

DEATH TO THE AVENGER

Kenneth Robeson

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DEATH TO THE AVENGER

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CHAPTER I. PROWL.

The Avenger was on the prowl tonight.

Swiftly, the word spread through the slimy alleys and the dark corners of the great city's underworld. Hard men who flaunted the police and scoffed at the law sought hurried cover as the word reached them.

At fly-specked bars, in closed and shuttered rooms, men buzzed in furtive whispers: "What's he after? Has anybody got the dope? Who's The Avenger gunning for?"

Those were the questions which flew around on the wings of fear.

Down at police headquarters, Inspector Cruikshank listened to the whispered voice of a stoolie over the phone and hung up with a worried frown.

"It's The Avenger," he said to Dolson, his chief aid. "He's on the hunt, They say he's out for big game. What the devil can he be after? What's on the books these days?"

Dolson scowled and scratched his right ear. "Who can tell, sir?" he growled. "It might be Gregorio Ruiz, or Nick Frogash "

Inspector Cruikshank groaned. "I hope it isn't Ruiz. That devil is too big for us to tackle "

"And for The Avenger, too!" Dolson broke in, "If Dick Benson is going after Gregorio Ruiz, there'll be fireworks in town tonight!"

"I better find out!" said the inspector. He flipped down the switch of the interoffice communication system and spoke into the box. "Get me Justice, Inc.," he ordered.

A moment later he had his connection, and a voice said over the phone, "This is Justice, Inc. Smith speaking."

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"Listen, Smitty," said the inspector. "What's this I hear about your boss? What's he on to?"

"On to?" Smitty repeated, in a tone of surprised innocence. "Why, what in the world are you talking about, inspector?"

"Lay off, Smitty," Cruikshank growled. "You know damned well what I'm talking about. Word is traveling on the underworld grapevine that The Avenger is on the prowl. Now listen, I just want you to tell me one thing is Dick Benson out after Gregorio Ruiz?"

"I'll ask him, the next time I see him, inspector," Smitty said, and hung up.

Inspector Cruikshank swore fluently as he cradled the phone.

"Smitty isn't talking!" he told Dolson. He reached for his hat, "I'm going out and see if I can find The Avenger, before the big guns begin popping. You, Dolson order out every man in your detail. Have them comb the town. Whoever spots The Avenger, have him phone in. Put it on the shortwave radio. I'll pick it up wherever I am!"

Dolson saluted the inspector's retreating back and got busy on the interoffice phone. Within a matter of minutes, the police department was a bustling beehive of frantic activity.

Two blocks away from headquarters, in the terrace apartment of a twenty-story apartment building that overlooked the East River, a man stood upon the terrace, staring down at the murky waters of the river, far below.

He was a tall man, with the nose of a hawk and the look of a falcon and the eyes of a devil incarnate, His lips were thin and bloodless, and his hands were long and sensitive, like the hands of an artist.

This man was in a black mood indeed. There was a dark unreadable look in his eyes, and his thin lips twitched spasmodically. His hands gripped the terrace railing tightly, as if they would rip it from its moorings.

His eyes, it seemed, were focused upon a single spot down there in the river, a spot near a crumbling and disused dock. But it was strange that his attention should be centered upon that spot, for there was nothing there no life, no movement.

Suddenly, the man with the hawk face swung around and stepped through the tall French windows into the lighted room beyond.

It was a great room, with costly drapes, rare oil paintings and curios and knickknacks from all parts of the world. Near one corner, under a fluorescent light, was an easel with a canvas resting upon it. Upon the canvas was an unfinished oil painting of a demure girl of nineteen or twenty, technically excellent but tinged with a strangely evil note. There was terror in the girl's eyes and revulsion in her face. The artist who had worked upon that canvas must have been one who gloried in the sight of terror.

The man with the hawk face brushed past the easel and stopped in the middle of the room, where three men stood waiting, their hats in their hands, servile and eager to please. Though they were hardbitten men, there was a lurking tinge of fear in their eyes as they watched this hawk-faced man.

He stood very still, looking at them for a full space of sixty seconds. And then, when he spoke, his voice was almost gentle. He was holding himself in check. He was not permitting the passion within him to burst its

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bonds.

"I want The Avenger!" he said, between grated teeth. "I want him dead or alive. I want him tonight! Do you understand, you three?"

The three men nodded their heads. The one on the left wet his lips.

"Yes, Mr. Ruiz," he said.

The second one swallowed hard. "Yes, Mr. Ruiz."

The third one spoke quickly, as if he wanted to get it over with. "Yes, Mr. Ruiz."

"Bah!" exclaimed Gregorio Ruiz. His eyes blazed as he mimicked them. "'Yes, Mr. Ruiz; yes, Mr. Ruiz!' Is that all you know how to say?"

His long finger lanced at the first of the three, a husky fellow with close-cropped black hair and a twisted nose. "You, Jasper!" His eyes swung to the next. "And you, Degnan. And you, Lithro. You three have been provided with men and money enough, to accomplish anything at all in this city, not excepting murder. Is it so hard, then, for you to capture or kill one man?"

Jasper was the boldest of the three. "That one man he's The Avenger, Mr. Ruiz. He's tough, that guy. And so are his pals that Smitty; even the dame, Nellie Gray. They're tough, and they play for keeps." Then, seeing the terrible wrath rising in the eyes of Gregorio Ruiz, he added hastily, "But we'll get him tonight. Don't worry; we'll get him tonight!"

Ruiz turned away from them. He strode out on to the terrace once more. Again, as if drawn by some terrible fascination, his eyes fixed upon that spot in the river, near the old and rotting dock. He spoke to them over his shoulder.

"Somebody squealed to The Avenger about that thing that's out there in the river. We don't know how much the squealer told. But we can't afford to have The Avenger find that thing out there. Do you all understand?'

Once more there was that chorus of, "Yes, Mr. Ruiz."

Gregorio Ruiz sighed. He came back into the room.

"Come," he said. "I see that I shall have to take charge of this, myself. Listen to me closely, you three. I shall tell you how we will trap The Avenger "

CHAPTER II. SMOKE OUT A KILLER!

If Gregorio Ruiz and Inspector Cruikshank were both worried about The Avenger's activities tonight each for a different reason perhaps they both had more cause for concern than they thought. As for Gregorio Ruiz, had he known exactly where The Avenger was at that particular moment, his rage might have burst all bounds.

That terrace apartment of Ruiz's was two blocks east of headquarters. Only a couple of blocks south of headquarters was the Criminal Courts Building. And here, on the third floor, a jury of seven men and five women was deliberating behind locked doors, on the fate of one man. That one man was Barney Dorset.

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The trial of Barney Dorset had lasted nineteen days. A procession of sixty witnesses had occupied the witness chair during Dorset's trial for murder in the first degree. Now, the jury was considering all the mass of evidence which had been placed before it. It had been locked in at eleven o'clock that morning. The judge was sleeping on a cot in his chambers, so that he would be on hand the moment a verdict was reached. The district attorney was pacing up and down in his office, and the defense counsel was engaged in a poker game with some reporters and bondsmen in a bonding office across the street from the courthouse.

The defendant himself was under heavy guard in the detention room on the main floor.

And it was just outside the courthouse that The Avenger might have been found, had anyone known where to look for him.

The long, powerful sedan of Dick Benson was parked on the side street, only a dozen feet or so from the north entrance. Dick sat in the back, with Nellie Gray behind the wheel. Tonight, Nellie was acting as chauffeur. But, to look at her, no one would have guessed that Dick's chauffeur was, in reality, a daintily fragile blonde. Her golden-blond hair was piled high on her head, hidden by a chauffeur's cap. The curves of her slim, girlish figure were hidden by a gray whipcord uniform, and her hands were incased in huge leather gauntlets.

Sitting in the rear, Dick Benson The Avenger was hardly more recognizable. He was attired in the complete outfit of a city fireman, with hip boots, fireproof coat and helmet, and a gas mask, slung by a strap over his shoulder. He had a long-handled ax at his side, and his face was liberally covered with soot. To look at him, no one would have thought he was other than a hard-working, tired, city employee.

Only his eyes indicated the driving resolve and the iron will which had made of him the one man whom the underworld feared and hated more than anyone or anything else.

It was he this Dick Benson who meted out punishment to those malefactors who were too big and powerful for the law to touch.

The long arm of The Avenger reached out where no man with a badge could legally go. And all over the world, men knew that if their cause was just, they could seek out that little street in the heart of New York where a small sign read: "Justice, Inc." There, they could find the help which the duly constituted authorities might be powerless to give.

Tonight, The Avenger was engaged in just such a mission justice beyond the power of the law.

He sat, apparently at ease, with one eye on his wrist watch. Headphones were adjusted to his ears, and he was speaking into the mouthpiece of the powerful but compact short-wave sending-and-receiving set which was built into the car. A distorting device enabled him to speak in absolute privacy with Algernon Heathcote Smith, at the headquarters of Justice, Inc.

"All set, chief," Smitty was saying. "Inspector Cruikshank phoned, but I gave him the brush-off. He hasn't got the faintest idea what we're up to. He's placed a couple of men outside here, on Bleek Street. But if you use the secret entrance, they'll never spot you"

"Right, Smitty," said Dick Benson, glancing at his watch. "Zero hour is 8:15. Synchronize your time. I have 8:13.5."

"Right, chief. 8:13.5."

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"Signing off, Smitty."

"Good luck. Signing off!"

Dick Benson removed the headset, placed it on a hook of the radio set and pressed a button. The set receded under the seat, a panel slid shut, and it was no longer visible.

Nellie Gray was watching him.

"Everything ready?" she asked.

The Avenger nodded. "Go to it, Nellie. Smitty will be phoning the alarm in less than a minute and a half."

Nellie smiled. This diminutive girl, endowed with the courage and skill which many men would have envied, had preferred to work by the side of The Avenger in his constant warfare against crime, rather than to seek one of the many glamorous careers which might have been open to one as beautiful and attractive as she. And she performed the duties assigned to her perhaps better than any man.

She slipped out of the car, walked swiftly to the corner, and threw a hasty glance around to make sure the cop on the beat was not in sight. Their timing had taken the cop's routine into consideration. At this moment, he would be at the other end of the beat, but those who worked with The Avenger had been trained always to be doubly sure. It was one of the many reasons why they, who took such numerous and terrible risks, were still alive and healthy.

As soon as Nellie was sure the cop was not in evidence, she reached up to the firebox and pulled the handle. This would flash the alarm at fire headquarters, which, in turn, would flash it over the fire department's telegraph, to the nearest pumper company.

At the same time, Smitty would be phoning in to say that he was a passer-by who had noted smoke issuing from the top floor of the Criminal Courts Building. This would insure that the dispatcher at fire headquarters would also send hook-and-ladder apparatus in addition to the pumper. Benson wanted as many pieces of fire apparatus as possible at the scene.

After pulling the fire alarm, Nellie Gray strolled back, past the entrance of the building. From the pocket of her whipcord uniform, she took a small round object, about the size of an orange. She hurled this object in through the open doorway.

There was a tinkling sound, as of broken glass, and a moment later, thick smoke began to billow out.

Nellie continued on to the car and slipped in behind the wheel.

Dick Benson's eyes were on his wrist watch.

"Good timing, Nellie," he said. "It took you just a half minute to get to the box and a half minute to walk back and throw the smoke bomb. That brought it to 8:15. The engines from the fire house take ninety seconds to get here, which should bring it to 8:16.5."

They waited till they heard the clang of the engines, around the corner. Then Dick Benson picked up his ax and stepped out of the car. He set off at a run for the side entrance. At the same time, a fireman from the pumper which had arrived at the front came running around the corner. Dick waved him back.

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"I'll take this door!" he yelled.

The fireman thought, perhaps, that Dick was one of his own crew, who had gone in the front, come through the building and out this entrance. He was satisfied and turned back.

Dick adjusted his gas mask, covering his face entirely, and plunged into the cloud of smoke emanating from the courthouse.

He had a complete plan of the layout of the building in his mind, so he did not need to see through the smoke to find the detention room where Barney Dorset was being kept under guard.

The smoke was spreading so thickly that it had filled most of the main floor. But when Benson got close to the door of the detention room, he could see two guards milling around in front of it, with their hands at their eyes. The smoke bomb which Nellie had thrown had been especially constructed for this purpose by Fergus MacMurdie, another member of The Avenger's band, who was perhaps the most skilled chemist in the world. In addition to the smoke-producing chemical, the bomb which Nellie had thrown also contained a small quantity of xylil bromide, which is a highly effective, though absolutely harmless, form of tear gas. Those two guards would see nothing for perhaps twenty minutes, but their eyes would be all right again before morning.

The Avenger slipped around behind the two milling guards, and fitted a key to the door of the detention room. He had taken the precaution to prepare this key in advance and knew that it would work.

He pushed open the door of the detention room.

The smoke had not yet penetrated here. Barney Dorset was seated in a chair, handcuffed, with a cigarette between his lips. He was a surly brute of a man, with a stocky chest and a pair of long and powerful arms. He had done many a killing at the order of Gregorio Ruiz. Throughout the trial, he had not been greatly worried, because he knew that Ruiz would take care of him. Twice before, he had been tried for murder, and the case had gone to the jury. But in some strange and unaccountable fashion, the juries had found verdicts of "not guilty," despite the weight of evidence. He was quite sure that this would be the case now, too, and his demeanor indicated this feeling of assurance.

There were two guards on duty inside this room, both armed with sawed-off shotguns. One of them had gone to the window at the arrival of the fire engines, but the other remained at his post, tautly watching the prisoner.

At Dick Benson's entrance, the guard exclaimed, "Say! Is it a bad fire?"

He assumed, of course, that Dick was one of the firemen, and that the guards outside had opened the door for him.

"Not bad," said Dick. The smoke rolled in with him, filling the room swiftly. The guard's eyes began to tear, and he raised a hand to rub them. At the same time, the other guard, at the window, began to rub at his eyes, too.

Dick Benson stepped over to the first one, took a small pellet out of his pocket, and cracked it between his fingers, right under the man's face. The guard got one whiff of the powerful anaesthetic chemical which the pellet contained, and his head drooped.

Swiftly, Dick repeated the procedure with the second guard. In a moment, they were both unconscious.

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It was beginning to be difficult to see through the smoke which was pouring in from the corridor, but Barney Dorset hadn't missed a thing.

"Hey," he exclaimed. "What goes on? You ain't a real fireman "

"No, you fool!" Dick Benson snapped. He had dropped to one knee beside the unconscious guard and was going through his pockets. He found the man's keys, and sprang to Barney Dorset's side. Swiftly, he unlocked and removed the handcuffs.

Dorset's eyes widened. "I get it! Greg Ruiz sent you. He's pulling this phony fire to get me outta here!"

"Follow me," Dick said curtly. "Keep your eyes closed, so the smoke doesn't hurt them. Hold on to my coat. And don't lose me!"

"Don't worry, pal," Barney Dorset said with a wide grin. "I ain't anxious to stay in this hole. If Ruiz is pulling this play to get me out, it means he couldn't reach the jury this time. But I don't get it. He told me everything was fixed. Something must have slipped up."

"Never mind the talk," Dick Benson told him. "Save your breath. You'll need it."

His gas mask afforded him protection against the tear gas and he felt his way out of the building, with Dorset hanging on to his coat.

CHAPTER III. PRISONER.

In the street, a great crowd had gathered, and the police had established safety lines. Just before emerging, Dick stripped off his fireman's uniform and boots, together with the gas mask, and dropped them on the floor. When he and Dorset emerged, they looked like two civilians who had fought their way out of the smoke.

"Keep your face covered with your arm," Dick whispered to him. "Act as if your eyes hurt."

"I don't have to act," Dorset growled. "I kept them closed, but they sting like the devil, anyway." He chuckled. "Boy! Ruiz is the smartest guy in the world. Imagine walking right out through the police lines like this!"

Uniformed men helped Dick and Dorset to the curb, and they climbed into the waiting car. As soon as they were inside it, Nellie Gray backed it down the street, with policemen waving them on, glad to get the auto out of the way. In a moment, they had backed around the corner, and Nellie headed the car uptown.

Dorset sat back, reclining at ease, his brutish face mirroring triumph. "It's good to work for a guy like Ruiz. He sure takes care of you. No wonder he's got the city eating outta his hand. Take me, for instance. I'd shoot the mayor to death on the steps of city hall, if Greg Ruiz gave the word. Cause why? Because I know Ruiz would get me off!"

He took a deep whiff of his cigarette as the car sped north, and allowed the smoke to dribble luxuriously from his nostrils.

"I swear by Gregorio Ruiz!" he said.

Nellie Gray turned her head slightly and uttered a low, amused laugh.

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"Brother," she said, "you'll soon be swearing at Gregorio Ruiz!"

At the sound of the feminine note in her voice, Barney Dorset froze, with the cigarette halfway to his lips, his eyes on her trim, whipcord-clad shoulders.

"Hey," he said. "You're a dame!"

He turned his head slowly and, for the first time, took a good look at Dick Benson. His eyes became wide, and flecked with terror, as he recognized the face of the man in whose car he was riding.

"The Avenger!" he gasped.

Dick Benson nodded. "That's right, Dorset. That jury back at the courthouse wouldn't have convicted you. Your boss got to them. But it will be a little harder for Ruiz to get you out of this!"

With a cry of rage and terror, Dorset flung himself at The Avenger. But Dick Benson's hands moved with uncanny swiftness, and before the killer realized what had happened, he was helpless in a punishing arm lock.

Benson held him so for a moment, then flung him back contemptuously in the seat.

Dorset stared at The Avenger like a caged and helpless animal which has suddenly learned that its keeper's whip has mastered it. He licked his lips. The fight was gone out of him.

Dick took another one of the pellets from his pocket. Holding his own breath, he stretched out his hand and broke it under Dorset's nose. The killer went lax as the powerful drug acted upon him. He slumped down, unconscious.

Nellie Gray tuned in the shortwave radio on the dashboard to get the police calls. The announcer was frantically calling all cars. The escape of Barney Dorset had been discovered. All policemen were cautioned to be on the watch. All exits from the city were being blocked. But The Avenger's name was not mentioned in connection with the escape. Nellie switched off the radio.

"Chief," she said, over her shoulder, "I think you're a wonder!"

"Don't crow, yet, Nellie," The Avenger said soberly. "We haven't licked Ruiz. Our gamble is that this will bring him out in the open; that he'll try something desperate to rescue Dorset and leave himself unguarded. But he's pretty clever. From now on, the watchword is 'constant alert.' We can't tell where or how Ruiz will strike back."

He pressed the button which brought the sending-and-receiving set out and once more got contact with Smitty.

"Operation completed successfully, Smitty," he said. "We're approaching headquarters from the rear. All clear?"

"All clear, Dick," Smitty reported. "You can come in."

Nellie swung the car into the next street behind Bleek, where the headquarters of Justice, Inc., were located. In the middle of the block was a public garage, which appeared innocent enough to the casual observer. But the moment the car rolled in, a service mechanic waved it on, down toward the rear. Nellie swung the car down a ramp which led into the basement. There were many cars parked here, and at one end of the basement

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was a greasing pit.

Nellie drove the car onto the pit. Immediately, an overhead door came down, shutting them off, in absolute privacy from the rest of the floor. The whole greasing rack began to descend, like an elevator. A moment later, they were in a wide, concrete tunnel, large enough for the car to move through, with room to spare on either side, but with no illumination.

Nellie Gray switched the headlights on, drove down the length of the tunnel, bringing the car to a stop at a blank wall. Immediately, the whole section of floor on which the car rested began to rise. In a moment, they were in the private garage of Justice, Inc., on Bleek Street.

This was the means of ingress and egress which The Avenger used when absolute secrecy was of paramount importance, or when the headquarters were under surveillance. In addition to the buildings on Bleek Street, Dick Benson was the secret owner of all that property on the entire square block. The public garage through which they had come was operated by a man who was in debt to Benson for his life and who was deeply devoted to him, and the employees of the garage were all trusted men who had seen service with The Avenger in many parts of the world.

There was never any danger of betrayal in the ranks of those who worked for Justice, Inc.

Dick Benson lifted the inert form of Barney Dorset out of the car and slung him on his shoulder. With Nellie leading the way, he carried him through the connecting passage, into the main building, and up a flight of stairs.

Smitty was waiting for them there, grinning.

"Inspector Cruikshank is upstairs in the office," he announced. "And is he mad!"

"I'll talk to him now," The Avenger said, "if you'll take this off my hands."

Smitty grinned, and took over the burden of the unconscious Dorset. He didn't bother slinging Dorset over his shoulder. He just carried him under his arm.

Algernon Heathcote Smith, research engineer and electrical wizard, was a giant of a man, looking like some towering Viking god of old, descended fresh from Valhalla to stride among mortal men. When his parents had sent him to Groton and then to Cambridge and Edinburgh, they had never thought that his brilliant and studious mind would ever find interests outside the cloistered halls of some sedate university.

But the crusade which The Avenger waged against crime had attracted Smitty's allegiance, and his greatest happiness was to risk his life daily in the constant war which Justice, Inc., was waging against the forces of evil.

He carried Barney Dorset as if he were a child's stuffed doll, rather than an inert man weighing a hundred and eighty pounds.

"I'll put him in the yellow room," he said. "Cruikshank would never find that room even if he got a search warrant and went through this place with a hundred men!"

Benson raised his eyebrows. "Is it that bad, Smitty?"

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"It's worse than that!" laughed Smitty. "Cruikshank is on the warpath. He threatens to go right out and get a search warrant!"

Smitty left, with Dorset under his arm, and Dick Benson turned to Nellie Gray. He patted her on the shoulder. "That was nice work, tonight," he praised her. "Better go and change. Get rid of that chauffeur's uniform."

He hurried upstairs, to the waiting room, where Inspector Cruikshank was champing at the bit, pacing up and down and listening to the radio. The announcer was babbling excitedly about the escape of Barney Dorset and hazarding a number of theories as to who had planned and arranged it.

Cruikshank shook an angry finger at Dick. "Look here, Benson I know damned well that you're the one who got Dorset out. Where is he? What've you done with him?"

"My dear inspector!" protested The Avenger, "are you accusing me of helping a murderer beat the law?"

"I know how you'll help him beat the law, Benson. You won't kill him yourself. But you'll arrange it somehow, so that he'll be found floating in the river some morning. Mind you, I'm not saying that isn't justice. Dorset wouldn't have been convicted. I know, and you know, that Ruiz is back of him, and nobody that Ruiz backs ever goes to the chair. But, man, you've set the city on its ear. I was afraid you'd do something fantastic, but I never guessed at this. When the word came in that you were prowling all the dives, I sent men out to find you "

"Yes, I know," The Avenger said. "But you should have come straight here if you wanted me, Cruikshank. You see, I'm here now. And you've had men watching this place since eight o'clock. They didn't see me come in, did they?"

Cruikshank nodded bitterly. "You've got half a dozen ways of getting in and out of here, Benson. I swear I'm going to take this joint apart one of these days."

"But not tonight, inspector. You'll excuse me? I'm busy "

"Now wait, Benson. Don't give me the bum's rush. I want Dorset. You've got to turn him back!"

"Why?" The Avenger's voice cracked like a whip.

"You violated the law, Benson. Do you realize you could get twenty years for what you did tonight?"

"How do you know Gregorio Ruiz didn't do it?"

"Ha!" Because Ruiz called me up the minute the escape was flashed. He's burning up. He's afraid you'll make Dorset talk. He didn't say so, but anybody can guess that's why he's so hot about it. He was hot before, when he found out you were gunning for him. There's something he's afraid you'll discover "

"That's right," The Avenger said quietly. "And I mean to discover it tonight!"

Cruikshank looked at him queerly. "What do you mean?"

"Come," said The Avenger. "I'll show you!"

CHAPTER IV. TRAPPED BLONDE!

Dick led the inspector out of the room, down a corridor, then up a short half flight of stairs. He rapped lightly at a door, and an elderly, high-pitched voice said, "Come in, please."

The Avenger pushed open the door, and they entered.

Cruikshank stared at the single occupant of the tastefully furnished guest room. It was a little old lady, with gray hair neatly combed and her wrinkled face alight with eagerness. She put down her knitting and stretched for a hand to Dick.

"Mr. Benson!" she exclaimed, almost pathetically. "Have...have you any word of my Laura?"

Dick went over to the chair and touched her hair lightly.

"Not yet, Mrs. Trent," he said in a voice that was surprisingly gentle. "But I hope to have something definite tonight."

There were tears in Mrs. Trent's eyes. She tried to take Dick's hand and kiss it, but he withdrew it gently.

"I wanted you to meet Inspector Cruikshank," Dick said.

The old lady peered at him through her spectacles. "We've met before," she said dryly.

Cruikshank was embarrassed. "Why...er...yes. I believe Mrs. Trent came to see me yesterday, about her daughter who had disappeared."

"She didn't just disappear!" Mrs. Trent snapped. "She was taken. Taken by those devils who work for Gregorio Ruiz. I told the inspector the whole story how Laura came home that night from work. She's a waitress in a restaurant, and she works till 9:30. She walks home along the River Drive, and she saw the boat out in the river, and she saw how they lifted the poor man up in the boat. He was tied and gagged, and he had something heavy around his feet. They threw him overboard, and he sank!

"It was raining hard that night, and Laura was hurrying, but she was so shocked she stopped in the rain, unable to move. Then there was a flash of lightning, and she saw the face of one of the men in the boat. The men saw her at the same time, and they turned the boat toward shore. Laura ran all the way home. She told me what she had seen, and I said she should go to the police."

Old Mrs. Trent stopped, and ran a finger under her glasses, to wipe away the tears. Then she went on: "But Laura never got to the station house. Those men must have followed her home, and waited outside for her. She didn't come back. Those men must have taken her away!"

Inspector Cruikshank coughed. He looked shame-facedly at The Avenger. "Mrs. Trent told me the story. We dragged the river at the spot she mentioned, but we didn't find any body. So we didn't believe her story. We merely filed Laura Trent's name with the missing-persons bureau."

"I know," The Avenger said. "But wasn't that the night that Lou Marconi disappeared? He was the bookmaker who was trying to buck Gregorio Ruiz."

"Yes, that's right. But just the same, we didn't find the body."

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"Isn't it possible that those men dived for the body, after they learned that Laura had seen them, and brought it up and dropped it somewhere else?"

"Of course it's possible," Cruikshank admitted. "But what can we do about it? If we arrested Ruiz on a charge like that, he'd be out in ten minutes, and he'd sue the city for false arrest!"

"Maybe you can't do anything about it, Cruikshank," The Avenger said softly. "But I intend to do something! I'm going to see if I can save Laura Trent" he lowered his voice so that even the inspector barely heard him "if it isn't too late!"

He took Cruikshank by the arm and led him out of that room, nodding to Mrs. Trent as he closed the door behind them.

In the corridor, his grip tightened on the inspector's arm. "I'm keeping that old lady here," he said tightly. "It's the only place in the city where she'll be safe from Ruiz. And, in case you're interested, that's the reason why Ruiz was so burned up when he heard I was out after him. He guesses where Mrs. Trent is. And he guesses what she's told me."

Cruikshank looked at him queerly. "You think it was Ruiz himself whom Laura Trent saw in that boat?"

The Avenger nodded. "Ruiz's ace killer, Barney Dorset, was in jail. I happen to know that two of his other top killers were in Chicago on a little job. He had Jasper and Degnan and Lithro, of course, but he wouldn't trust them alone on a piece of business like that. So it's quite likely that he supervised it in person,"

The inspector's eyes were very thoughtful. "Jove! If that's true, Benson, you're on the track of something!"

The Avenger said quietly, "And do you still want me to turn Barney Dorset over to you?"

Cruikshank avoided his gaze. "Er...suppose you forget that I've seen you, Benson. Let's just imagine that I didn't find you in. And the best of luck to you!"

The hands of the two men met in a tight grip. Then Inspector Cruikshank turned and hurried out.

The Avenger went swiftly to his office on the top floor. Smitty and Nellie were already there, waiting for him.

"I've got Dorset nice and cozy in the yellow room," Smitty chuckled. "He came to, but he's as jittery as a Jap in a Chinese laundry. I think we can make that baby talk!"

"What about Mrs. Trent?" Nellie asked. "Is she all right?"

The Avenger nodded. "I promised her that we'd have some word about her daughter tonight."

He picked up a phone from the battery of instruments on his desk, consulted a notebook, and dialed a number.

Smitty and Nellie watched him tensely.

"I hope this works!" Nellie said fervently, and added: "For Mrs. Trent's sake!" Dressed in feminine clothing, with her blond hair falling to her shoulders, Nellie Gray reminded one of a dainty and fragile Dresden doll, which one might hesitate to touch for fear of shattering it. But many a hardened criminal had discovered, to

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his sorrow, that Nellie's looks were entirely deceiving. when it came to a good fight.

The Avenger got his connection. "Hello," he said. "I want to talk to Arnie Jasper."

In a moment, he was talking to one of the three men who had been present in Gregorio Ruiz's terrace apartment, earlier that evening.

"Jasper," he said coldly, "this is Richard Benson. No, don't say anything. You needn't deny that you're connected with Ruiz. I want you to deliver a message to him. Tell him that I'm ready to make a trade with him. Understand? If he wants to do business, have him call me immediately, at Lakeside 7-7777. Good-by!"

And he hung up.

The three of them waited tensely, for perhaps four minutes. Then the phone rang.

"Ah!" said Smitty.

Nellie Gray's eyes were shining. Then Laura Trent is still alive!" she whispered. "Otherwise Ruiz would not have anything to trade for Barney Dorset!"

The Avenger picked up the phone slowly.

"Benson? This is Gregorio Ruiz. You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes," said The Avenger. "I believe you have something I want. On the other hand, I have something you want. I suggest we make a trade."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Ruiz said carefully. "But I'm interested. Just what do you mean?"

The Avenger's voice was stern. "Let's not beat around the bush, Ruiz. I'd like very much to keep Dorset. I can make him talk and get enough out of him to finish you. But I'm willing to give up that chance, to save the life of Laura Trent. If she's still alive, we can trade. If she's dead Heaven help you!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Ruiz's voice, low but clear. "I'll trade, Benson. Where can we discuss the details?"

"Anywhere you say."

"I'll meet you at the information booth in Grand Central Station in fifteen minutes. That's the best place to talk. There are no walls to listen. I'll bring one man with me, and you bring one man. I want your word that you won't attempt anything against my personal safety during our talk."

"You have my word," Benson said coldly.

"Good. And I give you my word that "

"You don't have to give me your word, Ruiz. It's no good. I'll take care of myself!"

"All right then," the other snapped. "I'll meet you in fifteen minutes!"

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Dick Benson hung up. He looked at his two friends. "Well," he said, "we have still to find out if Laura is alive. Ruiz may be lying. He may have killed her already. But we'll find out soon enough. Come on, Smitty!"

Nellie saw them to the elevator. Smitty chucked her under the chin, "Hold the fort, baby. And don't make eyes at that Barney Dorset. He's a killer-diller!"

"Get going, you big lug!" Nellie told him. "And don't take any wooden slugs!"

Smitty chuckled. "Not me. Or lead ones, either!"

Nellie watched through the nickel-steel slats of the Venetian blinds at the top-floor windows while they got into one of the cars parked at the curb. Then she went to the teletype machine to get the latest police releases on the search for Barney Dorset.

But she had hardly been there five minutes, before a red panel light showed that she had a visitor.

Frowning, Nellie switched on the small television unit, which threw on a screen a picture of the downstairs vestibule.

There was a dark-haired girl standing there, a girl about nineteen or twenty, dressed in a cheap blue coat. She seemed quite nervous and agitated and kept looking around as if afraid she was being followed.

Nellie swiftly pressed the button which opened the door. She was alone now in the building, for The Avenger's other assistants were away on various missions, and she had the full responsibility of the place upon her slim shoulders.

She watched the screen, and saw the dark-haired girl enter. Immediately, Nellie pressed the button which closed and locked the front door. Then she pressed a switch which transferred the image on the screen from the outside of the building, to the interior. Now, she could watch the dark-haired girl in the vestibule. Nellie placed her mouth to a speaking arrangement, and said, "Come upstairs, miss."

She watched the visitor step into the waiting elevator; then she pressed another button which opened the office door, admitting the visitor.

The girl entered, and looked around the strangely equipped room in a shy and frightened manner.

"What can I do for you?" Nellie asked in a kindly tone.

The girl's dark eyes met those of Nellie. She advanced a timid step into the room.

"My name is Dora Hayes," she said. "I...I want to see Richard Benson."

"I'm sorry," said Nellie, "but Mr. Benson isn't in. Perhaps I can help you? I'm Nellie Gray, his assistant."

"I...I have something to tell him. It...it's about Laura Trent." Instantly, Nellie was alert. "What about Laura Trent?"

"I think I know where to find her. I shouldn't be doing this. It...it's as much as my life is worth. But Laura is my friend. We worked in the same restaurant."

Nellie took her by the arm and led her to a chair. "Now, tell me all about it."

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Dora Hayes looked up at her pathetically. "If The Avenger were only here! There's no time to lose. I overheard two men talking. They were just starting to have dinner in the restaurant, and they didn't know I was clearing the booth behind them. One of them mentioned Laura's name. He told the other to order some sandwiches to take out, because the Trent girl would starve if they didn't send food down to her at least once a day. The other one laughed. He wondered why they didn't let her starve to death, and the first one said maybe they'd need her alive. And then when I brought the water to their table, they told me to make up two ham sandwiches to take out."

Nellie was watching the girl closely as she talked. "Do you know either of those two men?"

"One of them comes in regularly. His name is Arnie Jasper. He runs a numbers racket, I think. They're still in the restaurant. I asked another girl to take my place and hurried over here, because I knew that The Avenger had been looking for information about Laura Trent."

Nellie Gray made her mind up swiftly.

"Wait here, miss!" she said.

She hurried out of the room, and got an extra automatic. She put it in a special silk holster, which was strapped around her thigh. She had a gun in her bag, but she was not overlooking the possibility that this might be a trap of some kind. And if she should find herself in a tight spot, deprived of her purse, she could always get at this extra gun. She went into the next room, and looked through a peephole at Dora Hayes. The girl was sitting exactly where Nellie had left her, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously.

Satisfied, Nellie came back into the room.

"Let's go, Dora!" she said.

"What...what are you going to do?"

"I'll get a car, and we'll go right over there. In the absence of The Avenger, I'll handle this "

"Please!" said Dora Hayes. "Let's not use one of The Avenger's cars. I don't ever want to be seen in one of them. If it's ever known that I tipped off The Avenger, my life won't be worth a cent!"

"All right, Nellie conceded. "We'll take a cab."

She hustled Dora Hayes downstairs, and they hurried up Bleek Street to the corner. They found a taxicab cruising down the street, and just as they were getting into it, Dora Hayes dropped her purse.

"Come on," said Nellie. "Hurry!" And she stepped into the cab first.

The moment she was inside, she realized she had stepped into a trap. For she saw Dora Hayes spring up and slam the door shut.

Nellie reached out for the door handle, and found there was none. She was locked in. At the same time, a sickeningly sweet smell began to pervade the interior of the taxi. Nellie's senses began to reel. She struggled forward, in a vain endeavor to slide open the connecting window at the front. She saw the face of the cab driver, grinning sardonically in at her. Then every thing swam before her eyes, and she collapsed!

CHAPTER V. GREASE THE SKIDS.

In Grand Central Station, the crowds of hurrying men and women were oblivious of the tense drama which was being played at the information booth. True, they did cast a glance or two at the towering figure of Smitty, who loomed head and shoulders above anyone in the vast vaulted concourse.

But it was not Smitty who was carrying the ball at the moment. He was merely standing at The Avenger's side, ready to run the interference when and if it became necessary.

They were facing the tall and saturnine Gregorio Ruiz, who was accompanied by Arnie Jasper. It was like a duel at dawn, where each man brings his second. But there were no rules of honor to this duel, for Dick Benson well knew that no honor was to be found in the black and evil heart of Gregorio Ruiz.

"All right, Ruiz," he said. "We understand each other thoroughly. If Laura Trent is alive, we can do business."

"She's alive all right, Benson." Ruiz seemed to be preoccupied. His gaze was constantly wandering to the far side of the station, where the telephone booths were located. "And I'm willing to trade. I can't afford to have Barney Dorset grilled by you. He can take anything the police hand him. But you'd know how to break him down."

"We wouldn't use force," Benson said. "We have drugs. Rest assured that he'd talk. But as I told you, I'll give him up, to save Laura Trent's life. That isn't the end, though. I'm going after you, Ruiz, when this deal is over. You have fair warning."

"I understand," said Ruiz. His eyes wandered once more to the telephone booths, "Now what about Laura Trent? If I set her free, she can identify ... er ... the man she saw in the boat that night."

"I'll guarantee that she keeps silent on that," The Avenger assured him. "You'll have nothing to fear from her. I'll get you on something else."

"Then I suppose it's a deal," Ruiz began. Suddenly, a bitterly vindictive smile twisted his lips. A man had come out of one of the phone booths at the far side, and had raised a hand in the air. He waved the hand once, then disappeared in the crowd.

The eyes of Gregorio Ruiz gleamed with vicious hatred as he swung his gaze back to Dick.

"I've changed my mind, Benson!" he snapped. "It's no deal. If you want to do business with me, you'll have to do it on my terms, now!"

The Avenger had noticed that signal. His eyes narrowed. "What are your terms, Ruiz?" he asked softly.

Ruiz turned and winked at Arnie Jasper, who grinned insolently. "You tell him, Arnie. I want to watch his dead-pan face while he hears the news."

Jasper licked his lips. "It's a pleasure, boss!" He looked at Smitty. "It's your girl friend, pal Nellie Gray. How would you like to see her body floating face up in the river tonight? She's a cute trick, that dame. But she won't look so good when she's dead!"

The Avenger became tense and wary. But Smitty growled deep in his throat. "Why, you two slimy rats. If you so much as scratch her, I'll twist your heads off your necks!"

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He took a threatening step toward them, and Arnie Jasper became pale and backed up. But Gregorio Ruiz did not retreat. He wiggled a finger at Smitty.

"Tut, tut. my overgrown friend. No violence, please. Don't forget that golden-haired young lady of yours." He looked up at Smitty, giving him a sour smile. "I have no doubt that you could kill me easily with those two hands of yours. Or that Benson could do it, too, for that matter. You see. I don't depend on strength for my success. I depend on the gray matter up here." He tapped his forehead. "That's why I selected this busy place for our interview. It isn't so easy for you to use violence here, with all these people passing. So I'm afraid you'll have to accept my terms."

Smitty turned and looked helplessly at The Avenger.

Dick Benson's gaze had never left Ruiz's face.

"What's your proposition?" he asked harshly.

"That's better!" said Gregorio. "You'll forget about the Trent girl, Benson. She's out of this deal altogether. If you ever thought I'd turn her loose with what she knows you must have been crazy! We'll make an exchange Nellie Gray for Barney Dorset. And you pay me a hundred thousand dollars to boot! Take it or leave it. I want your answer now. If you refuse, you'll never see Nellie Gray alive again."

"But we'll get you, you rat!" Smitty growled. "We'll make Dorset talk, and send you to the chair!"

Ruiz shrugged. "I don't think you'd sacrifice Nellie Gray in order to get me. I think you'll do every thing in your power to save her life."

"You want me to sacrifice Laura Trent for Nellie?" The Avenger asked.

"Sure," said Ruiz. "What's she to you?"

"She has a mother who trusts me," The Avenger said.

Ruiz looked at him incredulously. "Then you refuse?"

Arnie Jasper broke in. "You're crazy, Benson! That dame has been with you a long time. She's your friend "

"I'm sorry," said The Avenger. "Nellie wouldn't want to live at that price. I refuse!"

He glanced at Smitty. "I think we need a little interference at this time, Smitty," he said mildly.

"Ah!" said Smitty.

He took a single step forward. One huge hand darted out and seized the neck of Gregorio Ruiz. The other moved equally fast, and seized the neck of Arnie Jasper. Then, with a quick, powerful motion, he slammed the two heads together.

For all his size and bulk, Algernon Heathcote Smith was capable of moving with the concentrated speed of chain lightning. Else, he would not have been able to survive so long in the service of Justice, Inc.

He moved so swiftly now that no one in the crowded station noticed that quick, sharp contact of the two heads. Bone cracked against bone, and the two men sagged!

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Swiftly, Dick Benson stepped around and put an arm about Gregorio Ruiz's waist. He raised Ruiz's right arm, and draped it around his own shoulder, thus supporting Ruiz on his feet, though the latter was semiconscious from the blow. At the same time, Smitty put an arm around Arnie Jasper, and supported him in similar fashion.

Smitty had put just enough force behind that smashing together of the two heads to make the men groggy, but not enough to knock them out completely. There were two reasons for this: First, they had to have Ruiz and Jasper in a condition to talk; second, they didn't want to carry two unconscious men through the crowd in Grand Central Station.

It was characteristic of the way The Avenger and Smitty worked. It had not been necessary for Dick to tell his giant companion any of this. They had operated together for so long that they could almost read each other's minds, and when they were in a tight spot, they functioned with smooth precision.

So, now, they needed no lengthy conference to decide what to do. Smitty knew what The Avenger had in mind, and Dick knew that Smitty understood his plan of action.

They began to walk the two semiconscious men out through the crowded station, moving close together. And they both raised their voices in close harmony, singing "Auld Lang Syne." Smitty sang bass, and then switched every once in a while to treble, while Dick Benson took the baritone, changing occasionally to a high key.

As they sang, they headed for the exit.

A woman looked at them in disgust, and said, "Imagine grown men allowing themselves to get in such a drunken condition!"

The woman's companion sniffed, disgustedly. "If they were my husbands, I'd know what to do with them!"

Smitty, who was nearest her, turned and looked at her owlishly. "Oh, lady," he said, making his voice thick and drunken, "what would you be doing with four husbands?"

They kept going, dancing Ruiz and Jasper out into the street. A station policeman said grimly, "Better get out of here, you fellows, or we'll run you in!"

"Sure, sure," said Smitty.

Jasper, who was just beginning to regain his senses, started to shout something at the policeman. Smitty lurched against him and, at the same time, pinched his arm so hard that he uttered a yell of pain.

The policeman watched them for a moment, and then turned away in disgust.

The four "drunks" lurched into The Avenger's car, which was parked at the curb. Smitty slid in behind the wheel. He was grim and sober as he tooted the car away from the curb and headed downtown to the headquarters of Justice, Inc.

In the back, The Avenger was seated between Ruiz and Jasper. He had one arm of each twisted behind their backs, and pushed up almost to the breaking point. He said no word to either of them. But, as he saw them coming to their senses and preparing to cry out, he put just a little more pressure on each of them. The pain drained all the breath out of them, leaving them powerless to cry out.

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Smitty drove like a mad genius, cutting lights by a hair, swerving in and out, but never taking his foot off the gas. It was a testimony to his superb driving skill that he reached Bleek Street in twelve minutes without once stopping for a light, and without once scraping a fender.

They drove in through the garage, and five minutes later they had their two captives upstairs.

Ruiz was pale and shaken, but stubbornly silent. Smitty picked him up, kicking and fighting, and carried him away to the blue room, which was next to the yellow room, where Barney Dorset was being detained.

Then Smitty came down and joined The Avenger in the office, with Arnie Jasper.

Jasper had fully regained consciousness, by now, but he had a lump on the right side of his head. He was sitting in a chair where The Avenger had thrust him, after frisking him for weapons. His little rat eyes were watching every move which The Avenger made, at the little experiment table in the corner.

Smitty took one look at the vial which The Avenger was handling and gasped.

"Dick! You're not going to give him that!"

The Avenger turned around. His eyes were almost expressionless.

"Why not?" he asked bleakly.

Smitty put on a good act. "But that will eat his insides out."

"That's right," said Dick.

He came toward Arnie Jasper, with the vial in his hand.

Jasper's eyes were big and round, and his lips were trembling.

"What...what you doing "

"Hold him, Smitty." said The Avenger.

Jasper leaped up, in a frantic effort to escape, but Smitty put a big paw on him, got Jasper's legs between his knees, and twisted his arms behind him. Arnie Jasper was helpless in Smitty's massive grip.

"No, no!" he shrieked, as The Avenger bent over him, with the oily, colorless liquid lying heavy in the vial.

"You know what this is," The Avenger said tonelessly. "It's sulphuric acid. You've heard of cases where jealous women throw it at other women. You know what it does to their faces."

He paused. "Well. Jasper, I'm going to feed this to you internally!~

"Have mercy!" Jasper whimpered. "In the name of pity "

"Pity?" The Avenger said harshly. "Do you ask for pity? You who have done Ruiz's dirty work for him? What kind of pity do you expect when Nellie's life is at stake?"

He reached over with one hand and clamped Jasper's nostrils shut in a cruel grip.

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"When you can't breathe through your nose any more, you'll open your mouth to get some air. Then I'll pour the sulphuric acid in!"

"Give me a break!" Jasper screamed. "I'll tell you where to find Nellie Gray!"

The Avenger paused, with the vial hovering above Jasper's mouth. "What do you think, Smitty?" he asked. "Can we believe him?"

"Well, we can try," Smitty said. "Let him give us the dope. If we get Nellie out safely, all right. If we don't, we'll come back and give him the acid."

"I'll tell you the truth. I swear I will!" Jasper screamed. "They took her to the Loomis Apartments, on the river. Ruiz owns the whole place. He's got a terrace apartment on the top floor, and he's got the subcellar fixed up for prisoners. You'll find her there, I swear!"

"Hm-m-m," said The Avenger. "Do you think he's telling the truth. Smitty?"

"It's true!" Jasper whined. "She's there. And that Trent girl is there, too. She saw Ruiz and me and Degnan dropping Lou Marconi's body in the river, uptown. Degnan followed her and picked her up, while Ruiz and I got a diving suit and fished the body up and moved it down the river. It's right near the Loomis Apartments now. I can even show the cops where to drag for it "

The Avenger nodded slowly. Smitty relaxed his grip on Jasper. The frightened man got to his feet, still shrinking away from the vial.

"I'd do anything not to get that stuff spilled into me. I once seen a dame who got it thrown in her face "

"This?" said The Avenger, holding up the vial. "Why should you be afraid of this?" He turned the vial upside down. and poured the thick, oily liquid over his own hand, Nothing happened.

"You see," Smitty explained, laughing, "if you knew The Avenger better, you'd know he'd never do a thing like that to anybody, not even a rat like you. That stuff in the vial happens to be mineral oil!"

"You dirty crooks!" Jasper shrieked. "You tricked me!"

Smitty picked him up bodily and carried him away. In a moment, he was back. The Avenger was waiting for him.

"I've phoned Cruikshank," he said grimly. "The inspector is going to meet us at the Loomis Apartments with the riot squad!"

Just twenty minutes later, the Loomis Apartments were in the hands of the police, without a shot having been fired. All those hard killers in the pay of Gregorio Ruiz permitted themselves to be taken like lambs when they saw the submachine guns in the hands of grim-faced policemen who welcomed this opportunity to clean up.

And in the subcellar, they found Nellie Gray, recovered from the effects of the drug and none the worse for wear. Laura Trent was there, too, just as Jasper had said.

When Nellie crawled out of the camouflaged coal bin in which she had been confined, she wiped soot from her face and grinned at Smitty and Dick.

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"I didn't think you boys would make it in time," she said, brushing the golden hair back from her face. "They were going to dump ten tons of coal into the bin, on top of Laura and me. My next view of the river would have been when I passed up in smoke, out of the Loomis furnace!"

The girl who had lured Nellie into the cab was in custody, as well as every one of the hirelings in the service of Gregorio Ruiz.

Ruiz lanced looks of murderous hatred at The Avenger, when, a half-hour later, he was turned over into the custody of Inspector Cruikshank, together with Barney Dorset and Arnie Jasper.

"Damn you!" he said. "I don't know how you did this "

"It's easy when you know how," Smitty told him. "Just grease the skids with a little mineral oil!"

THE END.