

# **CALLING JUSTICE, INC.**

A New Avenger Novelette by Kenneth Robeson

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# CALLING JUSTICE, INC.

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### CHAPTER I. THE MIAMI BUS.

The plump little man with the frightened eyes boarded the bus at Jacksonville and selected the aisle seat next to Nellie Gray. He mumbled a quick apology, laid his black leather brief case across his knees, and immediately opened a newspaper. He spread it in front of him, effectively hiding his face, and did not move for an hour. Nellie knew he was only pretending to read, for he never turned the page. Twice she caught him furtively peering past her, out of the window, just as passing cars overtook the bus. Each time he did this he threw a swift glance at the car, then buried his nose in the paper once more.

When the bus stopped for refreshments at St. Augustine the plump little man did not get out with the rest of the passengers, but continued his pretense of reading. Nellie squeezed past him into the aisle and went out to the refreshment stand where she bought a hot dog and a bottle of pop. While she was eating, surrounded by the other passengers, she saw a long green convertible coupe come flashing down the road and pull to a stop. It swung into the parking space beside the bus and a man emerged from the rear. This man wore a tan sport coat and his face was long and wooden. He said something to his driver who remained at the wheel, and then he swung his dark eyes upon the passengers. He scanned them with the attitude of one who seeks a particular person. Nellie got a cold feeling when she saw his eyes. They were almost fishlike in their expressionless stare.

The man evidently did not find what he was looking for because he turned and stared at the bus for a moment. Then he stepped over to the open door and poked his head in. At the same time that he did this he put his right hand in the pocket of his coat.

Nellie Gray's glance swept to the window of the bus where she had seen the plump little man only a moment before the coupe arrived, but now he was not visible.

Nellie knew that the plump little man had not left the bus. He was still in there. But he couldn't be seen; therefore he must be crouching down behind the seat. Hiding from what?

She experienced a distinct sense of relief when the long-faced man in the tan sport coat took his head out of the bus doorway and returned to the green coupe. She knew with the sure instinct which had made her The Avenger's right-hand "man" that the occupants of the green coupe were the hunters, and the plump little man was the quarry.

The long-faced man stepped back into the green coupe and it backed out of the parking space. Its powerful eight-cylinder motor rumbled throatily as the driver accelerated, and the coupe flashed down the road toward Miami.

With the characteristic thoroughness which The Avenger had instilled into all those who worked with him, Nellie Gray made a mental note of the license number of that green coupe it was an Illinois plate, number TQ323. She filed that number in the back of her mind and glanced at the bus window. The plump little man was once more in evidence. He no longer had the newspaper in front of his face. He was lighting a cigarette, and Nellie thought she detected a flicker of a smile upon his lips though she couldn't tell for sure at this distance.

The bus driver blew his whistle and called out, "All aboard." The passengers trooped back, eager to start on the last lap of the long ride. There were several vacant seats, but Nellie passed them up. Prompted by some curious motive which she could not herself analyze, she resumed the same seat, slipping past the plump little man.

He seemed to feel much better now and immediately engaged her in conversation. "Going to meet your parents in Miami?" he asked.

Nellie Gray repressed a giggle. Clad in a white blouse and a pair of navy-blue slacks, she looked as simple and unassuming as a freshly graduated high-school girl. Her traveling companion probably took her for a kid of seventeen or eighteen.

"Oh, I've traveled by myself for quite a while," she said airily. She wondered what he would have said if he learned that she was a veteran member of Justice, Inc. that efficient fighting organization headed by The Avenger, and devoted to championing the rights of the little man against the overlords of crime in every corner of the globe. The fact was that Nellie Gray had traveled to many parts of the world which the plump man had never even heard of. But he went on, blissfully unaware of the identity of the girl at his side.

"Are you going to get a job in Miami? It must be easy to get a job these days, what with all the defense work. What do you do for a living? Waitress? Manicurist?"

Nellie lowered her eyes. "Well, I guess I could wait on tables "

"Look here, miss," he said suddenly. "Maybe I have a job for you. What's your name?"

Elsie Jones," Nellie lied.

"Well, look here, Elsie." He lowered his voice. "I'm a lawyer. Joplin is the name. Frederick Joplin. I'm going to Miami to handle an important case for a client of mine. See this brief case? It's crammed with evidence. Evidence that will win the case for my client!"

Nellie kept her hands in her lap and let her long lashes cover her eyes. She waited for him to continue.

"Now the trouble is that my client's enemies may try to destroy this evidence. They may try to take it away from me."

Nellie opened her eyes wide. "You don't say! Do you mean they might try to do it by force?"

"Exactly!" He leaned closer to her, dropping his voice even lower. "Now see here. I can put you in the way of making a little money. Say two hundred dollars. How does that sound to you?"

"Why, that . . . that's wonderful, Mr. Joplin!"

He beamed at her. "Ah! That's fine. Now here " He produced a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off ten tens. "Here's a hundred dollars in advance. Take it!" He practically forced the money into her hand.

"But . . . but what do I have to do to earn this, Mr. Joplin?"

"I'll tell you." He took the brief case off his knees and laid it on her lap. "I want you to take charge of this evidence. When the bus stops at Daytona, I'm getting off. I have a bit of business in Daytona one more bit of evidence to get. It'll take me an hour or two, but unfortunately the bus won't wait."

"I see," Nellie said demurely, fingering the money in one hand and touching the smooth leather of the brief case with the other. It was not a large brief case just comfortable enough to carry under one arm. But it was rather heavy. And there was a small lock which kept the brass snapper shut.

"It's locked, naturally," said Mr. Joplin. "Now listen carefully, Elsie. I want you to remain on the bus when I leave you at Daytona. You go on to Miami. There, you will go to the Sunset Hotel and register. Go up to your room and wait until you hear from me. I'll be there later in the day. When I pick up the brief case I'll give you the other hundred dollars. Is that clear?"

"Yes," said Nellie. "It's clear."

If anyone had asked her she wouldn't have been able to say just why she was doing this. She certainly wasn't doing it to help the self-styled "Mr. Joplin" out of a jam, because he was lying from the word go. Nellie, herself, was on a vacation, and The Avenger had made her promise not to stick her pretty little nose into anything that didn't concern her while she was resting in Florida. But she'd never have been happy if she hadn't tried to solve this puzzle of why Mr. Joplin was being hunted by the long-faced man in the green convertible.

"Then everything is settled," Mr. Joplin was saying heartily. "It's all arranged!" He patted her arm. "Don't forget now the Sunset Hotel!"

"But Mr. Joplin, you don't know anything about me. How can you trust me with all this evidence "

He laughed that off with a wave of his hand. "My dear, I'm an excellent judge of human nature. I would trust you with my life! Now listen carefully, Elsie. If anyone should approach you and ask if you know me; if they should describe me "

Nellie smiled. "I'd tell them nothing."

"Excellent, my dear girl, excellent! I see you are wise beyond your years. Perhaps I can give you a permanent job later. Do this piece of work well, and perhaps I'll make you my secretary!"

"Wouldn't that be wonderful, Mr. Joplin!" Nellie murmured, veiling her eyes.

When the bus pulled in to Daytona Beach the driver announced a ten-minute stop-over. Everybody descended. Some of the passengers trooped into the Coffee Pot next door, while others strolled across to the beach. Mr. Joplin beamed at Nellie as he helped her down from the bus. He took her arm and led her out of the bus terminal to the street.

"I'll leave you now, my dear "

Suddenly he stopped short, sucking his breath in with an audible sound.

Nellie glanced in the direction in which he was staring, and saw the familiar green convertible, parked about fifty feet away.

"Excuse me," Mr. Joplin said hastily. "I think I'll go out the back way. It's nearer to where I have to go. Good-bye, my dear. And remember the Sunset Hotel!"

That furtive, frightened look was back in his eyes as he let go of her arm and hastily retreated toward the rear of the bus terminal.

Nellie watched him, saw him go out through a door at the rear and disappear into the alley behind the terminal.

Nellie turned and looked down the street. The green convertible was still there. But the long-faced man in the tan sport coat was nowhere in evidence. Neither was the driver of that car.

Nellie held the brief case tight under her arm and went into the Coffee Pot. She barely had time for a cup of tea before the driver announced that it was time to leave. When the bus pulled out the green convertible was gone. And Nellie Gray was alone in her seat. Mr. Joplin had not returned.

## CHAPTER II. THE SUNSET HOTEL.

It was evening by the time the bus reached the Flagler Street Terminal in Miami. Nellie had reservations in the swanky Coronado Hotel, but she went to the Sunset instead. She was intensely eager to delve into the mystery of Mr. Joplin and his brief case. She registered at the Sunset Hotel as Elsie Jones and got Room 301, which was a corner room. As part of the service, the bellboy left a copy of the local evening paper with her. and Nellie idly glanced at the headlines. Suddenly she stiffened. She read:

### MAN MURDERED AT DAYTONA

An unknown man was found, stabbed to death, in an alley behind the Fleetwood Bus terminal at Daytona Beach. Police state that the object of the murder was doubtless robbery, for the victim had been searched with special thoroughness, even to the extent of ripping the lining of his coat. The killers removed everything they found on the victim's body, even to his keys. There was nothing left by which to identify him immediately. The dead man was recognized by terminal employees as a passenger on the Miami bus, which had stopped at Daytona for ten minutes

Slowly, Nellie Gray put the paper down. She glanced at the brief case which lay on the desk. Its owner was dead. She was sure that the killer was the man in the tan sport coat. But that killer hadn't gotten what he sought. The thing for which Mr. Joplin had been murdered was lying here on the desk.

Grimly, Nellie went to her bag and took out a small set of keys. The lock on the brief case was a simple one and it yielded to her typewriter-case key. She raised the flap and began to draw out the contents. And her blood began to race swiftly as she saw what the brief case contained. Mr. Joplin's "evidence" was queer indeed.

There were half a dozen plushlined boxes in the brief case. The first box contained a jeweled horseshoe about six inches long. At conservative estimate it could not be worth less than a quarter of a million dollars. It was made of platinum and it was studded with diamonds large diamonds, brilliant and blue-white, and all matched in size from two carats at the ends, to a huge ten-carat stone at the apex of the arch. The thing glittered in her hand like something alive and dynamic!

Nellie put it down and opened the next box. Upon the plush cushion in that box there rested a diadem of diamonds which was breathtakingly beautiful. The stones sparkled and shone in the electric light with almost unholy beauty. She opened the other boxes and as the untold wealth of their contents was exposed, Nellie Gray began to understand that this must be some royal or imperial collection, pilfered from some royal vaults. For the value in dollars of these jewels was beyond estimate.

Mr. Joplin must have been desperate indeed to have intrusted this treasure to a girl he had never seen before. Desperate? Or clever, perhaps? But not quite clever enough. For now he was dead. But if his enemies knew where this treasure was

Suddenly, on an impulse, Nellie stepped over to the window. She turned one of the slats of the Venetian blind so that she could look out into the street. And, immediately, her blood began to race. For there, on the opposite side of the street, stood the green convertible!

That man in the tan sport coat had traced her here! How he had done it she couldn't understand. Even as she watched through the blind she saw the now-familiar tan sport coat. The man was crossing the street toward the car. He was apparently coming from the hotel. He must have been downstairs at the desk, inquiring about her.

Nellie saw him lean in at the window and talk to the driver of the car. The convertible immediately pulled away, and the long-faced man remained at the curb. He lit a cigarette and stood there, watching the hotel.

Nellie stepped away from the window. She switched on the radio, tuned it to a local Miami station, and then went over to the desk and looked down at the fabulous fortune in jewels which lay spread before her. There was enough wealth here to tempt anyone to commit murder. She was sure that the man who had called himself Joplin had not been the rightful owner. It should not be difficult to ascertain who owned them. It must indeed be a famous collection.

Nellie made her decision swiftly. She had gone far enough in this matter on her own. Her duty was clear. She must phone the police and turn these jewels over to them, At the same time she must tell them of the man in the tan sport coat. They could pick him up and they'd have their murderer, and at the same time a solution of the entire case. That course of action, she felt, was what The Avenger would have taken. This was no case for Justice, Inc. Here was not involved any matter of injustice to some unfortunate who could not fight back against the overwhelming power of the overlords of the underworld. It was a matter of murder and theft, purely a police-routine case.

That was the way she saw it at the moment. She reached for the telephone, and already had the receiver off the hook when she stopped abruptly. A news announcer had cut in on the radio program:

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"In connection with the murder of the unknown bus passenger at Daytona Beach, the police have narrowed down their search to one suspect, whom they expect to apprehend within the next hour. It has been established that the murdered man was accompanied by an auburn-haired girl dressed in a white blouse and navy-blue slacks. She was seen in his company at the Terminal and the victim was found stabbed to death immediately after the bus left Daytona. Furthermore, the auburn-haired girl was seen to be carrying a black leather brief case which had belonged to the victim. With utter callousness, this auburn-haired girl rode the bus into Miami, carrying the brief case, and she left the Miami Terminal with the other passengers. Police have had her fingerprints taken from the seat she occupied in the bus, and they are conducting a fine-comb search of all Miami hotels and of all busses and trains leaving the city. She cannot hope to escape...."

Nellie gulped hard and put the receiver down. If the police found her here, with these treasures in her possession, she'd have a hard time clearing herself of the murder charge. She could just imagine a district attorney laughing with hard incredulity at her story that the plump Mr. Joplin had given her a brief case worth an emperor's ransom and had trusted her to deliver it to him at the Sunset Hotel.

Acting swiftly she swept the Jewels back into the brief case. She had only a small overnight bag with her, for her trunk was coming by express and would arrive tomorrow at the Coronado Hotel. She stuffed the brief case into the overnight bag and went to the window for a last look before departing.

She peered out into the street and her heart sank. The green convertible was just returning. Four men emerged. Long-face spoke to them swiftly for a moment, indicating the hotel with a nod of his head. Immediately, two of them disappeared around the corner and two crossed over toward the hotel entrance.

And even as she watched a second car drew up behind the green convertible. This was a black limousine. More men emerged from it; and she saw the man in the tan sport coat giving them swift orders, then saw them cross toward the hotel.

Her eyes flickered. The sober truth was that she was trapped here in the Sunset Hotel; trapped until the man in the tan sport coat decided to launch his attack or until the police came.

Swiftly she picked up the overnight bag. Then she opened her door and darted out into the corridor. Far down the hall she spied a broom closet. She ran to it, pulled the door open, and peered inside. There were several pails in there, a couple of mops, and a laundry hamper. She opened the hamper, lifted out a pile of the soiled linen and pushed the overnight bag into it. Then she piled the linen on top of it. She closed the door of the broom closet and sped back to her room. Just as she reached it she heard the elevator cage stop at her floor. She saw the door begin to slide open. Without waiting to see who was coming up, she stepped into her room and closed the door. She heard the elevator door clang shut, but could not hear any footsteps on the carpeted floor out there.

With a sinking sensation at her heart she went back to the telephone. There was only one thing to do a thing she hated to be reduced to: she had to call The Avenger for help. Dick Benson The Avenger would of course drop everything and fly down here. So would Smitty Algernon Heathcote Smith who called himself The Avenger's left-hand man, and who could go berserk at the mere hint of anyone's harming a hair of Nellie's head. But Nellie squirmed at the thought of the big razzberry Smitty would give her when it was all



over. She would just imagine his great, hearty, booming laughter. "Hereafter, we'll have to send a nursemaid along with you, half-pint!" he'd chuckle. And then he'd probably add: "Can't trust you out alone till you grow up!"

Nellie shuddered. It would be humiliating. But it couldn't be helped. She had to make the call. She lifted the receiver.

And it was only then that she realized the full extent of the trap in which she was snared. For there was no reply from the switchboard.

The line was dead.

She had been mistaken in thinking that the enemy only intended to watch her. She had misjudged the man in the tan sport coat. And she realized that she should have known better. With a huge fortune in jewels at stake, this enemy would not be content to await developments. He would strike and strike quickly. His men must have taken over the switchboard downstairs. She had committed the unpardonable blunder of underestimating her enemy and the penalty might be swift death. She was cut off now from all aid. She was alone and on her own.

Slowly, she put down the receiver. With her senses keyed up to acute pitch by the imminence of danger, she heard the faint scraping sound as a key was cautiously inserted into the lock of the old-fashioned door. Someone on the outside was using a pass key.

She sprang to the door, reached it just as the key was turning in the lock, and her fingers found the catch. She twisted it fiercely, double-locking the door just in the nick of time. The turning key on the other side caught as the double-locked tumblers snapped. The man in the corridor must have realized at once had happened, for she heard the key being withdrawn. Then a voice spoke, close to the door: "Better open up quietly! You haven't got a chance!"

Nellie's answer was to flick off the electric-light switch, plunging the room in darkness. An oblong panel of light shafted in through the transom above, from the hall. Her face was set, her lips clamped tight as she realized that the enemy could reach her through that transom.

Deliberately, she took the pistol out of the waistband of her slacks. She stood to one side of the door.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What do you want?"

"Mever mind who we are. You know what we want. Are you going to open up?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then we're coming in."

"Better not. I warn you, I'm armed."

"We're ten to one. Whoever you are, you must be clever enough to understand that we mean business. Your only chance is to hand over that stuff. Pass it out through the transom and we'll go away."

Nellie laughed. "First you tell me I'm clever, then you take me for a fool."

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There was a moment's silence, then the same voice. "All right, you know the score. We can't let you live. It's too bad. I understand you're a good-looking girl. It's too bad you have to die."

"Before you start," Nellie said calmly, "don't forget that there'll be something of a fight. There'll be shooting. Every guest in the hotel will hear it "

The man outside chuckled. "We've taken over the hotel. The management and the guests think we're F.B.I. agents. They're co-operating with us!"

"I see," Nellie said quietly. "Well, I have one more ace up my sleeve. Would you care to hear it before you start your attack?"

"Certainly. We can spare you another minute."

"All right. The stuff you're looking for "

"Yes?"

"It's not here!"

"Ah!" There was another moment of silence. Then, "You've cached the stuff somewhere?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you, miss. You came directly here from the bus terminal. We know because we checked with your cab driver. You didn't stop anywhere."

"You can believe me or not, as you choose," Nellie said. "But if I'm killed when you attack, and you don't find the stuff here, I imagine you'll feel pretty bad."

"Indeed, yes. Hm-m-m. I wonder if you're bluffing. The chances are that you are bluffing. But I can't afford to gamble. We shall have to take you alive."

"That may be a little difficult, don't you think?"

"Difficult? Yes. But not impossible. I shall have to send for some additional equipment." His voice took on a queer, sardonic edge. "Please wait till I return. Don't go away!"

Tensely, Nellie listened at the door. She heard the murmur of voices, then that same voice, raised a bit louder. "Sturm and Corbey, you will remain here. If she attempts to break out, shoot to disable her, but not to kill. Do you understand?"

She heard grunts of acknowledgment and then, a moment later, the clang of the elevator door as the man who had spoken to her departed. In the dark, she moved over to the window. She waited, and then saw the man in the tan sport coat crossing the street toward the convertible. It was he, then, with whom she had fenced verbally. She watched while he talked for a moment with the driver. Then the convertible drove off, leaving him at the curb.

She stood at the window and watched the street, waiting. After twenty minutes the green convertible reappeared. Two men came over to assist the one in the tan sport jacket. The chauffeur handed each of them several small, round black objects which they put quickly into their pockets. Then they all crossed the street

toward the hotel.

### CHAPTER III. THE KING OF KILLERS.

Nellie Gray knew now that she was beaten. Those small round objects were tear-gas bombs.

But she wasn't going to remain on the defensive, to let herself be smoked out of here like a hunted animal. She hurriedly moved toward the dresser. By dint of pushing and pulling at it she finally managed to jockey it over to the door. Just as she got it in place she heard the elevator door opening, then the voice of the man in the tan jacket.

"All right, let's not waste any more time. Lob one in!"

Nellie scrambled up on the dresser and got a clear view of the corridor. She saw two of the men, each with a tear-gas bomb, their arms raised to hurl.

Nellie's face was tense and set. She smashed out the pane and thrust the pistol's snout out. She pulled the trigger twice, swiftly, and both of those men went down as the little weapon barked spitefully. She hadn't had time to aim with too much care, but she got one of those men just over the heart, and the other in the shoulder. The tear-gas bombs rolled away down the corridor and exploded, one after the other. A dense cloud of acrid smoke rose from them.

The wounded man screamed out, "Get me out of here, Haggard! It's choking me –"

And the voice of the man in the tan jacket cut sharply into that cry for help: "Shut up, you fool, I told you never to use that name!"

Standing on the dresser with her face back from the transom, Nellie Gray felt a sudden wild thrill course through her body. Haggard! She should have known it before! Only Royce Haggard could be so ruthless, so deadly swift in action. It was barely four months since Royce Haggard had brought off the most daring jail break in the history of the country. Together with nine other lifers, he had made a clean getaway from a Midwest penitentiary. They had shot their way across the country into hiding, leaving a pitiful trail of corpses behind. Huge rewards were posted. But the Haggard gang had seemed to disappear from the face of the earth. Here, then, was where they had turned up. But Nellie had seen pictures of Haggard. His face must have been changed by plastic surgery. That was why his expression was so wooden, so fishlike.

The acrid smoke spread in the corridor and some of it seeped in through the transom. Nellie's eyes began to smart. She stepped down from the dresser, pulled a blanket off the bed and climbed up again. She began to stuff it into the opening. She heard sounds of commotion in the corridor as guests came out of their rooms and Haggard's suave voice as he reassured them: "It's all right, folks, we're Federal agents. We have a dangerous criminal trapped in there. Get back in your rooms and lock your door and you'll be safe "

Nellie yanked the blanket away from the transom and put her face close to the jagged hole in the glass. She kept it there in spite of the stinging gas and raised her voice as loud as possible: "He lies! They're not Federal agents. That's the Haggard gang! Call the police!"

But even as she shouted that warning she knew it was useless. Haggard's men controlled the switchboard. They'd not allow anyone to leave, or to phone till they had accomplished their purpose.

She drew her head in and just at that moment a third tear-gas bomb came lobbing up through the transom. It

shattered the rest of the glass in the frame, struck the edge of the dresser on the way down, and exploded. Immediately, Nellie was engulfed in a cloud of pungent, choking gas. Her eyes began to burn and smart and fill with tears.

She closed them, held her breath, and jumped down off the dresser. Blindly she pawed her way to the bathroom, and pulled the door shut behind her, locking it. But the gas was already in there, and she got only a little relief.

She felt her way to the window and thrust her head out, but her eyes were so inflamed that the relief was negligible. Behind her she heard a shattering crash as someone hurled himself against the door. They had broken in! Blindly, she fired at the sound, but she knew she had missed when she saw a huge, weird shape loom up in front of her. It was Haggard, and his face was covered by a gas mask. She thrust the pistol at him, her finger on the trigger, but her hand was struck down viciously, and the gun exploded into the floor. Then something struck her on the side of the head and she fell forward, semi-conscious. Her hands were twisted behind her back, and a pair of handcuffs was snapped on. In her ear was the voice of Haggard, muffled by his gas mask: "Where is that stuff?"

Nellie laughed, almost hysterically. "Kill me, Royce Haggard! Why don't you kill me?"

"Not yet. you'll talk first."

"Never! I'll never talk!"

"Never is a long time. Maybe too long for you!"

She felt herself lifted helplessly across his shoulder, like a sack of flour, and carried through the smoke. She must have lost consciousness for a few moments, because the next thing she knew, a gust of cold, clean air revived her, and she was being carried across the street to the green convertible. Half a dozen men with machine guns were posted around to guard against the arrival of the police. Haggard was leaving nothing to chance. The stakes were high and these men were desperate and resourceful criminals.

Nellie opened her mouth to shout, but a brutal hand thrust a wadded handkerchief between her teeth, effectively gagging her. She was roughly dumped on to the floor of the convertible and it was moving smoothly away, with Royce and another man sitting in the seat above her.

As they cleared the outskirts of the city Nellie writhed with helpless rage. Haggard stooped down and made sure the gag was tight in her mouth, so that she could not make a last appeal for help. And then they were out on the Tamiami Trail accelerating to a swift pace, racing away from Miami.

After a while Haggard took the handkerchief away from her mouth, sat up and lit a cigarette. He looked down at her, allowing the smoke to frickle from his nostrils.

"Well, miss," he said suavely, "are you thinking of talking? It might be better for you. We're going to have a long time to spend in coaxing you."

He bent down deliberately and placed the glowing tip of his cigarette against Nellie's forearm. With his free hand he gripped her handcuffed wrist so that she could not twist away.

The excruciating agony of that fiery burn was almost unbearable. But Nellie clamped her teeth hard and held herself rigid.

Haggard grunted and removed the cigarette tip from her arm. Nellie felt herself about to faint as the agony coursed through her body, but she fought it off. Haggard looked down at her and said softly, "You're very brave, my dear girl. But it won't help. Just think will you be able to stand a continuous treatment like that? For hours on end? Perhaps for days? Believe me, you'll beg to tell me where the Zaharoff jewels are hidden. If you're wise you'll save yourself a good deal of torture and speak now."

Nellie's eyes opened wide. The Zaharoff jewels! She forgot the fiery agony which was almost numbing her arm. Of course! The Zaharoff jewels! It was Cornelius Zaharoff who had established a private empire fifty years ago on one of the islands of the East Indies. Trading in copra and rubber, he had amassed a gigantic fortune which he transmuted into costly jewels for the Armenian wife he had brought with him to share his empire. He had called her the queen of the island and bedecked her with jewels. For two generations the Zaharoffs had ruled their island with an iron hand, until the war had brought the swarming Japanese barbarians. Zaharoff's son had fled with the fortune in jewels, had brought them to the United States, only to have them stolen in a ruthless holdup by the Haggard gang. Haggard had locked the entire family, including their retainers, in the refrigerator to die. Haggard had been caught subsequently, but there had been no survivors of that crime who could identify him. Young Zaharoff had been away at the time. So Haggard had gotten a life sentence for another crime, and no one had ever been sure that it had been the Haggard gang which had perpetrated the Zaharoff atrocity.

Now here was the proof. But Nellie thought bitterly as she lay on the floor of the racing car that she, too, would never live to identify Royce Haggard.

The car swung off the highway and bumped along what must have been a dirt road, then came to a stop. Nellie was lifted out and carried over someone's shoulder into a shack of some sort and dumped on the floor in an inner room. A few minutes later Haggard entered with two men. At a curt order from him, Nellie was roughly lifted and seated in a rickety chair with her arms forced backward over the top, still handcuffed so that she could not move an inch.

Haggard stood over her, puffing a cigarette to glowing life. His eyes were small, veiled, fishlike; his face woodenly expressionless. He got the cigarette glowing and held it before her face. "Your eyes, my dear," he said softly. "They're beautiful eyes. I shall take the left one first." He moved the glowing end closer. "You'll naturally close your eye as the cigarette approaches, my dear. Consequently, it will burn through the eyelid."

Staring up at him, Nellie knew that this was the end. She knew that this man meant exactly what he said. He was going to do the thing that he threatened. He wasn't bluffing. There was nothing to stop him, not even a bit of human feeling. He wanted the Zaharoff treasure and he was going to get it.

Nellie could almost feel the searing agony that would come in a moment when the cigarette end touched her lid. Her eyes were still inflamed by the tear gas. But that had been nothing to this. She felt her knees trembling. She strained every muscle of her lithe body to break free without avail. She stared in fascination at that glowing tip of fire inching closer with the expressionless face of Royce Haggard behind it.

"We waited five years in jail for this chance," Haggard was saying softly. "We had the Zaharoff treasure cached away and we planned carefully so as not to muffle the prison break. We sent Procter that's your plump friend on the bus to get the stuff, but he thought he could cross us and make his getaway. You know what happened to him." Haggard's face moved closer with the cigarette. "Do you think we'll let anything stand in the way now? Not even your pretty eyes, my dear!"

In a desperate, frantic effort to gain time, Nellie exclaimed, "But you'll kill me anyway even if I tell you!"

"That's right, my dear. But at least you'll look beautiful in your coffin. And the pain. It's better to die without pain, believe me."

He moved the cigarette up so close that Nellie involuntarily blinked. She thought her eyelids were being singed.

"Wait!" she gasped.

Haggard did not move the cigarette. "I'm waiting," he said impassively.

"I checked the stuff," Nellie lied swiftly. "In the hotel safe!"

"Ah!" said Haggard. He stood up to his full height, removing the cigarette. "The hotel safe! So simple! And I never thought of it!" He chuckled and spoke to one of the two men who had remained stonily silent throughout the ordeal. "You see, Corbey, how impossible it is to foresee everything? To think of everything? We were looking for clever tricks, and this girl used the simplest one of all. The hotel safe!"

Corbey said glumly, "We can't go for it now. The cops'll be swarming all over the place. By this time the hotel people will know we aren't F.B.I."

"Naturally," said Haggard. "We'll have to wait till just before dawn. We'll take five men. That'll be plenty. There'll be no more than one policeman on guard by then. We shouldn't have any trouble at all with one policeman, eh? And the clerk will be glad to oblige us by opening the safe!"

Corbey grinned. "You bet he will! Just show him the lighted butt!"

Haggard nodded. He turned to Nellie. "Maybe you're lying. Maybe not. If you've lied about checking the stuff in the hotel safe, you've gained yourself five or six hours. You're welcome to them. But believe me, if the stuff isn't in the safe, you'll wish you hadn't talked at all!"

## CHAPTER IV. THE AVENGER.

On Bleek Street in the city of New York there is a modest building upon the front of which appears a small plaque bearing the cryptic inscription: Justice, Inc. Bleek Street is no thoroughfare. It is a dead-end street and there are no pedestrians who pass by chance. Only those enter Bleek Street who are bound for the building of Justice, Inc. And those are people in deadly need of help. For this is the headquarters of Dick Benson The Avenger. Having himself passed through a baptism of fire, his life and his huge fortune have since been devoted to saving others from the ordeal to which he was subjected. No person who seeks his protection from the overlords of crime in whatever part of the world it may be is denied assistance. The organization which The Avenger has built-up is small, but compact and deadly efficient. Operating like the well-greased fighting machine that it is, it clicks on all eight once it rolls into action.

But this evening there was no action at Justice, Inc.

Benson was fiddling idly with the dials of a powerful receiving set while the huge figure of Smitty, his powerful aid, was cramped into a chair, his huge hand gripping a telephone. Upon the foreheads of both of them there was a frown of worry.

At last Smitty finished his telephone conversation and racked the phone. He stood up, towering, big and powerful, like some viking god of old, a great figure of a man, with a deep and rumbling voice.

"There's something wrong, Dick." he said. "The Fleetwood people say that the bus arrived at Miami fifty minutes ago, If Nellie had been on it she should have phoned by this time. She knows our standing rule!"

The standing rule was that whenever any one member of Justice Inc., was away from headquarters whether on business or pleasure, he or she must keep in constant touch by phone, radio or wire. There was good and sufficient reason for that rule; Justice, Inc. had made itself many terrible enemies in the course of its constant battle against crime. And every member of the organization walked always in the shadow of death. Therefore, the precaution of constant communication. If headquarters failed to hear from a missing member on time. the others immediately swung into action.

"Did anyone leave the bus along the route?" Benson asked, still fiddling with the radio.

"The clerk didn't say," Smitty grumbled. "In fact he was damned close-mouthed. I gave him Nellie's description and I thought he was going to say something, but he changed his mind and asked for my number. Then there was trouble on the line and we were disconnected."

"I don't like it," said Benson. "Nellie must be in a jam. Phone Holloway. Tell him I want the fastest plane in the hangar. That converted Beaufort fighter will do the one the British government sent us, when we designed the gun assembly for the wings. It'll do three hundred cruising."

Smitty nodded and got on the phone, swiftly gave instructions. "Warm it up fast," he ordered. "We'll be taking off in twenty minutes!"

Just as he hung up, Dick Benson got a hairline tuning on a Miami station. They both became tense as they heard a news announcer:

". . . that the police are not sure whether the incredible battle of the Sunset Hotel is linked with the auburn-haired girl who is being sought as the murderer of the unknown man at the Daytona Beach bus terminal. There is reason to believe that the men who boldly posed as F.B.I. agents in that battle were in reality a contingent of the Royce Haggard gang. It boils down to the fact that they abducted a girl from the Sunset Hotel a girl who may or may not be the one wanted for murder."

With a muttered oath, Dick Benson snapped off the radio and sprang up.

Smitty uttered an ejaculation of dismay. "She's tangled up with the Haggard crowd! And all alone! Good Lord, she hasn't a chance!"

They both sprang to a desk in a far corner of the room and each took an extra gun a heavy .45 caliber automatic. In addition they helped themselves to several other accessories which had been developed in The Avenger's laboratories for the specific purpose of fighting fire with fire.

"Let's go!" Dick Benson said. "And God grant that we aren't too late!"

As they hurried down the back way to their secret garage, Smitty groaned. "It'll take us almost five hours to make Miami. If she's in Haggard's hands she won't live that long unless she's got an ace up her sleeve!"

It was exactly four hours and seven minutes later that Dick Benson put the Beaufort down on the airfield just outside Miami. He had pushed the ship as she had never been pushed before even by test pilots. She was whining in every strut and for the last hundred miles they had thought that the port wing would tear itself off. But the ship held together by a miracle and they hopped out of it and raced to the waiting car for which they had radioed. Sixteen minutes later they were outside the Sunset Hotel. Over the radio, while flying south,

they had caught further news reports, and they now had most of the story pieced together. Benson had decided to start from the Sunset Hotel on the theory that it was Nellie who had been kidnaped by the men posing as Federal agents. They left their hired car a block away and walked past the Sunset Hotel on the opposite side of the street. It was almost four a.m. and the city was as quiet as a tomb, with the heat hanging heavy in the air. The semitropical dawn would break in a short while' but now the moon was overcast and the night was dark.

It was Just as they were almost abreast of the hotel that Benson suddenly seized Smitty's arm and dragged him in under the shelter of an overhanging balcony. He was not s moment too soon, for a black limousine which had swung into the street with dimmed-out lights stopped at the entrance of the hotel. Three men emerged and a uniformed patrolman who was evidently on guard, came forward to meet them, half drawing a revolver from his holster. But he had no chance to get it all the way out for there was a spurt of flame from a silenced gun in the car and the policeman went down, dead before he hit the sidewalk. Then three more men came out of the car. One of them dragged the policeman's body over against the wall where it would be out of the way. Then all six entered the hotel, leaving one man at the wheel.

Smitty's face became flushed. "Damn them! That must be the Haggard gang. That's the way they operate cold-blooded fish. Come on, Dick, let's take them "

But Benson put a hand on his arm.

Not so fast, Smitty. Follow me!" Smitty followed him, both men edging carefully back, hugging the shadow of the overhanging balcony. till they turned the corner. Benson climbed into their car and Smitty crowded in beside him.

"If this outfit has Nellie," Benson explained swiftly, "it'll do her no good for us to tackle them here!"

Smitty's eyes glittered, He nodded. "You're right, Dick!"

He put his big hands on the wheel, tooted it around in a complete turn and switched the lights off. He pulled up just far enough so that they could see the front of the hotel. They had only a few minutes to wait before the six men emerged from the hotel. In the clear night air their voices carried, sharp and distinct.

"She lied, Corbey," said a suave voice. "The stuff isn't in the safe!"

"Damn her!"

"She'll be damned, all right! Wait till we get back!"

The men piled into the limousine and it pulled away.

Smitty eased the car around the corner, still without lights, and fell in behind, keeping about a hundred yards in the rear.

"This," he said viciously to Dick ~Benson, "is going to be a party!"

Benson said nothing. He only sat grimly, staring after the car they were following.

Nellie's position was extremely uncomfortable. Her arms were still handcuffed around the back of the chair and she was unable to move to any extent. And the cigarette burn on her forearm hurt excruciatingly. In the other room she heard two or three of the men moving about, waiting for the return of the rest. She estimated



that forty minutes had passed before she heard the car outside, and then the voices of the returning killers. She steeled herself for the ordeal that was to come. There would be no more delay now. They would stop at nothing now to drag the truth from her. And she knew enough about Haggard to understand that he would not cease the torture when she finally talked. He would want to make sure she was telling the truth this time.

But her head was high when the door opened and Haggard walked in, followed by Corbey and Sturm. He said not a word. He only stood in front of her and deliberately took a cigarette from his pocket. Just as deliberately he lit it and puffed it into a vicious glow. Then he reached out and seized her hair in one hand and thrust the cigarette at her eyes.

But the glowing end of the cigarette never reached its goal, for, suddenly, the lights blinked out and the room was plunged into total darkness. Only the cigarette glowed in the black void.

Someone cursed and Haggard raised his voice, calling to the men in the outer room. "Gurko! Put a fuse in "

But someone called to him. "It ain't the fuse. Haggard. Someone snipped the power line outside "

A window smashed somewhere in the room and a powerful searchlight played on the occupants, rested a split second on Nellie, then swung to cover Haggard and the other two. Almost as if the beam of light were a signal, a heavy automatic began to bark, following the searchlight around the room from one man to another. The gun barked only three times, each shot a bull's-eye. Haggard went down with a bullet in his lung, the other two with slugs in their stomachs.

Nellie's eyes lighted with relief and a sudden surge of hope. "Dick!" she shouted. "The Avenger!"

From the other room came a frightened shout: "The Avenger!"

It was drowned by the thunderous roar of another gun out there. Meanwhile, Dick Benson leaped in through the window and helped Nellie up from the chair.

"Thank God!" he said fervently.

The shooting was still going on in the next room, but, by the time Benson reached the door it had stopped. He shouted, "O.K., Smitty," and yanked the door open. His flashlight beam crossed Smitty, illuminating the shambles which the room had become. In the door the huge, powerful figure of Algernon Heathcote Smith stood, like an avenging god out of the Norse tales, a smoking gun in his hand. And on the floor was the evidence of his shooting.

"What about Nellie?" he demanded.

"Safe!" said Benson.

He swung around and Nellie nodded toward the figure of Haggard, lying on his back, with blood frothing at his mouth. "That's Royce Haggard," she said. "He has the key to these handcuffs."

Benson knelt beside him, went through his pockets and found the key. Swiftly he released Nellie Gray, and Smitty came over and patted her on the shoulder, speechless with relief at seeing her alive and unharmed.

Haggard was dying fast. He spat blood and tried to speak. "Before I die . . . tell me . . . where you hid . . . the Zaharoff treasure!"

## CALLING JUSTICE, INC.

Nellie knelt beside him. She felt no resentment now, only a coldness. "In the clothes hamper in the broom closet," she told him. "It was the simplest place I could find."

Royce Haggard groaned. "It was . . . too damned simple. I'm always . . . looking for clever . . . tricks . . . that's what . . . tripped me "

And he died.

Smitty turned and took Nellie by the shoulder and shook her. He had recovered some of his poise. "Good Lord, Nellie," he chided, "when will you learn how to take care of yourself? We can't let you go out alone any more till you grow up "

But Nellie silenced him very effectively. She stood up on tiptoe, stretched as far as possible and kissed him.

"That's how glad I am to see you. Smitty!" she said.

THE END.