

Dead's Red Finger

A Red Finger Story

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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THE sun was gone below the hot horizon, but its light still lingered, a curious red glow that lay heavily in the long canyon of Fourth Avenue and combined with a strange, breath-bated hush to make the July dusk somehow ominous.

Midway in one crimson-tinged block, Ford Duane stroked the back of a tattered volume with long, sensitive fingers. Tall and gaunt—studiously stooped over the bargain trays outside his dingy bookshop—his ascetic features veiled by their habitual drowsy calm, his eyelids sleepily half-closed, Duane appeared utterly withdrawn from the turmoil of a workaday world, utterly at peace. At peace? For this man death was a constant, grisly companion, the fear of death was in his every breath!

From far up the deserted, somnolent street, a raucous call sounded—unintelligible yet filled with an odd, disquieting excitement. Duane half-turned to the cry. To a watcher, if watcher there had been, the movement was indolent, meaningless. But at the corners of his thin nostrils, white spots showed, deepened. Hidden behind his slitted eyelids, tiny lights crawled like minuscule worms.

The lonely figure of a white-shirted newsboy, hurrying toward Duane down the darkening, empty vista, took on a fantastic, unreal aspect. His hoarse call seemed pregnant with dreadful meaning. „Papers! Final papers!“ The bookseller’s skin tightened and a grisly, unacknowledged dread prickled his spine.

The urchin reached him, twisted to him and stood spraddle-legged in front of him.

„Paper? Any these?“

Momentarily, Ford Duane stared uncomprehendingly at the youth who was thrusting a folded sheet fairly into his face. „*Post and Telegram*. Which one, mister?“ Then understanding exploded suddenly in the man’s brain. Carelessly, almost mechanically, he took the proffered newspaper and fumblingly paid for it. But behind his drowsy mask, his every nerve—every brain cell—was suddenly quiveringly alive.

„Final papers. Joinal! Telegram!“ The youngster’s shouts faded into the lamplit darkness. Duane stuffed his purchase into a sagging side-pocket of his gray alpaca coat, started on the nightly routine of dragging the bargain boxes within the pamphlet-hung door of his store. „Paper.“ The boy had said. „Any these?“ And then, „*Post and Telegram*.“ It was no accident that the phrases had been so oddly twisted, no accident that the initial letters of the first three words had been identical. P! A! T!

P.A.T. In many and various forms, those three letters had come to Duane; in a huckster’s shout, in an old man’s quavering offer of an ancient folio, in a beggar’s plea. Each time, inevitably, men had died in the night. Now again, the mysterious signal had come, and muscles bunched along the gaunt jaw of the dealer in dusty antique books, and in very blue eyes veiled by drowsy lids an eager light glowed.

Ford Duane locked the store door from within, wheeled to face the dim, mysterious gloom of the crowded bookstacks inside. His gaze warily probed the black pools of shadow between them, through which he slowly waded. He was like a taut wire, vibrant for any hint of danger. Even here, even in his own small store—above all in his own store—he must be infinitely on the alert.

At the rear of the shop, grime-encrusted curtains rustled, parted and swung shut. Duane’s hand found a familiar switch. It clicked and yellow light spilled from a pendant bulb to edge with harshness a touseled iron cot, a bare wooden table, a rickety chair. A steel shutter was tightly clamped over the single window, held there by a bar queerly too new, too thick for the stock of old books it ostensibly guarded...

DUANE jerked the newly-bought newspaper from his pocket, spread it on the table. Standing, he thumbed through page after page of the voluminous sheet. His feverish glance scanned each broadside, rejected it. Then, suddenly, breath hissed sharply from between his clenched teeth and the furious search was at an end.

It was an advertisement at which the bookseller stared! Crudely drawn, a tailor squatted crosslegged on a ship's bridge and sewed a patch on a limp pair of trousers. And beneath was the caption, black against wiggly waves on which the pictured craft rode:

PINCUS: ABLE TAILOR

Once more the fateful initials P-A-T! Once more! But below them was a hodge-podge of selling talk, a conglomerate of forced alliteration and mixed metaphor. What meaning could there be in this claptrap for Duane?

Yes. Able Tailor, not Able Seaman. If you want to safely sail the suspicious seas of style, men, whatever your nationality or politics you will not resort to artisans whose skill is unknown but will select the famous Abe Pincus captain of your sartorial ship. Wherever well-dressed men are observed, there his navy blue serge suits are seen, made from material guaranteed all wool and a yard wide. Investigate his values...

Duane's examination of the advertisement was brief. He shoved the paper aside, clearing the top of the table. White-scrubbed, the expanse of pine-wood was exactly the same as that of a thousand other cheap kitchen tables worn by long use. Exactly? Some manipulation of the man's fingers at the edge of that top, too fast to be clearly seen, and a thin, rectangular panel of wood lifted at the very center, as if pushed from beneath. Ford pried at it with quivering finger-nails, it hinged upward like a lid, and a shallow recess was revealed beneath.

The man bent over the table, staring into that secret pocket. There was only one thing in the depression, something *outré* as the mode of concealment itself. Extricated, it was revealed as a flat piece of gray paper, thick and stiff. It might almost have been half of a shirtboard, except that it was pierced by a number of rectangular holes, each an eighth of an inch wide and about a half-inch long. These perforations, though parallel, were placed apparently at random—made no appreciable pattern.

Duane slapped down the lid of the hiding place and it sank level with the rest of the tabletop. The line of separation was altogether invisible. The next instant, the place where the mysterious receptacle had been was once more covered by the news sheet, the ad that so poinantly intrigued Duane's attention uppermost.

The bookseller picked up the perforated cardboard, laid it over that advertisement. Some lines in the illustration seemed to match faint traces, on the gray stencil and these Ford matched up meticulously. Words stared through the holes. The man's lips tightened to a straight, grim line as he read:

—suspicious—men—nationality—unknown—observed—navy—yard—
Investigate—

„All right, mister!“ A suave voice was velvety behind Duane. „You're covered!“

The bookseller froze. Only his hands were alive, tightening on the table-edge.

For an infinite moment in the little chamber there was an appalled silence as panic and despair gripped Duane's soul. They had tracked him down at last—his implacable enemies. His sanctuary was violated, his masquerade discovered. The long game was at an end, finally—irretrievably at its inevitable end!

„Good evening!“ Duane’s voice was low-pitched, steady. But he stared straight ahead of him as he spoke. His slightest movement, he knew, would bring a bullet crashing into his spine and these last few instants of life were somehow too sweet to lose.

„Keep your hands way out from your sides and turn around. Slowly.“ There was excitement in the intruder’s tones and gloating triumph. Half the Chancelleries of Europe had laid a price upon the head of Ford Duane. The American ace in the underground war that eternally is waged between spy and counterspy, saboteur and secret agent—his slayer would gain at one stroke honor, and wealth. „Turn around, I say!“

HIS arms angling out stiffly, Duane obeyed. At one side of the cubicle he called home, the narrow wall had apparently slid aside to disclose a dark, shelf-lined niche beyond. Within this crouched a wizened, bent creature. In a taloned, grimy hand, a blue-barreled automatic snouted at Ford. Beady eyes peered at him from beneath a shock of unkempt, shaggy black hair. The fellow’s shabby clothing was dust-smearred; there was a streak of soot across one sunken cheek. Something of a rat’s vileness clung to him, and all a rat’s cruel savagery.

Duane’s mouth twitched wryly. „Feodor Dvatich,“ he exclaimed, softly. His last hope was gone that this might be an ordinary stickup—and with it the last need for pretence. „Evidently I was too trusting the night I recovered the chart of the M-6 mobilization plan from you and trusted your promise to leave America forever.“

Dvatich’s lips curled back from yellow, pointed teeth in an evil leer. „Fifty thousand dollars a certain power would have paid me for those plans. You robbed me of that. But now your death will give me many times that, hein?“

„Perhaps.“

„Of a certainty. Feodor Dvatich would otherwise have not wasted his time spying on other spies for the sole purpose of watching for you to appear so that he might track you down.“

Reluctant admiration sounded in Duane’s tones. „So that is how...“

„That is how I discovered your lair and the secret entrance to it.“ Yellow teeth showed again in a vainglorious smile. „Yes. That is how I succeeded where others have failed.“ He broke off, the muzzle of his pistol juttred toward the American. „But enough. If you believe in prayer, pray now, mister, because I fire when I count three. One—!“

Incredible how swift thought can be when only seconds remain in which to think! There was nothing to regret. In his few short years, Duane had packed excitement enough for a centenarian, had had innumerable narrow escapes. His luck had run out, that was all.

„Two—!“

He would like just once to have had his country know what it was he had done for it—just once to have been praised publicly, publicly rewarded. This working in the dark, receiving disguised messages—Good Lord! There was one on his table now! If he kicked out now, it might be days before the little gray man in Washington knew it. Meantime...

Half the Atlantic fleet was in the Navy Yard basin! Were they in danger! Danger he was being sent to avert?

„Thr—!“ Duane’s long leg lashed out, a released spring caught a rung of the cane-bottomed chair, flung it in an explosive arc to crash against Dvatic’s chest. Gun-bark blazed orange flame, something zizzed past the tall man’s cheek, and he had flung himself after that chair. His flailing fist splashed a yellow-toothed face into bloody pulp. The smoking automatic blazed once more, once only. Agony squealed in that hidden room—the sound was hardly human. The sudden flurry of action was over. A broken, unmoving body lay crumpled on the bloodstained floor.

Ford Duane’s eyes were hard, expressionless as agate, his face carved marble as he came erect, lifting the limp corpse of the would-be assassin and throwing it over one shoulder. The drowsy dealer in second-hand books was completely obliterated, replaced by a grim-featured, tight-jawed robot who stalked into the niche whence the killer had appeared. With his free hand, Duane tugged at one of the shelves within, it moved toward him, the wall to which it was attached came with it. Behind, wooden stairs, slick with greasy damp, dipped down into darkness. The tall man and his grisly burden went slowly down into that darkness.

A half-hour later, Ford Duane was once more stooped over the gray cardboard stencil, once more reading the words outlined. There was no sign of what had so recently occurred in this back-room space—no stain on the linoleum-covered floor. No change, except that a picture had been moved—was it to conceal a bullet-hole?

To one side of the advertisement that Duane studied, inconspicuous headlines topped a shipnews item buried inconspicuously on an inside page of the newspaper:

ALL EUROPE AN ARMED ENCAMPMENT—
PROPAGANDA HERE WORSE THAN 1914!

Returning Ambassador Says
Only American Neutrality Prevents War!

A SINGLE light burned high up in the archway of the Brooklyn Navy Yard’s Sand Street gate. Within the sharp-cut cone of its glare a stalwart marine stood stiffly erect, rifle aslant across a shoulder brightly blue. Lithe, young and strong in body he was, this soldier of the sea, but the outlines of his broad-planed features were somehow blurred where they should have been sharp and clean. Paint pouches showed under his troubled eyes and a faint hint of looseness touched—just touched—his thick-lipped mouth.

Darkness invested the sleazy dwellings facing the yard’s high wall; a darkness and a silence that were yet somehow creepily, foully alive. The marine’s glance slid across to them. It singled out one drab tenement, and his lips twisted with bitterness and distaste.

His hand tightened on his rifle’s butt. The shadows in the unlit vestibule of that draggled house had suddenly seemed to move. They were moving! The darkness there split; an inky blot detached itself, was gliding across the cobbles. It disappeared in the deeper blackness of the nearer wall, but a hiss of sound told of movement there. The scrape of fabric sliding against brick came nearer, stopped.

„Johnee!“ The voice from just beyond the gateway lamp’s illumination was low-pitched, guarded, but there was a lilting feminine sweetness in it that willy-nilly thrilled in the young soldier’s veins. „Johnee! Come here!“

The marine was a motionless, graven image, save that in his right temple, a pulse thumped, thumped. „Johnee!“ the voice came again, demanding—and seductive. „Just one leetle meenute!“

There was promise in the dulcet accents, promise, and obscurely, threat.

Private John Boles seemed to fight a force from outside himself, to fight unavailingly. His feet shuffled as it turned him toward the summons, as it jerked him out of the glare into blinding lightlessness.

„Johnee, heart of my heart!“ A warm body was close against him, warm lips were reaching for his. Redolence of woman’s hair, of a woman infinitely desirable, was dizzyingly in his nostrils. His free arm was tight around a soft, palpitant form...

And swung it, almost roughly then, away from him. „Lola! Damn it! I told yuh to stay away from here! Want to get me court-martialed?“

The girl squirmed in his hold, sobbed. „Oh Johnee! You deed not theenk of courtmartials biffore, whan you tell me you luf me. Deed you lie?“

„No!“ The word was a groan, wrested from his light throat. „I didn’t lie. I was nuts about yuh...“

„Then whyee...?“

„Till yuh propositioned me las’ night to let some guy slip through the gate. I shoullda turned yuh in, Lola.“

„But Johnee! Eet was the money I was theenking of, the money he would pay. Just theenk, you could buy your deescharge an’ we could be married. Wance more I beg you...“

„Yuh—!“

Still low-pitched, almost inaudible, still the marine’s expletive rammed Lola’s whispered words down her throat. „If you pull that once more, I’ll—“

Thud! The impact of the sandbag against the back of Private John Boles’ skull was almost soundless. He crumpled, like a ripped flour sack, and as he slid slowly to the unseen ground, a hand came over his shoulder to grasp his rifle so that it would not clatter an alarm on the concrete.

„Oh, you’ve keeled...!“

„Shut up, fool, or you’ll give the show away!“ This new voice was gruff, even in undertone, and vibrant with urgency. „Help me with his clothes, quick. We have only five minutes till his relief is due!“

FIVE minutes later, to the dot, the huge portal opened for the Sergeant of the Guard and the marine who was to take Private Boles’ place. The waiting sentry was not quite in his proper position, so that the shadows of the gate’s embrasure fell across his features. But he presented arms punctiliously, about-faced smartly at the Sergeant’s „Dismiss!“ and strode off into the yard’s obscurity.

The Sergeant yawned sleepily. This guard-post business was just red-tape in peace time, he thought. Just an excuse to keep a man up nights.

Huge cranes, mountainous derricks, were interlaced against a leaden, overcast sky. Between towering workshop structures impenetrable darkness weltered, hiding the now stealthy progress of the man who wore John Boles’ uniform. The marine barracks were far behind him now. What business could

he have in this portion of the yard? What business had those others here, for that matter, those two furtive figures that suddenly joined him, as though spawned by the tar-barrel murk? A low chuckle sounded from one of the skulking trio.

„That was too easy. If you had had a half-hour more, you could have let an army in and no one the wiser for it.“

„We are enough,“ the low-voiced reply came. „That which you carry makes us more powerful than any army.“

The row of tall buildings between which they had been hurrying fell away. A dim nimbus of light encompassed them. The gray glow of the city reflected from the overarching cloud dome. They were in an open space...

„Careful,“ the apparent leader said sharply. „Watch your feet.“

That halted the prowlers—on the edge of what seemed a cliff dropping down and down in terraced descent. Far below there was a tiny glint of water. Vision cleared, and it became evident that they were standing on the brink of a gigantic, man-built basin. Ahead, a vast gray bulk loomed, like some unbelievably enormous prehistoric monster asleep in the depression.

„The Missitucky gentlemen!“ the putative marine announced. „Pride of the American navy!“ There was something obscene in the way he lipped the words, something suggestive of a gourmet about to devour a Lucullan feast. A murmur came from his companions, the smacking of lips that drooled lewd anticipation.

A chaos of long timbers jutted out from the sides of the drydock, holding the dreadnaught erect in its ways. From a few paces to the left, a spiderly gangplank soared out over vacancy to reach the battleship's deck. Somehow in the drab dimness over there, the measured thump of pacing feet sounded. The shadowy figure of a lonely deck watch appeared from around a turret, pounded slowly aft.

„All right, G-X, take him.“ The leader's snapped command was scarcely audible, but one of the others dropped to his knees. His arms lifted. He was aiming a squat, grotesquely thick gun. The sound it made was only the dull ffft of an air rifle, but aboard the Missitucky, the solitary sailor pitched forward, pudded down, asprawl.

„Quick! Before anyone sees him!“ Three silhouettes flitted across the gangplank stark against a leaden sky. They clotted momentarily about that pathetic blotch on the vessel's deck. Then they were out of sight from the dockside and nothing broke the wide, faintly luminous expanse of steel...

For minutes there was no sign of a living presence there. Then, once more the measured thump of pacing feet sounded and from behind the forward turret, the dim-described figure of a sailor appeared to pound slowly aft in the appointed round of the dreadnaught's deck watch...

DOWN through the silent, deserted hold of the battleship, two stealthy skulkers descended, their steps almost inaudible on the steel companionways. He who was garbed as a marine led the way, his whole frame vibrant as a poisonous bushmaster snake tracking its prey. The other, more timorous in his progress, was shapeless in the voluminous topcoat he wore despite the heat. He was carrying something, a large box—carrying it gingerly as though he were in a deathly fear of it.

„Here we are!“ the fake marine breathed. In the dim reaches of the lowermost hold, illuminated by a single pendant light, the vast loom of the vessel’s engine-room stretched away. „Get busy!“

The other man lurched past him, deposited his mysterious burden close against the base of a gigantic Diesel engine, did something with shaking hands. A sharp metallic click splintered the silence, was repeated, became a ticking.

„All set, H-T?“ he asked. „You’re sure?“

His vis-à-vis turned. „Sure. In twenty minutes there will be no more Missitucky.“

„And the explosion that destroys it will set the world aflame. Look here!“ He held out the strange metallic fragment. „When they find this in the wreckage, they will be sure they know which nation inspired the deed.“ With the muzzle of his revolver he pointed out words stamped into the metal: „*Creusot Frères et Cie.*“

The other chuckled. „I’ll say they will be! What price *no entangling alliances* then?“

„A hundred for a pfennig!“ The supposed marine bent swiftly to place that lying piece of evidence on the floor. „These aloof Americans will be begging us to ally ourselves with them, and we will—on our own terms. But we’d better get out of here in a hurry. Come!“ He turned to the hatchway behind him...

And he did not take the pace he had intended! A tall, unearthly figure was advancing out of its darkness, as though spawned by deathly night.

But that which froze the saboteurs into fear-struck rigidity was the one, black-gloved hand that was visible, clutching a wide barreled, queer weapon. Not the weapon itself. These prowlers of the dark were, after all, brave men. But it was the finger that curled about the trigger, the scarlet finger that told them who it was that had tracked them down. The dread name dripped from the spy leader’s white lips:

„Red Finger! *Gott im Himmel! Es ist der rote Finger!*“

Yes, they were brave men. No cowards take part in the secret war. But to see before them the avatar of their trade—to be caught in flagrante delicto by HIM was enough to break nerves of the stoutest villain, enough to make the hottest blood turn to water in gelid veins.

„Red Finger!“ The planter of the infernal machine whispered it. „God have mercy!“

THEN silence, through which cut the tick, tick, tick of the bomb. Silence for a long, accusing minute, while Red Finger stood statuesque, ominous, and the destroyers cringed spineless before him. Silence, till a husky, intonationless voice dripped from behind the gray mask:

„Yes, Adolf Mauerer. Red Finger. You did not really hope to escape me, did you?“

The American’s strange gun was rock-steady, jutting pointblank at the others. „Shut off that machine, Mauerer. Shut it off.“ His command thudded, word by slow word, into an atmosphere somehow unnaturally thick.

H-T started to move, but somehow Mauerer’s shoulder was in his way, halting him. „Impossible, Red Finger,“ the latter responded, in a dead, flat voice. „Once started, the bomb cannot again be stopped!“

Tick. Tick. Tick. It was as if Death’s heels clicked, approaching slowly, inexorably. Tick. Tick. Tick.

„No?“ There was no emotion in the masked man's tones. „Then we stay here, we three, till it explodes.“

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Mauerer was immovable, indomitable as the implacable enemy who faced him. Tick-tick-tick. But his companion's frame was taken by an ague, by a shiver, imperceptible at first, that grew more and more violent, until...

„No,“ a wild, thin shriek rang out. „No! I will not die! Ach Gott! I will not die like dot!“ He twisted, Mauerer struck at him viciously. The blow staggered him, he plunged to the floor. A soft hiss sounded from Red Finger's gun, a jet of fine mist spat from it, sprayed Mauerer's face. The spy-leader lurched away, clawing at his throat. Crumpled. H-T was crawling across the deck, writhing toward the mechanism that ticked Death's approach. He reached it, scabbled at it...

Red Finger whirled to the pound of a footfall on a steel companionway. A sailor was coming down the stairs, a sailor from beneath whose canted cap blonde hair strayed. The American's tension relaxed, he started to turn away.

„Fritz,“ the man at the infernal machine squealed. „Get him! Kill him!“

A knife flashed into the sailor's hand and he launched from the stairs in a wild leap at Red Finger, the lethal steel arcking. Red Finger's gun spat mist again.

The sailor stumbled, slid lifelessly to lie in a crumpled heap over the body of his leader. Red Finger jerked around to the last of the trio. „Shut it off!“ he barked. „Or we'll all go up.“

The man's shaking hand tugged at the apparatus. „It's stuck,“ he whimpered. „I cannot push the lever over!“

He popped to his feet, his mouth aslaver, his eyes utterly insane. „Let me out,“ he squealed. „Let me out!“ He hurtled toward the hatchway, his face twisted to a semblance of ratlike ferocity, hurtled past Red Finger. The American let him go, dropped to his knees before the ticking bomb. There were seconds left, perhaps he could yet get it stopped. He had seen what the other had been trying to do...

The retreating footsteps of the man whom fear had driven mad resounded loudly up the steel stairway, but it did not drown out the awful tickticktick of the infernal machine. Red Finger tore at the switches, ripped his gloves. His fingers dripped blood. Tick-tick-tick...

„Halt!“ A sharp challenge, distance-muffled, rang out. The counterspy was conscious of the pound of many feet, far above. Good Lord! There were men on board now, they were coming down here, they would be caught in the explosion. He had to—get this damn' thing—stopped.

„Ah!“ Suddenly it was done. The obdurate lever slid over, the ticking was stilled. A warrant-officer pounded into the engine room, revolver in hand. Red Finger rose to meet him, hands above his head. „Keep those others out,“ he snapped, „till I have a chance to talk with you.“

THE morning sun burned down into the canyon that is Fourth Avenue. Ford Duane sat in a broken-backed swivel chair in the doorway of his second-hand bookshop, and yawned. Then he continued his languid perusal of the morning newspaper. One item seemed to arrest his attention momentarily.

„Early this morning,“ it said, „the harbor police found the bodies of three men floating in the Bay. The bodies were clothed only in underwear. There were no

marks of violence or any other indication of how they had died or who they were.“

Duane yawned again. It was lucky that the commandant of the Navy Yard had listened to reason. A trial, even a military trial, would inevitably have involved the name of Mauerer's nation. Skilled propagandists would have ferreted out the truth, published it...

It was peaceful here in the hot sun...

