

Red Finger - Spy Poison

A Red Finger Story

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A MAROON sedan bored steadily into the night, its headlights picking a deserted, narrow road out of the darkness. It was coming from Washington, but it was approaching New York from the north. The Captain of Infantry who drove it had changed its license plates three times since its stealthy departure. He was in civilian clothes, as were his two grizzled, stalwart passengers.

The hat-brims of all three were pulled low over their brows, their coat collars turned up about their jaws to hide their faces even in the auto's dark interior.

The man on the right of the rear seat glanced at the glowing dial of his wristwatch. „Eight-thirty, General,“ he muttered. „We'll be there in half an hour, right on time. I, for one, will be damned glad of it.“

„No more than I, Johnson,“ his companion growled. „This damned secrecy is nonsensical. Here we are, the commanders of the Coast Defense Forces and the

Air Corps, sneaking through our own country like a couple of hunted criminals. One would think we were at war and in enemy territory.“

„The Secretary of War’s orders, sir. He...“

„The Secretary’s an ass! Strictly between ourselves, of course.“ The speaker swayed as the car started to round a curve that was a dark tunnel through thick set, overhanging trees. „The Intelligence outfit’s balderdash about espionage has him buldo—“ Abrupt brakes cut him off, jarred him forward. The car-horn blared raucously. „What the...?“

„Unlighted car blocking the road, sir,“ the chauffeur explained crisply. „I’ll have to...“ Something thumped on the running board. The captain’s hand darted to his holstered gun. The door crashed open.

A black figure lurched in, flailed a blackjack against the driver’s skull before he could draw his weapon. In the same moment, others, springing masked and shapeless out of the leafy murk, invaded the rear. Muffled shouts, a brief struggle, ended in two meaty thuds. Someone groaned.

„Work quickly,“ a guttural voice grunted. „We have no time to lose!“

STREET lamps made little impression on the gloom of the Fourth Avenue block that is known as the Port of Missing Books. The atmosphere seemed filled with a dusty haze rising from the countless ancient volumes housed in the second-hand bookstores that border its dingy walks.

The drowsy shops were darkened, shut for the night. All but the one whose drab sign read, *Duane’s Second-Hand Bookstore*. Through that one’s dirt-encrusted windows a dim luminance still seeped and in its open doorway an alpaca-coated form stood gaunt and tall despite its stoop.

Ford Duane’s silhouette was that of an age-wearied man, worn and languid and as nearly ready for the rubbish-heap as the merchandise he purveyed. Had the light fallen across his face it would have been revealed as too young for one who spent his life in this back-eddy of the Metropolis, its lid-veiled eyes too blue and keen... Some peculiar quality there was in that furtive keenness. A wary fierceness such as lives in the eyes of a jungle beast that is hunter and hunted at once. There was Death in those eyes. Death which their owner had dealt and would deal again. Death that inevitably would be dealt to him were their ceaseless vigilance even momentarily relaxed.

A strange bookseller? Strange indeed. An unnamed, unnameable soldier in the invisible, endless war that knows no screaming headlines, no marching bands. In the war without glory and without honor whose insidious plot and counterplot endangers an unknowing nation more virulently than even booming cannon and zooming planes.

A shabby derelict of the night shambled past. A distant, single bong vibrated against the city’s never-ceasing hum. Duane glanced up at the Consolidated Gas Company’s tower clock, hanging like a yellow, figured moon over Fourteenth Street. Eight-thirty. He sighed, turned to go in.

The deep purr of a high-powered motor stopped him, the sough of its brakes. Imperceptibly Duane tensed, came slowly around again to the street. To a sleek limousine from out of which a liveried chauffeur jumped.

The man opened the rear door. The act turned on a light, and made a small, taupe-upholstered room of the car’s interior.

„Come here, please.“ The voice was high-pitched, querulous. An incredibly wrinkled little face peered out at Duane. The old woman was tiny in the big

seat, was swathed in funereal silk. An ebony cane diagonaled from seat-edge to floor and the woman's hand gripping it was gray and shriveled like old bone.

Ford Duane's hand, sliding into his trouser pocket, touched metal. He slouched across the sidewalk, halted a foot before he reached the mechanic who stood stiffly at attention, holding open the door. Duane's position was such that he had man and mistress in range of his vision, could act swiftly at any overt move on the part of either.

„Yes, madame,“ he said quietly. „What can I do for you?“

„You can come nearer,“ she snapped, her tone that of one used to authority and its exercise. „Do you expect me to shout my business to the town?“ Duane saw that there was a flat, square package on the seat beside her. „Pat won't let the door slam on you, if that's what you're afraid of. Will you, Pat?“

„No, ma'am.“ The man touched an extended finger to his cap visor. „I will not.“ But Duane didn't hear him. There had been the slightest of slight stresses on the repeated name, Pat. A muscle twitched in the bookman's cheek. That name was spelled P-A-T. The three letters had a meaning for him... His fingers slipped from the automatic in his pocket and he put a foot on the running board, leaning in.

„What is it?“ he asked again, loud enough for any possible eavesdropper in the shadows to hear. „You were looking for me?“

„No. I came to New York to see Laroux, the art dealer at the end of the block. But this insane motorcar went mad in Jersey City and by the time Pat brought it to its senses it had made us late. I'm selling the evil thing tomorrow and putting my brougham back into service. That is if there are any decent coach horses left alive. I have a dinner appointment at the Marie Antoinette, I haven't time to go hunting for Laroux. Will you take this landscape and give it to him in the morning?“ She jerked her skeleton hand at the package on the seat.

„Gladly.“ Duane reached for it. „What shall I tell him?“

„To send me a check for it and not rob me too much.“

„But who...?“

„Never mind who. He knows who owns Corot's *Pastorale au Thiers*.“ P-A-T again! „Thank you. Good-bye.“ There was another word, breathed so low Duane was not quite sure he heard it. „Good luck!“ And then, high-pitched and peremptory again: „Hurry, Pat. The Médoc is too warm already, I'm afraid.“

THE limousine whispered away. Ford Duane was hesitant for a moment, the wrapped canvas under his arm. He looked up the block at Laroux's art store, as if debating whether to rout him out. He shrugged, shambled, without haste, across the sidewalk into his own shop. He locked the door, left the lights on. Went wearily between the high, gray stacks to the curtained-off backroom that was his living quarters and put the package on a table. From outside half of it was visible, half was hidden by the tied-back drapes behind which Duane slouched.

He whirled, as the portière hid him, went down on his knees. A keen-bladed knife in his hand pried open the end of the flat package that was concealed from out front. Wary that his operations should not move the wrappings, he slid out an unframed canvas, stood up. Any one peering from outside would have been very sure the bundle with which he had been entrusted was untouched.

The picture glowed in the drab light. An ungainly peasant guided a plow through a wheat-field whose every blade was distinct, detailed, as though the

master had spent an hour in limning it. Scattered clouds were fleecy, soft in a sun-bright sky.

Duane's lips set in a thin, grim line. He turns again, faces a book-shelved wall. He reaches out, touches a volume, another, a third. The wall moves suddenly on well-oiled hinges, swings back again. There is no one, any longer, in the cubicle with its rumpled camp cot, its gas burner on an up-ended stove, and its hacked table.

In a cramped, windowless cubicle behind that shelved wall Ford Duane clicks on a glaring bulb. He puts the canvas on a narrow ledge jutting from an inner wall. He takes down a bottle from a shelf, wets with its limpid, colorless contents a wad of absorbent cotton. Brushes the soaked fibres across the picture.

A pungent aroma taints the air. In the pictured wheat-field some of the interlaced stalks change color. They make letters, running across the landscape. Faint breath hissed from between Duane's teeth. His eyes blaze suddenly, and as suddenly are veiled.

„Williamsbridge Road,“ he mutters. „At nine. It will take me an hour—They were delayed!“

The volatile compound to which the pastoral had given up its message evaporates. The picture is only a picture again. It is back in its wrappings, that all this time have not moved, and the opening through which it was slid has been repaired. The lights go out in Duane's Bookshop. No one has been seen to go out. But there is no movement in the darkened store. No hint of any presence.

WILLIAMSBRIDGE Road runs through the Borough of the Bronx of the City of New York, but its upper reaches are still largely rural. A weathered old house sat far back from the flagstoned sidewalk to which its unkempt lawn sloped and even had its windows not been closely shuttered there were no neighbors to spy on the curious proceedings within it.

„Jane!“ A squat, thick-set man with a leonine mane of white hair stopped pacing, suddenly, in a large room inside that house, lit only by a desk lamp near which a girl sat. „What time is it?“

„Half-past eight, Professor.“ Jane Adams looked up. „They aren't due here till nine.“ Her tan laboratory cloak did not altogether hide the lissome suppleness of her figure. „We shall just have to wait.“ Tawny lights glinted in her russet hair. The small oval of her face was lined with fatigue and there were faint blue shadows under her gray eyes.

„Wait!“ Kurt Rodney's long, sculptor's fingers plucked nervously at the frayed hem of his stained jacket. „I have waited twenty years. Waited and worked, since the night I stood on a London Street and stared at the bits of scattered flesh and bloody bone that an instant before had been a happy family, mother and father and golden-haired child, strolling the war-darkened pavement. But now that only thirty minutes remain, I can wait no longer!“

„You must be patient.“

„I don't know why it is that this fever possesses me now,“ the old man ran on. „A fever of dread. Of fear. Fear! Till you came to my laboratory at the University and persuaded me to take myself and my apparatus into hiding I did not know what that word meant. There was only my spectroscopes, and my dynamometers, and the joy of discovering hitherto unknown forces. You made

me ask for Sabbatical leave. You made me board the Around-the-World liner and then sneak ashore again in disguise. You made me come here to this benighted hide-away and remain here a prisoner—for six months.“

„For your sake—and for our country’s sake, Professor.“ There was compassion in Jane’s tone, and firmness. „If the secret of what you were doing, have done, were to be learned by America’s enemies...?“

„They would use it against her and my work would be in vain,“ Rodney broke in. „Yes. I know. That was why I consented. Excuse me, Jane. I am a silly old man.“ An endearing smile of apology seemed to light up the craggy, seamed countenance.

„You are a very great scientist, and a greater humanitarian. You have saved our cities, their teeming millions, from the nightmare horrors of the inevitable Next War. When the Army officers see what you have devised, when you demonstrate it to them...“

„Jane! Suppose something is wrong! Suppose it doesn’t work. They will laugh at me...“

„It will work. A hundred times it has worked. There’s no reason why...“

„Let’s try it again. We have time. We must make sure.“

„Very well.“ The girl lifted, wearily, moved to a wall. A click and the chamber was flooded with light.

A HUGE cage centered the room, a cage of mosquito screening. Its floor was covered by a miniature hamlet, tiny houses row on row along inch-wide streets. Surrounding the toy village, green-painted paper-maché simulated rolling country. Studding the line where town and country met were a number of small metal contrivances, curiously intricate. They might be models of field guns, except that the wee barrels were mounted on boxes out of whose surfaces quarter-inch glass lenses glittered. Threadlike, insulated wires connected these, coiled out through the wire meshes to a rheostat on a nearby cluttered table that in turn was joined to a wall-plug by a metal-covered cable.

On one wall of the cage, just beneath its roof, a row of inch-square cages of the same wire netting were fastened. Within each one a common house-fly preened itself, and each tiny cage was provided with a small door that could be opened from outside to make its occupant free in the larger chamber.

Rodney peered down into the cage. „Nonsensical, this display,“ he growled. „Unscientific.“

„But practical. The men who are coming here will be more impressed by it than by all your careful graphs and charts.“ Jane gestured to the black face of a closed safe recessed into the further wall. „They are practical men, not theorists.“

„Perhaps! Let us start!“

The girl moved the rheostat handle, from switch-point to switch-point. Stopped it half-way of its arc. A vague, humming sound was perceptible. That was all, but it seemed to fill the room with tenseness, with a spine-prickling excitement. Professor Rodney’s gray face grew paler, his lips colorless.

„All right,“ he said. „Go ahead.“

Jane stepped to the cage, lifted one of the small doors. The fly inside stopped preening itself. The girl tapped a sharp finger against the wire and the insect took wing.

It circled momentarily, darted over Toytown. Darted towards Toytown. The tiny gun-tubes came alive, jerked upward, spat minuscule, shiny pellets. The almost microscopic projectiles struck the fly, fell with it to the cage floor.

„Perfect,“ Rodney exclaimed. „If that had been an enemy airplane, or a fleet of them, raiding the city by day or night, the infra-red rays would have aimed and shot the rifles at them, and destroyed them with the same efficiency. No matter how high they flew, no matter how silently. Our cities are safe from poison gas, from bombs. The same devices on our own planes, battleships, tanks, will make their marksmanship perfect. I have made America invincible.“

„Invincible! And have insured peace.“ There was elation in the girl's face, overpowering joy. „Professor Rodney! You...!“

A knock at the outside door checked her. It came again. There was a pause. Then the double rap was repeated.

„They're here,“ the scientist gasped.

„At last!“

JANE ADAMS almost ran out of the room, into the small foyer that separated it from the entrance. In moments she was back, behind her two tall, military-appearing men whose hat-brims were pulled low over their brows, whose coat collars were turned up to screen their faces.

The newcomers looked curiously at the astonishing contrivance in the center of the room. Then one turned.

„Professor Rodney?“ His voice was hoarse, guttural.

„Yes. I am Kurt Rodney. And you are...?“

„Generals Sloane and Johnson of the United States Army. You have some device here you wish to sell to the War Department.“

„No!“

„What do you mean? We were ordered here to...“

„Not to sell. To give to the nation. Gentlemen! As you know, there is no question that any future declaration of war will at once be accompanied by air raids on civilian centers of population.“

„There is no doubt of that. The next war will be directed against the non-belligerent populations of the adversary countries. It will be a holocaust...“

„It will not. I have destroyed that fear for the United States for once and always.“

„Interesting—if true.“

The physicist's face darkened with anger. „You doubt me? Here is the proof.“ He thumped the huge cage. „Here.“ The disturbed flies buzzed.

„Yes?“

„Yes.“ Rodney thrust a hand inside the breast-opening of his jacket, struck his familiar lecture posture. „My device is based on the principle of the photoelectric cell that is used in industry to open doors, stop and start machinery, inspect and throw out imperfect products, and so on. You are familiar with it. Yes?“

„Yes.“

„But I utilize the invisible infra-red rays, which have a penetrative power far beyond that of visible light. Searching the sky with these, despite darkness or fog, my invention can...“

„Professor!“ the girl broke in. „Just a minute.“ She was at the safe-door, had been manipulating its silvery dial, but had not opened it. Her hand remained on its knob.

„Er—what is it, Jane? Why do you interrupt me?“

„You’ve forgotten to ask these gentlemen for their credentials. After all, we have only their word for their identity.“

GENERAL JOHNSON laughed, humorlessly. „Of course. Here they are.“ He brought a leather folder out of his pocket, flipped it open. Rodney peered near-sightedly at it. The seal of the United States was embossed across its lines of printing and writing, across a pasted photograph of the man who held it.

„This seems to be correct, Jane.“ He muttered. „I have no doubt this gentleman is whom he represents himself to be.“

„General Johnson!“ The girl seemed not yet to be satisfied. „How high does an eagle fly?“

„How high...?“ The man stopped. A sudden, brittle silence shut down. Then there was a gun in his hand, shouting at the girl. „You are too smart for your own good, young lady.“ The other man’s automatic, too, was out, was covering the professor. „You caught me with that password question but that will not prevent us from getting what we came for.“

Jane twirled the safe knob, stepped away from it. „I didn’t catch you with that question. The real General Johnson would not have known the answer and would have said so. There isn’t any answer.“ She smiled grimly. „What betrayed you is the shoes you both are wearing, but I had to make sure.“

„The shoes...! They’re dress shoes of the United States army. Regular issue. We were careful about that as about everything else.“

„Too careful. Generals in the American army purchase their own shoes. They are the same as any civilian’s. Yours...“

„You’re an ass, Gorslum.“ The putative General Sloane, silent till now, darted a vicious glare at his comrade. „But we’re wasting time. The plans are in that safe. Open it, girl.“

The corners of Jane’s mouth twitched. „And if I don’t?“

„You will.“ There was no suavity in his accents, only a hissing threat the more horrible because of its low tone. „We have ways of making you and they are not—pleasant.“

„Very well.“ The girl shrugged. She turned, manipulated the combination dial. The painted steel swung open—and a mass of charred, smoldering ashes spilled out. „If you can make anything out of these you’re good,“ Jane chuckled. „That last flip I gave the knob detonated a little bomb in here that I set for action while Professor Rodney was starting his lecture.“

„You witch!“ Gorslum exclaimed. He sprang forward, slammed the side of his gun against the girl’s cheek, gashing it. „You she-devil...!“

The blow jolted the girl backward, against the table on which the rheostat rested. Her elbow struck the rheostat-handle, jammed it against the terminal marked, „HIGH“. Sparks coruscated from the miniature field-guns within the cage and the little boxes glowed cherry-red, white. Melted down into shapeless lumps.

„And that finishes the last trace of Kurt Rodney’s secret,“ Jane Adams gritted, through teeth clamped on the pain of her wound. „He knows now why I

insisted on supplying the rig-up with far more current than it could safely take.“

„Jane,“ the old man groaned. „Jane. You are wiser than I. Far wiser...“

„Destroyed the secret, eh!“ Gorslum was white-faced with wrath, but his thick mouth was tight and very cruel. „Has she destroyed the secret, Trano?“

THE other man licked dry lips with a pink tongue. „She has not. It still lives—in its creator’s brain.“ And then the two men moved, quickly, purposefully, as though at an unspoken signal. When they were through both the Americans were in chairs, lashed and helpless. „He will tell us, and be glad to tell us,“ Trano continued, as though nothing had intervened, „all about it before we are done with him.“

„Never.“ Rodney had come out of his daze. „I will die before I speak.“ He was somehow majestic, bound as he was, somehow awesome. „And my invention will die with me.“

The sound Trano made might have been intended for a laugh, but the girl shuddered at its evil implication. „You will pray for death, my dear professor,“ he lipped. „You will think death a blessing.“

„Stop the talk and get to work.“ Gorslum seemed anxious, jittery. „I don’t want to keep that car standing out there overlong. We hid those we took it from well enough, but there is always the chance that they may be found and an alarm broadcast.“

„They will not be found,“ the other grinned, horribly. „And if they are, they will not talk. I changed our friends’ instructions slightly. For the better, as you now understand. But...“ He paused. „Ah! The professor has been good enough to provide me with just what I need.“

He darted to the table, snatched up an electric soldering-iron. „This develops a quite satisfactory degree of heat.“ He thumbed its switch, watched its swollen end grow dull black, glisten, begin to turn cherry-red. He turned, prowled toward Rodney, the long cord trailing behind him. „Take off his shoes.“

Gorslum knelt, fumbled at the scientist’s laces. Jane watched him with dilated pupils, but oddly enough the expression of her eyes was not quite hopeless. She seemed to be listening, intently. Not to any sound in the room. Not to any sound that existed. Her gaze flickered away from the ominous group around the other chair, flitted to the shutter-blinded window...

And was pulled back by a piercing scream of agony from Rodney’s writhing mouth. By the acrid tang of burned flesh.

The scream died down to a moan. „Are you ready to talk?“ Gorslum questioned. „Or shall my friend proceed?“

The professor’s blue lips quivered. He was an old man, Jane thought. How much could he endure? Was he breaking? Already?

„May you both... go to Hell!“ From him, from the cloistered scientist, it was not a meaningless oath but a malediction and a terrible curse. „To Hell...!“ And then he was screaming again, was writhing in anguish. The pungent smell of charred meat was nauseating...

The flies were buzzing, excitedly, in their cages. They smelled carrion, battered their wings against the wire, avid to get at it. Nausea retched at the girl’s stomach, thrust dizzy tentacles into her brain. The shrill sound of Rodney’s agony beat dully against her swimming ears. It stopped. A guttural voice was incoherent, meaningless...

It ended in a splintering crash—and a sudden silence. A silence that cleared Jane's vision for her, that brought her back to realization of her surroundings.

THE two spies were frozen, statuesque, Gorslum holding Rodney's bare ankles, Trano on his knees, the soldering-iron in his white-knuckled hand. The window-shutter was splintered, its aperture gaping. Someone was surging in through it. Someone—or something! The formless bulk that dropped lithely to the floor was a swirling mass of dark draperies, a black and grisly phantasm. It thudded on the wood, straightened.

„God!“ Gorslum gulped. „Red Finger!“

The apparition was tall, draped in a long black cloak that obliterated its figure. A gray felt hat crowned it, and a gray mask made it faceless except for narrow slits behind which there was a blue, dangerous glitter. But that which made of it a macabre, fantastic threat was the hand that jabbed a revolver point-blank at the torturers. Black, that hand was, black gloved. Except for one finger, the finger that curled around the weapon's trigger. That was a glaring scarlet as if it had been dipped in fresh blood.

„Yes. Red Finger!“ The masked head nodded and the toneless acknowledgment seemed to savor the dread that name inspired among all who moved in the murky underworld of international intrigue. „You forgot that New York is my district, Gorslum and Trano. Or did you think that you could succeed where so many others have failed?“

The only answer was a whimper from a clamped throat, a whimper of deadly fear. These men were brave. None but the brave enlist in the invisible war. But the man who stood before them was a whispered legend among their like a tradition of supernatural invincibility and relentless doom.

„Stand up!“

Gorslum dropped the professor's ankles. Trano straightened, slowly—exploded into lightning action that flung the heated iron he held straight at Red Finger's eye-slits.

The glove-held gun spat orange-yellow flame. The glowing iron clanged, smashed, in mid-air, into a hundred pieces that clattered down. But the momentary diversion had given the spies time to snatch out their own guns.

The sound of firing was continuous thunder in the room. Fiery jets laced the air. A lax body thudded down. Lead plucked at black cloth, sliced a fluttering fragment from it. A second body hung limply on the wire-mesh cage, sprayed a scarlet rain on Toytown.

Red Finger swayed, clutched at the window-sill for support. He hung there for a long moment. A darker patch spread, glistening, on the dark cloth of his cloak, at his side. He fumbled at the fluttering drapes and his gun was gone.

He was coming across the floor to the girl who called herself Jane Adams. He was staggering across the floor, clutching at the table, at a chair-back, to keep from falling. He got to her, fumbled at the knots that tied her.

HE was mumbling low words to her. „I got here as quickly as I could. The message was delayed.“

„I told you I would see you again.“

Her tone too, was low. But Kurt Rodney would not have heard them had they shouted. He had fainted. „When you sent me out of that office on Fifth Avenue and out of your life, I told you never to say never to a woman.“

„Flower!“ Recognition seemed to give him new life, to staunch his wound. „You! Who are you, Flower? Who...?“

„Number six-one-three. Just a number, Red Finger, to the Force. But to you?“

„A girl who has no business in the Force. Get out, Flower. Get out before it's too late. Before a bullet finds its billet in your soft, sweet body. Or worse happens to it. Worse...“

„And you, Red Finger?“

„I—I stay.“

„Then I stay, too. Red Finger! Are we neither of us to know life? Are we...?“

He was gone from her. He was across the room, at the window. She tried to rise, but she was still held tight by the lashings he had not finished unfastening.

„It will take you a minute to free yourself.“ He was out of the window. „Will you ever free me?“ He vanished into the chilly night, without waiting for an answer.

A WEEK later Ford Duane, still weak and pale from the automobile accident that had sent him to a certain private and very discreet sanitarium in the Bronx, unlocked his bookshop. Among the litter of letters and bills that had been poked through the slit in this door during his absence was a russet rose. Impaled on its stem was a narrow slip of paper, and on that paper one word:

„Never!“

