

Red Finger - Dead Dealer

A Red Finger Story

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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THE sky was a bleak, gray vault over the city, sifting down a fine mist of chill rain. Along Fourth Avenue, the rows of bookstalls were tarpaulin-covered, and muddy rivulets streaked the window of Duane's Second-Hand Bookstore. Within, lank and drooping-lidded, Ford Duane moved noiselessly between the gloom-shrouded, high walls of weary volumes across whose backs his fingers whispered lovingly. A single carbon lamp, pendant from an encrusted cord, spread heavy shadows on the bare boards of the floor and on the book-filled shelving—shadows that were somehow darkly alive and pregnant with an odd menace.

Veiled as they were, the eyes of the long-legged bookseller were keenly blue, strangely restless. They flicked about constantly with a wariness wholly at variance with the drowsy peace of the deserted shop; and under his stained

alpaca smock, tense muscles quivered with readiness for instant action. The thud of a passing footfall, the creak of a drying beam, twitched his sharp ascetic face to them and tightened his thin lips, time and again, till their source, their innocence, had been established.

The doorknob rattled and Duane whirled to the sound, his hand flashing to an inner pocket. A ragged, swarthy man scraped sodden shoes on the threshold and smiled ingratiatingly. „Please,“ he said in the liquid accents of southern Italy. „Please attend to moosic, meester.“ He gestured vaguely with a battered flute clutched in one dirty, gnarled hand. „Pay all that you like.“

Duane relaxed, but his face was rigid, expressionless. „No. No, I have work to do.“ He crossed, with his curiously silent glide, to a paint-peeled writing table near the door and slid into its broken chair. „And I have no money.“ He pulled a sheet of yellow paper toward him, a pencil. „I’ll be playing in the street myself if business keeps up the way it is. Try next door.“

The musician did not stir. But Duane seemed to have utterly forgotten the intrusion. He frowned musingly, and inscribed three letters at the head of the sheet. P-A-T. A gleam flickered in the beggar’s eyes, vanished. He shrugged, back into the street.

Duane smiled, fleetingly and without humor. He drew five horizontal lines across the paper, the five lines of the musical staff—and held his pencil poised, as if waiting for inspiration. But his eyes wandered to the three letters he had written, and his thin lips moved, repeating the flutist’s words; „Please attend to moosic. Pay all that you like.“ Was it only coincidence that the initial letters of the first three words of each sentence were the same, and were identical with those he had jotted down?

A flurry of heavier rain beat at the window. Its tattoo seemed like fingers rapping a message on the glass, a message of death. P-A-T! Once an old man had sold Duane a dog-eared volume he represented as a Petronius, printed by Arden and bound by Trant. That night, men had died, suddenly, mysteriously. On another occasion, a pushcart hawker had called his wares, „Pails! Axes! Teenvare!“ The bookdealer had made a purchase from him, and when the sun visited the city again, two bloated corpses were bobbing on the greasy waters of Long Island Sound. Now once more the three ominous letters had prefaced apparently innocuous words where Ford could hear them...

Shrill sound pierced the wall separating Duane from the store next door, the lilting rhythm of a popular song. „Have you ever seen a dream walking?“ the flute asked, muted by the intervening, thin partition. But the sugary flow of the tune was sprayed by a spatter of grace notes dropped in by awkward fingers fumbling the instrument’s stops. The discordance rambled through the melody, flew as it jotted down—those very notes! „—the Heaven in my arms was you.“ The flute sobbed into silence. The five horizontal lines on Ford’s paper were filled now by the hieroglyphics of musical shorthand. The thin-faced man looked at the sheet before him:

He paused a moment, considered the arrangement of the notes he had written, and suddenly his pencil was moving again, setting down English letters over the music he had inscribed:

„Odon at Kensico since Sun. Why? T.“

FORD DUANE stared long at the paper on the desk before him, while lumping muscles ridge his lean jaw and a veil seems to drop across his eyes.

The fingers of the rain tap against the storefront, but he hears only the fingers of Death rapping on his door. Not for him. This seeming shopkeeper has lived and breathed in the tangible presence of danger too long to fear it. The threat whose icy breath chills him is for the unsuspecting people of the teeming human warren called New York, for the women and the little children. At Kensico, in Westchester, the metropolis drinking water bids farewell to the sun before it plunges underground into great mains that divide and subdivide till their final capillaries reach into the city's multifarious homes and gush the fluid of life into glasses, pots, and infants' feeding bottles. At Kensico, if anywhere, is the City's vulnerable point, the Achilles' heel where an enemy may strike once, and slay a million-fold.

But we have no enemy—America is at peace with all the world. Duane's lax hand lies on a newspaper, today's Times. On an inside page, a small item notes that the transfer of gold from the San Francisco mint to mid-continent safety has been completed. Safety from what? Earthquakes, the treasury says. But the San Francisco Mint withstood the 1905 cataclysm with not a crack in its walls.

Yesterday the guard on the Panama Canal was doubled. Was that also to guard against earthquakes? For two years the fleet has been concentrated in the Pacific, while shipyards all over the country ring with feverish building. Earthquakes again?

In a far-off oriental land, men with reptilian eyes and tinted skin drink silent toasts to the Day when the red sun of the island empire shall dye the Occidental World with the lurid stain of the White Race's ultimate blood. Europe is torn with internal strife, bled white by its own vampire politicians, already an easy prey to saffron hordes ready to overrun it—did not America bar the way. America! Still strong! Still stalwart!

America must be weakened or dreams of World Domination will never be realized. America must be weakened—by strikes, by disease, by calamities mysteriously propagated and mysteriously spread. It is not the people of that distant land who have so decreed; it is not their King. Nevertheless someone has proclaimed America's destruction, and the rats dispatched to the task scutter in the darkness, gnawing, gnawing, gnawing...

Night-dark deepens in the drizzling street. Ford Duane sighs, lifts from his seat, locks his store-door, clicks out the one hanging light. He is like a gray ghost, slithering back to the curtained alcove in the rear where a frowsy cot, a table cluttered by unwashed dishes, and a single gas-plate on an up-ended box are all the home he has. He is like a phantom—and suddenly has vanished.

A keen eye might have noted the flicker of movement that was the swift raising and lowering of a trapdoor whose edges are so skillfully fashioned that now they cannot be discerned. A keen ear might have noted, momentarily, the scraping of fabric against stone beneath the bookstore. A ferret is prowling the underground burrows of the yellow rats that gnaw...

THE clouds have dispersed. There is a moon this midnight, and under the loom of Kensico Dam a hundred cars are parked while lovers whisper or are dreamily silent. Above them hangs a million watery tons of life and death, restrained by a staunch wall of stone. Above them creeps a more deadly peril, and one man alone can guard them from it.

Two miles north of the dam, the billowing dark blanket of the woods folds close to the silver sheet of the man-created lake. Here there are no cars, no

whispering lovers. The sylvan silence is broken only by the ripple of breeze-stroked water and the piercing hymn of a myriad insects of the night. Solitude, primordial quiet, reign supreme here, a half-hour from the tumult of Times Square—the peace of green and growing things. Peace—abruptly the insect-piping is silenced; the woods seem to listen with bated breath. Underbrush rustles and a shadowy form emerges from the trees.

An arrow of light darts across the lake's surface, spatters against the shore. The moon's effulgence takes the intruder. He is squat, stocky. The sleek, black hair of his hatless head lies close to the skull. Cold cruelty glitters in his black, perfectly round eyes and tightens his fleshless lips to a straight gash across his oddly tinted face. Even his walk, as he slithers across the narrow band of pebbles to the water's edge, is somehow exotic, somehow—reptilian.

He stands motionless, gazing across the reservoir, gazing at the pale glow of the southern horizon beneath which the city spreads. His arm hangs straight down at his side; in its hand is a small, black satchel circled by thick straps. That hand is long-fingered, almost effeminate. Its nails are filed to sharp points and the crescents at their bases are deeply, queerly blue. There is about this man an aura of evil, of chill malevolence from which the very trees seem to shudder away.

The Oriental kneels, places his black bag on the ground. His hands move deftly, the straps fall away, there is the click of a lock and the bag is open. He fumbles within, brings out a long, thick cylinder of glass within which a viscous transparent liquid absorbs the moon's silver and turns it to a green radiance eerily suggestive of putrescence—of rotting, plague-stricken cadavers.

The man smiles, slowly, satanically, and he tugs at the cotton-swathed cork plugging the tube of death. The pop as it comes free is startlingly loud in the stillness. He twists to spill the green liquid into the water from which New York will drink tomorrow.

A cold, grim voice sounds abruptly from the tree-shadows. „Hold it! Hold it just that way, Baron Odon.“

Something in that sudden voice freezes the saboteur as if he has been sprayed by a jet of dry ice. Only a sharp hiss of startled breath shows that he is alive.

Again the underbrush rustles with human movement. A shadow firms, slides out on the tiny beach. It is a tall figure of darkness in the moonlight, a shapeless blue detached from the velvet night. Odon, cringing on his knees, the lethal container in one hand and its stopper in the other, glimpses a concealing black robe, topped by a shapeless gray felt and a gray mask from behind whose twin slits menace glints. His fear-widened eyes fasten on the muzzle of a revolver snouting pointblank at him, on a revolver and on the rock-steady hand gripping its butt.

That hand is a blob of black, almost invisible against the cloak's blackness. But one finger, the finger that curls about the gun's trigger, is blood-red, a dash of scarlet weirdly awesome. The Asiatic's lips twitch, soundlessly form a name. „Red Finger!“

IN THE dark subterranean world where the silent, eternal war is waged that waits for no ultimatums, no booming drums nor blaring bugles, that name is one of dread. More than one master-spy has been erased from the lists of his nation by that scarlet digit, more than one fine-wrought scheme for America's

destruction has been smashed by him whose badge it is. In a dozen chancelleries, a fortune waits to reward him who can prove that Red Finger no longer lives... „Put that cork back into the tube, firmly.“ The words drip from under the speaker's gray mask, each a slow syllable of infinite threat.

Odon obeys. Death is once more stoppered. „Stand up and hand it to me.“

The Oriental comes lithely erect, holds out the green cylinder at arm's length. Red Finger's other hand, black-gloved, appears from the folds of his cloak to take it. Something whips from the murk of the woods, close behind him—something thin and snakelike. It coils about his neck, tightens. Odon drops to the sand, just under a spray of fine mist that jets from the counter-spy's gun. The American jerks back, gurgling, clawing at the thing that has clamped off his breath, that is dragging him irresistibly backward. Yellow hands clutch Red Finger's ankles; he crashes to the ground. Odon is swarming over him, wrests the gun from his grip, coils and knots a long, strong cord about the American's wrists and his ankles. Quick, uncouth words crackle from his lips and a third form of mystery comes out of the shadows, chuckling.

„Checkmate this time, my dear Red Finger,“ the Asiatic pants, as he loosens the garroting filament from the other's neck and rises to look gloatingly down at his helpless adversary. A gray mask dangles from his long fingers. „Or shall I call you—Ford Duane, dealer in second-hand books?“ His utterance is clipped, precise, only that odd hiss reveals that he is using an alien tongue.

Duane, arms and legs lashed, weaponless, in the power of his implacable enemy, looked up and smiled. „My felicitations, Baron Odon.“ His blue eyes, murky now with defeat and despair, peered past the Asiatic to the other, the one who had so skillfully garroted him in the very moment of his seeming victory. He saw a swarthy, Italianate face; thick lips twisted in a grin that still had something of the ingratiating quality of the psuedo-beggar's smile, the beggar whose flute had skirled a cryptic invitation to die. „You fooled me neatly.“

Odon bowed with the exaggerated politeness of oriental etiquette. „Not any more neatly than you have fooled me, so many times. But you were handicapped by the inferiority of your race. When I made up my mind to concentrate upon removing you it was impossible for me to fail.“

Except for his eyes, the counter-spy's countenance revealed only interest in the master-stroke of a skilled antagonist. „How did you manage it? Only T knew who I was. He was always himself the messenger, and we used a different code each time.“

„Your scheme had a fatal weakness. T is the head of your Intelligence Service. Others as well as you report to him and they are not all as skillful. I detected one, fed him information, watched him till he slipped once in communicating with your Chief. Then T himself came under my scrutiny—the rest was easy.“

Red Finger shrugged. „Well, you win, Odon. This time. But there are others, always there will be others till you slip in your turn. We do not live long, we who fight the invisible war.“

„No,“ the oriental's voice was very low. „We do not live long, and no tears are shed when we die. But tears are shed while we live, many tears. Look!“ He stooped. When he rose, the tube of green death was again in his hand, open. „You die tonight; tomorrow there will be mourning in your nation. But not for you, my friend, not for you alone.“ His arm snapped, whiplike. An emerald

stream arced through the moonshine, splashed into the reservoir, was gone. „The stuff is heavy, Duane, it sinks to the bottom where the currents are swift. In an hour it will be in the mains, by morning a hundred thousand housewives will sniff a faint odor in their cooking and wonder whether they have failed to clean their pots well enough. By night... Wherever you are by tonight you will be welcoming others, many others to those Golden Streets of which your priests prate.“

DUANE'S face was white against the silver sands, white even to the lips, but his eyes blazed fury. „You fiend!“ he gritted. „You unspeakable thing! God—your God and mine—will damn you forever for that!“

Odon's smile was blind. „My God will reward me with the sight of streets strewn with the corpses of white-faced menials who make way for the inheritors of His earth... But I have no more time for you... Tony—the knife!“

The swart renegade to his race stepped forward, a blade glittered blue as he bent, caught the light as it swept down, straight to Duane's bared throat. The American was suddenly doubled up in a jack-knife. Folding almost too swift for the eye to follow, his bound legs lashed out, his heels plunked into the stabber's groin. An agonized shriek split the silence, the Italian lifted to the tremendous impetus of that unexpected, two-heeled kick, catapulted across the strand and writhed, prostrate on the beach.

Duane was rolling, his new motion continuous with that which had laid the Italian low, toward the startled Oriental. Before Odon quite realized what had happened, Ford thudded against his legs. The Asiatic toppled, his hand flashing to a pocket even as he fell, coming out with a flat, black automatic. A shot blazed orange flame into sand. Duane flipped a back-somersault, came incredibly to his feet for an instant, hurled himself headfirst at Odon. Another shot spat flatly, pounded sickeningly into flesh. Ford's skull thumped against Odon's chin. He whipped about and his teeth were sunk into the other's gun hand. Blood spurted over his lips; his head twisted, bone snapped and the automatic span away across pebbles, plopped into water.

Odon's left arm came up and over Duane's shoulder, long yellow fingers slid along Ford's neck, searching for that spot behind the ear where life comes near the surface, at the mercy of a probing thumb. The maelstrom of combat split as Duane whirled away from the fatal jab. Again he launched into a flashing backward flip that brought him erect, bound as he was. His knees bent, his thigh muscles exploded, and he was leaping, almost flying, through the air. His heels crashed against Odon's chest, he jarred down on his spine, whirled over to meet his antagonist.

And lay still, gasping for breath, as he saw that the Asiatic was quite motionless at the water's edge, his thin, cruel lips edged by a red foam.

A hot iron bored into Duane's shoulder, where Odon's bullet had struck. His body was one huge ache and his lungs felt as though flames seared them. Blood dribbled from cuts at his wrists, at his ankles, where the cords had cut deep during the almost miraculous acrobatics by which he, even though tightly bound, had vanquished two armed men. Ford's smoldering glance sought the other, the Italian who would have knifed him at the command of the spy. He was gone. He must have run away as soon as the first paralyzing effect of the blow he had received had passed. Well, hirelings are rarely faithful. But he had

left his knife, there at the water's edge. After awhile, Duane thought dazedly, he could crawl to that knife and get free.

Then Red Finger saw a thick glass cylinder half-buried in the sand, empty now except for a few green drops that still clung to its lips. He groaned. That emerald liquid was at the bottom of the reservoir, being carried slowly toward the huge pipes that would split, and split again till their final branching would bring death into the very homes of New York's millions. An hour, Odon had said. An hour! How long was it since then? How much time was there left?

THE parked cars were gone from the huge plaza below Kensico Dam. It was late, very late, and in the stone gatehouse atop the great wall Tim O'Hara drowsed in his cushioned chair and thought of the corned-beef and cabbage Kitty would have ready for him when he got home in the morning. This was a cushy job, he thought, watching those big valves that could shut-off the water from the city at a click-over of this switch that was wide across as a man's head. Made a man feel like somebody, knowing he could make a big city thirsty just by a twist of his wrist. Not that Tim had ever had occasion to click the switch in the five years since the boss had got him the job, nor he wouldn't in five more years. But he could if he wanted to...

Tim O'Hara rubbed his eyes and settled lower on his spine. Time for forty winks before he had to go-around with his oil-squirter and bit of waste. What was that?

Running feet thudded on stone outside. Someone was pounding on the big oak door that shut out the curious from the gate-house. „Open up!“ a muffled voice came through the wood. „Open up in there!“

Tim got heavily to his feet. „Who is it?“ he called. „Who wants in?“

„Open, damn you!“ The fellow, whoever he was, was mush-mouthed for all his yelling. Some drunk from Valhalla, mebbe, raising hell. Well, Tim would put a flea in his ear and send him away damn quick. The gate-tender picked up a huge spanner, limbered across the concrete floor under the tremendous gleaming circles of the hand-wheels that could be used to raise or lower the gates to the big mains if for some reason the motors did not function. He got to the door, got his hand on its knob, swung the portal open.

„What the hell—“ he began, and stopped, open-mouthed at the spectacle that presented itself. The head of the man outside lolled against the door sash to which he clung with clack-gloved hands that were muddy, ripped. His face was scratched, streaked by dried blood. His eyes were half-shut and what could be seen of them was a bleary red. Some black rags hung from his shoulders, his wrists were swollen to twice their size. One shoe was gone entirely, the other blood-clotted. A green vine was twisted, queerly exuberant, around his waist. One does not crash at top speed through two miles of lightless underbrush and brambles with impunity.

Duane looked dazedly at Tim's florid face. He mumbled something unintelligible, pushed himself away from the lintel. „Shut—shut off the water!“

O'Hara took a backward step, lifting his spanner. The man wasn't drunk; he was stark, staring crazy. „Git away from here,“ he grunted. „Before I crack you.“

Ford's mouth twisted. „Listen, man. There's poison in the reservoir. Poison!“

Tim spat on a calloused palm, took a firmer grip on his wrench. „Poison is it? I'll poison yuhr skull to a pulp if you don't beat it quick's your tootsies'll take you.“

The counter-spy's glance slid over O'Hara's bulking shoulder, saw a clock against the wall. Its hands made a narrow V at the top of the dial. One o'clock. The hour was up, or almost so. „Oh God! Will you show some sense? Half New York will die tomorrow if you don't throw the switch at once.“

„There's one guy thot's goin' to wish he' dead in about tin seconds,“ O'Hara bellowed, and lunged at the intruder. The spanner whistled through the air, crashed against the doorpost as Duane dipped in a sudden crouch. He came up within the long, simian arms of the gateman, came up with his fist flailing. Smack! It caught O'Hara flush on the button. Tim's eyes glazed, he reeled, dropped.

DUANE shook his own head to clear away the gray mists welling up in his tired brain, shuffled into the station. A vertical slab of bluish stone was studded with bare-poled switches. At its very center, the biggest pair of copper studs was neatly labelled: OPEN-MAIN-MOTORS-SHUT. It took every ounce of energy he had left to stagger to the switchboard, to get his fingers around the black handle of that biggest switch and pull it down, thrust it home.

A dim hum, somewhere beneath the floor, rose to a roar. The building vibrated to the whirling of gigantic armatures, laboring to close down the watergates, to shut-off the poisoned water from the people twenty miles away.

He must rest now... rest...

Then he heard leather tap on stone at the door behind him! Odon's squat form, his blood-smeared, yellow countenance was framed in the doorway, the leveled automatic in the Asiatic's left hand.

Duane put his own hand out, found the back of Tim's chair, held himself erect by holding on to it. Below his feet a muffled, enormous thud pounded, and the motor-hum stopped. „You're too late, Odon,“ he said. „The water's shut off.“

There was no humor in the spy's thin-lipped smile. „It can be turned on again.“ He slithered softly across the floor, edging toward the switchboard, pivoting around the black muzzle of his gun that was fixed unwaveringly on Duane's belly. His right hand was twisted, brown with blood, but it lifted behind him, lifted unerringly to the handle of the main switch, tugged to bring it over, to open the gates to the green death. Blue lightning crackled as copper bars pulled out of the studs marked: SHUT, as the switch wheeled over to enter those marked: OPEN...

And Duane's arm swept up. The gatekeeper's chair came up with it, hurtled across the narrow space between spy and counter-spy, crashed against the Asiatic's head, crashed it against the switch.

A thousand volts of blue lightning fizzed, crackled, roared through human flesh. Black smoke misted the light in the gatehouse, and the acrid aroma of charred meat was pungent in the little chamber. That which had been Hayashura Odon, Baron of a distant Eastern nation, master saboteur, pitched to the floor.

Ford Duane staggered, retched with nausea, and tumbled atop him. But in the gate-house on Kensico Dam, the motors did not roar again. And when the police that O'Hara would call should come and arouse Red Finger, certain muttered words, the furtive showing of a secret sign, would set him free to dive into his lair once more, there to lick his wounds against the time when again his country should have need of him.

