

# **Second Hand Death**

## **Secret Service Operator #5 A Red Finger Story**

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

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THERE is nothing to distinguish Duane's Second-hand Bookstore from the other shops of its kind that line lower Fourth Avenue with their decrepit outside-boxes of tattered volumes in front of their dark bookstacks within. Its signs—„This Box 15¢ Each“; „Choice Selections, 50¢“—are just as rain-streaked and illegible, its grimed plate-glass just as forlorn. As pathetic, too, the men and women with worn faces and threadbare garments who dare its gloomy precincts to browse along those musty shelves.

Nor is there anything to set him apart from the other storekeepers, the long-faced, alpaca-coated man who inhabits its depths—as dusty-seeming and inconspicuous as his stock-in-a-very-paltry-trade, except that he appears a bit

younger than the others, and that his very blue eyes are continually moving and very watchful.

And yet, death and the fear of death are a living presence in that drab shop.

The shadows that lie in black pools on the unpainted floor might well be the brooding shadows of world-events stirring heavily in the womb of time; the dirt-streaked curtains at the rear that part occasionally to show a narrow camp-cot, a wooden chair, and a two-burner gas-plate on an upended box, might be the veil that hides a nation's fate. For Ford Duane is not quite what he seems, though his very existence depends on the maintenance of his identity as a dreamy, cobweb-brained sexton of a Tomb of Defunct Books.

Surely the bent old man, in a frock coat of rusty black, and high, clean stock over which his grayish chin folds and quivers, who hugs a dog-eared volume in his gaunt fingers, cannot have picked this particular doorway in which to stand timorously for any other cause but chance. He had tottered slowly down the long block, pausing momentarily at each cluttered entrance, palpably working up courage to pass through one of them. His bleared old eyes blink and peer nearsightedly at Duane as he silently appears from the shadows almost as though one of them had come to life.

The ancient gulps. „I—I—You buy old books, do you not?“ he quavers.

A secret smile flickers around the other's suprisingly firm, determined mouth. „Occasionally,“ he responds, „Though I prefer to sell them. What have you there?“

„A Petronius, printed by Arden and bound by Trant.“ He says it proudly, and hearer's dark eyebrows arch as if in appreciation, but, curiously enough, there was never any such printer as Arden nor any binder as Trant. Is Ford Duane a neophyte then, to be impressed by unctuously mouthed but counterfeit names? Is the would-be seller a fraud? Perhaps. And then again...

„Let me see it.“ Duane takes the book from the reluctant hand of the old man, ruffles its yellow pages. The leather of its binding smears his fingers with a fine brown dust. „Yes,“ he says at last. „It is a fine specimen, but I can only offer you two dollars for it.“

„Two dollars! It cost me twenty-five!“ And so starts a leisurely chaffering on the doorstep, where any passerby can hear. And why not? They have nothing to hide, those two...

Nothing?

The bargaining is over at last, the book is Duane's. As he counts the money into a palsied palm, he watches the old man falter down the street, vanishing around the nearest corner. Then he turns back into his shop.

Those extraordinarily keen eyes of his flick over the two or three idlers as he moves slowly toward the rear. His thin, aquiline face is impassive, but an exceedingly close observer might notice that a tiny muscle is twitching in his smooth cheek. He goes through the curtain that ineffectually conceals his living quarters from the store proper and it drops behind him. Momentarily, at least, he is concealed from those outside. He rests a hand on a breast-high book-filled shelf; there is a flicker of movement—and he has vanished!

BEHIND those shelves that have swung out and back on oiled hinges so quickly, Ford Duane is no longer impassive. By the light of a small bulb high up in the ceiling his face is alive and his eyes glow with excitement.

The book he has just purchased is still in his hand, he lays it on a shelf that is attached to the inner wall, opens it to the first blank flyleaf. Seating himself on a high stool, he pulls out a drawer beneath the shelf, fumbles out of it a tiny hooded lamp that he sets next to the leather covered Petronius. He plugs the short cord attached into a socket before him, reaches to a handy switch.

Click! The ceiling bulb goes out and velvety, impenetrable darkness invades the cubicle. Click! That was the sound of another switch, but the blackness remains, so thick as to be almost tangible. There must be something wrong with the wiring of the little lamp.

No! There, just where the book must be, tiny wriggles of light appear, iridescent tracery of living fire. Indistinct at first their outlines become clearer. They are letters, words. Exhaled breath hisses sharply as Ford Duane reads the message that has come to him thus deviously from an inner, closely-barred and guarded room in a certain building in faraway Washington.

A solution of aspirin, a ball-pointed pen, were all that were required to write that invisible communication. A special bulb, equipped to emit only ultra-violet light was all that was needed to make it give up its secret.

But a man will die tonight, before Duane can act on the instructions thus given him. A man will die and horrible death will hover over hundreds, thousands more. Tomorrow a coded cable will flash under two oceans and bring consternation into another barred and guarded room in a chancellery three thousand miles from the one in Washington...

A BLACK shade was tightly drawn over the window of a small room on the twentieth floor of the St. Vincent Hotel. The towering façade outside this aperture dropped sheer and ledgeless from its sill. Only a fly could have found hand- or foot-hold, on that blank wall, and so far did the huge hostelry overtop the surrounding low roofs that the interior of the chamber could be observed only from the spidery structure of Brooklyn Bridge, a quarter-mile away, and then only by a powerful spy-glass.

But the room's occupants seemed to have great need of secrecy, for its door was locked, not only by its usual bolt but also by a contrivance that slid between door-edge and jamb and could be removed without trace. The crevices around the door and its keyhole were tightly stuffed with cotton batting, and the single light within was cast by a lamp whose shade was covered with a black cloth. Its illumination was thrown only downward to the table-top on which it stood.

The rest of the room, therefore, was in semi-darkness enhanced somehow by the pale gleam of the bed's coverlet and the darker shadows of two men seated opposite one another at the table.

Only their hands were clearly visible.

One pair clutched the edge of the small round table. They were big hands, their joints swollen, the tips and inner surfaces of their fingers calloused as only long, hard labor can harden a man's skin. They were weather-tanned, but under the bronze there was a gray pallor oddly at variance with their evident strength. The palms were wet with cold sweat.

The owner of these hands, one knew, was under a tremendous strain, was fighting hard to keep an appearance of steadiness and calm while he waited for some critical decision to be made by the other.

The hands of that other, slim and effeminate, conveyed an impression of wily power, of sure dominance. Their skin was oddly tinged, the nails filed to queer long points, and at the base of those nails, crescents of deep blue, strangely exotic.

These hands gripped the margins of the topmost blueprint of a pile spread over the top of the table. One felt, rather than saw, that the owner of those hands was intently absorbing every quirk and angle of the sharply defined white lines that patterned the cerulean sheet.

Within the circle of illumination there were two other objects, both close to the hands holding the outspread plan. One was a bulky package of grimy-edged, rumpled envelopes held by a thick, black elastic. The other was a bull-nosed automatic, compact and vicious.

For a while there was no sound in that mysteriously isolated chamber except the faint rustle of paper and the heavy, tortured breathing of the man who waited. Then his vis-à-vis spoke. „Yes,“ he muttered, „These are what I wanted, Mister Lassiter. You have fulfilled your bargain.“

„How about your end, then?“ Lassiter asked hoarsely. „The letters—?“

„Are yours,“ The speaker’s hand moved swiftly, yet without hurry, to the automatic’s grip. It lifted the gun and pushed the bundle of letters across the table with its muzzle. They vanished in Lassiter’s capacious paw, now visibly trembling, „You may assure the lady her secret is safe.“

„Damn it, Odon,“ There was a wealth of bitterness in the response, „that’s the only way you’d have ever gotten those plans of the subway ventilating system from me. If they’d been my own letters I’d have told you where to go, but I couldn’t let hers get to—“

„The person who would have been so very interested in reading them. No! We knew that, and used our information.“ Odon was rolling the plans up dextrously, though one yellow hand still held the automatic. „I cannot quite comprehend your Occidental viewpoint.“

„You wouldn’t. But I still can’t get it through my head why you went to so much trouble to get them. The principles are common knowledge, and your engineers—“

„Are as good as yours. Yes.“ Something vaguely mocking had come into Sato’s tone. „Perhaps you might be enlightened if I were to tell you that I represent not the municipality of our largest city but—our War Office.“

„What!“ Lassiter forgot caution in an astonished shout. „Your War—But why—?“

„Why should that department be interested in your subway?“ A chair grated as the alien rose. „Simply this, my dear sir. While our King and your President struggle to reach an approachment on the difficulties between our nations, we of the military prepare for the failure of their negotiations. New weapons are being forged on both sides, new methods of warfare. No longer will the uniformed forces alone bear the brunt of battle. The new strategy will consist of striking at the civilian population, and striking first. Gas and disease germs, will be munitions of the next war, their swift dissemination will constitute its tactics. With these maps we shall know just where to place our gas bombs, just where to release our death-dealing microbes so that they may spread through New York with the greatest rapidity. You see—“

„You dog!“ Lassiter’s chair crashed to the floor as he leaped to his feet, the table skidded sideways as he dove past it, his big hands fisted and flailing. „You

yellow dog!“ But the other’s ready gun cracked, its sound thundering here but inaudible outside the muffled room.

A sudden blue hole appeared in the engineer’s right temple. Odon slid aside, catlike, watched Lassiter plunge past him and thud blindly against the wall. The big man clawed at the plaster; a sound burbled from his throat, something between a groan and a shriek. Then life was out of him and he had collapsed, a shapeless, sprawling heap on the dull maroon carpeting. Where the back of his head lay, a darker pool spread, seeped into the thick pile.

Odon stood motionless for a moment, the faintest of smiles twisting his thin lips with cold cruelty. „So to the rest of his nation when the day comes,“ he muttered in his own language. „And may it dawn soon.“

He turned back to the table, put his murder-weapon down, and lifted the blueprint roll to stow it in a cunningly-contrived pocket of his dark jacket. „But I must rid myself of the weakness that urged me to taunt him with the fate awaiting his countrymen before I stilled his tongue forever.“

His long fingers sought the light chain, jerked it. Blackness swept in to hide murderer and victim under a common pall, but there was a feel of movement in the room, the slither of the spy’s feet across the rug, the soft rub of cotton against wood as he pulled the muffling from the door cracks. The metal grated with the wee sound of well-oiled hinges. A widening gray line showed that the door was opening to let the spy out into the early-morning corridor with his burden of horrible death for New York’s teeming millions. His squat form was silhouetted against that dimness, and then—against a sudden blaze of white light from a flashlight lens. „Not so fast, Odon,“ a cold, hard voice sounded. „Not so fast.“

Low-toned as it was, that voice was keen-edged with threat of sudden death. The spy saw a gleam of metal next the steadily held flashlight, the snouting barrel of a revolver. His face froze, was an expressionless mask. His one hand tightened its hold on the doorknob till white showed over the muscle at the base of its thumb, and the other arm moved rigidly away from his side. „Get back,“ the newcomer ordered. „Get back into that room.“

Odon’s three rearward strides were stiff-legged, the newcomer’s advance noiseless as the foreigner’s own movements had been. The door thudded shut once more on taut drama within the drab hotel room.

The torch-beam, reflected back from palely-enameled walls showed a vague, black-clothed figure ominously motionless. A gray felt was pulled low over his forehead, a gray mask hid nose and mouth, only his narrowed eyes were revealed, their irises a steely blue. Even the one visible hand that held the butt of his weapon was covered by a skin-tight glove. That glove pulled the killer’s glance to it. Concealed fear flickered in the oddly-round eyes that betrayed his race. For, although the rest of the glove was black, the finger curled around the gun’s trigger was a glaring scarlet, as if it had been dipped in fresh blood.

The spy’s lips scarcely moved, but his words were sharp; „The Red Finger!“ was what he said. „But I thought—“

„That Reinhardt Gans had done for me? So he reported to his government, and your undercover man there read that report and sent the news on to you. Whereupon all you spies and saboteurs breathed a huge sigh of relief. It would be lots safer now, you thought, to carry on your filthy work in the United States, each for his own nation, getting ready for the time you all dream of

when America will have to fight the World. But Gans was mistaken. Too bad, isn't it?"

Odon shrugged, fatalistically. „Very much too bad. We will have to take steps to repair Gans' mistake.“

„I don't doubt that you will try. But in the meantime, the plans, please, for which you killed Lassiter. Put them on that table.“ The voice of the Red Finger was suddenly diamond-hard. „And only the plans. You know well enough that if your hand comes out with a gun in it my lead will be in your belly before you have a chance to use it.“

The spy's thin lips tightened, a straight gash across his face. „Take them,“ he defied, „if you can.“

„I'll take them from your dead body, you rat,“ Red Finger snapped. „In ten seconds. One—“

„No you won't. Look.“ Odon's stiffly-extended left arm twisted, so that the palm of its hand was turned toward the other. Held loosely between thumb-ball and palm a half-inch crystal ball glittered. „If my hand relaxes this will drop. It contains quintol, our new explosive, sufficient to blow everything in this room to atomic fragments. How about it, Red Finger, will you shoot?“

The American paused almost imperceptively. „Two—“ his count went on, „Three—“

Odon's queer eyes glowed. „That isn't all,“ he resumed, smoothly. „On my body is a thin-walled vial in which is a virulent culture of the bacilli of the bubonic plague. Shattered by the explosion, they will scatter—hundred, thousands in this city will die horribly—“

Red Finger had continued steadily through this pronouncement. „Six—Seven—“

What manner of man was this? The villain was not bluffing, that much was certain. Nor could he be bluffed; fanatic eagerness to die for a cause is a notorious trait of his race. Was the Red Finger about to sacrifice deliberately hundreds of lives for momentary triumph, a triumph he himself could not live to savor? „Eight—“

The contemplated use of the plans he determined would be hardly more damaging than the result of his shot. „Nine—“ The American's face was hidden, but Odon's glistening features, flat-faced, high cheek-boned, was set, fish-scaly beneath its racial tinge. Eternity quavered in the tiny chamber before the final numeral crackled on the taut air—„Ten!“

The scarlet finger jerked, a dull plod sounded, a fine mist sprayed from the American's gun muzzle, a vaporous cloud about the spy's head. His body twitched, then, was limp. His hand opened. The ball was dropping—seemed to hang in space as if reluctant to loose the cataclysm it enclosed. Lightning quick, Red Finger sprang forward, his hand darted out, was under the death-sphere! The fragile crystal nestled into a soft, gloved palm; fingers, one carmine, closed gingerly about it. Before Odon's flaccid form had thudded to the floor and settled to its final lax sprawl, the tiny murder-bomb had vanished into some interstice of the other's clothing and his revolver was back again in the queerly-marked hand that had so dexterously averted disaster. Pent breath whistled from behind the mask, and a muffled voice exclaimed, „Close, by George! Too damn' close for comfort.“

Red Finger allowed himself only that instant's consideration of what would have followed failure. Then he dropped, lithely as all his motions were, to his

knees beside the still form of his victim. A moment's fumbling and the long roll of blueprints was transferred to his own person. The squat automatic was next. Red Finger's hands trembled as they extracted a thin glass sliver containing a murky yellow jelly. The clipped letters that had been Lassiter's doom appeared in the fanlike beam of the counter-spy's torch. Red Finger held these for a moment, scrutinizing the handwriting. „Marie Prall,“ he muttered. „Back at her old tricks. If Lassiter had only known what I do about her...“

Here lay the real tragedy of this incident in the underground warfare that wages continually between spy and counter-spy in every city of the world. The woman for whom the engineer had, with woefully mistaken chivalry, sacrificed his honor and his life was an international adventuress, her services at the command of the highest bidder...

THE packet stowed in the capacious recesses of his garments, Red Finger turned to contemplate Odon. „I'd like to leave you here,“ he addressed the still figure grimly, „for the city cops to find. But your compatriot fireaters would welcome the indictment of the Baron Odon for murder in America, it might be just the spark they need to destroy the peace of the world. War's coming sooner or later, but my jobs to stave it off as long as I can.“ He shrugged, „And so, my dear Odon...“

Red Finger lifted himself erect, out of the glow of the torch that he had laid on the floor. Fabric rustled. A click, and the lamp came on, the black covering whisked from its shade. A red-haired youth was visible, freckled-faced and grinning, attired in the emerald green uniform of the St. Vincent's bellhops. He was twenty-two or thereabouts, his deceptively slender body concealing muscles of steel, sinews of whipcord.

He bent again, lifted the squat spy effortlessly, propelled the unconscious man toward the door. So cleverly was it done that anyone watching would have sworn that he was a hotel guest who had drunk not wisely, but too well, who was being guided to his room by an urchin half-amused, half-bored. And it was thus that the two progressed through the dim-lit hotel corridor, up a flight of stairs, and into another room directly above that in which sudden death had come to one more dupe of the new international espionage.

Here Odon was tossed, still fully dressed, on a bed. The putative bellhop did a curious thing then. He got down on the floor, squirmed under that very bed. In seconds he was out again, dragging after him a small black box from which two filament-like wires trailed. On top of the flat contrivance a perforated disk showed, the earpiece of the device that combined stethoscope and radio-amplifier to make eavesdropping a facile thing. It was evident now how he had been able to time his appearance at the psychological moment.

The youth crossed to a window, pulled it up, and hurled the contrivance out. The crash of its landing came faintly up to him, at the end of a twenty-one story fall to hard concrete. There wouldn't be enough left of the instrument to tell even a paleontologist what it had been. A last quick glance around to see if there were any other trace of his long vigil here, then the door opened and Odon was alone, sleeping stertorously on the bed where he had been placed. Peculiarly enough, when he woke in the morning he would find that the room had been registered in his name, the night's rental paid. And, very wisely, he would slink away into the vagueness of the furtive land in which he moved, nursing a headache and the sourness of defeat...

THE stoop-shouldered man with a florid face bleared by bad liquor who shambled unsteadily up a slimy tenement stoop on Third Avenue resembled neither the dusty Ford Duane who kept a bookshop on Fourth, just behind, nor the red-haired, grinning bellhop of the Hotel St. Vincent. He had trouble in finding his key, this derelict, and a watchful cop had already started to walk over from across the cartracks before the unpainted door in the dark vestibule opened. Once in the dimly-lit hallway reeking with stale smell of yesterday's corned beef and cabbage and the boiled fish of the week before, the man padded down creaking wooden steps silently, turned left between white-washed cellar walls to the shabby room that he rented from a hard-pressed janitor for a dollar a week. His hand closed on the knob of the skewed door. A voice said, „Hold it that way, you. Just that way.“

The man froze. From the shadows beyond, two forms materialized. Rough fingers clutched his arms, digging in. „Chees, guys,“ the bum whined, „yer shinnying the wrong pole. I ain't got a jit, honest I ain't.“

A guttural chuckle sounded, then a second voice said, thickly, „You might so well not try that, Cholm O'Hara. Or maybe you like better that I call you Red Finger? Save your breath for a prayer, because your tricks are all through.“

The Bowery accent dropped from the captive's speech, and he slumped wearily, the hands holding him apparently his only support. „Oscar Thorn!“ he groaned in defeat, „you—“ His speech choked suddenly, and he exploded into action. One foot lifted behind, lashed out and plunked into a soft groin. And Duane's left arm was free.

His hand flashed to a armpit; a knife gleamed in the dimness. He whirled, and steely muscles ripped away from the other retaining clutch. His quick twist showed him a second blade sweeping down at him. He caught it on his own, parried it with consummate skill. His opponent, bulky, obese, grunted, dodged back, came in again with surprising agility. But the American's muscles vibrated like tempered springs, he flashed in and out again—and the battle was over. A heavy form thudded to broken concrete.

Ford Duane whipped to the other man squirming on the basement floor. A pencil ray shot from a thin torch in his hand, kicked a brutish face out of the darkness, blue-jowled. He studied that face for a fleeting instant, came to a quick decision. „You,“ he snapped. „Do you know what this is all about?“

The fellow groaned. „Cripes,“ he blurted. „No! De guy asks me does I want ter make a sawbuck beatin' a guy up an' I says I'd work over me own gran'mudder fer dat. Den he brings me in here an' we lays fer yuh. Gawd, if I'd knowed...“

„All right,“ Duane interrupted. „That's all I want to know. You can make that ten yet, and another like it if you will do as I say, and keep your mouth shut.“

„Gawd,“ the other grunted, unbelievably. „Ye're an all right guy at that. What've I got ter do?“

A HALF-HOUR later there was a new-made grave in the soft dirt of the tenement's backyard. A bewildered gorilla was climbing a fence on the way to freedom. Duane watched his shadowy form disappear in the graying dawn, sighed, and turned wearily back into the basement.

Once more he was at the door of the cellar room that had once been a coal-bin. That door thudded softly behind him, and his tired footsteps seemed



recurring echoes of that thud in the windowless dark. A bedstead creaked, hinges grated softly. And there was no longer anyone in that other room.

But—moments later—Ford Duane was in the concealed cubicle behind his bookshop. Deft fingers twitched off a wig, erased skillfully applied paint, removed collodion strips that had widened nostrils, broadened a thin mouth. A flicker of movement, and a pajamaed young man moved slowly about his meagre living quarters, donning the dusty habiliments of a dreaming, other-worldly bookseller.

No one would wonder if he dozed off at his pamphlet-cluttered desk out there between the bookshelves. He always looked as if he were half-asleep anyway.

