

A Coffin for the Avenger

Avenger Series, #2

by Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951

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Chapter 1

The Black Tulip.

IT is not strange that Dick Benson, as he paced impatiently up and down the lobby of the cozy little hotel, was unaware of the existence of Emma Puglese. For Emma lived eighty miles away in the heart of one of the slum sections of New York City, and Benson had never met her.

Yet his fate and hers—and perhaps the fate of a nation—were inextricably bound together, by threads which the Fates had begun to weave a long time ago.

At the moment, however, Benson's thoughts were far removed from Emma Puglese, whom he did not even know. They were upon a man named Crawford. He had driven eight miles from New York with Nellie Gray to meet this George Crawford, and now the man was forty-five minutes late.

As Benson paced up and down, Nellie Gray, demure in her slim young beauty, stood at the window looking out at Main Street.

It was a pretty little colonial hotel that Crawford had chosen for his appointment. It catered mainly to tourists, for Main Street was part of Linden Highway, which ran right through the town of Postville. But now, with gasoline being rationed, there were hardly any tourists. There were only two or three patrons in the dining room, and the clerk behind the desk at the rear was dozing fitfully.

At the window, Nellie Gray kept watch. The hotel was situated right where Main Street curved. From here the highway ran due west, up a hill into the setting sun. And the road was as straight as a ruler. To Nellie it looked like a broad ribbon laid carefully up the side of the hill, disappearing over the top.

She brushed the blond hair from her face and said, "I'm hungry, Dick. Why can't we eat while we wait?"

"I'm afraid we won't have time," he told her. "I've never known Crawford to be late. If he isn't here in five minutes, we'll drive up to his estate."

"But he particularly asked you not to. He was insistent when he phoned."

"I know. But I'm afraid something's happened to him."

"He only said his chauffeur had been kidnaped. Why should anyone want to kidnap a chauffeur?"

"I don't know, Nellie. He said he'd explain when he met us."

"But if that's all—"

"It's not quite all, Nellie. He also said something about not knowing where to turn; that the only man he could have looked to for help had been killed today in a plane crash."

"Ah!" Nellie's eyes narrowed. They were pretty blue eyes, but they were keenly intelligent. Indeed, she had to be intelligent to be able to work with a man like Benson.

"The teletype!" she exclaimed. "I saw it on the teletype before we left. Admiral Miles, of Naval Intelligence, was killed in a plane crash at Pensacola this afternoon!"

In their headquarters in New York they had a teletype machine which received, in addition to all the news services, the latest flashes from the police departments of nine States, and the confidential releases of the F.B.I.

For that headquarters, located not far from New York's East Side, was known throughout the world as Justice, Inc. And Dick Benson, its guiding genius, was known as The Avenger. To that building on Bleek Street in New York, came men and women from all the far corners of the world—men and women who could not find justice anywhere else; men and women who found themselves beaten in a hopeless fight against criminals in high places, beyond the reach of the law. Those men and women The Avenger helped. For he could go where the police dared not. His justice was neither blind nor shackled.

And so it was that the poor man came to Justice, Inc., when he had not the funds to hire a lawyer in a ten-dollar case, while the millionaire came when it was his only hope.

Of all these Benson selected those matters which plainly demanded his peculiar kind of justice. With untold wealth at his command, and ably assisted by a close-knit circle of assistants, he had made the name of The Avenger a synonym for ruthless war upon injustice.

He had chosen to answer Crawford's call tonight, because he had known Crawford well in other years; and though the man was wealthy, he had mentioned over the phone that this was a matter which might well involve the country's safety.

But now he was late, and Benson knew that the web of the Fates was being tightly spun.

Nellie Gray stiffened as she glimpsed a car which appeared over the rim of the hill, heading down toward town, with the sun splashing golden behind it.

"Dick!" she exclaimed. "There's a car. It's a Rolls-Royce. It must be Crawford!"

As they both watched the car, Nellie spoke over her shoulder. "When Crawford called, you told me to listen in on the extension, but I had to leave it for a moment to answer another phone. I just caught part of something he said to you about—it sounded like a black tulip."

"Yes," said Dick. "He did say something about a black tulip. But he was excited, and he jumped from one thing to another. He said something about looking out for the black tulip."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Nellie said. "It must be horrid. Imagine a tulip being all black!"

"During the last war," Benson said slowly, "there was a vicious German spy who passed himself off in this country as a Dutchman. He went by the name of Pieter van der Heusen. He killed without compunction, and he had no mercy for men or women or children. But he had an abnormal love of flowers. He spent all his spare time in horticulture. It was said that his greatest ambition in life was to develop a black species of tulip!"

Nellie's eyes were on the Rolls-Royce, which was tearing down the road at a terrific rate of speed.

"Crawford's in an awful hurry," she said. "But tell me about this Pieter van der Heusen. Was he caught?"

Benson shook his head. "No. He operated in this country all through the war, and then he went back to Germany and retired to grow tulips. No one knows whether he is still alive. If he is—"

Benson left the thought unfinished, and Nellie said slowly, "I wonder—"

She broke off, gasping, and pointed to the big Rolls-Royce. It was nearing the bottom of the hill, but instead of slowing down for the curve, its pace was increasing.

Nellie frowned. "He must have plenty of confidence in his brakes."

She uttered a short cry as the car leveled off at the foot of the hill and headed directly for the hotel, never slackening its speed. Now, with the Rolls less than a hundred feet away, they could clearly see George Crawford seated behind the wheel. He was upright, and seemed to be leaning backward, and his mouth was working spasmodically as if he were trying to shout to them. He seemed to be wearing a voluminous white coat of some sort, which was on backward. The car was so close to the hotel now that they could see the coat had no lapels or buttons.

"It's Crawford!" Nellie exclaimed. "He must have lost control—"

She had no chance to finish for she was suddenly seized around the waist from behind by Dick Benson. He fairly lifted her off the floor, and leaped backward toward the desk at the rear of the lobby.

Benson didn't move a fraction of a second too soon, for he had hardly carried Nellie to the safety of the desk at the rear of the lobby before the heavy Rolls-Royce, traveling straight as an arrow, jumped the curb and crashed head-on into the front of the hotel.

The smashing impact of the immense juggernaut tore away part of the wall and the doorway and sent chunks of plaster, brick and glass flying in all directions. The car crashed into the lobby, its front tires blowing out with cracking explosions like pistol shots. The hood became a mass of bent and twisted metal. Debris came piling down upon the car as one of the rafters in the lobby ceiling gave way. For a moment the whole building shook as if it might come tumbling down.

Then the tremor ceased, the plaster stopped falling, and the wrecked car came to rest, half in and half out of the lobby.

For the space of a couple of minutes neither the clerk nor the people in the restaurant moved. They were stunned by the sudden catastrophe.

But Dick Benson released his hold upon Nellie Gray and leaped to the side of the car.

Nellie shouted, "Look out, Dick, it may explode!"

He disregarded the warning and sprang to the door of the Rolls, wrenching at the handle. But the door would not open.

The figure of George Crawford sat erect and unmoving behind the wheel. The wheel was jammed into his chest, and the top of the car was crushed down upon his skull. He was dead, of course, but his body was still sitting upright.

Nellie Gray came up alongside of Benson and uttered a low gasp of horror.

"Dick! He's... he's wearing, a strait jacket!"

Benson nodded grimly.

Crawford's torso was incased in a white strait jacket, with the arms lashed across his chest so that he had been powerless to move as the heavy car hurtled down the hill, carrying him to destruction.

"It must have taken a fiendish imagination to conceive a thing like this!" Benson said. He pointed to two heavy wires, running from the steering wheel down to eye screws in the floor board. That was what had kept the car straight and true on its course. Crawford's body was also lashed to the seat so that he had remained erect all through the wild ride. Incased in the strait jacket, he had been helpless to do a single thing to save himself.

"Who could have done it?" Nellie demanded.

Benson was already reaching in through the shattered window. Pinned to Crawford's strait jacket there was a white card, perhaps five inches long and three inches wide.

"This may answer your question, Nellie." he said. He removed the card and held it so that she could read it. The message was written in indelible ink in a bold and striking longhand:

To the Avenger:

Here is your friend, Crawford, with my compliments. He signed his death warrant when he sent for you. Will you take a bit of advice, Mr. Avenger? Go home. Go back at once, and forget what Crawford told you. Otherwise, I shall wipe you out—and all those associated with you in Justice, Inc. Believe me, Mr. Richard Benson alias The Avenger, I can destroy you as easily as I destroyed Crawford.

There was no signature to the note. But attached to the card by its stem, just below the message, there was a single dwarf tulip. It had just begun to open. Its petals were of the deepest black, flecked here and there with blobs of red, which resembled nothing so much as drops of blood.

Somehow, though the flower was in itself satanically beautiful, its appearance afforded no sensation of pleasure, but rather one of horror. For no tulip had ever been grown so small, or with black leaves.

Some monstrous horticulturist must have taken a keen and evil joy in thus producing a horrid perversion of nature; perhaps the same kind of twisted mind which had devised the hellish scheme of sending Crawford hurtling to his death in a strait jacket.

Nellie Gray stared wide-eyed at the strange and startling flower which comprised the only signature to the note.

"The Black Tulip!" she said in a low, tense voice.

Chapter 2

The Coffins.

IN the squalor of one of New York's few remaining slums a truck moved through the night. Of itself the vehicle was not worthy of a second glance, for it was merely a truck with slatted sides.

But its freight consisted of seven coffins.

The lettering on the side said:

BRODERICK CASKET CO.

The business of the Broderick Casket Co. was ostensibly the sale and delivery of coffins to undertakers.

The truck moved quietly through the streets, and if people noticed it at all it was to comment on its depressing cargo.

But as the truck swung into Pelham Street, a girl of about eleven, with long black braids, ran out into the street after a small mongrel dog.

"Come back, Tony!" she cried.

Tony was a brown mongrel, a little more than a year old, and quite playful. He wanted the girl to chase him, and he yelped and ran in front of the truck.

There was room for the truck to swerve if the driver had wanted to make a sudden twist of the wheel. But he only muttered a curse and let the heavy wheels roll over the little dog's body.

It seemed that he took a certain amount of satisfaction in doing that. But when he stopped the truck and descended he managed to so control his expression that nothing of the sadistic pleasure showed in his face. He spread his hands as he spoke to the small crowd which had gathered there over the dog's broken carcass.

"You see how it is," he explained. "The dog ran right in front of me. It's a good thing the girl didn't follow him."

"That's right," someone said. "It wasn't the driver's fault. Look at that heavy truck, loaded with coffins. How could he have stopped?"

But the little girl with the long black braids was weeping unrestrainedly.

"You could have swung out!" she cried through her tears. "You could have tried to miss him. You didn't even try!"

The driver shrugged and looked for sympathy to the crowd. "She shouldn't be out playing with her dog this late, anyway. She should be in bed. It wouldn't have happened if she had been asleep in bed where she belongs."

"Yes," said the same woman who had spoken before. "That Emma Puglese is always picking up stray dogs. She'll cause a real accident with them yet. Go on home, Emma Puglese. Your mother shouldn't let you out so late."

Emma Puglese wiped the tears from her eyes. "You're a bad man," she said to the truck driver. "You didn't have to kill my dog. You did it on purpose. I'll find some way to get even. Yes, I will!"

She cast a glance at the name on the truck, and then sat down on the curb, covered her face with her hands, and gave way to unrestrained sobs.

The driver, seeing that the sympathy of the crowd was veering to the girl, dug into his pocket and drew out some money.

"Here, girl," he said. "Here's three dollars. Go buy yourself another dog. It wasn't my fault, but I don't like that you should cry."

Emma Puglese thrust the bills away. "I don't want your money. You're a bad man. I won't touch your money!"

The driver shrugged, looked at the crowd as if to say, "What can I do about it?" and climbed back into his truck after moving the body of the dog over to the curb.

The crowd dispersed as he drove away, but Emma Puglese sat there, sobbing, angry and hurt.

The truck with the seven coffins continued down Pelham Street for a block, and then turned into Farr Street. It stopped before the undertaking establishment of Sylvester Strake Son, Inc.

It was rather late for a delivery, but there was a light in the undertaking parlor. And strangely enough, a man stood in front of the door, who looked up and down the street, and nodded swiftly to the driver of the truck.

The driver thereupon descended, and with the help of the man from the doorway he removed one coffin from the load. Between them they carried it inside.

Now an empty coffin does not require great exertion from two strong men. Yet these two were sweating when they set the coffin down on the floor.

The man who had been standing in the doorway glanced inquiringly at the truck driver.

"Did you have any trouble, Lambertini?"

"No," said Lambertini. "It went off like clockwork. But I'm kind of worried. The Avenger won't lay off just on account of what we did to Crawford. It'll only make him tougher."

The other shrugged. "We can handle anything. The Avenger is only a man. Better go down with your load and report to the boss. I'll give you a hand with the coffin and then I'll take over the truck."

He helped Lambertini move the coffin onto a low dolly, and they rolled it into the back room, then onto a small elevator platform.

Lambertini returned to the front, let the other man out, watched him get into the truck and drive away, and then locked the door. He closed the Venetian blinds over the windows and turned out the lights. Then he went back into the rear, stepped onto the elevator platform beside the coffin and pressed a button.

The platform descended to the basement.

The basement was no different from that of any other undertaker's establishment, and a minute search would have revealed nothing of a suspicious nature.

But Lambertini rolled the dolly off the platform, pushed it across to the opposite wall and pressed a button.

Immediately, a portion of the wall began to swing slowly outward on well-oiled hinges, revealing a long, narrow passage, dimly lighted at the far end.

Lambertini pushed the coffin along to the far end, and the opening in the basement wall swung shut behind him. As he approached the far end another section of wall opened and he went through with his load.

A strange new world was revealed. But it was a queer and perverted world, as if some weird magician had rubbed Aladdin's magic lamp the wrong way.

The subterranean chamber was low-ceilinged and damp, but it was huge in expanse. At the left there was a long row of glassed-in rooms, in which men and women sat and worked at typewriters, radio sending and receiving sets, and teletype machines. There were other offices in which women filed papers and operated multigraph machines.

In all there must have been fifty or sixty people working down here underneath the surface of the city. It might have been a busy newspaper office from the speed and efficiency with which everybody was working.

But on the left-hand side of the chamber was the truly amazing spectacle. For here a space perhaps twenty feet wide and fifty feet long had been set apart and fenced off with a neat white picket fence and made into a garden!

It was as weird and ghastly a garden as anyone might have dreamed of in a tortured nightmare. It consisted of neat rows of dwarf tulips, all black, and flecked with blobs of red.

They stood in ranks, like miniature soldiers of Satan—abnormally small, yet pregnant with a horrid sort of evil.

How those tulips could have grown at all in that underground cavern was impossible to tell.

Lambertini trundled the coffin along a cement walk between the glassed-in offices and the tulip bed. And a man arose from among the tulips to meet him.

The man had been stooping over one of the rows, weeding it carefully. But now, as he arose, it became evident that he was as abnormal as the outlandish bulbs he was cultivating.

His torso was huge, his shoulders broad and powerful. His arms were longer than average. But his legs were so short that he looked like a dwarf. His head was large and entirely bald, and a pair of cruel, clever eyes peered out from under thin and stringy eyebrows.

"Well, Lambertini?" he asked.

Lambertini stood stiffly, as if he were at attention. "Orders executed, colonel," he said. "Mission successful."

The tulip man nodded. "Follow me."

He turned and led the way along the cement path, along the row of glassed-in offices, never looking to the right or the left. Lambertini followed, pushing the dolly along.

At the rear of the low-ceilinged chamber the tulip man pressed a button and a section of the wall swung open, revealing a private office.

They entered and the door closed silently behind them.

On one wall of this office there was a rack of automatic pistols. Below it was a rack of .38-caliber revolvers, all carefully oiled, shining and bright. And on the floor there were a dozen wooden cases. One of these cases was open, revealing the contents. They were packages of ammunition for the weapons.

There were no windows in the room, but—as in the outer chamber—the air was not stale. On the wall behind the desk there was a large picture of Adolf Hitler, flanked by two swastika banners. Other than that the room contained no decoration except for a single black tulip in a glass on the desk.

The tulip man seated himself at the desk. He motioned toward the coffin.

"You have him in there?"

"Yes, Colonel Strake," Lambertini said.

"Open it!"

Lambertini took a small screwdriver from his pocket and knelt beside the coffin. He loosened four bolts at the corners and removed the lid, which was perforated at intervals with air holes to permit its occupant to breathe.

The man who lay in the coffin was incased in a strait jacket, just as Crawford had been. In addition his feet were bound at the ankles and he was gagged. He was unable to move but his eyes stared upward in a terrible sort of fascination.

Lambertini reached down and cut the cords that held the prisoner's ankles. Then he lifted him by the shoulders, helping him to his feet. Roughly, he led the helpless man to a chair and pushed him into it. He stepped around behind him and undid the gag.

The prisoner was about forty-five, with a thin and scholarly face, a high forehead and wide-spaced blue eyes. He found it difficult to sit in the chair, for his arms were wrapped around him in the sleeves of the strait jacket, which was pulled cruelly tight. He was able to breathe only in short, quick gasps.

The tulip man's great bald dome shone brightly under the electric light as he smiled at the prisoner.

"My dear Forsythe! It is four months since we last met, is it not?"

"Damn you!" Forsythe gasped, trying to breathe against the constricting pressure of the strait jacket. "Damn you, Strake, you won't get away with this!"

The bald-headed Strake continued to smile. "You're a fool, Forsythe. Don't you know by this time that there is nothing"—Strake's face suddenly congealed with a swift rush of rage—"nothing, I tell you, that The Black Tulip can't get away with!"

He sprang up from behind the desk and came around on his absurdly short legs until he stood squarely in front of Forsythe, "Four months ago I offered you half a million dollars for your depth charge formula. I offered to smuggle you aboard a U-boat and take you to Germany where you would have been rewarded even beyond the money I offered—"

"Sure," Forsythe said bitterly. "I'd have been rewarded in a concentration camp!"

Strake proceeded as if Forsythe had not spoken. He shook a finger in his prisoner's face. "But you saw fit to reject my offer. You knew my power, however, so you arranged with the Intelligence Service to go into hiding while you worked out the formula for the Forsythe Down-draft Depth Charge. You went to live on Crawford's estate and posed as his chauffeur. You set up a laboratory in the garage, didn't you? And you thought that The Black Tulip would never find you, eh?"

Forsythe's glance dropped before the intensity of passion in the other's eyes.

"Well, Forsythe, we found you!"

"You'll never get away with this, Strake. Crawford saw your men carry the coffin away to the truck. When he misses me he'll guess I was in it—"

He stopped as Strake began to laugh softly.

"What... what are you laughing at?"

"I'm laughing, my dear Forsythe, at your stupidity. Did you think we'd leave Crawford alive?"

"You... you've killed him?"

"Draw your own conclusions."

"Damn you!"

"Is that all you can say, Forsythe?"

"No, no! That's not all I can say. I tell you that it won't help you to have killed Crawford. Admiral Miles of Naval Intelligence, arranged with Crawford to let me live on his estate. They arranged that Admiral Miles was to phone once a day. The admiral must have phoned already. He'll know there's something wrong. They'll scour the country. They'll not leave a stone unturned—"

"Wait, Forsythe. Don't be misled by false hope. I want you to realize the full futility of your situation. Suppose you think back. Who else besides Admiral Miles knew where you were and what you were doing?"

Forsythe clamped his lips shut.

"Ha!" said Strake. "You refuse to answer. Well, you needn't worry. You needn't be afraid of giving me any information which might help me. You see, I'm remarkably well informed. I happen to know that Admiral Miles was the only man in Washington who knew of the arrangement with Crawford. They kept it such a dark secret that it wasn't even placed in the files."

"All right," said Forsythe. "Suppose you're right. Admiral Miles must already have phoned—"

"Wrong again, my dear sir. It may interest you to know that Admiral Miles was killed in a seaplane crash today at five o'clock!"

Forsythe's eyes bulged. "You... you're lying!"

Strake chuckled. He picked up a newspaper from the desk and held it before the helpless man's eyes.

"Read!"

The headline stared back at Forsythe with the ineluctable surety of doom:

FOUR DIE IN SEAPLANE CRASH!

Admiral Miles, Head of Naval Intelligence, Among Those Killed
Crash Attributed to Sabotage.

Strake chuckled again.

"We made sure, Forsythe, that no one would remain alive who knew about you and your invention. If the Forsythe Down-draft Depth Charge should ever be perfected for the American Navy it would mean that a destroyer could drop a canister of explosive over the side which could detonate immediately, without danger to the destroyer itself."

"That's right," said Forsythe. "We could wipe your damned U-boats off the face of the seven seas in a month!"

"Exactly, my dear Forsythe. And it is just to prevent such a contingency that we have sought you high and low for four months and have at last found you. Do you

think, Forsythe, that we will allow anything—anything, I say I—to stand in the way of our acquiring the secret of your depth charge?"

"You'll never get it out of me," said Forsythe.

Strake smiled. "Within twenty-four hours, my friend, you will be begging to be allowed to tell your secret!"

He motioned to Lambertini. "When I leave," he ordered softly, "tighten his strait jacket one notch. Continue to tighten it one notch each hour for the rest of the night!"

Forsythe's face whitened as he heard the order.

"You're a devil!" he gasped.

Strake nodded his big, oversized bald head. His eyes were bright and cruel. "You understand what will happen, don't you, Forsythe? Each notch is about a quarter of an inch. By morning your strait jacket will have been tightened by almost three inches. Your ribs will be constricted to the edge of the breaking point. You will barely have room to take enough breath into your body to support life. Your heart will pump faster and faster, but not strongly enough to propel the blood to your extremities. Your hands and feet will become numb first. Then your legs and arms. You will be able to watch yourself die by inches, so to speak. There will be a fiery pressure in your chest. You will be fighting, every moment, for breath."

He paused and smiled a terrible, twisted smile. "At nine o'clock in the morning I will return and sit here at the desk, and watch you fight for your life. It will be a losing fight, Forsythe. Believe me, I know. I have sat here and watched many a man like that. Not one has refused to talk. They have begged for one thing, only—a quick death. You, too, will beg for that, Forsythe!"

"Damn you," the inventor whispered. "Damn you down to the lowest cellar of hell! You can't get away with this. Something will happen. Something unforeseen. Something you've overlooked. Something you didn't plan on. God won't let you get away with it!"

Strake's cruel eyes flickered. It was almost as if he winced at the mention of the Deity. Almost, in that fleeting instant, it seemed to the bound and desperate prisoner that he was looking at the Prince of Darkness himself—and that the name of God had caused Satan to squirm.

But Strake turned away from him to the desk, hiding that look in his face. He picked the black tulip out of the water glass and raised it to his nostrils. He looked at the prisoner in the chair and spoke slowly.

"They call me The Black Tulip, Forsythe. And they say that The Black Tulip has never failed. It is true. And it is true because I overlook nothing. Nothing unforeseen can happen, Forsythe. I have planned well and I have taken everything into consideration. That is why I always succeed. With me there is no such thing as the unforeseen circumstance. You will beg to talk tomorrow. I have said it. It is a certainty."

He turned and walked out of the room on his queer, ungainly legs.

And Lambertini stepped behind Forsythe's chair, undid the laces, and tightened the strait jacket one notch.

Chapter 3

Emma Gets Help.

EMMA PUGLESE didn't go home. She sat on the curb after the crowd had melted away and she sobbed.

After a while she took out a handkerchief and dried her eyes. She avoided looking at Tony's body because she was afraid that if she did she'd begin to cry all over again, and she didn't want to waste time crying now. She had made up her mind what she wanted to do, and she meant to do it quickly.

She crossed Pelham Street, walked to the corner, and then hurried three blocks west. When she came to Bleek Street she turned left into the dead end and walked down until she came to the building with the modest bronze plaque over the door:

JUSTICE, INC.

Resolutely, she pressed the button and waited.

She didn't know it, but a cunningly concealed television device was transmitting a picture of her to a watcher inside.

After a moment or two the front door began to swing open automatically, and Emma's eyes widened in wonder.

A voice said, "Come in, please."

It was a kindly voice, and though she couldn't see where it came from, she entered.

The door closed behind her.

"Don't be afraid," the voice said. "We have a lot of gadgets around that work automatically. It's just some tricks that we've worked out. No one will hurt you."

"I know," said Emma, speaking to the empty air. "I know no one will hurt me here. This is where The Avenger lives. I want to talk to him."

"The Avenger isn't here right now, but maybe I can help you," the voice said with quiet amusement. "Are you in trouble?"

"Not exactly. But something has happened that needs to be avenged. That's why I came to The Avenger. I heard my daddy talk about The Avenger, and I know he helps little people get even with big people for bad things they do to them."

"Aha!" said the kindly voice. "And did a big person do a bad thing to you?"

"Yes, he did. A man in a truck just ran over my dog."

The voice was full of regret. "I'm terribly sorry to hear that. Did you love him a great deal?"

Emma's eyes filled with tears. "He could stand up and beg. And he carried small bundles for me. We played every day when I came home from school."

"Maybe we can get you another dog."

"That isn't what I came for," Emma said firmly. "I came because the man ran my dog over on purpose and I think he should be punished."

"Are you sure he did it on purpose?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I looked up at the driver just when the truck came near Tony. I wanted to shout to the driver to look out. But then I saw that man's face. It...it

was terrible. He was enjoying himself. Then I knew it was no use shouting. I knew he wanted to kill things. I could see it in his face. So when he offered me money I wouldn't take it."

"Well," said the voice, apparently impressed. "I'm sure The Avenger will want to help you. Did you get the man's name?"

"I saw the name on the truck. It was the Broderick Casket Co."

"And what is your name?"

"I'm Emma Puglese, and I live at 13 Pelham Street. There was no address on the truck, but I can tell you where it was going. It was going to Strake, the undertaker. It comes every night and delivers coffins to Strake. Sometimes one, sometimes two. But I noticed that the coffins on the bottom of the load are always the same. It's just the two top coffins that are different."

"Now wait just a minute, Emma," the voice said, suddenly serious. "Wait there. I'm coming down."

Emma waited, fidgeting, until a door suddenly opened almost alongside her where she had not thought there was any door. A man emerged and smiled down at her.

Emma gaped at him. She had never seen such a big man. Like some great viking god he towered over her, but somehow she wasn't at all afraid of him, for she saw the kindness written in his face.

"My name is Smith," he told her. "Algernon Smith. Smitty to you. I'm one of The Avenger's assistants."

"I know about you," Emma said. "I heard daddy talk about you, too. You're an electrician."

Smitty smiled. His reputation as an electrical engineer had spread to the four corners of the globe. But he had preferred to give up the emoluments of a career of research and invention for the more precarious one of fighting against crime by the side of Dick Benson.

"Now suppose you tell me about that truck with the coffins. Tell me everything you can think of about it."

"That's all I know," Emma said. "Us kids used to follow it when it went down the street, and we would watch them unload the coffins. That's how we came to notice that the bottom ones were always the same. We used to sneak up and make chalk marks on the bottom coffins when the driver was inside. And then, a few days later, when we'd want to do it again, we saw that the same chalk marks were still on the bottom coffins. That meant they were the same, didn't it?"

"It surely did," Smitty told her. "And I'm glad you came. I'm going to look into it right away!"

"Will you go over and punish that bad man?"

Smitty put a hand on her head. It was a huge, powerful hand. But its touch was as gentle as the breeze.

"I'll investigate him, Emma. And whatever is necessary shall be done. Now come on I'll walk you back to Pelham Street. You go home and I'll look up that undertaker!"

He raised his voice slightly, speaking to thin air, just as Emma had done.

"Take over, will you, Cole?" he said.

"Now listen, Smitty," said the voice of Cole Wilson, from somewhere in the building. "This is no time to, go gallivanting after coffins. Dick will be here in twenty minutes. I just had him on the short wave. He's completed his investigation up at Crawford's estate and he hasn't found a thing. We're up against a blank wall on this case and it might be better if you stick around. Can't Emma wait till tomorrow to get her man punished?"

Smitty winked at Emma.

He spoke to Cole Wilson, who was another one of the brilliant young men The Avenger had gathered around him.

"Now don't get excited, Cole. It won't take me but ten or fifteen minutes to look this up. I'm intrigued by the coffins that never get delivered. I just want to look around that undertaking establishment. I'll be back before Dick and Nellie arrive."

"All right," Cole Wilson said. "I suppose you won't sleep tonight if you don't look into it. I'm busy as the deuce, but I'll take over for you."

Smitty grinned and took Emma's arm, and led her out into the street. He stopped off with her and bought her a banana split with three balls of ice cream, and he had one himself, too. Then he saw her safely to her house on Pelham Street, and continued on around the corner to Farr Street.

Chapter 4

„I've Never Died Before.”

SMITTY saw the undertaker's establishment halfway down the block, but before going there he stepped into a drugstore on the corner and consulted the telephone directory. He found that the Broderick Casket Co. was located in Brooklyn. He dialed the number and frowned when someone answered the phone. It was after nine o'clock, long past business hours.

"Hello," he said. "Is this the Broderick Casket Co.?"

"That's right."

"Well, I want to order a coffin."

"We're all out of coffins, mister. Shipped the last one today."

"But how can I die without a coffin?" Smitty demanded.

"Who are you?" the man at the other end asked, suddenly suspicious. "Have you ever done business with us before?"

"No," said Smitty. "You see, I've never died before!" And he hung up.

Thoughtfully, he went out of the drugstore and walked down the street toward the undertaking parlor.

There was a light in the store as he approached, but he couldn't look in, for the Venetian blinds were drawn all the way down, behind both the door and the plate-glass window.

Smitty approached the door and a man standing near it said, "Were you looking for someone, mister?"

"Why, yes," said Smitty. He glanced at the name on the window. "I'm looking for Mr. Strake."

"What did you want to see him about?"

"About a coffin that was delivered today by the Broderick Casket Co."

The man stiffened. One hand stole into his coat pocket.

"What about the coffin that was delivered today?"

"I thought I'd like to buy it. It was a pretty coffin. It might be nice to be buried in."

The man grinned. "You getting ready to die?"

"I'm afraid so," Smitty said, looking at the bulge in the man's pocket.

"Well, mister," said the man, "I'm sure Colonel Strake will be glad to see you. Very glad."

He stepped up close to Smitty, and with his left hand he rang a bell alongside the door. Almost at once the door was opened.

"Go right in!"

Smitty obeyed. As soon as he was inside the gunman stepped in, too. The man who admitted them shut the door and locked it.

"Who's this, Otto?" he demanded of the gunman.

Otto grinned. "He's a customer. He's looking for a coffin to be buried in, Carl. What do you think of that?"

Carl chuckled. "He has certainly come to the right place!"

"This way," said Otto, showing Smitty the suggestive bulge in his pocket.

Smitty went in the direction indicated.

Otto did not take him through the secret door in the rear wall. Instead he led him to a small office, which was apparently used for making funeral arrangements. He pressed a button on the desk in a peculiar manner. And then they waited, not speaking.

Perhaps four minutes later another door at the back of the office was opened and Colonel Strake entered, shuffling on his queer short legs. His shrewd, cruel eyes darted to the great bulk of Smitty's figure and he sucked his breath in sharply. But he made no comment.

He looked at the gunman and said, "What is it, Otto? Why did you signal me?"

Otto jerked his head toward Smitty. "I found him snooping around the front of the store. He was trying the door. Claims he wants to buy a coffin."

"Hm-m-m," said Strake. "I think we can accommodate the gentleman. I really think we can!"

He directed his sharp glance at Smitty. "Who are you, sir?"

Smitty grinned. "The name is Smith."

"—Ah, yes. You're the one who just phoned the Broderick Casket Co."

Smitty became taut. The Broderick Casket Co. was in Brooklyn. They must have called here the moment Smitty hung up. There was, then, a very much stronger connection between the Broderick Casket Co. and the Strake establishment than just the sale of coffins.

But his thoughts were interrupted as Strake began to talk softly.

"I recognize you, Mr. Algernon Heathcote Smith. Once having seen you it would be impossible to forget you. You are The Avenger's assistant, are you not?"

"The Avenger?" Smitty repeated. "Who's he?"

Strake raised a hand. "Please, Mr. Smith. Let's skip the play acting. You know very well who The Avenger is. Your presence in front of this establishment can

mean only one thing—that The Avenger has found some clue directing his attention to us. Please tell me what that clue is!"

Smitty's eyes became narrow. He had come here on a whim, an impulse. He had been affected by Emma's story, and intrigued by the idea of coffins on a truck which were never delivered. No thought had entered his mind that this place might be connected with the Crawford murder, which The Avenger was working on. But now he had something to chew on.

He began to laugh. It was ironical that the killing of a little dog and the hurt anger of a small girl should have led to the first break in the Crawford case. The murder of Crawford and the abduction of the chauffeur had been so carefully planned and well executed that not a single clue had offered itself for The Avenger to work on. Benson had told Smitty over the two-way radio only a little while ago that he was up against a blank wall.

And now this!

Smitty didn't know it at the time, but Forsythe's prophetic words were coming true with a vengeance. The unforeseen circumstance which no man can plan for had upset Strake's careful calculations.

But if Smitty was in ignorance of the main angles of this mystery, Strake was no less mystified as to what sort of clue had brought him here. And he was grimly determined that Smitty should talk.

"I asked you," he repeated softly! "what was the clue which turned your attention to me!"

Smitty grinned. He chanced a shot in the dark. "It was the black tulip," he said.

"The Black Tulip!" Strake exclaimed. "How? How did that lead you here?"

"The odor," said Smitty. "I followed the scent."

Strake smiled grimly. He pressed a button on the desk, and before Smitty could move the room was suddenly filled with grim and husky men. There were more than a dozen of them, streaming in from three doors, all armed with short clubs and blackjacks, and they swarmed over Smitty like a small avalanche.

Chapter 5

What Happened to Smitty?

IT was nine thirty when Dick Benson and Nellie Gray got back to Justice, Inc. They had missed Emma Puglese by less than twenty minutes.

"Smitty's gone on a wild-goose chase," Cole Wilson told them glumly. "Something about a dead dog and a coffin that's being delivered over and over again to the same place."

"Hm-m-m," said Benson. "Sounds intriguing. I don't blame him for going out on it."

"But not at a time like this!" Nellie Gray said hotly. "He knows we're up against one of the cleverest criminals of the century, and that we have to concentrate all our energies on fighting The Black Tulip. He has no right to go out on side issues!"

"That's what I say," Cole agreed. Then he added, "You have a visitor, Dick. A man from Naval Intelligence. He just came a couple of minutes ago, and I asked him to wait in Room One. He said it was extremely important. His name is Lieutenant Commander Anderson."

"I'll see him at once!" Benson exclaimed.

Lieutenant Commander Anderson was a quiet, soft-spoken man, who looked anything but what he was. He showed Benson his credentials and got down to business at once.

"As you know, Mr. Benson, Admiral Miles was killed in a plane crash today. I was his chief assistant, and he had left in my safe-keeping a packet of confidential papers in code, which he considered too dangerous to be placed in the navy files. They were papers relating to matters which he handled personally, and which would be left at loose ends in the event of his death."

"Ah!" said Benson. "Was there anything in those papers about Crawford?"

Anderson nodded. "How did you guess?"

"Crawford mentioned something that led me to believe he had been working with Admiral Miles."

"That is true. After decoding the papers, I learn that Stanton Forsythe, the inventor, had almost succeeded in perfecting a depth charge which would explode wholly downward, thus preventing injury to the ship which dropped it."

"I see!" said Benson. "Such an invention would revolutionize anti-submarine warfare!"

"Exactly. It would enable us to clear the seas of submarines within a couple of months. But there was reason to believe that the notorious spy—The Black Tulip—was seeking to get hold of the secret principle behind the theory of the Forsythe Down-draft Depth Charge. There was still several weeks of work to be done on the plans of the invention, and Forsythe feared for his life. Admiral Miles therefore arranged for Forsythe to go to work for Crawford, ostensibly as a chauffeur. Crawford had a completely equipped experimental laboratory in the back of his garage, and it was the ideal arrangement for Forsythe."

"It was ideal," Nellie Gray broke in bitterly, "until The Black Tulip discovered where he was!"

Commander Anderson nodded. "You're quite right, Miss Gray. The reason I have flown in from Washington to see you, Mr. Benson, is because in Admiral Miles' notes I find a reference to you. He says that Crawford knows The Avenger well, and has said that if anything arose in the nature of an emergency, he would call upon you."

"He did," said Benson. "But The Black Tulip was too clever and too fast for him, as you know. Here"—he took from an envelope the card with the tulip attached—"I kept this from the local police. I didn't want them messing the case up."

"You did right, Mr. Benson," Commander Anderson said, studying the card. "Do you know who The Black Tulip is?"

Benson nodded. "I think he's Pieter van der Heusen."

"Ah! You remember Van der Heusen, then?"

"I've studied the records minutely. I was quite interested in the man. He was a clever spy."

"So clever that he escaped after the last war. He's back here now, we're certain. But we haven't the faintest idea where he is, or what name he's using."

Anderson paused and added emphatically, "We must find The Black Tulip quickly, Benson—before he tortures the secret of the Down-draft Depth Charge out of Forsythe!"

It was just then that Cole Wilson stepped into the room, looking anxiously at his watch.

"I heard the conversation over the recording system," he said. "I don't like to bother you at a time like this, Dick, but Smitty hasn't come back. He said he'd return in twenty minutes, and you know our rule—always make contact by phone or radio if unable to keep an appointment."

"It means Smitty's in trouble!" Nellie exclaimed. Gone was her former anger at him for having gone off on a tangent. Now she was full of concern. "He must be killed or captured—otherwise, he'd have phoned!"

"Evidently he's run into something bigger than he expected," Benson said. He glanced at Cole Wilson. "Where did he go?"

Wilson went out and came back in a moment with a cylindrical record. Every conversation that took place with a visitor to Justice, Inc. was automatically recorded for future reference. Now, Wilson played the record back and they heard Emma Puglese telling Smitty about the dog, and about the coffins, and that they were usually delivered to Strake's.

When the record was finished. Benson's lips were tight. He glanced at Lieutenant Commander Anderson. "Will you do me the honor to use this place as your headquarters while working on the Forsythe case? We'll co-operate with you to the fullest, of course. But I must beg you to excuse me while I go look after Smitty."

It was one of the inviolable rules of Justice, Inc., that when one member of the organization was in trouble or in danger, the others would drop everything and pile in to his help. Otherwise, the underworld would long ago have succeeded in whittling them down, one by one. Each knew that in the event of peril he could count on the others to fight through hell or high water to his side. And this knowledge contributed greatly to the compact efficiency of Justice, Inc.

And thus, ten minutes later, Dick Benson was walking slowly down Farr Street, toward the undertaking parlor of Sylvester Strake.

Chapter 6

The Bed of Tulips.

BENSON paused at the door just as Smitty had done before, and Otto, who was once more standing outside, stepped over to him.

"You looking for some one, mister?"

"Why, yes," Benson said mildly. "I'm looking for a rather big man. I believe he came here a little while ago."

"Sure, mister," said Otto. "He's inside. We were sort of expecting you to come looking for him." He put his hand in his coat pocket and with his left hand he rang the bell.

The door was immediately opened by Carl.

"Go right in, mister," said Otto, showing Benson the bulge in his coat. "It'll be a pleasure to entertain you!"

The one great mistake that Otto made was not to look behind him. He had not, therefore, seen the long, sleek car which had crept along the street in Benson's wake, nor had he seen the trim figure of Nellie Gray descend and move toward them like some lissome princess of fairyland—with this difference, that no fairy princess ever carried a .32-caliber pistol!

Nellie pushed the muzzle of the pistol against Otto's spine.

"Don't forget me, young man," she said. "I'm in this party, too!"

Otto stiffened. For a fraction of a second his attention was pulled away from Benson.

That was all The Avenger needed. He gripped Otto's gun wrist in fingers of steel, drew it out of his pocket without apparent effort, and twisted his arm behind his back, all in one swift, fluid motion.

Otto cried out at the pressure on his arm, and let go of the gun he had been holding. Nellie Gray caught it as it fell.

Benson swung Otto around and gave him a stiff shove that sent him stumbling through the open doorway, into Carl.

Then, before either of them could regain his balance, Benson and Nellie stepped inside and Nellie closed the door. She leaned against it, smiling winsomely, and covering both Carl and Otto, her own pistol in her right hand, and Otto's in her left.

"And now, gentlemen," Dick Benson said mildly, "I'll thank you to take me to where you're holding Mr. Algernon Smith!"

His eyes were cold and hard as he spoke. And he added softly, "I hope—for your sakes—that he hasn't been harmed!"

"To hell with you!" growled Otto.

Benson sighed. He stepped in with a motion so fast that Otto did not know what was happening until both his wrists were twisted behind him.

Benson gripped both of those wrists in one hand, and though Otto struggled and fought, he was powerless to break that hold.

With his left thumb, Benson pressed against a certain point under Otto's armpit. He increased the pressure, and Otto uttered an involuntary cry of pain.

He tried to squirm away, but the pressure increased inexorably. The gunman tried to scream, but the sound died in his throat and changed to a moan of agony as Benson dug his thumb deep into that spot. Sweat sprang out on Otto's face and on the back of his neck. The pain was so sharp and so intense that he could barely catch his breath.

Benson's face was grim and hard.

"My friend's life is in the balance," he said tightly. "Do you think The Avenger fights with kid gloves when his friends' lives are in danger? Talk fast or I'll increase the pressure till you die of the agony!"

"Stop! Stop!" Otto gasped, his face running with perspiration.

Benson nodded grimly and relaxed the pressure a bit.

"Talk!"

"Smith... is down... below. The headquarters... of... The Black Tulip—"

Nellie uttered an exclamation. Benson's eyes glittered.

"Show me!"

"This... way—"

Otto nodded his head feebly toward the wall at the rear.

Benson spoke swiftly to Nellie over his shoulder.

"Smitty must have blundered into something. We mustn't miss on this. It means even more than Smitty's life!"

"Right, Dick!" she said. She kept Carl covered while Otto led The Avenger to the secret door at the rear and pressed the concealed button that opened it.

"What lies beyond here?" Benson demanded.

Otto was no longer defiant. All the fight had gone out of him. He was pathetically eager to please, lest he be subjected to the terrible agony of that pressure beneath his armpit.

"It's the headquarters of The Black Tulip," he said, the words fairly spilling out of his mouth. "Down there, more than fifty people work. They are the home-office organization. From here the orders go out which direct the work of German spies all over the United States. It's the heart of The Black Tulip's organization!"

"All right," said Benson. He motioned for Otto to move back next to Carl, where Nellie could cover him. From his pocket he took a small box that resembled a snuff box. From the box he took a wad of something that looked like cotton, about a quarter inch in diameter, and put it in his mouth. Then he took two small glass ampules from the box and returned the box to his pocket. He nodded to Nellie and stepped through the secret doorway.

"Don't take any lead slugs when you're not looking, Dick!" Nellie called after him. "And see if you can bring Smitty back all in one piece!"

Benson didn't answer. But the smile upon his face was almost that of an avenging angel as he strode down the length of the corridor toward the secret door at the other end.

He pressed that button as Otto had directed, and stepped through into that strange and hellish underground world which was ruled over by the man who called himself The Black Tulip.

He saw the bed of tulips, flecked with blood-red blobs, and he remembered the flower he had found upon the strait-jacketed body of George Crawford, and his mouth tightened into a straight, thin line. He saw the glassed-in booths where men and women worked all day and all night to destroy America, and his eyes flickered with a strange and unholy light.

At the rear, Dick Benson stopped before a door. He turned the knob and stepped inside.

Swiftly, his eyes scanned the contents of the room, noted the single tulip in the glass of water, the picture of Hitler on the wall, the strait-jacketed figure of Stanton Forsythe, breathing with difficulty against the tight-notched torture corset, and then, on the floor, the bound figure of Algernon Heathcote Smith, face cut and bruised, but grinning nevertheless.

"Hi, Smitty!" he said.

"Hi, Dick!" Smitty said through his cut lips. "They couldn't find a strait-jacket big enough for me. What do you think of that?"

Dick Benson glanced over to the desk where Strake sat, his big bald head gleaming, his small, cruel eyes flickering with quick doubt.

"Smitty wears a size 52, Colonel Strake," Benson said in a conversational tone.

Lambertini was standing behind Forsythe's chair, getting ready to tighten the strait jacket another notch, and the sweat was standing out on the inventor's forehead.

Forsythe groaned. "Why did you have to come here, Avenger? Now they'll get you, too!"

Strake arose from behind the desk.

"I see you are unarmed, Avenger," he said smoothly. "Have you come to make terms with me?"

"Yes," Dick Benson said slowly. "I've come to make terms. I'll accept unconditional surrender—nothing less!"

Strake smiled queerly and put his hand in the drawer of the desk.

"It would seem," he said slowly, "that I am the one to make the terms—"

"That's where you're wrong!" Benson said.

He flipped one of the glass ampules over on the desk. It fell on the glass top and broke. At the same time he flipped the other ampule over toward Lambertini. It struck the back of Forsythe's chair and broke there.

The effect of those two glass ampules was startling, to say the least.

They contained a highly concentrated ether compound which had been developed by Fergus MacMurtrie, the chemical wizard who worked for The Avenger. The properties of this secret—formula ether compound were such that unconsciousness could be induced by one cc. in a hundred thousand cubic meters of free air within a period of one half second.

MacMurtrie had developed the ether compound for the United States Secret Service, and Dick Benson was, perhaps, the only person in civilian life who had access to it, for he had lent MacMurtrie's services to the army for this purpose.

Sylvester Strake fell over on the desk in the act of reaching for the gun in the drawer. Lambertini just folded up and lay down to sleep on the floor against Forsythe's chair.

Benson himself was chewing upon the wad of cotton, impregnated with a special solution which made him immune to the effects of the drug by energizing certain salivary glands in his mouth. But Smitty and Forsythe enjoyed no such immunity, and they went out like a light, just as fast as Strake and Lambertini. Benson smiled grimly. He crossed to the desk and picked up the phone.

A switchboard operator somewhere in the building said. "Yes, Colonel Strake?"

"Give me Liberty 1-1111," Benson said, mumbling his words so that the operator should not recognize that it was not Colonel Strake.

Liberty 1-1111 was the number of Justice, Inc. In a moment, Cole Wilson answered.

Swiftly, Benson switched from English to Hindustani. That, he was sure, was a language which The Black Tulip's switchboard operator would not understand, even if she were listening in.

Concisely, he told Cole Wilson what had happened, and instructed him to inform Commander Anderson.

"Have Anderson raid this place at once," he ordered. "I'll break a master capsule outside in the main room and that will render them all unconscious—sort of set them all in Anderson's lap when he comes with the raiding squad. We don't want to give them a chance to destroy a single paper!"

Cole Wilson acknowledged the orders, still speaking in Hindustani, which he had learned during his five years as a surveyor for the British government in India. He rang off, and Benson opened his snuff box again, and took from it a large glass ampule, about the size of a four-ounce bottle. There was enough concentrated anaesthetic in there to render a whole town unconscious. He opened the door of the office, stepped out and hurled the capsule out onto the concrete walk. Then he stepped back inside, confident that MacMurtrie's solution would do its work well. He had instructed Cole Wilson to prepare wads of cotton saturated with the antidote, for the use of Commander Anderson's raiding squad, so that they would not succumb to the fumes.

Smiling a little, he set about the task of releasing the unconscious Forsythe from the strait jacket, and of untying Smitty's bonds.

Half an hour later the raid was complete, affording the Intelligence Service the greatest haul of spies since the beginning of the war, and including the spy master himself—Pieter van der Heusen, known as The Black Tulip.

Smitty was sitting up, half groggy, and rubbing his eyes. He looked up to see Benson and Nellie watching him amusedly.

"Wake up, big boy," said Nellie. "You done noble—even if you didn't know what you were doing. Justice, Inc. is going to give you a wooden medal!"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Smitty, suddenly coming to his full senses. He began to scramble up to his feet.

"Take it easy, big boy," said Nellie. "What's your hurry? You haven't any place to go—"

"That's what you think, beautiful!" Smitty told her with a grin. "I hope to tell you I have some place to go!"

"But where—"

"To see my girl friend!"

"Girl friend!" Nellie exclaimed with a sudden tinge of jealousy. "Since when—"

Smitty grinned. "Her name is Emma Puglese, and she's ten years old, and I have to go and tell her that the bad man who killed her dog is being punished!"

"Oh!" said Nellie Gray.

