

Death's Toy Shop

A Red Finger Story

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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JANE WEST pecked falteringly at her typewriter. She peered near-sightedly at the shorthand notebook on the desk beside her, twisted ill-shod feet under her chair, stopped to erase what she had written, began again. Her dress of cheap rayon hung clumsily from stooped shoulders to lump in awkward folds about her more awkward form. Her hair, if washed, might have shown tawny lights, but it was grotesquely frizzed in a pitiful attempt at coquetry and her mouth gaped half-open, giving to her carbon-smudged face an expression of fairly blatant stupidity.

The man in the doorway of the office that was partitioned off from the big loft watched her with contempt in his shadowed gaze. But there was satisfaction, too. This was what one would expect, he seemed to be thinking, when one hired

a seven-dollar-a-week stenographer from a fly-by-night business school. And it was exactly what he wanted.

Beyond the railed-off enclosure in which Jane worked, cluttered shelving went row upon row back into obscurity. The objects filling those shelves were weird and wonderful. Here a collection of tin frogs squatted, vividly green, waiting for someone to wind their springs and give them life. Next to them a horde of miniature hula dancers, shameless in short net skirts and nothing else, poised rivet-jointed limbs in expectancy of the same magical touch.

There were woolly prize-fighters, black and white. There were polka-dotted beetles big as a baby's fist, lifelike flies heading carded stickpins; an infinite variety of puzzles and games; miniature playing cards with which no game could be played because no single suit was complete. Gargoylesque masks hung in clusters from the drab ceiling. This was the stock, in short, of a „pitchman's" supply house, destined to be hawked on street corners and at county fairs, or to serve as prizes at boardwalk and pleasure park concessions.

The Americo-Oriental Trading Company dealt in gim-crackery and brummagem. And in death!

If the loft's one huge window had not been almost opaque with encrusted dirt, Jane West might have looked out through it over a pinnacled city in whose canyons six million people went about their early evening pursuits in fancied security. She might have seen the lights of an airplane that was burring westward to carry its mail and its passengers over three thousand miles of smiling, peaceful countryside; over a hundred million Americans unaware that the shadow of mass murder hovered over them; of sudden, unpresaged disaster; of rapine and arson and merciless, terrible slaughter. But Jane picked out a few words, wrinkled her freckled nose in dismay, reached for her eraser...

„I want that letter to get out tonight," her employer said, in the precise, unaccented syllables of the educated alien. „You've been at it an hour now."

THE girl looked up, tears in her gray eyes. „But Mr. Carron," she wailed. „You're always so petickler 'bout every word bein' spelled jest right, an' about all them dozens an' grosses in the orders. You'll yell if I make a mistake. An' you make me nervous, standin' there an' watchin' me like that. As if—as if you t'ought I might steal somethin' or somethin'."

Carron's thin lips twitched with covert amusement. „I was not watching you, Jane," he responded. „I am expecting a very good customer from Mexico, and he's late." He was short, spare in his dark suit. His patent-leather shoes were pointed, almost effeminately small. The faintest of blues tinged the crescents of his carefully tended fingernails. His cheekbones were slightly too high, his black eyes vaguely almond-shaped. „I was wondering if anything—if he has been delayed. No, young lady, I trust you implicitly..."

„Thank you, Mr. Carron."

„I'm right in trusting you, aren't I, Jane?" The man's voice dropped a note, slurred. „You wouldn't by any chance talk to anyone about my business?" It was a low purr, somehow menacing, somehow infinitely cruel. „You wouldn't try to listen at my keyhole?"

The cloddish girl looked bewildered, surprised in a dull sort of way. „Law, Mr. Carron! What would anyone be asking about your business for? An' how could I listen at the keyhole when I'm all the time busy writing. It's all I kin do to get my work out, let alone monkeyin' aroun' with what ain't none of my affairs."

An icy smile licked Carron's sallow countenance. „No,“ he murmured, half to himself. „There isn't room in that dull brain of yours for even feminine curiosity.—Oh, hello, Señor Gonzales. Come in! Come right in.“

The elevator door had slid open, and a tall, cadaverously thin individual had stepped out of it. His pointed fingers twirled the end of a pointed black mustache; his chin, his nose, were pointed; his eyes were black, glittering points in a swarthy, hollow-checked face. He clicked his heels, bowed, and one listened for the jingle of spurs and the rattle of a sword.

„Señor Carron!“ he exclaimed. „I am desolate zat I am late. Bot your so-beeg ceety, eet ees meex me all up.“

„Pretty puzzling for a stranger,“ Carron smiled. „But you got here all right. Come on inside and we'll get right down to business. I've got the greatest set-up you ever heard of for your fiesta.“

Gonzales' heels tack-tacked on the unwashed wooden floor, and Jane's typewriter took up its halting tack-tack again. The two men vanished inside Carron's private office. The door closed behind them.

The sound of its closing was metallic. Strange, that in this shabby establishment the ceiling-high partition in which that door was set should be of heavy steel.

Stranger still was the change that came over Jane West. She was suddenly tense, vibrant with incongruous excitement. And while one hand still peeked at the typewriter, she did a very queer thing. She bent. The fingers of her free hand fumbled within the side of one of her disreputable shoes. They fished out two threadlike wires, jabbed their stripped ends into the slits on each side of a floor board far under the desk. Then Jane straightened, and once more was laboring, nearsightedly, falteringly, at her typewriter. Its tack-tack spat against the steel partition, penetrated it, assuring the men behind it that she was still at her desk, so far from them that what they said could not possibly be overheard.

BUT Jane West's head was canted to one side, pressing one ear against a raised shoulder, against a flat disk that was hidden by the sleazy fabric covering that shoulder. And the voices of Messrs. Gonzales and Carron whispered very clearly in that ear.

„What happened?“ Carron snapped. „Why are you late?“

„I was followed all ze way from Agualeguas. On ze train I could not get reed of my shadow, bot wiz a leetle ingenuity, in ze ceety, he was—*pouf*.“

„You are sure you got rid of him?“

„I am Señor Alcido Tiano!“ Insulted pride was in the reply. „I would not be alife eef long ago I deed not learn how to deal wiz spies.“

„Good Lord! What...?“

„A man lies in an alley, far from here, wiz a knife slash across ze gullet. Finee.“

„I wish that had not happened.“ The man called Carron sounded worried. „It would be too bad if at the last minute you were traced here. This set-up is perfect. It has been quite natural for this kind of business to be sending and receiving letters from all over the country, and with all the items it handles easy to work out an unsuspectable code. And since most of the goods I handle are made in the Far East, neither my cables nor my letters to—our employers—have been subject to suspicion. If the police should trace you here now...“

„Zey deed not trace me.” Gonzales—or Tiano—seemed very sure of himself. „An’ it weel make no deeferece aftair tonight.“

„After—You mean...?”

„I mean zat eef you haf done your part properlee, zere will no longer be any necessitee for secrecy aftair ze clock strikes seven. Our forces are massed along ze bordair, from ze Gulf of Mexeeco to ze Gulf of California. Ze fleet of—our allies—ees in ze Paceaefic, wiz thousands of ze bombeeng planes ready to take off for ze attack. Remains only your word zat you are readee. Eef you geev me eet, zere weel be a telephone call here from Tito Manuon een an hour from now. He ees schedule to play ze guitar from ze WROW on a national—how you call?—hook ’em up. Eef I geeve him ze wor’ to play ze...”

„Mañana Rumba. I know. That’s the signal for everything to start. God, man, haven’t I been thinking about it, dreaming about it, for months? Well, you can tell him to play it. My men are ready. Trained, armed with the machine-guns and grenades and gas-bombs I’ve been sending, bit by bit, in my shipments. They’ll strike at the signal, invade every State Capital, every city hall of any importance and take a thousand hostages. The President is speaking tonight at a political rally. We’ll either capture him or kill him. The country will be paralyzed, disorganized. We’ll make our own terms by noon tomorrow, and they’ll be harsh ones.”

„Good. Vary good. My congratulations, Señor Ho Chien. We will show ze worl’ how to make war.”

„Thanks, Tiano. Well, since we’ve got nothing more to do till Manuon calls, suppose we have a drink.”

JANE WEST was white, gasping. She had suspected the cables and letters to be coded, but since the cipher was an arbitrary one had not been able to get the details of the conspiracy. She had waited, discovery, death, always at her elbows, for this moment of illumination. She must get out of here...

„Zere ees somesing more, my fran’. Zat girl, outside...”

Jane pushed shaking hands down the desktop, shoving herself up from her chair. But her foot held the dictaphone connection, momentarily.

„Hell! She’s all right. She’s so stupid she doesn’t know her knee from her elbow. I’ll tell her—“

„She may be stupeed, bot I trus’ no one. Get her een here. We shall keep her here teel eet ees too late for her to betray us.“

„All right, Tiano, if you—“

Jane was on her feet. She threw a despairing glance to the emergency stairway door. It was locked, barred. No time... She darted to the elevator, thumbed both down and up buttons. If only the car were right here...!

„Jane!” Carron’s—Ho Chien’s—silken voice sounded behind her. „Where are you going?”

She turned. „I was just goin’ to run aroun’ the corner to let my boy friend know I was goin’ to be late. I got a supper date wit’ him.“

„Yes?’ The man’s eyes narrowed. „Well, I need you here. You can telephone him.”

„He ain’t got no phone. An’ he’s that jealous he’ll be coming here to see what’s the matter if I don’t let him know I’m all right.”

She had no real hope that she could get away. But she had to try something, anything. Tiano pushed past Carron. There was a gun in his hand.

„You weel go nowhere, mees,“ he snapped. „You weel—“ Red light flickered over her head. The elevator was about to stop. „Wan wor’ to ze boy an’ you both die.”

The lift door slid open. „Down,“ the black-faced operator called. „Who’s gwine down?”

„No wan. Bot eef you weel wait just a leetle meenute—“ Tiano’s gun was concealed under his coat, but Jane knew it was there, agonizingly knew that a single word from her would bring lethal lead flaming into her body, into the Negro’s—„Mees—zis young lady would lak you to deelever a note for her. She weel write eet now.“ And their deaths would accomplish nothing. „To someone she likes so mooch she would like to see heem again, some day.”

His meaning was plain. He was offering her life in exchange for lulling the suspicions of a possible confederate.

„Yes, Jimmy,“ Jane’s lips could hardly form the words. „That’s what I wanted.“

„Zere ees a quarter for you eef you weel take ze message.”

„Sure, mister,“ the boy grinned. „I got time now. Everybody else is gone. I’m just waitin’ fer you folks to close up.“

„Zat ees good. All right, Mees. Write w’at you want to say.”

Jane dragged herself to her desk, her limbs moving as though through some viscid, invisible fluid. She stuck a sheet of the Americo-Oriental’s stationery in the machine, wrote:

Pat dear:

The boss has a lot of work for me and I can’t get away. I’ll see you in the morning, if I can, to hear how the game comes out. Be careful, dear. You never played for such high stakes before.

You understand, don’t you?

Flower

She was conscious that Tiano was reading over her shoulder. „I was going to watch him play bridge,“ she said, „for a lot of money.” She folded the paper, addressed the envelope. *Mr. Ford Duane—Fourth Avenue.*

„Pat?” the Mexican arched his eyebrows. „Flower?”

„They’re our pet names for each other,“ the girl explained. „We always use them.” She licked the envelope closed, started back to the elevator. „Here, Jimmy—”

„No! Wait!” Tiano intercepted her, took the envelope from her. „I haf just theenk, I mus’ go out myself. I weel deelever ze note.”

The elevator door clanged shut. Jane stared at it, gelid fingers squeezing her throat. Tiano had tricked her. He had guessed that the note might conceal a warning, and was making sure that there would be no interference with his plans. „I know how to deal wiz spies,“ he had said. „A knife slash across ze gullet...”

„Come on inside here,“ Ho Chien purred. „We’ll wait for Tiano to get back.” His tongue licked his lips. „He’s an artist with that knife of his. Between the two of us I think we’re going to have some very interesting entertainment while we’re waiting for Manuon’s call.”

FORD DUANE, alpaca-coated, lank, stooped under a lassitude too dreary for his apparent youth, sat at a shabby desk near the front of his second-hand

bookstore. A pencil in his long, slim fingers idly traced a rose on the dust-filmed desk-blotter, and he seemed half-asleep.

The shadows were thick and dark between the towering tiers of tattered books that filled the dusty store. Outside, wan street-lamps struggled vainly against the night, filling the grimy Fourth Avenue block that is known as the Port of Missing Books. In all the peaceful land, there could be no spot more somnolently peaceful than this.

And yet death was a living, breathing presence in this sleepy store. Duane's ears were attuned to every footfall, every slither of movement, in the street outside. The keen blue eyes under his drooped lids slid, every now and then, to peer through an artfully contrived aperture in the piled books of his window-display. Eternal vigilance was the price Ford Duane paid for life itself!

He was not, by far, the defeated dealer in discarded volumes that he seemed.

All over the world a secret, deadly Game is being played, a game the stakes of which are nations themselves. Spy and counter-spy, saboteur and masked guard, the players of the Game fight an endless war. Unknown to the people they attack and protect, unknown even to each other, they breathe danger every second of the day, the year. They fight, and die, unwept. No medals are pinned on their breasts, no wreaths are laid on their tombs.

The rules of the Game are rigid. They say that the players must remain nameless, unknown to one another, team-mates as well as antagonists. But Nature scoffs at man-made rules. Ford Duane was a champion in the Game. But for months a face had hovered in his thoughts. A sweet mouth, formed for kissing. Gray, brooding eyes. Tawny hair in which light glinted duskily.

He knew her only as „Flower”. Drawing the rose on the desk, he wondered where she was. Whether she was still alive. She might lie in a nameless grave, for all he knew, and his heart with her.

But he did not forget to watch the street through the aperture in the window. He did not forget that his identity and his lair might somehow have been discovered. There was a price on his head in the chancelleries of half the world. There were those who needed no price to make them thirst for his blood. Now, even now, death might be stalking him.

A footfall thudded on the sidewalk. A tall, cadaverous man came into view. He had a white envelope in his hand, and every once in a while he would look up at the numbers on the store doors, scrutinizing them. Ford Duane watched him.

The man reached the front of Duane's bookstore. His waxed mustache twitched. He turned. He was coming in.

The glass-panelled door opened, closed again. „Señor Ford Duane?” Alcido Tiano inquired, bowing.

„I am Duane,” Ford rose. „What can I do for you, sir?”

„Sometimes known as *Pat*?”

„Yes.” There was no surprise in Duane's reply, no change in his expression. But a pulse throbbed in his wrists. *Pat*! The three letters, P-A-T, were a signal to him that he was again being called to sit in on the Game. In many and various ways that signal had reached him, and always after that men had died. Perhaps, this time, it would be his turn to die. „Yes. I am called that by one or two close friends.”

„Ah. Zen zis lettair ees for you.” The Mexican slid it onto the desk. „Perhaps zere ees an answeer. Eef you don't mind I weel look at your so manee books.” He was infinitely suave, infinitely courteous. “I haf ze passion for ol' books.”

„Of course.” Duane watched Tiano move away, far back into the shelf-cast shadows, heels clicking on the floor. Then he picked up the envelope, opened it.
Pat dear: The boss—You understand, don't you? Flower!

LITTLE muscles ridged Duane's blunt jaw. Her hand had written this note! But what did it mean? There was no indication of what code she had used. It was too short for any code...

„Zis first edeetion of Butler's *Hudibras!*” the messenger's excited exclamation came from the gloomy depths of the store. „Weel you come here please, Señor Duane? I weesh to ask you...”

Of course! The real message was verbal. Flower's note was only an introduction, a warning that the bearer was to be trusted. The man wanted Duane to come away from the front of the store, to where there would be no possibility of their colloquy being observed by some chance entrant.

„Right with you, sir.” Duane thrust the letter into the breast pocket of his alpaca coat, where it rustled against the dried petals of a rose whose faint fragrance had reminded him for weeks that once it had been a token from the Flower that she had escaped a lethal trap. He padded back between the high bookstacks, rounded the end of one of them to whence Tiano's voice had sounded.

He wasn't there. No one... A shadow moved on the floor...!

Duane whirled, his muscles exploding into instantaneous action. A lithe figure leaped at him from the covert to which it had moved, knife-metal glinting in a down-flailing arc. Duane ducked, lightning-swift, under the murder-blade. The outflick of his fists was a rapier thrust, pounding one-two into the assassin's belly. Then his fingers, steel strong, were clenched on Tiano's knife-wrist and his free hand was darting under the lapel of his gray jacket.

„Sacré!” the Mexican hissed. „You are too smart.” His features contorted, a gargoyle-writhing mask of malevolence. „Bot how do you like—thees.” His other hand lashed out, stabbing another knife at Duane's breast. So close he was that it could not miss...

A jet of thin vapor spewed from under Ford's coat, into Tiano's face. And the killer was suddenly nerveless, limp—the knife clattering from his fingers, his thin body slumping after it—collapsing like a gutted meal sack.

Ford Duane stood above his victim, swaying. Once again unremitting watchfulness, split-second coordination of senses and brain and muscles, utter preparedness for any eventuality, had saved him. But he knew the adventure was not ended. It had only begun. There was no doubt that the Flower had written that note. The signature itself was known only to the two of them. The very fact that the killer had brought it told him that she was in dire danger.

Or that she was beyond all help.

The American's countenance was a grim false face, his eyes two glowing, terrible orbs. Her message was concealed in the apparently meaningless words, then. What was it? He did not have to take it out of his pocket. Every character was burned into his brain.

„...I can't get away.” She was a prisoner, somewhere. Possibly in the office on whose letterhead the letter was typed—„the boss” indicated that. „I'll see you—if I can.” She knew herself to be in deadly peril. „...How the game comes out.”

„The game”—there was only one Game to the two of them, the game they played against death and the secret armies of their country's secret enemies. „...You never played for such high stakes...”

Such—high—stakes. The stakes of their Game were always the safety of America. If he had never before played for such high stakes...

He must find her—at once. Time later to decide what to do about the assassin he had vanquished. Duane dropped to one knee. There was strong cord in his pocket. Lashed about the man's wrists, his ankles, it should keep him safe...

A DESK-CLOCK ticked loudly in the stillness. The girl who called herself Jane West sat slumped in a chair, her wide, staring eyes fixed on the dial of that clock, and on the telephone next to it. Ho Chien sat bolt upright in another chair, a window behind him framing his exotic figure, his peculiarly round head. His hands played idly with a pearl-handled revolver on the desk-top, but his blue-nailed forefinger was never far from its trigger.

Jane knew that the instant she tried to move out of her chair a bullet would thud into her quivering flesh.

„You were very clever, my girl.” Ho Chien said chattily. „I never would have thought of looking into the box you had standing against the partition, where you kept that hat of yours so it wouldn't get dusty. Smart to have the microphone and amplifier in its false bottom, picking up the vibration of voices from in here. But it's all over now.“

No use for deception any longer. „Maybe it isn't all over yet,” Jane said quietly. „Your friend Tiano hasn't returned, and it is three minutes to seven already.”

The man smiled, without humor. „That will not make any difference. If Tiano is not back when Manuon calls, I will tell him to play the Mañana Rumba. And after that—you will pay for deceiving me—as many other of your female compatriots will pay, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.“

There was terrible significance in the way his lips curled back from his pointed teeth. It told Jane what lay in store for the women of her country if ever that lilting melody was broadcast. The pulsing strains to which they had so often danced would be a signal of despair for them.

The clock ticked, ticked, each separate tick a hammer blow of agony on her soul. Duane had not received her note. No—Tiano had taken it to him—and had killed him. That was why the Mexican was not back. He had been caught, arrested. But the dreadful deed was done. Otherwise Duane would be here...

Tick. Tick. Tick. Two minutes more. Oh God! Two minutes to seven. Two minutes to—Hell.

Tiano wasn't back yet. Maybe Ho Chien was lying. Maybe Manuon would not take orders from him.

„I arranged for Tito Manuon's time on the broadcast,” the spymaster answered her unspoken thought. „He will do whatever I say.“

No hope. No hope anywhere. The fate of a nation, of America, trembled in the balance. And there was nothing she could do. Nothing anyone could do, now.

Jane West could not know it, but five stories below a frantic man rattled the knob of a door that was closed and locked, a man who had been led to the address by the letterhead on Jane's note. Inside that door a Negro boy and a grizzled watchman lay on the lobby floor, their throats slit from ear to ear. Alcido Tiano did not believe in taking any chances...

Tick. Tick. Tick. The longer hand of the desk dock moved, imperceptibly, indomitably, toward the end of the hour. To the end of America's last hour of freedom. In cactus thickets swarthy men crouched, muffling the clank of their

rifles, nursing their machine guns. Far out on the Pacific great gray vessels rose and fell on a heaving tide, and stocky, saffron-visaged pilots warmed up the motors of great bombing planes. In a thousand cellars in a thousand cities, other men waited, waited—for seven o'clock and the palpitant, throbbing strains of the Mañana Rumba...

AND in a fifth floor New York office—the only lighted office in the building—a tawny-haired girl watched a clock's minute hand move, her dilated eyes measuring the distance between herself and the telephone that stood next to the dock. If she moved swiftly enough, she wondered, when the telephone bell started to ring, would her momentum carry her across that space, as bullets pounded into her? Would there be life enough left in her when she got across it to smash the instrument to the floor, to smash it so that it could not be used? Even if she did, would Manuon give the signal anyway?

Tick. She could only try. *Tick.* It was the only chance left and if it did not come off she would be dead anyway. *Tick.* She would want to be dead. *Tick.* Thirty seconds more. Her muscles gathered for the desperate effort, her eyes clouding to veil her intention. *Tick...*

Glass smashed in, from the window! A swirl of black draperies showed in the jagged aperture for an instant. Ho Chien twisted...

An appalling figure leaped into the room from the fire escape, led to the room by the lighted window. Tall, black-swathed, black-masked. Felt hat pulled low down. Black-gloved hand outthrust, a curiously thick-barreled pistol snouting from it. The finger curled about that trigger startlingly, awesomely red; the red of spurting blood.

It was the sight of that finger that paralyzed Ho Chien for an all-important instant. Long enough for Jane to leap from her chair and knock the pearl-handled revolver out of his reach. Then a name spewed from his suddenly pallid lips.

„Red Finger!“

A word of terror, that name, in the subterranean world where the endless war is fought. Ace of counter-spies, the bravest of America's secret enemies trembled at the very thought of Red Finger. Many had died at his hands, many had limped home to tell of failure at the moment of success. But he wore no medals. He was on no Roll of Honor... and never would be!

„Yes, I am Red Finger. Your hands up, Ho Chien. Way up...“

Jane didn't hear the rest. She heard only the shrill clamor of the telephone. She twisted, reaching for the cradled instrument...

A shot barked. A red hot slug pounded into her shoulder, slammed her across the desk.

„I weel take zat call,“ a voice said, and there were shots again, loud and thunderous in the small room. Tiano was flinging into it, his gun spewing orange-red flame at Red Finger, at Jane. Ho Chien was on the floor, wet, pungent mist from the thick-barrelled pistol following him down, but the American counter-spy was disarmed, his curious weapon shot from his hand. He was darting about the room, dodging Tiano's flaming bullets. The telephone clamored. Lethal lead plucked at Red Finger's black cloak.

The Mexican reached the desk, reached for the receiver. Jane, rolling in her agony, sank sharp, fierce teeth in his wrist. He cursed, struck at her with his gun-barrel. The sight slashed her cheek.

Red Finger leaped, a great black bat swooping through midair, spattering blood-drops as it flew. He came down on Tiano's shoulders. The two pounded to the floor. Jane plucked the telephone receiver from its cradle.

„Hello.” There was none of her pain, her agony, in her voice. „Hello, Manuon.”

„Who ees zis?” the receiver squeaked in her ear. „I want to talk to...”

„Señor Tiano? He is unable to answer you, Señor Manuon. He is very busy. But he wants me to tell you not to play the Mañana Rumba. Something has happened at the last moment to change his plans.”

The hard rubber cylinder slipped from her strengthless fingers. Dizzying dark pulsed about her...

Red Finger pushed himself up from the floor. His black cloak was clotted, viscid, gashed in countless places. He swayed, looking down at the writhing figure at his feet.

„I thought,” he choked, „I left you safely tied up.”

A snarling smile twisted Alcido Tiano's face. „You forget eet ees Tiano wiz whom you deal. Zere ees no rope made zat weel hol' ze great Tiano. Especially eef eet ees in a place where zere are sharp edges on all ze feet of ze book shelves, place' zere by a man who expec's sometime to be tied up in hees own store.”

„I would have remembered that,” Red Finger's voice sounded as if he was laughing, with pain threading his laughter, „if I hadn't been thinking about a flower.” He stopped. There was no use talking to a dead man, a man whose spine had been snapped by a trick of jiu-jitsu learned long ago.

MANY messages throbbed out over the Americo-Oriental's telephone that night. There were thousands of quiet arrests, all over the country, thousands of prisoners in Federal jails the next morning. A gray fleet steamed home, baffled. Disappointed bands of marauders skulked across cactus prickled deserts, cached their weapons against a revolution that sooner or later would be sure to come...

But before those messages started, before Jane West got out her lists of addresses and her files of letters, there was a very human moment in the dusty fifth floor office where one man lay dead and another unconscious. A moment in which soft words were whispered that had nothing to do with the Game. A moment in which lips met in a caress older, by many centuries, than the endless war.

