

Caged Horror

A Red Finger Story

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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LONG-LIMBED, gawky, Ford Duane leaned against the dust-filmed doorjamb of his second-hand bookshop and blinked sleepily out at Fourth Avenue, asphalt-paved and deserted. Elsewhere New York was just awakening to its hectic evening of pleasure, but here the day was ended and the yellow glimmer of the storelight behind him was a futile gesture at inviting trade. Passersby now would be too few and too hurried to browse among Duane's musty shelves.

Yet, as a man's figure was silhouetted against a corner street lamp's blue-white cone, Ford's young-old face seemed almost imperceptibly to tighten, and the narrow slit of his eyes seemed to glimmer with a queer expectancy. An odd readiness for instantaneous action quivered in his gaunt body like a leashed

spring. It was as if some inner alarm suddenly had been set off. As if Ford Duane had heard the rattle of Death startlingly along this dormant street.

Now the distant form pounds purposefully along the sidewalk, comes opposite Duane's vantage point, pauses. Ford can see now that the man has a pipe in his mouth, that he is fumbling in a pocket of his topcoat, evidently for a match. He finds and strikes one, lifts it to the pipe bowl.

The tiny spark flares up; vanishes as the stranger pulls the flame into the tobacco he is igniting; flares again, vanishes once more. Queerly the little spurts of light seem to make a pattern of dots and dashes—the flashing letters of the Continental Code! P-A-T. And again P-A-T. Then the match is flicked away, and the smoker starts off once more on his interrupted progress toward a subway kiosk.

But the bookman, blue eyes aglow with a strange light, shoots a quick glance up and down the empty street, and shifts his position, lifting a long, angular arm to rest a hand on the doorjamb above his head. Those three letters, of all the alphabet's twenty-six, have time and again come to this somnolent bookshop and its languorous owner. And each time those letters came men have died, obscure soldiers in the underground war of spy against counter-spy, of saboteur against secret service agent, that never ends.

For a nation's existence depends on the secret, perilous labors of unsung heroes like Ford Duane; upon men like the nameless messenger who, getting Duane's signal that the coast is clear, turns at the next corner to cross Fourth Avenue and deliver whatever it is he has for the undercover ace. Something of extreme importance it must be, that it is being brought so openly. Little muscles make a lumping ridge along the pseudo-shopkeeper's gaunt jaw. The blood pulses more warmly in his veins, sings in his ears...

But that sound is not the blood in his ears. It is the sudden, shrill hum of a buzzing gas engine. A motorcycle flashes out from the sidestreet where the courier is crossing, skids around, strikes the man squarely. He arcs, a limp, sprawling figure, high in the air; thuds down head first, sickeningly. The motorcycle sputters a machine-gun-like protest at the collision; weaves drunkenly about, its goggle-masked rider fighting to control it. And before Duane can start his frantic dash the murder-machine has straightened, is hurtling away, arrowlike down the long dim reach of the Avenue, its roar fading out in the dull grumble of the unknowing city.

Ford pounds toward the flaccid dark heap in the gutter. If there is thought at all in his frozen brain at that moment it is that his unknown colleague may be dead, but that the message has not been touched, that it is still waiting for him. Unless it was verbal—unless it is locked forever in a silenced brain!

He drops to his knees beside that pitiful, broken heap, staring into the blanched face which is turned sightlessly toward him, and from mouth and nose smears of vivid scarlet tell their own tale. But it is the crushed-in skull that finishes any slight hope Duane might have that his comrade may still be alive. Ford's long, pallid fingers search swiftly through pockets, through the various secret interstices of the courier's daubed, torn, gore-clotted clothing. Nothing!

The undercover man rocks back on his heels. That, then, is why the murderer did not stop to search his victim!

A VIBRATION, an almost unheard footfall, the sixth sense those gain who walk always with danger, something, jerks Duane around, heaves him erect in a single lithe movement. Just in time! A shadow grows, changes into a man's shape, and hurtles at him. Ford glimpses the flicker of a drawn knife sweeping thirstily for his throat, glimpses a high-cheekboned, saffron face. His fist smashes that face and bone crunches under the steelknuckled impact. His left arm launches another pile-driver blow, and the assailant lifts on the end of the white man's arm. His weapon spirals away, clatters into darkness. The Mongolian sinks down alongside the dead American.

Duane's countenance is now a marble mask, expressionless but somehow dread-inspiring as the visage of a basilisk. A pulse throbs in each temple, and his pupils are tiny, feral. Not many who have seen his features so transformed have lived to remember it. And yet, somehow, he seems puzzled.

The knifer's open attack on him was unnatural, not consistent with the usual tactics of under-cover combat. If They had penetrated his disguise as an innocuous vender of old books, then They would have found some more subtle way to encompass his destruction. The assault must have been inspired by some other motive. For what other reason than to dispose of an interloper who interfered with the recovery of something for which this other agent had been slain?

But there isn't anything on the corpse, not where it could have been gotten at quickly and transmitted with a minimum risk of discovery. The poor fellow had been almost at his goal, would have had the missive at his fingertips...

At his fingertips! Involuntarily Duane glances to the dead hands, at the pipe that is still held in the left, at the fingers of the right hand, fastened so curiously over the bowl. Duane's tight lips twitch; he pulls the pipe gently from between those stiffening fingers.

The briar is still warm, the blackened flakes it cups are still smoldering... And from the left, heavy approaching footfalls thump.

Duane thrusts the pipe into his own pocket, brings his hand out with a small metal cylinder that goes to his lips. The sound of his breath evokes the piercing, blood-exciting shrillness of a police whistle. It seems to echo from out of the dark canyon of sleeping lofts and office buildings. Then a big-shouldered, blue-uniformed patrolman pounds into sight, running...

THE front door of Duane's Secondhand Bookshop was locked now, the volume-filled shelves behind it abandoned to black, dust-smelling darkness. In the rear of the long store, behind curtains slung over a sagging pole, Ford Duane sat on his creaking cot and looked drearily at the gnarled, large-bowled pipe.

He rapped out black ashes, a wet dottle, onto the floor, peered into the receptacle whence they came. There was only char within, and the single hole at the bottom through which smoke might enter the stem. Duane thrust his thumb into the bowl, hooked it and twisted. The inside of the bowl made a quarter turn, slid out of the shell within which it was contained.

The undercover man grunted with satisfaction. The inner bowl still thimble-like on his thumb, he poked a little finger into the place where it had been, fished out a folded bit of thin paper. He grunted in admiration. It was not only a good hiding place, but if a man was captured, a twist of that bowl while the pipe being smoked would burn up any incriminating evidence.

Then he was unfolding the message and squinted in amazement to find it in clear English, not in any of the many ingenious codes used by the Service of which he was a part. Haste! Desperate haste. Time to encipher, to decode the epistle was lacking; it must be written, delivered, read in desperate haste.

And acted then in greater haste than even the writer could have known. The corpse that would lie in the Morgue for weeks, and finally find an unnamed grave was in itself a sufficient warning.

A HUGE ocean liner warped into its pier. In the great, flood-lighted shed, trunks, valises, gaudily labelled grips were being piled around columns bearing placard letters, and their anxious-eyed owners were seeking them out, keys in hand. Seeking them out also were jutting-jawed men in peaked caps and blue uniforms—Uncle Sam's Customs inspectors.

A hand-truck, piled high with luggage, rumbled down a gangplank but did not stop at any of the lettered pillars. It rolled straight down the long concrete passage to the big iron gates at the pier-front, and the guard there swung those gates open for it. Black letters on a white ground, pasted on the three big trunks that the truck carried, explained its privilege of free passage:

Diplomatic Baggage

So these three trunks are passed out, quite uninspected, to the broad, cobbled expanse of West Street. And, following the loaded truck a short, wiry individual whose black eyes were slanted in a tinted, emotionless countenance, but who was as dapper as any other rising young diplomat, cat-footed silently out of shadows between the Apgaria's pier and that next to it.

The stalwart deckhand who brought the hand truck thus far tipped the device dexterously, so that the trunks slid off with a minimum of jar. He turns to the Oriental. „Needn't tell me ter be careful, sir. I could 'ear they was somefin bloody well aloive in that top box.“

The other's lips moved in a smile, but his eyes were somehow narrower, colder than before. „You are mithtaken,“ he lisped. „Oh, quite mithtaken.“ He thrust a slim hand at the seaman; a crisp, green bill passed from it to the cockney's capacious paw.

„Thankee, Sir. Guess I was a bit h'off thinkin' I 'eard a scutterin' an' athumpin' as I come along.“

„Yeth, you were,“ the diplomat sighed. „By the way, would you mind thtepping down to that thecond pier from here and telling my man I am ready for him?“

The deckhand took another look at the banknote, has seen the numeral in its corner, and he became all obsequiousness. „Yes, sir. Of course, sir.“

The Englishman starts off to the left, darkness swallows him. The yellow man made a peculiar gesture; a motorcycle pudded softly out of dimness to the right and stopped briefly beside the three trunks. One handlebar seemed a trifle askew, and there was a red stain at the front wheel's fork. The haunched-over, goggle-masked rider listens to a few swift words from the almond-eyed man, then slid away after the seaman who has talked too much.

Almost immediately after that a small black Ford truck purred into view, following the motorcycle out of the gloom. Three short, wiry men leaped from its front seat, slung the three trunks into the enclosed body, slammed doors and

jumped back to their seats. Curiously enough, the diplomat had vanished into the dark interior of the truck with those uninspected trunks.

When the first taxicabs started coming out of the Apgaria's pier the only sign left on West Street of all this was a single, untended handtruck. That wheelbarrow-like device was to be still there the next morning.

WITHIN the truck driven by the three yellow-skinned men, the darkness was absolute. But there was sound, queasy sound, and somehow blood-chilling. The scratching of tiny feet, and the shrilling of half-muffled squeals. The rubbing of fabric on fabric, and a low, infinitely evil chuckle.

Wood scraped. A small rectangle of light showed just above the truck floor. It faded and came again as the vehicle lumbered past street lamps. There was the tang of coffee and the heavier smells of meats, of cheeses. Feet padded softly and key grated in a lock, clicked over.

„Just a minute,“ a voice said, very low, but diamond hard and cold as steel itself. „You die, Maturo, if you make a move to lift the lid of that trunk!“

„Who... who are you?“ the diplomat whispered. „How did you get in here?“

The responding voice, coming out of blackness where the light from that opening did not reach, was emotionless, icy. „Look!“

A click, and faint radiance sprayed over an awesome form, a tall dark threatening shape. It towered seemingly higher than the very ceiling of the truck-body, a torso that was an amorphous fluttering black robe, bat-like; a gray-masked head through whose eye-twin slits menace glinted.

But that which focused Maturo's gaze was neither black body nor gray mask. It was the hand that held the snout of a revolver point-blank at him. A hand ebony-black in its glove—but for the finger curled around the trigger of that gun. That finger was not black but vividly, awesomely scarlet.

The Asiatic stared, his lips twitched, a name slid almost soundlessly from between them. „Red Finger!“

In Asia, in Europe, even in America itself there were those—governments or individuals—who would reward with untold wealth him who brought proof that Red Finger is no more. Many have tried to win that reward, but the very manner of their death remains to this day unknown. They vanished without trace, into the limbo of darkness.

„Yes!“ The steel-hard speech of the master counter-spy replied to the exclamation. „Yes, Maturo. You did not really think that you could liberate those rats inoculated with bubonic plague here in New York's provision district without running up against me? We are not asleep, Maturo. We never sleep.“

If the gray hungry rodents once got loose, through the little hole in the truckside and into the warrens here of grain and cheese and vegetables and meat, no earthly power could keep the dread plague from sweeping the country. Of all the schemes Red Finger had checkmated, this was the worst. Women, infants—none will be safe...

And after a month of the plague, that Oriental power could do what she would in a world where there was none but America strong enough to stand in the way of her mad dreams of conquest.

„No!“ The Mongol, still motionless, still leaning atop that chest of Black Death, let the monosyllable slide from his lipless mouth. „No. It was too—“

RED FINGER'S eyes glittered with triumph. „Get away from that trunk!“ His words dripped into the swaying silence of the moving vehicle. „Get back!“

Maturo paid no attention. „It was too much to hope for,“ he repeated, „that I might serve my country so much better than I planned... die, Red Finger!“ He heaved upright. The trunk-lid came open with his lifting arms and a noisome wave of scuttering, squealing furry gray bodies poured out. Snarling, viperish bearers of the Black Death.

Red Finger's gun flared. Maturo pitched head-first into the chest whence age-old horror was surging—his protective armor forever useless. But the rodents, scenting the food-odors, darted for the opening.

The American hurtled through the dimness. His lank body crashed down, along the truck-wall. The foremost rat squealed wildly as that weight pounded down on it; the counterspy felt the sharp nip of lethal teeth through the folds of his black robe. But that foremost rat could not get out through the hole in the truck-side. For Red Finger's flesh stopped the hole which Maturo has opened for his exit, for the exit of those rodents. Red Finger's flesh—and his soul—writhed in uncontrollable revulsion at the noisome wave of living foulness engulfing him.

Even then, Red Finger's senses were slipping under the sting, the constant, awful sting of the ravenous, angered vermin. The Orientals out front would soon discover what had happened, and release the rats. Even if they did not, someone would open the doors...

Red Finger's gun was still in his hand. He lifted it, and furred rodents scuttered away at the movement. He aimed the weapon carefully at the front of the dark truck body, low down. Too low to strike the men on the front seat beyond that unseen partition. Too low to strike anybody but the gasoline tank.

Orange flare sliced the darkness. Again the gun spat. The crash of Red Finger's shots was thunderous in the confined space, and the pungent, choking stench of gasoline filled it. The American's scarlet digit pressed the trigger again.

And the interior of that small truck was an instantaneous holocaust of flame, a blast of blue horror. Then there was no longer any truck at all. There was only a shattered heap of flaming wood and steel in the center of Gansevoort Street. There was only a shambles of charred small bodies of dead rats; of three flaming cadavers. And farther away, blasted to the sidewalk by the force of the explosion, a lank, writhing, flaming figure.

A teamster, inspired, lifted a huge box of damp sawdust in his brawny arms and dumped its contents over Red Finger. It was the one thing that could have saved the American's life—that and the thick wool of his robe, the padded felt of his mask. There was no saw-dust box near enough to save the saffron-skinned men.

Later, a mummy on a hospital bed, bandaged out of all human semblance, whispered weak words to a startled physician. Yes, there was a serum for the bubonic plague. In New York, enough perhaps for two or three cases, not more.

Enough to send Ford Duane back to his Fourth Street bookshop—months later—scarred, crippled, but ready to go again when the next call comes, as inevitably it must.



