

# **Death Rides the Sound**

## **A Red Finger Story**

**by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949**

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THE shabby stores along lower Fourth Avenue are somehow furtive despite the apparent frankness of their decrepit outside—boxes of „Bargains in Used Books.“ A film of gritty dust grimes these bedraggled offerings, smuts the unwashed window-fronts, seeps into the gloomy interiors of the shops and spreads gray haze over the absorbed browsers and somnolent attendants within. Those who frequent the vicinity know, or think they know, that its air of hangdog stealth cloaks neither sly criminality nor high intrigue, that it is rather the pitiable camouflage of outlived writings, and of men who have never known life.

Nowhere, perhaps, is there a drowsier back-eddy of musty quiet and stagnant uneventfulness than this. Yet, over one of the drab shops in this sleepy row the scythe of Death is suspended by a spider-filament taut to the

breaking point. The merest whisper of suspicion into the ear of one of a half-score thin-lipped, stony-faced men sitting behind the guarded doors of secret rooms in far-off capitals would map that thread. The slightest hint reaching one of a hundred others; ghostly wraiths waging unacknowledged war in the dim underways of a world ostensibly at peace; and eager fingers would reach thousands of miles to sever its tenuous fibre. For something more than the life of a man hangs by that easily parted strand. A Nation's fate depends on its strength.

Death, and the fear of death are silent, invisible sentinels at either side of the pamphlet-hung doorway in which Ford Duane folded his lanky limbs into a broken-backed swivel chair. Beneath their drooping lids his very blue eyes freeze suddenly to icy points and the scalp tightens under his brown shock of unruly hair. The glance of a passerby has lingered a fraction of a second too long on his spare frame!

Lithe muscles coil like steel springs, thin nostrils flare imperceptibly... but the paunchy man with the rusted-black derby shambles on and Duane relaxes. He knows there is nothing to fear from this particular individual; but how he knows, he cannot tell you. There is a sixth sense common to a hunter and hunted by which they recognize each other's presence. And as both hunter and hunted, Ford Duane possesses that sense to a marked degree...

His head turns slowly to a tinny rattle from up the avenue. Its source is revealed as a leisurely approaching pushcart, piled high with gleaming kitchen utensils and shoved by a stocky, shirt-sleeved and sweating man. As Duane spies the portable store a raucous voice calls out: „Pails, axes, teenvare. Pails, axes, teenvare.“ The corner of the bookseller's mouth quirks.

A bent old woman, Victorian bonnet fastened to the straggly gray remnants of her hair by that almost obsolete instrument, a hat-pin, appears from the interior of his shop. One almost transparent claw grips a dog-eared volume of Jane Porter's Thaddeus of Warsaw and a professional gleam comes into Duane's eye as he slouches erect, scenting a sale. „I can let you have that for...“ he begins, but his face falls as the supposed customer squeaks, „Oh, I just want to get a pail from the man; my old one sprang a leak this morning.“

„By Jove,“ the bookseller exclaims, „so did mine! Maybe we can get them cheaper if one of us buys two at a time. Here, you wait and let me get them.“

„Pails, axes, teenvare,“ the peddler's shout is repeated. He has other items in his cart, but his cry is unvarying. Does it convey any meaning to Duane? Is it merely coincidence that the same initial letters recur now in the pushcart man's shout? „Pails, axes, teenvare.“ Perhaps. But the shopkeeper's stroll to the curb is too nonchalant, too open to have an ulterior meaning. Duane scarcely glances at the pails the peddler hands him at last, certainly they are twins, and the one he turns over to the old woman in exchange for her twenty-two cents is taken at random.

DUANE moves through his shop with no apparent haste. He pauses to straighten a shelf and the shining bucket whose bail he has thrust over his arm clangs against its edge. But, veiled by the lax droop of their lids, Duane's eyes slide over the idlers in the shadows, discreet challenge in their hazed depths. Only the old, familiar figures lurk in the shadows. A tiny muscle twitches in Duane's smooth cheek and he reaches the half-open curtain swinging before the narrow alcove. There, only a rumpled camp cot and a two-burner gas plate

indicate his living quarters. He turns to the right, is momentarily hidden from the store-room beyond. A slender wall of tight-packed books moves suddenly on well oiled hinges, swings back into place. The incident is lightning-fast. The musty alcove is just as it was before. Except that Ford Duane has vanished from it.

Behind that wall of shelved books is a cramped, windowless cubicle, not more than a yard square. When Duane seats himself on a high stool and sets the pail, top down, on a narrow wooden ledge attached to the inner wall, a fair-sized rat would have trouble finding room to squeeze in. A switch clicks and a powerful light, high up in the ceiling, pours down its radiance. The man's sharp-edged face is no longer impassive. His eyes are ablaze with excitement and eagerness, his thin lips half parted. His long-fingered hand trembles slightly as he pulls out a drawer beneath the shelf and extracts from it a jeweler's magnifying glass.

Fitting the lens into his right eye, Duane bends over the tin bucket, and scrutinizes its upturned bottom. Faint breath hisses from between his teeth and his hands tighten on the shelf edge. But the powerful light beating down on the tin disk reveals only a number of almost microscopic indentations, scattered at random over its shiny surface, tiny, pointed scratches such as no polished surface can escape, no matter how carefully it be handled.

The pseudo-bookman reaches for the drawer again, brings out a pencil, a sheet of paper, and another object. It is a disk of transparent celluloid, and as Duane places it on the pail bottom he sees that it is engraved with a series of close, concentric circles and radiating lines. Around the outermost circumference a series of letters are etched, and a circular space at the center is blank, except for three scratches very like those on the pail, triangularly arranged. Strangely enough a little juggling of the celluloid makes the three tiny markings in the center of tin coincide with the trio on the transparent disk. Duane grunts with satisfaction.

Each of the other scratches, seen through the engraved film, falls exactly within one of the tiny arcs marked off by the whitish circles and straight lines, and no two are between the same two circles. Duane catches up his pencil and jots down letters, swiftly.

In seconds, he is staring at this cabalistic line:

SBTRS \* PLN \* DSTRY \* GSMSK \* PLT \* B \* T

and his face is suddenly bleak, his mouth a straight, thin gash. His pencil moves again, swiftly, putting in omitted vowels:

SABOTEURS PLAN DESTROY GASMASK PLANT B—T

Duane's lids narrow to hairline slits, and two white spots appear either side his pinched nostrils. Why has the mysterious individual known only as „T“, head of the American Counter-espionage Service, sent it to him?

For a long time there is no movement in the hidden chamber, no slightest sound except the deep, even breathing of a man sunk in deep thought. On the ancient continent that lies over the blue curve of the earth and sea armies are on the march, their grim weapons charged and ready, while the dictators who have set them moving mouth-phrases about „usual maneuvers“ that they do

not expect to be believed. The ranks are forming, but in each bristling front there is a vacant space. Holocaust waits for America, and America, remembering what Europe would have her forget, smiles with veiled eyes and says quietly, „Not again. Once was enough!“

On a still more ancient continent another race waits with inscrutable patience for the Day when the lowering Western sun shall be bathed with the hue of blood. But some among them are not content to wait...

IN MOONLESS, misty darkness two figures paced the lightless margin of Long Island Sound. High above them the vault of a great bridge sprang in a soaring arch, behind them gigantic cylindrical tanks loomed ominously. Squat buildings leered at them from red-glowing windows, seeming somehow diabolical in the murk. But those were only the huge containers for illuminating gas that supply New York, the fires that encarnadined those windows only distilled that gas in long iron retorts of heated coal. Why then are blue-barreled rifles slanting across the shoulders of these slow-moving sentries; why should the men peer so tensely into the low-lying river haze? Why are soldiers on sentry go with loaded guns in a land at peace with all the world?

„Gees, Sarge,“ one of the guards voiced this very question. „I’m gettin’ the gimmicks watchin’ for somethin’—I don’t know what. What’s the big idea, haulin’ the battalion off Governor’s Island an’ shippin’ us over here? Labor trouble?“

„No. No-o-o.“ The free hand of the other rasped the graying bristles on his square jaw. „I dunno as I ought to tell you, but if you can keep your lips buttoned mebbe I will. You should ought to know what you’re looking for. Know what you’re guardin’, Jenkins?“

„I’m askin’ you.“

The sergeant’s voice was a hoarse whisper. „Gas-masks—six million gas-masks!“

„Yeah! What would we do with six million gas-masks? Hell, that’s enough for every man, woman an’ child in Noo Yawk.“

„That’s just who they’re for.“

The private chuckled. „Good stuff! But I ain’t a rookie. C’m on, what’s th’ straight dope?“

„I jest give it to yuh.“

„But what th’ hell would we want to be puttin’ masks on civvies for? Women an’ kids ain’t goin’ to do no fightin’!...“

„But they’re goin’ to git gassed in the next war. Judas Priest, wake up! Don’t yuh read the papers?“

„Aw, those tabloids is all guff!“

„You’d know if you’d been on guard at staff meetings, like me. I’m tellin’ yuh the next war is goin’ to see whole cities wiped out by gas before we get a chance to shoot off a rifle. But Uncle Sam ain’t asleep. We’ve got gas- mask plants an’ warehouses all along both seaboards, an’ at the first sign of trouble the masks gets put out to everybody, damn quick. This Plant B’s the biggest. Maybe they got a tip-off that it’s goin’ to be blown up or somethin’ tonight. That’s why we’re here. Orders is take any suspicious characters alive so that we can find out what country’s trying the stunt.“

Jenkins was convinced. „Hell,“ he spat. „Any country pulls anything like that, we’re going to hop all over ‘em. We ain’t goin’ to take any more Black Toms layin’ down!“

„Put my name on that detail too. I—Hell! What’s that?“

The sergeant whirled, his rifle barrel slapping into his left palm, its butt jerking to his shoulder. „Who is there?“ he challenged, the sharpness of his voice flattening at the river-mist.

The private was taut, his gun also at the ready. „Whatja hear?“ he muttered from the corner of his mouth.

„Sounded like an oar. But I don’t see nothin’. Guess mebbe it was a water rat...“

„Or some sailor heaving garbage overboard from that Eyetalian tramp over there by Ward’s Island. Wonder to me they let her stay there.“

„We can’t tip our hand by shyin’ every boat away from here. That would be a dead giveaway. Now, as I was sayin’... G-gaw...“

The sergeant choked suddenly; the rifle dropped; his hands came up to claw at his throat, were reddened by a gush of blood from a gaping hole where an instant before his neck had been. He slumped to the gravel, the private’s lifeless form thudded atop him. And gray mist rolled over two twisted, gory corpses; a hazy mist-shroud that hid them with a softness more merciful than that of the men who had done this thing.

For an instant the night held its breath in shocked silence, then stone grated against wood. The shadowy keel of a rowboat dug into the gravelly beach. It rocked a bit, and two stocky figures came over the gunwale, waded ashore. One slithered to the entangled bodies, bent swiftly to them, rose as swiftly. „Both dead. That was fine shooting, Dominic.“

„And the silencer worked beautifully; the alarm has not been given.“ The other hesitated a moment, then went on. „But I do not like it, Angelo. I tell you I do not like it. There is no war between our country and theirs. I am befouled with the murder of two brave soldiers.“

„Dominic!“ Angelo’s voice was sharp. „You forget yourself. It is not for us to question orders, for us only to obey. Our leader, the all-wise, has set this task for us. But hurry! We have ten minutes to get our bombs from the boat, plant them and return to the Santa Maria.“

Dominic still temporised. „There were two sentries, not one as we were told. Perhaps there has been a leak, and the plant itself is also more thoroughly guarded.“

„Bah! If I had known that you were such a coward I should have come alone. One of these is a sergeant, he but chanced to be here at the crucial moment. Come.“

The two saboteurs returned to grope in the dark bulk of their boat. They straightened, each lifting a shadowy bag. And froze as cold, hard words vibrated behind them.

„Stay just that way, you two.“ That sudden voice was keen-edged with the threat of sudden death. „Put those bags down in the boat, gently, and your guns beside them.“

The prowlers dipped to obey, lifted again. „Now turn, slowly.“ Oddly the speaker seemed as anxious to avoid being heard as they themselves had been, to judge from the repression of his tone, pitched so as to reach them and be heard no further. They came around stiffly till they faced their captor.

HE SEEMED at first a part of the swirling fog, so blurred were his outlines. A shapeless gray felt was pulled low over his forehead, a gray mask covered his face so that only the glint of narrowed eyes were visible through its slits. His figure was formless in a black cloak that fell from his shoulders to the ground. But that which tightened the spies' scalps and bristled the short hairs at the base of their skulls with superstitious fear was the steady hand that held a revolver point-blank at their heads.

It was black, that hand, black-gloved except for the long finger that curled around the weapon's trigger. That was scarlet; even in the misty dark they could see that glaring scarlet as if it had been dipped in fresh blood. And a name dripped like blood from Angelo's bloodless lips. „Red Finger!“

The mask head nodded, and it seemed almost as if the hidden mouth smiled humorlessly. „Red Finger,“ it assented, savoring the dread that name inspired among all who moved in the murky underworld of international intrigue.

A second's silence intervened, accentuated by the greasy lap of water along the rowboat's keel and the far-off melancholy hoot of a ferry. Then, „Who gave you the orders for—this?“

„Capit—“ Dominic began, his voice thinned by fear, but Angelo's hard-driven elbow into his side choked off the words. „Try and find out!“ the more virulent of the two said. „We have failed, and death is our reward, but we shall never talk. You will save time by turning us over to your police.“

Red Finger's black shoulders shrugged. „That, precisely, is what I shall not do. But you are small fry; I have no more time to waste on you.“ The scarlet digit twitched, twice. No report shattered the river quiet, but two jets of fine spray spurted from the muzzle of his gun, to become a vaporous cloud about the saboteurs' heads. The spies collapsed like two ripped meal-bags, thudded to the ground, lay motionless.

AT ONCE the counter-spy leaped into furious action. His lithe figure sprang forward, in an instant he had heaved the unconscious saboteurs into their tiny craft, and shoved it off and whipped into it. He let it slide out into the Sound with the momentum of his initial shove, let the current take it. The fog closed around the boat. There was a dull plop into the water, then a second. Those particular bombs would lie at the bottom of the East River till Judgment Day. A tiny, hooded light flickered over a swarthy face; touched ascetic lips, a close-trimmed, black mustache; went out. A black cloak fluttered overside, a gray mask followed...

Minutes later a limp body, clad only in shirt and drawers, bulked along the rowboat's gunwale. „God take your soul, Dominic Liscio. You did your duty as you saw it.“

The river chuckled gruesomely as it clasped yet another flaccid bundle to its muddy bosom. Then muffled oars dipped softly into the stream and the boat's bow turned toward the loom of the Santa Maria, until the rowboat reached and thudded against its rust-streaked hull.

From the deck of the tramp steamer a cautious voice called, in Italian, „Who is it?“

„Liscio,“ the whispered reply came in perfect Piedmontese, and in the voice of the man whose corpse now bobbed somewhere on the Sound's scummed flood.

„Dominic Liscio. Get us on board quickly. Angelo has met with an accident, he's unconscious. Help me with him.“

An unintelligible exclamation came from above, feet thudded. The man in the boat heard an authoritative rumble, curiously guttural for an officer of an Italian vessel. Then a Jacob's ladder coiled down, and he had fastened the boat to its end, had lifted Angelo to reaching hands, toward a flashlight's glare above, and was himself stepping on to the dim deck.

Shadowy forms were barely visible. One approached, broad-shouldered, paunchy, the shape of his head unmistakably Teutonic. Light flicked over the figure standing there in Dominic Liscio's clothes, and fingering Dominic Liscio's close-clipped black mustache so that his hand all but screened a swarthy face that might have been Liscio's own. „Well, what happened?“

Liscio's reincarnation responded in English, taking the cue. „We got the bombs planted, all right. Hell will break loose in half an hour. We'd better get away from here. Someone—“

„Wait. Tell me in the cabin. Come.“ The other turned, waddled on thick legs to a companionway. Warm light irradiated the mist as a door opened, fanned out. The disguised Red Finger's eyes slid to a face just revealed at the edge of the luminance; his lids narrowed. But he followed the German into the cabin and the door shut behind him.

HE STOOD just within that door, watching his bulky shaven-poll host, and his fingers hovered near the lapel of Liscio's pea-jacket. The other heaved around, his flabby cheeks quivered. He was just beyond a table on which were a pitcher and a tall glass on the inside of which yellow foam still made dripping rings. His hamlike arms hung straight down and his hands were concealed by the edge of the table. „Now we can speak with more comfort. Tell me about it.“

„First you tell me something, Herr Gans. Tell me how it happens that a Nazi spy is serving in the Italian Secret Service?“

The vast expanse of Gans' face was expressionless, but his piglike eyes glittered. „Ach! Once more! I told already that I was unjustly cashiered by von Goering when I reported that I had killed that dangerous American, Red Finger, and afterwards it was proved I was mistaken. Why must you ask that question again?“

„Because it just occurred to me that if our little expedition had been tipped-off to the Americans and they had captured two obvious Italians sabotaging their gas-mask plant, this country would have been swept by a tempest of rage that would have forced its leaders to throw the power of the United States on the side of Hitler in the coming struggle.“

The German's red mouth twisted. „True. But what of it? They were not tipped-off.“

The other's voice dropped a note, was thick with menace. „But they were, Herr Gans. They were. And I think that fact will be of great interest to my compatriots aboard.“ He half-twisted, got a hand on the doorknob, then froze, held for an instant by a sudden sound over his shoulder.

„Stop!“ Gans barked. „Stop—Red Finger!“

The American's eyes flicked back, saw the black tunnel-mouth of a forty-five automatic snouting at him. He came fully around to face that menace, his hands went above his head, and he smiled.

„Good, Herr Gans! Very good! Suspecting my imposture you got me in here and you had that gun ready to flash on me at the proper time. But how did you know?“

„Liscio was provided with a password to use when he returned, though I knew he would not return. When you did not use it, I knew you were not him. And who else could you be but—Red Finger? Only you, Red Finger, would have defeated the plan to wreck the gas-mask plant without the repercussion on which I counted, and then have the skill and the nerve to come here made up as the man you have killed.“

„Thanks for the compliment.“ The counter-spy, at the mercy of his archenemy, appeared as carefree as though the table between them were set for a luncheon instead of being spread for death. „But I must return it. Your whole scheme was clever, too clever, in fact for you to have evolved it.“ The German's smirk was suddenly replaced by a black scowl. „May I venture to guess that it was suggested to you by—a certain Baron Odun, that suave, brilliant chief-spy of—an Asiatic power.“

The fury that leaped into the other's pink face rendered verbal admission unnecessary. The American's eyebrows arched, and he went smoothly on. „Perhaps it did not occur to you that he was making you a catspaw to pull his country's chestnuts out of the fire?“

„A catspaw,“ the Nazi spluttered. „Ach! What nonsense. How a catspaw?“

„Simply enough. With all Europe at each other's throats, and the United States embroiled, how simple it would be for that Far Eastern empire to wait till the nations of the white race were bled white and then strike—surely, swiftly, with certainty of success. Our Pacific Coast stripped of its man-power, our fleet concentrated in the Atlantic... You see? In a week Odun's country would be entrenched in North America, and then—world domination!“

Fear flickered Gans' pig-eyes. Then they glazed over with red hate. „You talk well, Red Finger. But it will not save you. I shall not miss this time.“ His fat finger trembled on the trigger. „You die—now!“

The American's long leg darted out, thudded against the underside of the cabin table. It lifted, crashed against Gans' rotund belly. The pistol crashed; the shot thudded into wood. Red Finger was a streak of black action as he hurtled across the room.

A knife flashed in yellow light from beyond Red Finger's shoulder, and its gleam was quenched in fat flesh. Blood spurted from a thick neck, but, uncannily, the crimson blood seemed to catch only one finger of the counter-spy, the trigger finger of his right hand, dyed that finger scarlet.

„VERY good,“ an oily voice slid into the room. „I could not have done better myself.“ The American gasped, lifted to his feet.

A slender, saturnine sailor was inside the closed door, the faintest of smiles twisting his tight lips. „But don't try anything like that on me.“ The hands that held two flat automatics were long-fingered, almost effeminate; their skin was oddly tinged, and the crescents at the base of their queerly pointed nails were deeply blue, strangely exotic.

„Odun!“ Red Finger said quietly. „I might have guessed you'd be here!“

„Unfortunately—for you—I came to the same conclusion as he did, from the same premises. And Red Finger has put too many spokes into my wheels for me to miss this opportunity to dispose of him once and for all.“ Except for an



almost imperceptible odd hiss the man's English was precise, even stilted. „I regret exceedingly the necessity of terminating the life of so gallant an adversary.“

Under the film of brown with which he had painted it Red Finger's face was gray, drawn with defeat. „So you win at last, Odun! But I wonder if you would grant me a favor.“

The characteristic round eyes of his race in the saffron face were wary. But Odun's tone was courteous, almost regretful. „If I can, but...“ he shrugged, deprecatingly. „I shall not take any chances with you. You can hardly blame me.“ He nodded to the quivering, jellylike mass that had once been the ace of the Nazi secret agents.

„All I want is a puff at one last cigarette—yours if you wish.“

Odun's usually impassive countenance showed just a trace of puzzlement, but his racial code of courtesy forbade refusal, as Red Finger well knew. „I have none,“ he said, "but you may take out and light your own, if you give me your word you will not draw a weapon instead.“

„Thank you,“ the American responded gravely. „I do give my word.“ Then, at Odun's nod, his hand slipped into a pocket, came out with a package of cigarettes and a lighter. The white tube in his mouth, a little flame flared at the quick rasp of his thumb and he inhaled gratefully. „You know,“ he said. „If America did nothing else for the world her gift of tobacco entitles Columbus to immortality.“

„But you must admit that it was the East that brought that gift to its perfection. Just so, when Asia conquers the world, we of the East will make it a far better place in which to live, even for you whites.“

Red Finger's cigarette glowed redly. „That will be—“

With the last word a sudden puff sent the cigarette flying across space into Odun's eyes. The arch-spy's instinctive gesture to avoid it was uncontrollable, and Red Finger seized that split second to catapult upon him.

His fists flailed, so fast that they were a mere blur, the spats of their landing a single sound. Odun crashed against the bulkhead, Red Finger twisted, had the door open and was through it and over the rail before the startled seamen outside realized that the door was open. Someone shouted; muddy water geysered; and the fog and the night closed their impenetrable veil over the muddy water.

A SKULKING figure found an alley between two houses on Thirteenth Street in the block between Third and Fourth Avenues, and vanished into its shadows. That same figure might have been seen, had there been anyone to look, wearily climbing a fire-escape ladder to a roof, flitting shadow-like over gravelled tin, vanishing into the square, dawn-cast shadow of a brick chimney. But when the sun's beams filtered across that roof, minutes later, no human form marked its blank expanse.

Six stories below, the ceiling of Ford Duane's secret cubicle opened like a trapdoor, and the bookseller's weary form dropped through. The hook-lined wall open, shut again. And a perennially weary, young-old man touched flame to his breakfast gas-stove...

The web holding the Scythe of Death from its disastrous fall seemed a trifle stronger this morning. But the two grim sentinels still held their place at each doorpost of Ford Duane's Second-hand Bookstore.

