

CARGO OF DOOM

An Exciting Novelette by Kenneth Robeson

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CARGO OF DOOM

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CHAPTER I. DON'T CALL THE POLICE!

Smitty was away in Washington when the phone call came in at Justice, Inc., and the other members of The Avenger's staff were dispersed over the four parts of the world, so that only Benson himself and Nellie Gray were on hand. The voice over the phone was that of a child. Benson, as he answered the call, estimated that she was barely more than nine or ten. She talked with a Scandinavian accent in which was mingled the training of a good English private school.

"Are you Mr. Benson, sir, please?" she asked anxiously. She seemed to be hurried and perhaps frightened.

"Yes, my child," Richard Benson replied in a kindly voice.

"You are the one they call The Avenger, sir?"

"Yes."

There was a tinge of sudden relief in that lost, childish voice. "Then everything is all right. Mamma was worried and afraid that I wouldn't be able to get you. She was afraid I might not be able to use the American telephone. Please, Mr. Avenger, will you help my mamma and me?"

"Of course "

"Then you must go at once to the Suydenville Hotel. Mamma is afraid they will kill her and me, too. Please say that you are Mr. Foster, and ask for a message at the desk. Mamma has gone out, but she dares not ring you up herself for fear that she is followed. I must ring up now because those men are coming back. I hear them in the hall." The child's voice became more hurried. "Good-by now, and may God bless you for helping us!"

There was a click and the line went dead.

Richard Benson hung up with a frown, and looked at Nellie Gray, Nellie was shutting off the automatic recorder, which she had turned on at a signal from him, It had recorded the conversation, a thing that was always done at Justice, Inc., whenever a call came in that was out of the routine.

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"What do you think of it, Nellie?" Benson asked.

Nellie Gray, slight, diminutive, was as efficient and as daring as any of the male assistants of The Avenger. "It might be a trap, of course, Dick!" she said thoughtfully. "Your enemies are not above using a child to bait a death trap for you."

Benson shrugged and arose. He put on his hat and coat.

Watching him, Nellie smiled. "You'll go, of course?"

"Naturally. I hardly think that child could have been coached to put on such a performance over the phone."

"Be sure to call in regularly. Dick," she said.

He nodded and went out.

Ten minutes later a taxi deposited him at the Suydenville Hotel, in the East Fifties, not far from the Queensboro Bridge. It was a neat little place, but rather old, and was patronized now almost exclusively by a clientele of refugees from the Scandinavian countries.

Benson entered and looked around swiftly. There were two or three groups of people sitting around in the lobby, all talking earnestly, doubtless about the war situation. No one seemed to pay him any particular attention as he crossed to the desk, The clerk looked up and nodded, and Benson said, "Excuse me, has anyone left a message for Mr. Foster?"

"Foster?" repeated the clerk. "I'm sorry, sir, but no message has been left for you."

Benson frowned. He thanked the clerk and turned away. One of the phones in the booths at the other side of the lobby was ringing and a bellboy answered it. The boy emerged from the booth and called out, "Phone call for a Mr. Foster!"

"Right here," said Benson. He gave the boy a coin and entered the phone booth closing the door behind him. He picked up the receiver. "You are calling Mr. Foster?" he asked.

It was a woman's voice at the other end, muffled and low, and tinged with a note of hysteria. "Thank God! I was afraid you wouldn't come. I was afraid Hilda might not be able to get you!"

"You are Hilda's mother?" Benson asked.

"Yes, yes. Please every second is precious. Just to make sure you are the right man, will you tell me your real name?"

"I am Richard Benson."

"The Avenger!"

"Yes."

"You must help me. Mr. Benson! You must help me to save Hilda! For myself I do not care. They are following me, but I had to phone now, or it would have been too late. Listen carefully. At exactly nine thirty, one of their men is to be at the foot of Edge Street, along the Marabout Creek. From there he will be guided

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by a flickering flashlight. But I have arranged it so that their man will not keep the appointment. You must be there instead. It is the only way. But go armed and be ever watchful for a knife in the back, for they will betray each other without compunction "

"Hold on just a minute," Benson said. "Will you please tell me what you're talking about? Why should I go to the foot of Edge Street?"

"Didn't Hilda tell you?"

"No. She only asked me to come here to the Suydenville Hotel."

"Then she must have been interrupted. O merciful Lord, I hope they haven't harmed her "

"Look here, madam. Whoever you are, if your daughter is in danger I think you'd better call the police!"

There was a gasp of sheer terror at the other end. "I ask you, in the name of everything you hold dear, not to bring the police into this. You are The Avenger, the man who helps those who are in terrible trouble, who have no more hope and no chance. If that is so, then I ask you to help me now, and never breathe a word of this to the police!"

"I'm sorry, madam. You're asking too much."

"Then . . . then you won't help?"

"Not unless you explain "

"God help me, I cannot explain now. Each minute that passes is like a drop of blood spilling from my Hilda's veins. If you will come back to the Suydenville Hotel at midnight I will explain all, I will tell you everything you wish to know. But now "

Suddenly, her voice ended in an agonized gasp as a crash sounded through the receiver. Then there was silence for a moment.

Benson tensed, his hand tightening on the instrument. "Hello "

He was interrupted by a click as someone carefully hung up the receiver at the other end.

Benson raised his hand to jiggle the hook and call the police; but he refrained, recalling the woman's passionate plea for secrecy. Slowly, he replaced the receiver on the hook and stepped out of the booth.

None of the people in the lobby seemed to be any more interested in him now than they had been upon his arrival. He made his way out to the street. He found a taxicab and told the driver to cross the bridge into Queens, toward Marabout Creek. It was all he could do to carry out the woman's request.

It was thirteen minutes after nine when he left the cab a block from Edge Street and walked the rest of the way through the dimly lit, unpopulated section out here at the God-forsaken edge of Queens. He had hardly reached Edge Street before he spotted a small, flickering flashlight almost a hundred yards away, along the bank of the dank, ill-smelling Marabout Creek. He smiled grimly in the dark. Thus far the unknown woman's arrangements were working out with the accuracy of a timetable. He shrugged and set out after that moving light, toward the blind appointment that had been made for him along the dark and forbidding margin of Marabout Creek.

CHAPTER II. THE TATTOOED MAN.

There were no residences here and no factories; only a few ancient warehouses, long ago abandoned, boarded up and crumbling with desuetude. There had been a time when the creek had been an important waterway for barges bound for the East River; but the creek had dried considerably over the years; and with the development of rail and truck traffic it was abandoned now, except for stray cats whose eyes gleamed like twin points of opal in the dark, and for fat water rats which scampered boldly almost under Benson's feet as he walked, following the flickering light that led him he knew not whither.

Suddenly, the light ceased moving.

Whoever was carrying that flashlight had stopped walking. The figure of that person whether it was the woman who had phoned, or someone else was utterly indistinguishable in the dark.

When that guiding light stopped, Benson stopped. It flickered three times quickly, then went out altogether. Benson waited, frowning, for some further signal; but there was none.

After a moment he moved on toward the spot where the light had disappeared. He judged that it was about two hundred paces away, and when he reached that place he stopped and looked about him in the dark.

At this point, the creek widened somewhat and the murky waters became deeper, for soon it would empty into the river. It was deep enough here to accommodate small craft; and, sure enough, Benson's eyes discerned the outline of a small cabin cruiser tied up at the crumbling embankment. He moved over to the edge and peered down at it. The boat was secured by a single hawser, made fast to a stanchion on the bank. It was tied up so close that one might step aboard without difficulty.

Benson frowned. He produced a small flashlight and allowed its beam to play for a moment along the lines of the craft. He saw now that it was no pleasure cruiser, but a ship's launch of some kind, equipped with a small cabin. Upon the bow was painted a name: S. S. Brunhilda, Copenhagen.

There was no light aboard, no sign of life or motion. It appeared to be utterly deserted. Yet this was the only place where the person carrying the flickering flashlight could have gone. There was no other shelter in the immediate vicinity.

It might be that this was a trap; that the mysterious telephone call was a cunning bit of bait calculated to lure Richard Benson to his death. There were many who hated The Avenger with a deep and abiding hatred that would grow cool only with his death; for The Avenger's name was anathema in the slimy byways of the underworld. And those who feared and hated him would be more likely to try to drive a knife into his back in the dark than to face him in open battle.

Benson smiled grimly and stepped off the bank, down onto the deck of the launch, playing the flashlight before him. He stooped at the door of the low cabin and turned the knob. It was unlocked and it came open. He sent the beam of light lancing into the interior and he sucked his breath in sharply at what he saw.

A man lay dead on the floor, in the cramped space between the two longitudinal seats. He lay on his back with his arms outstretched. He was naked to the waist. His face and his hairy torso were covered with blood, for his throat had been slit from ear to ear.

For sixty seconds Benson stood still and taut, listening for sounds in the night. But there were none. Whoever had led him here, like a will-o-the-wisp, had either gone or was hiding close by.

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Benson's gaze swept over the cramped cabin. There was a closet at the forward end, a brass-bound chest opposite. Both were open, thoroughly ransacked. Papers and clothing were disarranged in evidence of hasty search. But there was no sign of the weapon which the killer had used.

The Avenger stepped into the cabin skirting the bloody corpse. The man had been dead for about an hour, as near as he could judge without a careful examination. He must have been a seafaring man, for there was an intricately tattooed design upon his chest, done in three colors, amazingly brilliant and clear.

It showed up startlingly beneath the thick black hair. It was a picture of a submarine sinking by the stern with the bow high up out of the water. It had been done with great attention to detail, for it showed a man with a mustache and black hair parted in the middle leaping from the conning tower into the water; and it showed the number of the submarine, lettered alongside the prow U-777.

The features of the man were clearly distinguishable. The tattooer must have been an artist of great talent for the face of that jumping man was done with so much feeling and skill that one might have thought he was looking at the face of the devil himself. The face was gaunt, and the lips thin and merciless, and the man's features were contorted into a grimace of such sheer hatred and vicious evil as could not have been imagined to exist upon this earth.

For all his vast experience with the forces of evil and crime, Richard Benson shuddered at sight of that diabolical face, depicted in all its depravity upon the chest of the dead sailor. He could not understand why this murdered man, who lay here with his throat slit, could have allowed such a hideous scene to be depicted upon his chest. What dark and unhallowed reason had impelled him to allow the tattooer to burn indelibly upon his flesh the record of that devil's disciple leaping from the conning tower of a sinking submarine?

At the lower right-hand corner of the tattooed design, just above the dead man's breastbone, there appeared a small, almost indecipherable signature, as if the artist had been desirous of registering with posterity the record of his satanic creation. Stooping low and holding the flashlight close, Benson read that signature.

Miguel Fatuma.

It was at that precise moment that he heard the stealthy scrape of a shoe upon the deck outside the cabin door.

CHAPTER III. TIME BOMB.

Swiftly, Benson doused the flashlight, plunging the cabin into darkness. At the same time he shifted his position, stepping across the dead man's body to the other side.

He acted not a moment too soon, for something whirred through the cabin doorway and embedded itself in the far wall with a thud. He could not see it, of course, but he knew that it was a knife, and that it had been aimed at the spot where he had been standing. It had missed its mark only because Benson had acted with the instinctive speed of a fighting man to whom danger is a familiar neighbor.

Out in the darkness of the deck, someone uttered a short, sharp curse. Then there was silence.

Benson's automatic was in his hand now. He stood on the balls of his feet, ready to fire at the slightest sound. He knew that this was to be a duel to the death in the dark, but the unknown assassin out there had the advantage for he could wait for Benson to come through the doorway.

The Avenger put out his foot and took a step toward the door. His foot slipped in a pool of blood and he put

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out a hand to steady himself against the bunk. His shoe scraped the floor, and out on the deck a gun blasted three times in swift succession. The assassin had switched from knife to gun. Evidently he considered it more important to eliminate Richard Benson than to maintain silence.

Benson dropped low beside the body on the floor as the slugs smashed into the bunk close beside his head. He spotted the orange flashes of the gun. Grimly he thrust his automatic out and pulled the trigger. The deep thunder of his own gun mingled with the spiteful crack of the weapon in the assassin's hand as he fired five times, just to the right of those orange flashes. The night was split with the dreadful threnody of the blasting guns.

Three times more the other fired, and then the orange flashes ceased and the night became black. Benson couldn't tell whether he had hit his enemy or not. But he leaped up and dashed out through the doorway onto the deck. In the dark he hurtled against a heavy body. The next moment he was grappling with a powerful antagonist in a vicious, silent battle in which no quarter was given or asked.

One huge bony hand seized his right wrist in a grasp of steel, attempting to twist the automatic's muzzle upward, while a clubbed gun in the other bony hand descended upon his head. But Benson, well-versed in the lore of rough-and-tumble fighting, sensed his enemy's intention and twisted away, hard. The gun butt descended harmlessly, grazing his shoulder, and the invisible assailant grunted, but held like death to his grip on Benson's gun wrist.

The Avenger drove a hard left upward and his knuckles smashed against bone, drawing another grunt. But the unknown assassin seemed to have a jaw of iron. He came in, wrapping his arms around Benson's supple figure in a crushing bear hug, at the same time twisting Benson's gun arm behind his back. The Avenger countered with a judo trick he had learned years ago in the Orient, he let his knees buckle and his body sag, arching his spine backward. The effect was to carry him back, down onto the deck, with the other on top of him. Instinctively, the enemy let go his grip to put out his hands and break the fall.

Benson hit the deck rolling, and his shoulder struck the other's arm aside. The man toppled down on top of him, and Benson, already turned around on hands and knees, caught the other's arm over his shoulder and came to his feet with a heave. He sent the man flying through the air, heels over head, and a dreadful shriek escaped from the fellow as he went catapulting far over the side of the launch into the black and murky waters alongside.

It was only then that Richard Benson became aware of the presence of another craft in the creek. It was a power boat, and it had managed to come up within ten feet without sound. Only because the engine had not been used. Instead, there were four oarsmen stroking it, two on each side, while a fifth man held the tiller.

Just as Benson glimpsed the boat a powerful searchlight flashed blindingly from the boat, its beam sweeping past the face of the man at the tiller, illuminating it clearly. And Benson uttered a deep and startled gasp, for that face was the original of the face tattooed on the chest of the murdered sailor! It was the cruel face of the man pictured as jumping from submarine No. U-777!

But Benson had only a moment to realize that, for the beam of the searchlight swung across the water where the bony-handed assassin struggled, swimming laboriously.

The cruel-faced man at the tiller uttered a swift, sharp order, and the oarsmen stroked powerfully while he veered the craft toward the swimming man. With one hand he held the tiller, and with the other he threw out a line which the assassin grasped.

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Immediately, the man at the tiller shouted another order; in response the oarsmen shipped their oars. One sprang to the engine and whipped the crank cord, and the motor sprang into life. Two of the oarsmen hurried to the stern and pulled in the swimming assassin, while the fourth rose up to his feet with a machine gun in his hand. He opened up with the rapid-firer, sweeping the deck where Richard Benson stood.

But Benson, at the first sight of that machine gun, had known what to do. He leaped off the deck of the launch, landing on the embankment and dropping flat on his face, just as the lethal barrage swept over him. He had lost his automatic somewhere in that fight on the deck of the launch and he had no weapon with which to reply to the fire from the power boat. He could only lie still, hugging the ground, while the hot bursts searched him out. But the power boat was fast sweeping down creek toward the river under the propulsion of its stuttering engine. In a moment it was out of range.

Whether they thought they had killed him, or whether they were anxious to leave the scene, Benson could not tell. But suddenly the machine-gun bursts ceased, and the searchlight was snuffed out. A blanket of blackness descended over the creek and the embankment. In another moment even the chugging of the engine became too faint to hear.

Benson started to get to his feet, but suddenly there was a terrific, flashing explosion, and the S. S. Brunhilda's launch seemed to disintegrate into thin air before his very eyes. A time bomb of some kind must have exploded in its entrails.

For a flashing second of time the whole of Marabout Creek seemed to be illuminated by the very fires of hell. Bits of wood and metal catapulted through the air, and fiery streams of flame licked out in all directions. What was left of the hulk of the launch began to burn with vicious intensity as the metal scraps began to rain down from the air.

Benson stood up, wiping a gash on his cheek where a jagged bit of metal had struck him. He looked with somber eyes upon the burning wreck.

The murdered body of that dead seaman would never be found now, by the police or anybody else. And the strange tattooed picture of that cruel and evil man leaping from submarine No. U-777 would never be seen by any other living eyes. The secret of the murder was consumed in its own ashes.

Benson heard a police siren in the distance and he turned and hurried away from that fiery holocaust. The flames sent an eerie glow over all of Marabout Creek, and Benson swung into a side street as quickly as he could before the police should arrive.

The mystery of that strange woman's phone call was now darker than ever. There had been a time bomb aboard that launch. Had it been meant for The Avenger? Had the whole set-up been an elaborate trap as Nellie Gray had feared to lure The Avenger to death? Benson could hardly bring himself to believe it. That little girl's voice had been too fresh and too innocent; and the mother had surely sounded sincerely frightened.

As Benson hurried in search of a cab he thought of that ghastly tattooed picture on the dead sailor's chest; of the cruel visage of that man, leaping from the U-777. He wondered if it could have any connection with Hilda, or Hilda's mother, or with the murder of the sailor. Or was it merely one of those weird coincidences, which must be disregarded? He made a mental note of the name signed to that gruesome work of art Miguel Fatuma. Perhaps if he could find the artist

A police car came tearing down the street and he hugged the wall, not wishing to be seen. After it passed he made his way again for half a dozen blocks until he reached the subway line.

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But even before he got there he knew that he was being followed.

Benson was too old a hand at work like this to be mistaken about such a thing. He couldn't spot the man who was tailing him, if it was a man; but he was as sure of it as of his name.

He made no attempt to lose his shadow, but calmly entered a bar and grill and stepped into the phone booth at the rear. He dialed Liberty 1-1111, the number of Justice, Inc., and a moment later he was listening to the buzz of the phone. It rang for sixty seconds and there was no answer. Benson frowned. Nellie Gray must have gone out, leaving headquarters without coverage. Only something of the most vital importance could have induced her to do that.

But there was a way for Benson to find out. He hung up, got his nickel back, and dialed Liberty 2-2222. It was the auxiliary line at Justice, Inc., installed for just such an occasion. He let it ring five times, then clicked down the receiver, breaking the connection. Once more he inserted the nickel, dialed the number over again, and let it ring seven times. He broke the connection again, and then dialed the number a third time.

The five-seven ring was a code call which actuated an electric cell installed at Justice, Inc. This electric cell broke a circuit in the auxiliary phone, releasing a spring that raised the receiver hook, just as if a living being had answered the phone. So that when he dialed the number for the third time, instead of getting the no-answer buzz, he heard the characteristic click which takes place when a phone is answered. Then, a moment later, the voice of Nellie Gray came to him, clearly and distinctly. It was coming off a record-player which had been automatically put into operation when the receiver was raised. Before leaving headquarters, Nellie had spoken her message onto the record and left it hooked up.

As Benson held the receiver to his ear he heard Nellie's voice:

"Dick: I have just received a phone call from a person named Miguel Fatuma, of Thirteen Aberdeen Lane. He claims he has important information concerning the child, Hilda, and her mother. He was desperately urgent, and insisted that I come at once. I'll be back as soon as possible. Good luck!"

The record ceased playing and there was a click as the automatic mechanism set the receiver hook back down again.

Benson hung up in his phone booth with a sudden sense of lightening peril. The name of Miguel Fatuma struck him hard like a hammer blow. It was the name signed to that grim tattooed picture on the murdered sailor's chest. Miguel Fatuma was the one who had done the tattooing. But how had this Fatuma guessed that Hilda's mother had called upon The Avenger for assistance?

Benson glanced at his watch. It was nineteen minutes before eleven. At midnight he must be at the Suydenville Hotel in the hope that Hilda's mother would be able to contact him there. In the meantime he had planned to seek out the S. S. Brunhilda the ship from which the launch had come. But now he had to change his plans and go to 13 Aberdeen Lane.

He glanced out through the glass panel of the booth door and saw that a man had come into the bar while he had been phoning. The man had not glanced at the phone booth, but had stepped up to the bar and ordered beer. He was a stocky man with a harsh-featured, ruddy face, and he was attired in a pea jacket and a visored cap. Upon his sleeve there was a strand of gold braid, indicating that he was a ship's captain.

Benson knew instinctively that this was the man who had followed him from Marabout Creek. He stepped out of the phone booth and moved down the length of the bar toward the front door. He passed the ship's captain at the bar, but the man did not turn around.

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Benson stepped out of the warm barroom into the frigid night, he did not move away, but flattened himself against the wall and waited. It was only a moment later that the sea captain came hurrying out.

If he was surprised to see Dick Benson waiting here he did not show it. In fact he did not even seem to notice him. His harsh features did not relax as he turned up the street, moving toward Benson and looking straight ahead.

But when he had just come abreast of him the ship's captain swung, lithe as a panther, bringing his hand out of his pocket with a small, snub-nosed pistol. He thrust the pistol at Benson's stomach with his finger wrapped around the trigger.

CHAPTER IV. THE GOLDEN CARGO.

The Avenger was not unprepared for such action. Aware that he walked constantly in the shadow of death he had trained himself and his assistants to be ever watchful and ready always for surprise attack. He was already side-stepping as the seafaring man whirled, and his left hand descended, steel-strong fingers clamping themselves around the man's wrist, and twisting it away with a quick, powerful motion. Then he brought the edge of his left hand down in a slicing cut upon the bone of the man's forearm, and the ship's captain grunted and let go of the pistol. It clattered on the pavement and lay there unheeding at their feet as the two men faced each other, eye to eye.

"Damn you!" the ship's captain whispered. "I should have shot you first. What have you and your rats done with Esther Wagstrom?"

Dick Benson's eyes narrowed. "Esther Wagstrom? Would she be Hilda's mother?"

"Aye, and well you know it! You and that devil you work for that devil, von Richter!"

Dick Benson's eyes narrowed. He retained his grip on the other's wrist. "Just a minute now. What's this about von Richter?"

"As if you didn't know! You are one of von Richter's devils, who have hounded Esther Wagstrom and her little Hilda over three continents!"

Dick Benson drew a deep breath. "Now wait. If I let go of your wrist will you promise to talk quietly for a minute? There's something you and I must get straight!"

The other was impressed by Dick's tone of voice. "Aye, you have my promise. But what is the good of talk "

Benson let go of his wrist. "Now let's start from the beginning. Would you care to tell me your name?"

The other looked disgusted. "My name? You know my name well enough. I am Captain Helmut Walsingen, in command of the freighter Brunhilda, out of Copenhagen!"

"You're docked in New York now?"

"At the Royal Danish Pier, on the East River."

"And that launch with the dead sailor it was from your ship?"

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"Certainly. But why do we waste time. You know all this. Was it not you and your fellows who murdered poor Eric Skoljes, my first mate? Did you not set off the time bomb to destroy his body so that the tattooed picture of von Richter would forever be destroyed?"

Dick Benson studied the man keenly. Then he said slowly, "If you're telling the truth, Captain Walsingen, then you and I need not fight. We're on the same side."

The other peered at him suspiciously. "On the same side? Or the same side with one who does von Richter's devil's work?"

Dick smiled. "I do not work for von Richter. My name is Benson. Richard Benson."

Captain Walsingen's eyes widened. "The Avenger?"

Dick nodded.

Walsingen looked doubtful. "Esther spoke to me of The Avenger. But I did not believe that there was such a person. It was I who found the launch with Eric's body, and when I told Esther she said that only The Avenger could help her. She said she would call upon him for aid. But I did not believe in The Avenger. I went myself. But then I saw the light which you followed to the boat, and I thought you were one of von Richter's men, coming to destroy the body."

"You saw the fight on the launch's deck?" Benson asked.

"I saw it. I was hiding in the shadow of the warehouse."

"Do you know who those people were on the power boat?"

Captain Walsingen pursed his lips, his keen eyes searching Dick Benson's features. "I did not know then. But if it is true that you are The Avenger, then those must have been von Richter's men. The one who came aboard must have planted the bomb, for I saw him carrying something bulky."

Dick Benson nodded bleakly. "And the man at the tiller was von Richter! No wonder they hurried away so fast! They were expecting that bomb to go off!"

He stooped and picked up the snub-nosed pistol. "Let's be going, captain. We have work to do tonight!" As he was raising the pistol his arm struck the wall of the building and there was a slight cracking sound. "There goes my watch crystal!" he said ruefully. He picked the bits of broken glass out of the watch, then took out his handkerchief and wiped the face. When he was through he smiled at the other. "I always resolve that I'll buy unbreakable crystals, but somehow or other I like glass better."

Walsingen shrugged the comment off. "You Americans!" he exclaimed. "You pay attention to odd, unimportant things when lives are at stake!"

Benson smiled again. "Sometimes it's the unimportant little things that make the difference between life and death, captain!" He handed over the pistol, butt first.

Here, captain. Take it. Where we're going tonight you'll be needing this!"

Walsingen looked unbelievably at the extended butt. "You . . . you trust me with this weapon after I tried to kill you with it?"

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Benson nodded. "I'm staking my life on my judgment."

The ship's captain blinked and put the pistol back in his pocket. "You must indeed be The Avenger!" he whispered.

Benson guided the captain across the street, under the elevated line, to a cab stand and pushed him into a taxi. "Thirteen Aberdeen Lane," he ordered. "And stop for a minute at No. 1 Bleek Street!"

On Bleek Street was the headquarters of Justice, Inc., and Dick could get himself another gun there. He knew that before the night was over he would have need of a weapon.

As the cab sped Across the Queensboro Bridge. Captain Walsingen demanded, "Why do we go to Aberdeen Lane?"

"To see a tattoo artist," Dick told him. "We're going to visit Miguel Fatuma."

Walsingen's eyes widened. "Fatuma! It was he who tattooed the picture of von Richter on Eric Skoljes' chest!"

"Why?" Benson demanded.

"Both Fatuma and Eric Skoljes had reason to hate von Richter. Eric Skoljes was Esther Wagstrom's brother. She was Esther Skoljes before she was married. Her husband was an anti-Nazi, and when the Germans moved into Denmark he was executed with thirty others. But he was a great shipbuilder and he had hidden a fortune in gold, and the Germans wanted it. They tortured Esther's husband, but he would not reveal the hiding place of the gold. It was this von Richter who tortured him, for three days, and when Wagstrom would not speak at the end of those three days, von Richter ordered him shot.

"Esther and her daughter Hilda had fled from Copenhagen with her brother Eric, and they had taken the gold with them. They brought it to a little seaport on the Danish coast where my vessel, the Brunhilda, was berthed. Esther's husband owned the Brunhilda. He had been good to me when he lived, and I was determined to help his wife and child. I loaded the gold on board and we set sail, Eric acting as my first mate. We cleared the Baltic before the Germans closed it, but they learned that the gold was aboard my ship and set their submarines to watching for us. We dared not make for an English port for von Richter had set a cordon of submarines to cut us off. So I sailed for Spain. We put in at Barcelona with ninety million dollars of gold aboard, but we could not stay for von Richter had traced us. His agents were ready to pounce on us when I set sail again."

"You had ninety million dollars aboard?" Benson asked incredulously. Walsingen nodded. "It was gold which had been entrusted to Esther's husband by the great industrialists of Denmark, as well as by the Bank of Copenhagen. The Nazis were frantic to get their hands on that store of gold, for they could have and still can use it in some neutral countries. But we were determined that they should not get it."

"You came to New York?" Benson demanded.

"Not directly. We stopped first at Buenos Aires, then at Montevideo, and later at Rio. But everywhere that we went the devils of von Richter hounded us. We could not get landing papers, we could not get visas. And if we had been able to land we would have been murdered. They attempted to hold us by court actions, and twice we slipped out of harbors just before the authorities. For fourteen months we have sailed over the face of the earth. But at last we have come to New York, and when we were granted permission to enter the harbor, we thought that our troubles were over." Captain Walsingen sighed. "But they were only beginning!"

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Benson looked at him sympathetically. "Von Richter again?"

"Yes. He reached New York a day before us. What name he uses here, I do not know. But he has men to do his killing, and money and power. He will stop at nothing to seize hold of our gold."

"But what have you to fear now?" Benson asked. "In this country you have only to go to the authorities. Tell them of von Richter."

"No, no," Walsingen interrupted. "Esther and Hilda are not quota emigrants. They may not enter the country. If the police learn of their presence they will be arrested."

"I see," said Dick Benson. "So that's why Esther didn't want me to talk to the police!"

"Exactly! And von Richter knows this, too. Tonight, Eric brought Esther and Hilda ashore in the launch, and let them off at Marabout Creek. They went to the Suydenville Hotel, but they had no sooner checked in than Esther realized that von Richter's men were on her trail. They called her on the phone and told her that she must meet them, or that a bomb would be thrown into their window. Fearful and frightened, she had to leave her Hilda there and go to the meeting."

"She must have told Hilda to phone me," Dick said.

"Yes, for she dared not use the telephone herself. She was watched. But she reasoned that once she left they would not bother about what Hilda did. They had men in the hall and Hilda was able to phone you. This, I guess, for I do not know surely. I was on board the Brunhilda, myself. When it became late and Eric did not return with the launch, I went in search of him and found you know what!"

The cab had reached Bleek Street and Benson went up for a moment and got himself a Savage .38, with an extra handful of cartridges. He also took with him an emergency kit which looked like an innocent platinum cigarette case, but which contained material more concentrated and more powerful than TNT.

He returned to the cab and the sped east toward Aberdeen Lane.

Captain Walsingen was nervous and taut. "I . . . I have a feeling," he said tensely, "that tonight we approach the end of our journey on three continents. I am afraid that tonight we come to grips with von Richter!"

"We shall see!" Dick Benson said grimly, thinking of Nellie Gray.

CHAPTER V. VENGEANCE!

Aberdeen Lane was an ill-smelling bit of an alley, barely a hundred yards long, which ended up against the rotting fence of a refuse dump which faced the East River.

Benson and Walsingen left the cab a block or two away and walked the rest of the distance.

"See!" exclaimed Captain Walsingen. "This is quite near the Royal Danish Pier. There! You can see the Brunhilda!" He pointed down a side street and Benson saw the freighter, a dark hulk in the night.

"And you say there's ninety millions of gold aboard her?"

"Aye," said the captain. "My manifest reads Argentine beef. It is not admitted to this country and I am only

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supposed to stop, en route to Newfoundland. But the gold is there, and von Richter is bound to have it. The hatches are sealed and I have a guard of ten stalwart Danish men aboard who will fight to the death to protect the golden cargo. But von Richter may yet get it by other means. If he threatens Esther or Hilda, what choice will I have but to give up the gold?"

They reached the mouth of Aberdeen Lane, and Benson suddenly lost all interest in the Brunhilda; for, peering down, he distinguished a mark on the sidewalk in the shape of a Maltese cross. It was pointing diagonally away from Aberdeen Lane, straight in the direction in which the Brunhilda lay at her pier!

Walsingen hadn't noticed that Maltese cross. It was made with yellow chalk and it was so small that one would not have seen it without looking for it. Benson had been looking for it because it was part of the communication system of those associated with Justice, Inc. It told him two things first, that Nellie Gray had been here and gone. second, that what he sought was not here, but in the direction in which the stem of the cross pointed!

Captain Walsingen was saying eagerly, "I did not know that Miguel Fatuma was here in New York. We met him in Buenos Aires. He is half Greek, half Spanish. He was in Crete when the Germans took it. There he met von Richter, who killed his mother and his sister. He hates von Richter as much as I do. And since he was one of the few who have seen von Richter's face. he tattooed it on Eric Skoljes' chest. Eric wanted it that way, so that he would have a picture of the man he hated as long as he lived."

They had already entered the mouth of the alley. Suddenly, Dick Benson stopped short. He turned to look at the other. "You say your name is Helmut Walsingen?" he asked softly.

The captain's hand was in the pocket of his pea jacket. He looked queerly at Dick. "Yes. That is the name I gave you."

"That's queer," said Benson.

"Queer? What is queer?"

"You say that this Miguel Fatuma met von Richter in Crete. But Crete was conquered after Denmark. Yet you told me that von Richter has hounded you over three continents; therefore, he could not also have been in Crete!"

"Ah, so!" the other said softly. "You have found the little things in my story which do not jibe, eh? Perhaps I talked somewhat too fast!"

"You did," said Benson. "You tried to twist the truth to suit your impersonation, and you got stuck on the details. Just who are you?"

The other smiled viciously. He brought his hand out of his pocket, gripping the pistol which Dick had returned to him. "Stand still, Mr. Avenger. In a moment you shall die! I thank you for returning my weapon to me!"

"Don't mention it," Dick said dryly, looking down at the muzzle of the gun which was pressed against his stomach. "At a guess, I'd say that the real Captain Walsingen is that dead sailor back there on the launch, eh? And you, You're probably a Nazi sea captain who's been smuggled in here by submarine to take Walsingen's place. Your job is probably to sail the Brunhilda out of here, with the gold aboard after von Richter captures it!"

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"It is too bad," the other said viciously, "that a man as clever as you must die. What you have guessed is the truth. I am Captain Hans Mueller of the German navy. With von Richter, I landed here yesterday from a submarine."

"You killed the real Walsingen." Benson accused. "and then you set the bomb so that the picture of von Richter would be destroyed. That was when Esther Wagstrom called me. She wanted to guide me to that murder without revealing herself. But you were there, waiting. You seized her while I was aboard the launch and put her on the power boat."

The eyes of Hans Mueller sparkled, "Exactly, my dear Mr. Avenger. And we have Hilda, too. And your beautiful young lady. And tonight we sail. It was our man who phoned to your young lady. There is no Miguel Fatuma. He was liquidated two months ago in Buenos Aires!"

"So you think you're sailing with ninety millions of dollars, eh?" Benson said. "To use to spread Nazi propaganda in South America!"

"And for you, Mr. Avenger death! Here is the end!" His finger, curled around the trigger, contracted viciously.

But there was no explosion. Not even a click.

Mueller swore and stepped back, squeezing the trigger again. Once more nothing happened.

Dick Benson chuckled. "You see, my dear Mueller, I'm not quite the fool you took me for. When I picked up your gun I wedged a bit of broken glass from my watch crystal under the hammer. It won't shoot till the glass is removed!"

As he spoke he drew his own Savage. "You and I, my dear Mueller," he said, "are going on board the Brunhilda!"

A few minutes later, two figures approached the gangplank of the S. 5. Brunhilda. In the dark it would have been difficult for anyone to tell that the taller of the two, slightly behind the other, was holding a Savage automatic at his companion's back. A guard at the rail saluted and spoke in German. "Steam is up, Herr Captain. We are ready to sail. Major von Richter instructs me to inform you that he awaits you in the smoking lounge with the prisoners."

The Herr Captain Mueller only grunted and stepped past the guard. But Dick Benson stopped for a moment and smiled pleasantly at the fellow. "Surprise!" he said.

Too late, the guard's hand went to the revolver at his belt. Benson's Savage swiped upward, the muzzle caught him under the chin and he went down and out.

Benson stepped over to Mueller. "You, too, my friend," he said. His left fist crashed upward in a beautiful uppercut, and knuckles thudded against bone. Mueller went backward and his skull cracked against the deck. He lay still.

Grimly, Richard Benson moved aft toward the lounge. The deck was deserted. Evidently the ship was short-handed, and the muted throbbing from the bowels told him that the engines were going, requiring all hands below.

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He made his way along a companionway and found the smoking lounge. It was a small room, probably used by the ship's officers and the half dozen passengers they carried, in addition to freight. Benson stopped for a moment in the doorway, gun in hand, and surveyed the scene. Nellie Gray was sitting in a straight-backed chair, her hands raised in the air. Beside her were a woman and a girl of about nine, both fair-haired and blue-eyed, also with their hands in the air. At the other side of the cabin nine seamen stood with their faces to the wall, hands clasped over their heads. Covering them was a single bullet-headed man with a submachine gun. This, then, was the Danish crew of the Brunhilda, no doubt slated for a watery death as soon as the ship cleared the river.

But it was not at these that Benson looked. His gaze fastened upon the single man who stood in the center of the lounge, with a pistol held carelessly in his hand.

This was von Richter! This was the man who had commanded the power boat; this was the man whose picture had been tattooed upon the chest of the murdered seaman!

Von Richter was half turned away from the doorway and he therefore did not see Benson. But the bullet-headed man with the machine gun saw him and uttered a sharp oath, and swung his weapon around.

Grimly, Benson shot that fellow between the eyes, and the thunder of the shot re-echoed through the cabin. Von Richter spun around, raising his pistol; but he never had a chance to fire, for with a roar like a cage full of angry beasts, the Danish seamen twisted around from their positions against the wall and sprang upon him.

This was their vengeance, this the chance for which they had prayed without hope. In a split second von Richter's body was buried under that avalanche of vengeful men. A single piercing shriek escaped from his lips and then no more.

Benson hurried into the lounge and tried to push through that throng. But by the time he reached the inner circle it was too late. The body of von Richter was not a pretty thing to look upon.

The leader of the Danes seized Benson's hand and wrung it hard. Then he snatched up a machine gun and called to the others. "Come! We will take care of the rest of the Germans!"

Benson didn't stop them. He turned to Nellie Gray, who patted his arm, "Always on schedule, Dick! Did you see my mark?"

He nodded. "How did you manage to get it on the sidewalk?"

"I pretended to trip as they led me here. It only took a second to make the Maltese cross." She turned to the woman and the little girl, "This is Esther Wagstrom and Hilda. They're millionaires, Dick, many times over. There's "

"Ninety million dollars in the hold!" Benson finished for her, smiling."

"But how did you know?"

He winked. "I got it from the enemy."

There were sounds of scuffling outside and a few shouts, but no shots. Nellie shuddered. "I hate to think what's happening to those Nazi seamen!"

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"And I," exclaimed Esther Wagstrom, "shudder to think what is happening to my countrymen. Our king is no longer able to protect them from the brutality of the Nazis!"

Benson patted Hilda's glorious golden hair as he led her out of the lounge, keeping between her and the body of von Richter. Out on deck, the Danish seamen lined up and their captain stepped forward. "We must sail tonight for, otherwise, the authorities will hold us and intern our gold."

"But your gold will be restored to you after the war," Benson objected.

The captain smiled bitterly. "We do not care for the gold itself. It is the things that the gold makes it possible for us to do. In Europe we have many friends. Our gold will set up underground agencies will pay for arms and secret newspapers and propaganda. We will spend every dollar of it to bring nearer the day when we can be free of Nazi tyranny!"

"I don't know," said The Avenger. "I should report this to the police and "

"No, no!" Esther Wagstrom begged. "Give us our chance to fight the Nazis!"

Benson sighed, He glanced at Nellie Gray, whose eyes were shining and eager. "Let them go, Dick!" she whispered.

Richard Benson nodded. He took Nellie's arm and led her down the gangplank.

Five minutes later, the S. S. Brunhilda was moving down the river. Thanks to Nazi efficiency, her papers were all in order, her sailing arranged for through forged documents. No one would stop her on the way down the bay.

As the ship moved off, Esther and her daughter waved from the bridge. And a low cheer broke from the Danish seamen. A voice called out, "We will meet again, Avenger when our people are free. Till then, God bless and keep you!"

Nellie's hand was tight upon Dick Benson's arm, her eyes moist. "God bless and keep you all!" she whispered.

THE END.