taught their pets to mean quick flight. Habeas and Chemistry took off, vanished in the woods.

"Damn!" a man said. "Somebody may find them!"

"Then if the pig and ape can talk, that'll be swell," the leader remarked, and grinned. "Let's go."

"We're heading—"

"For the cavern," the spokesman explained.

The other pointed at Monk, Ham and the four boys. "Do we have to take these? Surely, the chief don't intend—"

"Don't worry. They'll be deader, before long, than their overrated friend, Doc Savage."

They filed off through the woods with the prisoners, walking rapidly, occasionally swearing at the speed with which the sun was rising.

Chapter XIV. STOWAWAY

THE warmth and the brightness of that same new sun probably helped arouse Doc Savage.

For a little while, he did not know where he was—his mind was befogged, for he had been drugged. He had drugged himself. The capsule, that had contained the potent sedative which he had taken deliberately, lay at his side.

He tried to move his arms. He managed that. He was pleased. He had hardly expected as much.

There was incredible stillness in his ears.

The night had been chilly, and the temperature had not risen much as yet, but it was perceptibly warm among the rocks where he lay. A squirrel was investigating him, and so had been a buzzard, although the latter was now winging away disappointed. Background for everything was the dampness of the nearby rushing river.

It was the same river that ran through the lumber mill of Marcus Gild, and was dammed to form the long storage pond into which Doc Savage had dived to escape from the men in green.

He had dived into that pond a long time ago. A very long time ago, it seemed. He moved his arms and legs some more, and began to realize that he hurt all over. Every nerve was a telegraph line for agony.

The concussions of the grenades had done that. Not the grenades thrown in among the logs of the storage pond. He had been clear of those. It was just one grenade, a lucky one, tossed far down in the river, that had all but removed his life with one sickening thump.

Now the utter stillness was hurting his ears.

He spoke. He could not hear himself. He was deaf.

Beside him, near the sedative capsule, lay the diving "lung"—it was also the gas filter that he had used on that earlier visit to Marcus Gild's home. Use of that device had enabled him to swim below the surface of the river and escape the men in green.

He had taken the sedative after reaching safety. Taken it because he knew he was in no physical shape to pursue the raiders, and because he wanted to rest, and did not want to be tortured by thoughts while he rested. The sedative had made his mind blank, except for a few grisly nightmares, while he had rested.

He tried his voice again, tested his ears. Above and beyond all the bronze man's other accomplishments was his ability as a surgeon, his knowledge of human anatomy.

He did not think he was permanently deaf. But the shock of the grenade exploding under water had done his eardrums no good, even though he had plugged his ears when he felt the first underwater blast, a precaution that had probably saved his hearing.

He began taking exercises and carefully kneading muscles—he knew a great deal of osteopathy, and he used that knowledge. So that in half an hour he not only could walk, he was fairly active.

He made no effort to reach the lumber mill and pick up the trail of the men in green as they fled with Vee Main and their other prisoners. The men in green would be clever enough to hide that trail.

It was their other trail, the one they had made coming to the vicinity, that Doc Savage sought.

He found the trail without much difficulty.

It led to a spot where boats had been beached. Doc Savage examined the boat marks, made his strangely low and exotic trilling sound briefly—for they were the marks of folding boats, and that meant something.

THE raiders in green had come back to their folding boats and paddled away in them, the marks indicated.

Doc found Vee Main's footprints among the returning marks. Or a woman's tracks, at least. That they were Vee Main's was just a reasonable guess.

The river water was bitterly cold, frigid enough to sap strength, and the bronze man knew that he needed vitality, so he did not swim. He followed the river.

Where the river entered the lake, there was a wide cove of smooth water that crinkled lazily in the morning sunlight.

The plane sat on the cove. A big plane, two-motored, both engines huge cowled reservoirs of power. The cabin would hold twenty in a pinch, and the ship was certainly large enough to fly fast with that burden.

Morning breeze was kicking the heavy plane around, giving trouble to the three green-coverall-clad men who held the mooring lines. Two of them gripped the lines, braced heels, and were dragged, making grooves across the sandy beach, until they were hauled into the water. The third man stood on the plane wing and gave them profane advice.

"Run her up to shore again!" yelled one of the pair in the water. "Then you get off there and help us! Three of us can get her tied to that tree."

The green-coverall-garbed man on the wing began laughing.

"Why can't you guys just swim around and lead her?" he demanded humorously.

The pair in the water didn't think it was funny; they climbed onto the plane, and one of them knocked their humorous companion overboard.

"When the others come back, they may wanta get aboard in a hurry!" one snarled. "So we keep this plane close to the beach, without actually grounding her. Them's orders."

All three of them got overside with lines, after one of the drenched men had entered the cabin and pulled the ship close to the beach with roaring motors.

They labored on the sand. The motors idled, helping them. Finally they got the lines to a small tree and began making them fast.

Unexpectedly, there was a popping sound. The preoccupied men whirled. Black smoke was boiling around one of the plane motors, swirling back to envelop the craft.

"Hell! She's afire!" one squalled.

They dived for the ship. Both motors were turning. One man floundered into the cabin, splattering water, and cut the engines.

The black smoke cleared away, and there seemed no harm done.

"What happened, dammit?" one man demanded.

"Must've been a backfire."

"Made a blasted lot of smoke, didn't it?"

"Yeah. But you can see that's all it could've been, can't you?"

"I guess so."

They were satisfied it was a backfire.

Which pleased Doc Savage no little. The bronze man was now crouched in the tail of the plane, back of the lavatory, where chances were one in a thousand against anyone ever looking. The smoke had not been a backfiring motor—it had come from a smoke bomb which the bronze man had used to hide his act of swinging into the plane.

Everything had worked out very well. Even the fact that the men themselves were soaked, and had splattered around in the cabin, had concealed the water that had dripped from the bronze man's garments.

"We're getting the inside of this crate as wet as the devil," one man complained.

But the dampness aroused no suspicion.

Doc Savage carefully pocketed the diving "lung" which he had used to swim underwater to the plane. The gadget was being repeatedly useful.

TWENTY minutes or so later, a man dashed out on the beach. He was a messenger, apparently, who had come on ahead.

"The trap worked like a charm," he explained. "They'll be here as soon as I go back and tell 'em it's safe."

"Why shouldn't it be safe?"

"The State police are combing the woods," the other advised. "We've seen 'em once or twice from a distance."

He went away to advise his companions that the coast was clear. Doc Savage set to work with the tip of a knife blade that had very good steel, and got tiny apertures in the skin of the plane, one on each side, and one in the bottom, to serve as peepholes.

And he saw, a bit later, the arrival of the prisoners—a cavalcade consisting of several green-garbed men, a number of caveman midgets, Monk, Ham, and the four boys. It was the first time Doc Savage had known that Monk and Ham were involved in the mystery, and the bronze man almost made his small involuntary trilling sound of mental stress, but caught himself in time.

Thorn bushes had scratched the captives, tree limbs had horned them and ripped their clothing. They looked as if they had been slapped around somewhat. On top of that, their tempers were bad.

They were heaved into the plane.

The ship took the air. It flew south fifty miles, west for a hundred, south some more, then swung and, after a good deal of flying, crossed the thickly populated suburbs of Chicago, where planes passed frequently enough that the chance of a particular one of them being noticed was very rare. From Chicago, the craft angled up until it entered clouds.

After the plane was in the clouds—it was suddenly obvious the pilot had been hunting clouds for such a purpose—the craft completely changed its course, and droned northward while hidden high in the vapor masses, following a course that was taking it far out over the lake.

The flying had become monotonous, the motor roar prevented any chance of overhearing conversation, and so Doc Savage gave more attention to his surroundings—the interior of the tail of the big plane.

There was a folding boat, carefully lashed down, two or three parachutes neatly packed, and one ‘chute that had not been packed, and was a great loose bundle of silk that squirmed and shifted under the impact of such small wind-streams as entered through cracks, or around control-wire guards.

Doc had noticed the loose ‘chute before—but now its shape had changed somewhat.

Suddenly, the bronze man scuttled back, fell upon the ‘chute pile with open arms, and clutched.

"Quiet!" he hissed. "It's Doc Savage."

The ‘chute pile heaved for a while, until the man concealed under it decided he was helpless, after which Doc Savage uncovered the face of his new captive.

Marcus Gild's elephantlike visage stared up at him quizzically.

Chapter XV. ISLAND AND CAVERN

MARCUS GILD'S big round body made a great cushion under the parachute folds, although the cushion was not as soft as might have been expected when one had seen Marcus Gild in street clothes.

The moneybags of Crescent City was worried, but not exactly afraid. He was more puzzled than anything; his small eyes sparkled with inquiry, and his big ears were almost sticking forward to hear answers to questions.

"It gets me," he said.

"What does?"

"You stowing away in here," Marcus Gild explained.

Doc Savage's regular metallic features showed no surprise. He said, "You had me figured as the schemer behind what was happening, didn't you?"

Marcus Gild nodded. "All I had ever heard of you was rumors—stories about an unusual fellow named Doc Savage, who was always getting in trouble. After you came to my house, and I ran you away with the gas, I sent Vee Main out to find out who you really were, and what you were up to."

"Vee Main went through my belongings at the Worth home," Doc said, "then she visited the Crescent City library and read up on me."

"She was checking up on you for me," Marcus Gild pointed out. "But she was seized before she could report."

Doc Savage asked, "How did you get here—in this plane?"

"I'm not so stupid," said Gild.

"Obviously."

"I have a lot of property in Crescent City, and a lot of men work for me—so I have to keep pretty close check on things. I have spies. I know about everything that goes on."

Marcus Gild sat on the folds of the parachute and looked proud of himself, like a little elephant that was very sly. He continued:

"Since this mystery turned up in Crescent City—and more particularly, since my golden images were stolen—I've had my private detectives watching everything."

"And?"

"One of my private detectives," Marcus Gild explained, "reported that a mysterious large plane had made several landings recently at the mouth of the river that led to my lumber camp. It is one of the few suitable—and hidden—landing spots for a plane in this vicinity."

The fat, sly old dollar-magnet paused to look proud of himself again.

"The golden images were stolen to make things hot for me," he said. "To point suspicion at me. The fact that Vee Main seized the boys—she really meant them no harm, and only intended to learn what they knew about the mystery, and about you—it was a mistake, I'll admit, for it made the police suspect me more and more. It got to the point where the police were going to arrest me. So I skipped."

"You shouldn't have skipped," Doc Savage told him, "if you had no guilt to cover."

"Guilt? Hell, I was guilty of ordering Vee to kidnap the boys, wasn't I? Anyway, with me locked up, who was there left to solve the mystery?"

There were the police, the State troopers, and a few others around to solve the mystery, but Doc Savage did not remind the rather egotistical dollar-trap of that.

"So you came to the river mouth to see if the mystery plane was there?" the bronze man asked.

"Exactly. I got aboard her in the darkness. It wasn't hard. I just hid on her, figuring they'd take me to the hideout of these little gold cavemen. You're doing the same thing, aren't you?"

Doc Savage listened to the motors, which were panting with less violence. He put a flake-gold eye to the tiny hole he had made in the fuselage.

"Island below," he said.

And the plane landed.

IN about ten minutes, all was quiet.

Marcus Gild muttered, "It sounded as if they ran the plane into a hangar."

"Quiet," Doc Savage warned.

The bronze man, pressing an eye to the peepholes, made out what seemed to be rock on both sides, and water below. He crept to the hatch, got it open cautiously, made sure no one remained in the cabin of the big plane, then eased to a window.

The ship stood in a vast, crude, but strong-looking hangar made out of stone set in concrete mortar, and great ceiling beams. The place seemed deserted.

Doc Savage climbed down to one of the floats, from which he could step ashore. Marcus Gild followed, his weight making the plane bobble and sway.

Exit from the hangar appeared to be through a stone doorway, which was closed. Doc Savage did not go near the door, but entered the water and beckoned Marcus Gild to follow, a suggestion which the fat man followed, after hissing bitterly about the coldness of the water. They swam out of the hangar silently, turned right, and touched the stony shore of the island.

The island, as Doc Savage had seen from the air, was a stone wart on the shiny blue skin of the lake. A large wart, maybe half a mile across, and horned all over with ledges, rocky peaks, as well as knobbed with big boulders. Trees stuck like moss in the stony cracks, and there was a furring brush. It hadn't looked so good from the air.

At close range, the island looked like something that had been half created, then forgotten.

Doc Savage peered around the hangar corner.

There was a man crouched in the bushes, watching the hangar door.

Doc Savage waited long enough to be reasonably sure that no one else was around. Then he leaped, came down on the water, clutched the fellow's throat to paralyze sound, and turned him over.

It was Vick Francks.

DOC SAVAGE had started to administer a pressure on certain spinal nerve centers which would induce unconsciousness, but he changed his mind. He held Vick Francks, keeping the man silent, until the fellow should get the situation straight in his mind.

"Know him?" old Marcus Gild demanded.

"His name is Vick Francks," Doc explained. "He came to me and explained that he was one of the victims of the little gold ogres. He is rational-minded most of the time, but he has murderous spells."

Vick Francks was staring at them in amazement.

Doc Savage told him, "Don't make a sound," and released the throat pressure.

Vick Francks kneaded his neck, swallowed; the first two times he tried to whisper, he only managed croakings.

"I got away again," he gulped finally, "I was watching the hangar, afraid to go in and try to steal the plane. I can fly a little."

"Where are the four boys?" Doc Savage asked grimly.

"They're still safe—here on the island—in the cavern."

"Cavern?"

Vick Francks pointed toward the central part of the island. "It's up there."

"You willing to help us?" Doc demanded.

"You're here to raid the island?" Vick Francks stared at them. "How much help have you got?"

"You, if you're willing. And Marcus Gild, here."

"Only the three of us!" Vick Francks shook his head. "We'll never make it! There's a lot of them here!"

"We will not make it if we do not try," Doc assured him.

Vick Francks shuddered, thought for a while, shuddered again.

"I'm with you," he said, "but I think we're all crazy."

Doc Savage led the way a few rods into the mass of boulders, upheaved stone, gnarled trees and thorn bushes that bit them as viciously as animals, and halted.

"You stay here," he directed, "while I go ahead and reconnoiter."

"Think that's safe?" Vick Francks asked uneasily.

Doc Savage did not comment, because it obviously wasn't safe; he went ahead. The shrubbery, the waste of stones, swallowed him.

There was almost complete stillness after the bronze man had gone, because the island seemed devoid of bird life, and the leaves on the scrawny shrubs were so starved that they made a noise only when the stronger puffs of the lake breeze came, which was at long intervals.

Marcus Gild waited until the wind and the emaciated leaves were making some sound.

Then Marcus Gild hit the unsuspecting Vick Francks a terrific fist blow and dropped him senseless.

"It's about time," Marcus Gild said grimly, "that this thing got wound up."

MARCUS GILD got down on his knees beside unconscious Vick Francks and went through the man's pockets, then swore when he found nothing whatever therein. He used Vick Francks' belt, and his own, to bind the man's ankles and wrists. Then, to make sure the fellow was really unconscious, he hit him again.

Marcus Gild left his victim hidden under a bush, and started off. He had trouble with his beltless trousers, and hitched them up.

Marcus Gild disappeared in the direction of the cavern.

Doc Savage came out of the bush behind which he had been concealed, watching. Sinking beside Vick Francks, the bronze man administered a powerful stimulant which he carried as a part of emergency equipment.

Vick Francks was soon groaning and batting his eyes.

"That fat old devil!" he gritted feebly.

"He hit you," Doc Savage said.

Vick Francks nodded. "And don't that prove something? I'll bet everybody in Crescent City was right! The old reprobate is behind this mess."

"You think Marcus Gild is the boss of the men in green and the little gold-skinned dwarfs?" Doc asked.

"I sure do."

"We might follow him and see."

Vick Francks was shaky on his legs, but with the aid of the bronze man, he managed to navigate the steeply sloping stone sides of the island, climb over masses of boulders that stood as thickly together as racked pool balls, and catch sight of Marcus Gild.

Marcus Gild was creeping along, making for a sheer cliff that had an overhang which looked as if it might hide the mouth of a cavern.

A little golden-skinned midget appeared unexpectedly behind Marcus Gild. The little man wore a small overcoat with a velvet collar, such as old-time actors affect, but he took this off in order to move more silently, disclosing that his knotty and unpleasant little body was clad only in a breechcloth. He carried a club.

The dwarf proceeded to trail Marcus Gild.

"That's queer," Vick Francks breathed. "He's trailing his chief."

"Apparently."

"He doesn't act," Vick Francks said, "as if he meant Marcus Gild any good."

"Wait here," Doc directed quietly.

"What are you going to do?"

"Get the midget."

Vick Francks stopped, stood very still. Doc Savage went ahead, using all the speed and silence he could muster. His muscles, due to the effects of the grenade in the log storage pond, lacked their usual efficiency, but he managed well enough.

The dwarf was taken completely by surprise. His grunt was not loud enough to attract Marcus Gild. He dropped his club.

Doc Savage held the struggling little man in silence, until Marcus Gild went on, not knowing that anything out of the ordinary had happened behind him.

Then the bronze man began examining the dwarf. He gave attention to the little fellow's golden skin.

Something that he found caused the bronze man to make, for some moments, the strange, low trilling sound, the note as exotic as the song of some unknown tropical bird.

With pressure on spinal nerves, Doc made the midget harmlessly unconscious.

Then he picked up the dwarf's club, examined it, gave it a twist, and the lower portion came off like a shell in his hands.

There were several very modern-looking trick hypodermic needles inside the club, arranged so that, when a blow was struck, a chemical fluid would be injected into the victim.

Doc emptied the chemical out of the hypo needles inside the club. He put the club back together again, tossed it on the ground where it might have dropped.

A few moments later, Vick Francks came creeping up.

Doc Savage was examining the dwarf's skin again. The bronze man had squeezed water from his own damp clothing, was scrubbing the midget's gold-colored skin.

"Here's something," the bronze man said grimly, "that probably explains the whole mystery."

Vick Francks picked up the club.

"I was afraid of that," he said.

He struck Doc Savage with the club.

Doc jumped up, staggered around enough to make it look good, then fell down and pretended to be overcome by the hypodermic which had been—but wasn't now—in the club.

Chapter XVI. THE OGRE'S NEST

VICK FRANCKS proceeded to have a fit—but not the kind of fit that he had advertised himself as being subject to, due to the evil machinations of the little golden ogres. This was a fit of joy. He wanted to howl his delight, to jump up and down, but couldn't because of the nearness of Marcus Gild, so he was about to bust. He managed several very large silent laughs, and pinched himself hard, the pain giving relief to his feelings.

He shouldered Doc Savage, showing some astonishment at the bronze man's weight, then walked to the right, quickened his pace, and shortly stepped through a narrow aperture in the stony island, into the mouth of a cave.

Instantly, he was surrounded by fully-sized men, and smaller ones.

Vick Francks dropped Doc Savage to the floor. Several men got a look at the bronze giant, and began to take uneasy steps backward.

"Hell, he's helpless!" Vick Francks snapped. "I popped him with one of the clubs filled with hypo needles. It'll be hours before he wakes up."

"Doc Savage," a man muttered, "is tricky stuff to monkey with. I've heard plenty about him."

Vick Francks snorted. "As if I didn't know. That first time, when I went to him and claimed to be a victim of the golden ogres, I thought it'd be simple to knife him. But it wasn't, even if he never did suspect me."

"He never suspected you?" a man asked.

"Not once."

"He must be slipping," the man mumbled.

The remark angered Vick Francks, and he scowled darkly, said, "Don't underestimate my own ability, fellow!" after which he whirled on the others.

"Old Marcus Gild is on the island," Vick Francks explained grimly. "Go look for him. Grab him."

"And that," said the man who had complained, "will make everything perfect."

He wasn't complaining this time—he meant it. Vick Francks grinned appreciatively.

"All Crescent City needs now," he said, "is for old Marcus Gild to appear and start acting insane and trying to kill people."

All of the full-sized men, and part of the midgets, hurried out into the bright sunlight to search for Marcus Gild.

The other dwarfs fell upon Doc Savage, dragged him deeper into the cavern. Some of the little fellows were strong, but they all got out of breath quickly.

"This is a hell of a job!" one puffed.

"You're right," agreed another. "I wish I was back in the circus. It may be tough to be stared at, but it ain't half as much hell as we've got ourselves mixed up in."

"What circus were you with?"

"The International Congress of Wonders. Good outfit. Fired me for working a clip racket. I was black-balled."

Another dwarf said grimly, "I was black-balled, too. Off a carnival. Couldn't get booked anywhere."

"If we'll compare notes, we'll find that we've all been blackballed," the first explained. "That's the way Vick Francks managed to pick out midgets who—er—would work this for him."

Doc Savage, who was perfectly conscious, but pretending to be otherwise, heard all of this, and it checked with what he already knew, or surmised.

Examination of the dwarf's gold-colored skin, a few minutes ago, had shown him that the unusual complexion came from a simple chemical dye.

The plain fact was that all these little men were merely midgets whom Vick Francks had hired to play a part.

Doc let them toss him through a barred gate, and slam the door.

THE steel bars of the gate were thick, and the gate itself was set in a thick iron panel which closed off an arm of the cavern. The floor was of stone, the air was cool, and the stillness almost immediately broken by a voice.

"Blazes!" it said. "Doc Savage!"

The voice was small and squeaky, so Doc said, "Monk! How many of you are in here?"

"Just Ham, the four boys, Vee Main, and three other men."

Doc asked, "Who are the three other men?"

Don Worth's voice answered that. "One is my father. The other two are men who were smart enough to realize the truth about the little gold ogres. They were not fooled, so they could not be released to tell a mad story about being seized by small golden cavemen."

"And the truth—"

"The dwarfs are really ordinary freaks, most of them former circus attractions. Hired to perpetrate a hoax."

Doc Savage knew that, of course.

"What kind of a hoax?" he asked.

"We're not sure," Don explained, "but it's got something to do with disrupting the commercial life of Crescent City until—"

"Until Marcus Gild is ruined!" Vee Main snapped.

"Eh?"

"Oh, it's all perfectly clear to Marcus Gild and myself, and has been for some time," the girl said grimly. "Six months ago, a gang of crooks approached Marcus Gild and offered a ridiculously cheap price for all his holdings in Crescent City. Marcus Gild refused, naturally. And this is the result."

Doc Savage asked, "Is this the cavern to which the prisoners who thought they were seized by fantastic little gold men were brought?"

Mental Byron said, "That's right, Mr. Savage. But the victims are kept in another part of the cave, and they never get to see any full-sized men—while they are conscious."

Doc said, "We have a general line on everything but the malady that the prisoners have been given. Do you know anything about that?"

"Nothing," Mental admitted.

Ham said, "Doc, from what we've learned, that malady is real."

There was a noise outside—men approaching—and Doc Savage hurriedly flattened out on the cavern floor and became an excellent imitation of a man still unconscious.

"I'm supposed to be drugged from a club blow," he explained.

The door was unlocked, and two men came in, protected by rifles that thrust menacingly through the

door, and seized Doc Savage. They carried him out.

THE bronze man was dumped on the floor of another arm of the cavern—the place seemed to have as many branches as a tree—where there was enough light coming from a portable electric lantern to show canvas cots, cooking equipment, and assorted litter. Evidently the living quarters.

And also the throne room—because Vick Francks walked in, pulled a canvas chair into position, and sat down.

"He coming?" he asked.

"They're bringing him," a man told him.

Vick Francks turned his attention to Doc Savage, eyeing the bronze man sourly for a time, then getting up and kicking him in the side a few times.

"Am I going to enjoy giving it to him!" Francks said grimly. "It'll take at least two hours for him to regain consciousness, though."

He went back and sat on the canvas chair.

"What the hell's keeping them?" he complained. "Why don't they bring him in?"

"Say, he's so heavy he must be stuffed with lead," a man explained, "and he's refusing to walk."

They meant old Marcus Gild, who was towed into the place shortly. The elephantine old moneybags was not walking, so they had rigged a kind of stretcher on which to carry him, and the six men who managed this were sweating.

Marcus Gild showed some scars, evidently results of a battle when he was captured prowling around on the island in search of the cavern. They had tied him hand and foot.

They dropped the stretcher in front of Vick Francks, and Marcus Gild landed on the stone floor hard enough to make a *plunk!* somewhat like a ripe melon. That enraged him. He lashed out, and upset two men, despite the fact that he was tied. Then he got a third down, and proceeded to roll on the fellow. The victim shrieked for help, howled that he was being crushed.

They got Marcus Gild off the unfortunate man. They sat the old financier against a rock, and proceeded to slap and kick him. He did not seem to mind much, although the small eyes of the Crescent City moneybags promised plenty of trouble for them if he ever got loose.

"All right," Vick Francks announced, "we'll get down to brass tacks, as the man said."

Doc Savage, quite conscious and alert, his arms not bound, and his legs free, remained very still and listened. The mystery seemed to be clearing up by itself.

Vick Francks said, "Mr. Gild, you are a lone wolf, are you not? That is—you have no near relatives."

"How the hell'd you find that out?" Marcus Gild snarled.

"Investigation."

"Well, what of it?"

Vick Francks nodded at one of his men, directed, "Bring those papers."

The man went away, came back with a sheaf of legal-looking documents, as well as a fountain pen. These were held where Marcus Gild could read them.

Marcus Gild scanned the papers, emitted a roar.

"It's a damned lie!" he shouted. "These things say I've got a son! I haven't got any son!"

VICK Francks laughed. "You're going to acquire a son—legally."

"Who?"

"Me."

"Why, you damned—"

Vick Francks held up a hand, snapped, "Those papers are pre-dated two years ago. They contain my picture, my fingerprints, and your affidavit that I am your son, by a former marriage. It just happens that my name is really Gild—Victor Gild."

"You're no blood of mine!" Marcus Gild howled.

"Of course not. But I wouldn't be any prouder of it than you would be, you old hippopotamus! But you sign those papers. We know how to get them into your strong boxes, and have them found later."

Marcus Gild grimaced, heaved futilely at his bonds, then yelled, "What's the meaning of this?"

"I'm becoming your heir," Vick Francks said calmly. "I appear and take over the vast Marcus Gild holdings, after—"

"After what?" Marcus Gild snarled. "You going to kill me?"

"Only legally—if you behave. But if you don't sign those papers—actually."

"What do you mean—legally?"

"Insanity."

"Huh?"

"You're going," said Vick Francks, "to become one of the victims of the malady which affects the minds of those who have seen the little golden ogres."

Old Marcus Gild became very still and thoughtful, and no doubt it was now all clear in his mind, because he blew out a noisy grunt of comprehension.

"This whole thing," he said, "is an elaborate scheme to rob me of everything and make it look good."

Vick Francks grinned.

"Not look good," he said. "It will be very sad. Eminent financier victim of mysterious malady which is sweeping city. Is committed to bughouse. His estranged son comes and takes over financier's business interests—as directed by document found in unfortunate man's strong box." Vick Francks shook the

papers. "Here are the documents! Sign them!"

Old Marcus Gild said many things, and none of them was pleasant or complimentary, or devoid of sulphurous content; it was not known around Crescent City exactly what old Marcus Gild's previous life had been, but judging from his vocabulary, it had included stevedoring or mule-skinning.

After old Marcus Gild ran dry, they beat him. Rather terribly. Doc Savage became a little pale from the strain of lying and watching and doing nothing, but he knew it was not wise to make his break as yet.

Vick Francks became tired of the torturing.

"It'll take time," he said. "Gag the old rhinoceros so he can't talk and give my identity away. The others do not know but what I am just an innocent victim of the little gold men. I'll go among them as prisoner, pump them, and see if Doc Savage left anything in Crescent City that may give us future trouble."

After Marcus Gild was gagged, he and Doc Savage were carried back to the cavern arm where the four boys, Vee Main and Monk and Ham were imprisoned.

Vick Francks had himself gripped firmly, carried inside with Doc and Marcus Gild, and dumped on the floor as if he was one of the prisoners.

The guards withdrew.

Monk dashed forward. Before Doc Savage could stop him he let the feline out of the sack.

"Doc!" he exploded. "You were conscious all the time—why didn't you make a break!"

Chapter XVII. HELL IS UNDERGROUND

VICK FRANCKS seemed to rise straight off the cavern floor as if he were being levitated in a magician's act. He had just received one of the great shocks of his career—possibly the last one, it was plain, unless he got out in a hurry.

"Help!" he squalled. "Damn it! They've tricked us!"

He made for the door like a bullet. So did Doc Savage. The men outside yanked the door open. Doc Savage tripped Vick Francks as they went through, and the would-be son of Marcus Gild was down and across the floor, swapping ends.

"What the blazes is this?" Monk howled.

"The end of several careers," Doc shouted, "unless we all move fast."

Everybody was moving fast. The prisoners came charging out of the cavern arm. There was no light except electric lanterns and flashlights carried by the Francks men, and these threw grotesque dancing shadows over cavern walls and ceiling. Arms that were twenty feet long, in shadow on the ceiling, reached out and connected with chins that were as big as suitcases.

Doc Savage had been searched, of course. His gadgets—those carried in a special vest of many pockets which he wore—had been taken. He had, to all appearances, no resources but the remarkable physical strength which he had developed by a consistent daily two-hour routine of exercises which he had taken since childhood.

Monk was howling. Monk's small squeak of a voice had a faculty of turning out more noise than a braying donkey when he got excited. The homely chemist dived at men, slugged with fists. Whenever he could, he dragged victims down on the floor, because he liked to fight on the floor, where his long arms and simian agility gave him an advantage.

Ham was more of a dilettante among fighters. He belonged to the dance-and-jab school. He even preferred to do his jabbing with the innocent-looking sword cane which he usually carried—but the enemy had taken that. Ham jiggled in, speared a man with his fist—and was knocked flat on his back from another quarter. After that, Ham got up and used Monk's wild-cat tactics.

Vee Main got a man's coat, pulled it over his head to hamper and blind him, then began pounding the fellow's head with the heel of one of her slippers, which she had removed.

Doc Savage lunged clear of the mêlée, got between the fighting group and the door. He stripped off his coat, his vest.

The front lining of his coat, and the back lining of his vest—two parts of his garments which never, ordinarily, came in contact—were taken in the bronze man's hands and rubbed together. The friction created a hissing blue flame that began to burn the cloth.

Chemically treated, the cloth—it was impregnated with the compound parts of tear gas—began to give off blinding vapor.

Doc Savage threw the burning gas-cloth, not among the fighters, but out in the cavern, where any more men who ran up to join the fight would pass through the vapor and be blinded.

THE cavern was full of voice-thunder. Echoes made none of the words understandable. Shots were ear-splitting concussions. Stamping and grating of feet was magnified by the cave acoustics, made into landslide and volcano noises.

Monk and Ham and the four boys could handle the situation here, it appeared.

Doc Savage headed for the spot where the other prisoners were confined—the poor unfortunates who had been deluded into thinking they were the victims of fantastic little golden dwarfs. The bronze man ran swiftly through the darkened cave.

He saw lights ahead—smoking torches. Pitch knots burning with fitful scarlet, throwing off smoke. Torches, of course, would be part of the theatrical color used by the midgets to make it seem they were fabulous little creatures out of prehistoric eras, instead of down-and-out circus midgets who had been hired by Vick Francks.

Behind the torch-carrying midgets was an array of prisoners. These captives were not behind bars. They were lashed to boulders, tied to pegs set in cracks in the stone floor.

Doc Savage lifted his voice. He imitated Vick Francks' tone.

"Run for it! Leave everything!" he shouted. "The police have come!"

The little men could not see him. They recognized Vick Francks' tone. They were already worried by the fight sounds. Panic came with a rush.

"Quick!" Doc shouted. "Escape if you can! The police are here!"

As a matter of fact, the police were there—Doc Savage and his men held honorary police commissions as a convenience in their strange work of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers.

The midgets raced for the exit.

Doc reached the prisoners, began untying them, and ordering those whom he freed to help get the others loose. He thought of something.

"Just free those who do not have the malady!" he warned.

He was too late with the warning, he realized. But they could recapture the malady victims later. Now, they needed all the fighting help they could get.

The bronze man plunged back toward the scene of the main fight. He found the Vick Francks men already in retreat—the tear gas in the cavern had been too much for them. They were fleeing out in the daylight.

Monk howled, "Hey, guys! Guns! Rifles!"

He had found a small arsenal which the enemy had not been able to reach.

Doc Savage shouted, "No unnecessary killings!" It was his policy never to take a human life if it could possibly be avoided.

If Monk heard, he pretended not to, Monk not being entirely in sympathy with the bronze man's respect for the lives of gentlemen such as Vick Francks. Monk scattered rifles through the crowd.

Bullets began moving in quantities, and gun-sound shook rocks and dust off the cavern walls. The fight worked rapidly outside, where fusillades of echoes bumped back and forth across the island.

Vick Francks took flight. They saw him, running wildly, with two other men, toward the spot where the plane was concealed.

Doc Savage yelled, "Your chief is deserting you! He's fleeing in the plane!"

EFFECT of that on the enemy was about what the bronze man had hoped. They broke and ran. As many of them wanted to get away on the plane as could—and their infuriated former prisoners were intent on stopping them.

It was one of the ex-prisoners—a former victim of the little gold ogres—that brought disaster to Vick Francks. The man must have been a victim of the malady, demented. Maddened. No sane man would have done what he did.

They saw the madman, first, after Vick Francks got the big plane out of the stone hangar, and the craft was scudding across the lake.

The maniac clung to the tail of the craft. He was riding it. Evidently he had snatched hold at the last moment. He tried to work forward into the cabin, but could not.

The plane got into the air, moving at terrific speed. Again and again, the man on the tail tried to creep along the cabin top. Unable to do that, he began attempting to beat a hole in the plane fuselage with his fists.

Inside, they must have heard the fist blows. Because a man leaned out, and began shooting at the unfortunate maniac on the tail of the plane.

The madman must have known something about planes. Because he got to the tail controls, managed to force the elevator flippers down—drove the plane in a screaming dive into the lake.

There was a great splash when the craft struck water. One wing came off, went glancing across the surface like a thrown flat stone. Water climbed up, sheets of it that turned into spray. There was smoke, a surprising amount of it—and after the plane had sunk, great bubbles that came up, bubbles the size of barrels, that burst with splashings.

On the island, they watched with ready rifles, but no one ever swam away from the plane crash.

Don Worth said, "The other plane—the one they stole off Doc—is on the other side of the island."

"Right!" barked B. Elmer Dexter. "These midgets may try to use it."

They reached the plane ahead of any of Vick Francks' men.

Half an hour later, they had the midgets and the full-sized men of Vick Francks' gang rounded up and incarcerated in the prison arm of the cavern.

Funny Tucker took a deep breath.

"Well, brothers," he said, "as Godiva remarked when she finished her well-known horseback ride, we're drawing near our clothes."

Nobody laughed.

"Close—clothes. Get it?" Funny asked disgustedly.

THE disposition of the prisoners, Don Worth and the others learned, was to be made in Doc Savage's usual fashion, which was an unusual one. The captives would go to Doc Savage's unique "college" for curing criminals.

The "college" was an institution in up-State New York, the existence of which was unknown to the public in general. Doc sent criminals here, where they underwent delicate brain operations at the hands of specialists whom the bronze man had trained, operations which permanently wiped out all memory of the past. The ex-criminals were then trained—taught to hate crime and wrongdoing, and instructed in a trade—and later released, to go through the rest of life without ever knowing of their past.

Monk and Ham began the job of ferrying the captured crooks, midgets and all, to the "college."

Doc Savage assembled Don Worth, B. Elmer, Funny and Mental.

"Fellows," he said, "the worst part of this mess is still unsolved—the malady. We haven't a cure for that."

Mental Byron nodded soberly. "There must be a cure, or a preventive inoculation."

"You suggest that," Doc said, "because Vick Francks and the others did not seem at all afraid of the affliction."

"Exactly."

They proceeded to search the cavern, seeking some trace of the serum which had caused the malady, or its cure.

A number of things were cleared up by the search. Almost the first objects they unearthed were the little gold statuettes of Marcus Gild.

"These things were stolen to throw suspicion on me," Marcus Gild said soberly.

The old moneybags was in a remarkably chastened mood.

Doc Savage mentioned the fact that, much earlier in the mystery, he had passed a tin box apparently containing money—really holding a radio transmitter—to one of the villains, and it had ended up buried in Marcus Gild's castle yard.

"Describe the man who got it," Marcus Gild requested soberly.

Doc Savage did so.

"That," groaned Gild, "was one of my trusted employees. The fellow must have been bought off by Vick Francks."

The old financier stalked off gloomily.

"The old dollar magnetizer," said Funny Tucker, "seems to have changed."

They gave truth serum to the survivors of Vick Francks' gang and, late that afternoon, found the cache of serums—two serums. One to produce the malady. One to combat it.

THE week that followed was a tumultuous one in Crescent City's history.

Four times, mobs stormed the hospital headquarters which Doc Savage set up to administer treatment to the victims of the malady—the affliction was a kind of fever, which flared sporadically, and affected the brain, making the victim irresponsible and violently inclined.

Twice, old Marcus Gild was almost mobbed—despite the fact that the newspapers printed stories showing he was not the cause of the whole thing, but the victim.

Marcus Gild became a very depressed man. A changed man. He approached Doc Savage.

"I am," he said gloomily, "the most hated man in the world."

"Only in Crescent City," Doc corrected.

"What would you advise me to do about it?"

"You might try using some of your money to establish a hospital, a recreational center, summer camps for needy children, and possibly a restaurant or two where a person can get a meal for a few cents."

"Those things won't pay," the old moneybags grumbled.

"They'll pay you off by giving you a good feeling," the bronze man assured him. "You'll find that out."

Marcus Gild stamped off, and evidently thought it over, because the next day he was back.

"Give me some ideas," he ordered.

In the combined task of setting old Marcus Gild up in the wholesale charity business, and getting Crescent City rid of the malady, the four boys proved to be a great deal of help to Doc Savage.

B. Elmer Dexter, for once, saw a chance to make a million dollars, and passed it up cheerfully.

"We could cash in," he remarked, "by charging for the cure to this malady. But brothers, think how we'd feel."

Even Funny Tucker was industrious, which was unusual for him. As he explained freely, he was so lazy that the only exercise that came his way was generally during the winter, when he got a cold and his nose ran.

As the situation in Crescent City began to shape up, and it was evident that Doc Savage would soon leave, the four young friends held a conference, as a result of which they approached Doc Savage.

"We've got an idea," Don Worth explained.

"It's a swell idea," B. Elmer said.

"We like excitement," Funny Tucker added.

"So we figured it would be swell to join you," Don Worth told Doc Savage, "on one of your future adventures."

Somewhat to his own surprise, the bronze man discovered he was not averse to the idea. Many persons had wanted to join his little group in the past, and he had turned down the applicants as fast as they came, for one reason or another. But these boys were different. They were four young fellows who were unusual, had courage, and a great many likable qualities.

"We'll see," Doc Savage said. "It might be managed."

Monk and Ham finally located a farmer who had found their pets, Habeas and Chemistry. They brought the animals back to Crescent City.

"I just thought of somethin' funny!" Monk declared.

"Got his mind on himself again," Ham said unkindly.

Monk glared indignantly at Ham. "I look upon you," he told Ham, "as a shyster, and a polecat to boot."

"You can assume any character you want to," Ham assured him, "when you look upon me."

Funny Tucker asked, "Does this squabbling go on and on?"

"Always and always," Doc admitted.

THE END