

# **Red Finger Meets His Match**

## **A Red Finger Story**

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

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EXCITEMENT ran like a fever through the manifold arteries of New York. Broadway quivered with its tremor, manifest in the fluttering of starry flags which tossed above a honking, eager rush of traffic and made vivid the drab, towering walls of the world's most famous street. It surged tumultuous through the side-streets. Its hot thrill shuddered along Fifth Avenue and the broad sidewalks of the jeweled thoroughfare became murmurous and black with the thousands gathering to wait for the Procession that not yet for hours would file between the Golden Lamps. It hammered in the subways, buzzed in the „El“ trains, the buses, the street-cars whose racketing rush brought more and ever more of the city's myriads to the city's heart.

The pulse of that heart was a vast throb in the air, a measured tuneless rhythm of drums beating martial time. Drums everywhere! The whole vast

metropolis was their sounding board. Into every nook and cranny of the sprawling town their dull beat, beat, beat penetrated—into every alley, and every street...

Even into the musty drowse of the Fourth Avenue block which is known as the Port of Ancient Books came that pervading throb, even into the dim dusk within the sleepest of the sleepy, second-hand bookshops there—that of Ford Duane. Beat, beat, beat, it stirred even the dead dust filming the lofty, crowded shelves of forgotten tomes. Only Duane himself seemed immune to it, the young-old man whose drooped, tired-seeming lids veiled eyes somehow too blue, too keen for the lethargy of his tall, bent figure—for the dull, uneventful round of life in this black-eddy of the city's torrential stream.

Too keen? Perhaps they were not keen enough, those eyes. Perhaps some time they would not be quite watchful enough to forestall the sudden, flashing flicker of death which at any moment might strike at their owner. For death, to Ford Duane, was an ever-present, ever-imminent threat. There was a price on his head in half the chancelleries of the Eastern Hemisphere. There were those whose lust to slash steel into his heart—to blast lead into his flesh—needed no price to whet it. Sooner or later he knew, one of those must discover who the shambling bookseller he pretended to be really was. And then...

From somewhere far off, a filament of silver sound threaded the beat, beat of the drums, a bugle singing the ta-tit, ta-tit, ta-tit taaa of *Assembly*.

„Queer, isn't it, that they couldn't find anything but war music to play today?“ There was a strangely sweet huskiness in the voice of the girl who turned to Duane from the shelf where she had been browsing. „You would think that He would hate the bugles and the drums and the brass bands to whose blare the soldiers have always marched to slaughter as much as He hates war itself.“

Dark-suited and dark-hatted though her slender, supple small figure was, she glowed, somehow, in the grimy twilight of the grimy shop. It must be some transparency of her skin, the bookman thought, that gave that effect of an inner light, or maybe it was the way tawny lights glinted in her russet hair.

„Even He has to use the old, primitive ways to put His idea across,“ he responded. Both were capitalizing the masculine pronoun, neither seemed to doubt that the other understood who was meant. In New York that day it could mean only one man. „Always in the past parades have meant war. This one means peace—but it's a parade anyway.“

„YES! A parade to tell Europe and Asia and Africa their propaganda has failed.“ Her gray eyes were shining now with an almost fanatical luminescence. „To tell them America will never again take part in their quarrels—that America is a land of peace. Thousands—hundreds of thousands—following Him through the streets, tramping after Him with all the fervor of a Crusade. Shouting, and meaning their shouts, *No more war! No more war!*“

The girl's speech was exalted, but then, the speech of most men these days was exalted, led to the heights as they were by the vision and the strength of the Great Man whose triumph the Peace Procession signaled.

„Never in all the world,“ the girl went on, „has there been such a march of victory as this one. Of His victory after all these months of lonely fighting, and struggle, and almost of despair. Victory over the Old World's wily tricks to bring us in on one side or the other, knowing they must have us or be defeated. Victory over the shouters here at home, the jingoes, the profiteers, the honest

but misguided zealots who still believe the way to Peace must be mired by the tears and the blood of war. A glorious parade!”

„Glorious.“ Ford Duane repeated the word, but no exaltation showed in his face that was too seamed, too grim for his youth. „And dangerous!”

„Dangerous!” She gasped, her long, flexible fingers coming up to her breast. „What—what do you mean?” The drum-pulse was suddenly ominous in the hush of the bookstore, suddenly a dull and boding threat. For a long minute, a throbbing silence lasted, while Duane covertly studied her, and then he spoke.

„The city is like a tinder box,” he explained slowly, wondering what there was about this girl that made him speak—he whose very existence so long had depended on silence. „The city and the whole country. Like a powder magazine needing only a spark to set off an explosion that will blast the world apart. The very frenzy for peace to which He has lashed us might, in the merest instant, be transformed to just as virulent, just as overpowering a tornado of destruction. And,” Duane’s voice dropped very low, „someone might be planning, right now, to do exactly that.”

„How?” she gasped, her lips suddenly white. „How could anyone...?”

„Suppose—suppose that four hours from now, while He is riding at the head of His Procession, He were to be shot down? What would happen, do you think...?”

„They would tear his assassin into little pieces!” Her hands made small rending motions, somehow horrible. „Into such little pieces he might never have lived at all.”

THE fury that shook her was a strange and deadly passion in so slight a frame, but Duane went on, evenly. „And suppose it were discovered that the killer was not a madman but an emissary of one of the nations who are at each other’s throats across the sea?”

„We’d sweep them off the face of the earth!” the girl flared. „Every man, every woman in America would rush to arms and...” she caught herself. Her eyes widened, their pupils dilating till they were staring, black pits. „Oh!” she moaned. „I see—but that would be insane. It would be mass suicide...!”

Duane’s countenance was a gray, bleak mask, his mouth a straight, grim line somehow tortured. „Neither insane nor suicide. If the wrong nation were blamed for the deed!”

„No,” the russet-haired girl groaned. „No. Men are not so horrible. Not so vile...”

„Dulce et decorum est,” Duane shrugged, „pro patria mori. Sweet and proper is it to die for one’s country. Not only to die. To make of oneself an abomination in the memory of decent men.” All the repression of his lonely calling, all his loathing of the human vermin he fought in the slimy, underground spy-world of the Endless War, spewed bitterness into his unaccustomed speech. „Not long ago the venerable Chancellor of a nation then the leader of the world’s culture forged a telegram to plunge half a continent into war, and boasted of it in his memoirs. Why I...”

He stopped, startled, dismayed at his own garrulity. He had almost betrayed himself to this snip of a maid with a tiny, pert face and haunting eyes. What was there about her that shook him so out of the icy, impersonal calm to which necessity had schooled him? What...? The tramp, tramp of marching feet slogged in. A detachment of men were passing, marching soldier-like in straight

lines, in perfect step to the thump, thump, thump of the omnipresent drumbeat. Marching soldier-like—but not in uniform, bearing no rifles. Wearing instead, proudly as an accolade of knighthood, each a broad, white satin ribbon across his breast with the single, scarlet word blazoned upon it: PEACE!

„Oh!“ the girl exclaimed. „I must be going. I’ve got to join my unit.“ She started for the door.

„Wait!“ The word seemed torn from Ford Duane without any volition of his own. „Wait! I can’t let you go without knowing whether I’ll ever see you again, without knowing who you are.“

She turned at the doorway. A mysterious smile hovered faintly about her pale lips, a brooding compassion tintured her eyes with mystery. „We may not be permitted to meet again,“ she half-whispered in that husky, heart-tearing voice of hers. „But I was instructed to tell you that my name is Patricia Ann Towndell.“ Then she was gone, vanishing somehow into the pulsing, excited vastness of out-doors as though she had been only a glamorous dream.

DUANE made no move to follow her. „Patricia-Ann-Towndell,“ he repeated, low-toned. „She’s one of us!“ There was no joy in his voice. There was only a great fear for her. For to be „one of us“ meant to know no slightest moment of safety, meant to walk always in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And she—so fragile—so utterly glamorous...

But he was wasting time—they both had wasted time they had no right to waste. Patricia Ann Towndell! P—A—T. Three letters out of all the alphabet, but three letters with a grisly meaning. In a huckster’s shout, in a beggar’s plea, a newsboy’s hawking cry, they had come before this to Ford Duane to herald a message from a closely guarded little room in Washington. And each time, secret forces had moved in a gray and secret underworld and someone had mysteriously died.

But where was the message now?

Duane’s blue eyes darted about his tiny shop, saw nothing that was not there before she came—yes! On the floor where she had stood for a little while glowing with her inner light, a filmy scarf lay. Only a pastel-hued length of gossamer georgette... Duane bent to it and as he picked it up his long, sensitive fingers were trembling slightly, almost imperceptibly.

He straightened, moved slowly between the ceiling-high stacks of his stock-in-trade toward the curtain hung from a sagging pole that screened off the rear. He moved slowly, lethargically, but every nerve of his gaunt body was taut, every sense tense with vigilance. A little muscle twitched in his cheek...

Ford Duane reached the narrow back room where a rumped cot, a rickety chair and a knife-hacked table furnished drab living quarters for what the world knew as his drab life. He left the curtain open, so that he might have a clear view of anyone coming into the shop—so that anyone coming in might have a clear view of him—slumped on the chair and apparently lost in his habitual brown study. But, peculiarly enough, the curtain-edge just hid the table-top from such a possible customer, and on that table-top the flimsy scarf was spread flat.

Apparently half-asleep, Duane’s gaze slid searchingly along the cobwebby fabric’s hem, along the tiny stitches which fashioned that hem. Those meticulous, hand-sewn stitches were not quite of even length, as hand-sewn stitches can never be. Some were almost infinitesimally longer than others.

Long and short, short and long, they made a pattern. Dash-dot, dot-dash... They made letters, not in the Continental Morse Code of wireless communication which might be read by anyone guessing their secret, but in another, similar code whose key lay only in Duane's brain, and in the brain of the gray little man who hid in that barred Capitol chamber and directed the invisible army in whose ranks Ford Duane was a single cog.

Dash-dot, dot-dash... The message was read at least. Duane sighed, rose, stretching his awkward, gawky length. Behind their veiling lids tiny, lurid lights crawled in his eyes.

THE crowd was growing restive now, along Fifth Avenue. The crowd! It wasn't a crowd any longer. It was a gargantuan, many-celled entity, packing the long street from building line to building line, from Washington Arch to the circle of filling stations and movie houses at Central Park's northern end. It was a single soul, the soul of an America reborn, welded into unity by the flaming words of Him whom they awaited, merged into one by the beat, beat of the drums, by the throbbing, brazen rhythm of the bands about which those who were to march were forming.

They were playing a single tune, those bands, and by some miracle of a common inspiration they were playing it in perfect unison. The throbbing beat of it pulsed in the brains of the millions, pulsed in their throats, broke forth in a vast Niagara of sound, a song such as never before the world had heard, a song sung by a city.

The thunder of it surged from the streets, surged upward to the sky. The thunder and the glory of that marching hymn:

*Never more as soldiers march we on to war,  
Murder, loot and rapine know we never more.  
Peace and love for all men, calling no one foe,  
Beastlike into battle never shall we go...*

And the swelling surf of the chorus:

*Hear us, God, we pledge thee,  
War we wage no more!*

They broke into great, pealing shouts, „No more war! No more war! NO MORE WAR!“ that seemed to fill the high dome of the sky, to roll on and on over the tossing sea where great, gray steel monsters prowled seeking one another to belch flame and destruction, to reach the old, disillusioned lands across whose ancient soil the mailed feet of Mars still strode.

The song and the shouts roared against the flag-bedizened facades of the tall buildings along the Avenue, beat into them. Beat into the four structures fronting Rockefeller Center, over each of whose portals the name of a different alien nation is graven. Beat into a large showroom in one of them, a suavely carpeted room behind whose plate-glass window three smirking wax dummies displayed the glittering best that far-off nation offered for sale to America.

„They're due to change that tune very soon,“ a man in that room said softly. „Sooner than they think.“ His English was perfect—too perfect—its very precision betraying that it was not his mother-tongue. He leaned against a

crystal-fronted showcase, frock-coated, swarthy, a faint sneer lifting the corners of his thin, cruel lips, his glittering, black eyes somehow vulturine...

A STOCKIER, not quite so dapper individual turned from gazing out of the window at that incredible crowd and stroked his trim vandyke with fingers the color of a dead fish's belly. „Maybe, Garon. Maybe.“ He shrugged. „But I...“

„But what?“ Garon queried, his countenance darkening. „What troubles you, Fator, my friend? You yourself admit that our plans are faultless.“

The other shrugged. „Faultless, yes. But I have seen faultless plans fail before, because of one man. Because of...“

„The one they call Red Finger? The American counter-spy who almost singed your feathers, last year?“ Garon's smile was a taunting, evil thing. „I don't think he'll bother us. I have made certain arrangements...“

„Arrangements!“ Fator exclaimed, „What arrangements?“

Garon seemed quite pleased with himself. „Simple ones, Fator. Simply to dispose of this redoubtable Red Finger before he disposes of us.“

„But—but no one knows who he is or where he exists between his exploits. He vanishes...“

„Bosh! He has to be somewhere, and he has to receive orders from someone. Long ago I made it my business to discover who that someone is—long before our present project was even dreamed of. When we did start work, I let that someone learn of our little enterprise, with the proper inflection, of course. I had his messenger spotted, and...“

„And intercepted the message!“

„No, fool! That would have been what you would have done. Red Finger would have been warned by some other channel, and—poof! No. My men had orders to follow that messenger and... But you shall hear for yourself what occurred.“

The whine of the freight elevator, far to the rear, had interrupted him. The two turned to the bronze doors, waited in a silence emphasized rather than broken by the terrific roar outside. The doors opened...

The fellow who emerged was dressed as a porter, and his broad, powerful frame stamped him as a very capable one. He stood at the elevator gate, twisting his cap in his hand.

„Well,“ Garon burst out, with the excitability of his race. „Report, Sloman. Successful, of course?“

The fellow shook his head, and there was fear in his eyes. „We were on her heels every minute, heard every word she spoke to anyone. There was nothing suspicious, she gave no paper to anyone, mailed no letter, 'phoned no one. It's a dud...“

The saboteur was livid with rage. „Ass!“ he squealed. „Imbecile. She fooled you. She must have fooled you. And you let her give you the slip...“

„No, chief,“ Sloman interrupted. „We did not.“

„What do you mean?“

„The time was growing short and nothing had developed, so we decided to bring her here.“

„Here!“ Garon and Fator exclaimed simultaneously. „Here!“

„Yes, Chief.“ Sloman turned and went back into the elevator. Almost at once he was out again, bent under the weight of a trunk on his shoulders such as valuable frocks are shipped in. He let it slide, unlocked it and threw open its lid.

THE two others were leaning over the trunk's side almost before it was opened. „But she is beautiful,“ popped from Fator's lips. „A flower...!“

„A flower of evil to us if we can't make her talk—and quickly!“ Between them, Garon and Sloman had the girl out of the trunk. She was gagged, bound hand and foot, but the gray eyes under her rumped, russet hair were defiant. Garon jerked at the gag, jerked it free.

„Who is he?“ he splurged, wasting no time. „Who is the one to whom you took the message?“

The girl's mouth worked. Then: „This is an outrage! To be drugged in a taxi in the heart of New York, to wake up tied up and boxed like a piece of merchandise. I'll report...“

„You'll report nothing, and you'll tell us what we want to know, or else...“ The fact that Garon did not complete his threat was somehow more ominous than if he had. The girl paled, made a decision.

„I won't bluff, then. That's no use. But I'm not bluffing when I tell you that you won't get anything out of me. Not if you kill me.“

„No?“ Garon purred. „No?“ He was feline, cruelly feline. „We shall not kill you, yet. But you shall speak, my dear. You shall speak... Fator,“ he turned to his aide, his voice crackling. „In that drawer back there are scissors and an alcohol lamp. We shall see whether or not the little lady will tell us what we want to know.“

The shorter man found the articles called for, came back with them. The girl flinched at the snap of the match that lit the lamp, watched with dilated pupils the points of the scissors grow red, then white in the flame. At last Garon turned back to her, and his eyes were black, demoniac pits in a Satanic face.

„For the last time,“ he purred, „who is Red Finger?“

Her throat throbbed, and the arteries at the sides of her neck fluttered with her terror. But her gaze, fixed on the white-hot metal points, was defiant and her lips tight-shut. Garon lowered the thing he held, lowered it till the smell of the hot metal was in her nostrils, till she had to close her lids against the glare.

„That won't help you,“ he whispered. „Flesh burns through, and eyes can be blinded. Will you tell us who Red Finger is?“

„No!“ the girl gasped, and felt the gag go back into her mouth. That was, she knew, to stopper her scream, which might be heard above the thunder of the crowd. Heat from those terrible scissors seared her lids, she smelled the acrid tang of singed lashes...

And suddenly the heat was gone as someone pounded on the outer door. „Just a minute,“ Garon called out. „Into the trunk!“ he hissed. „Quick. Into the trunk with her!“

SHE was back in the trunk, the straps that had held her rigid before buckled about her again, the lid closed down.

„Hear us, God, we pledge thee,“ roared in as Garon opened the door to his unlooked for callers. „War we wage no more!“ Three men in the uniform of the city police stood out there.

„What is it, gentlemen?“ the alien asked, courteously. „What can I do for you?“

„Sorry, mister,“ one of the policemen said. „You’ll have to get out of here. Federal orders are to clear all buildings along the parade route, for fear of something happening.“

„But this is a semi-diplomatic establishment,“ Garon objected. „Surely those orders cannot apply to us. We’re representatives of a friendly country.“

„Sure. Sure you are. That’s why you ought to be anxious to get out. Suppose He was killed by a bullet from some window along here and we couldn’t make out just where? It would be just too bad if you were found in here, wouldn’t it?“

„Good Lord! There is no expectation of such a calamity, is there? No possibility?“

„I dunno,“ the officer shrugged. „Except that there is a kind of tip flying around that trouble may come. You know how it is. But tip or not, you gentlemen will have to leave.“

„If that’s the case... Come, Fator, and you, Sloman. It seems we are not to have a grandstand seat at this history-making parade after all. Get your coats.“

„And don’t try to get back either,“ the policeman offered as a parting shot. „From now till the parade’s over, every one of these buildings is being watched. Nobody gets in nor out...“

The roar of the crowd—the roar of that tremendous song—beat now into an empty showroom, a showroom deserted save for the trunk within which a valiant girl lay bound and gagged but jubilant in the knowledge that whatever outrage these men had plotted had been headed off. Had she not been new, very new to the world of intrigue and creeping death she would have wondered uneasily why Garon had given in so easily, why he had seemed almost to expect the order to vacate...

They would come back of course, she thought. They would come back. But what they did to her then would not matter. Nothing would matter if He marched safely down there at the tread of his hosts, marched safely through the singing thousands, the hundreds of thousands who split the welkin with His song:

*Never more as soldiers march we on to war.  
Murder, loot and rapine know we never more.  
Peace and love for all men, calling no one foe,  
Beastlike into battle never shall we go.  
HEAR US GOD! WE PLEDGE THEE  
WAR WE WAGE NO MORE!!!*

The chorus roared like the trumpets of Gabriel’s host, exploded into a cheer that shook the building, that shook the world itself. He was coming. The Great Man was coming. Up Fifth Avenue he rode, and the clamor that greeted him was like a clashing of firmaments...

IN the apparently deserted showroom there was a little stir. One of the waxen figures in the window swayed, shaken by the tornado of cheering. No! It wasn’t the cheering that moved it. It was moving itself. It was no dummy, it was a man! A man alive, moving now closer to the glass, daring to move closer to the glass because all possible watching eyes were fixed, below there, on the silver-haired, tired-faced man who sat in a slow-moving car and rode with head bowed.

The Great Man was almost directly beneath now. And up here, the seeming dummy was crouching, was lifting in his painted hand an oblong box of black metal to smash it through the glass, to send it hurtling down on the Man and on the crowd below. A bomb to explode in midair, to blast to death the Man Himself and hundreds who shouted now about Him. To blast to death thousands and hundreds of thousands more in the months and years of the holocaust which must follow when those left alive down there would turn from the shambles below and see the gaping hole in the window whence that bomb would come—see the flag waving from a tremendous pole just below that window, the flag of a nation to which Garon and Fator did not belong!

The Great Man's car jolted slowly ahead. The assassin's hand lifted a little more. His muscles tightened for the lethal throw, but he waited. Waited till he was sure he could not miss.

„Hold it!“ a voice spat behind him.

Something in that voice—a deadly threat—held the killer's hand in momentary paralysis, just long enough for a black-robed figure to leap forward in a great batlike swoop, to grab the death-box in one black-gloved hand, and crash the assassin's skull with the thick-barreled pistol he held in the other.

The pseudo-dummy slumped at the feet of the gray-masked, gray-hatted man. He stood there, that grim figure, for a triumphant moment... twisted at the thud of footsteps from the rear...!

Garon came running across the long floor, Fator. Guns in their hands came up, belched flame. But the black-robed being wasn't where they had aimed. Moving with the speed of black lightning, he had ducked behind a veritable dummy, had leaped to the floor of the showroom and was crouched behind an ornate desk, the box-bomb still in his hand.

„Drop those guns,“ he whispered, „or I'll throw this at you.“

„Throw and be damned,“ Garon snarled. The two spies had taken covert behind a bronze-fronted showcase. „You might kill us but it will kill you too. We'll all go down to hell together.“

THE other crouched lower. His gunhand crept to the side of the desk. He could not reach them with bullets. He could only hold them there until...

Red Finger pressed the trigger. A vapor spat from the gaping mouth of his gun, shot across the floor, curled around the edge of the case behind which the plotters hid. He shot again and again. There was a thud from the place at which he aimed, another. Dull meaty thuds of unconscious forms hitting the floor.

Red Finger stood up, gingerly placed the bomb on top of the desk that had served for a trench. He did not bother to look at the victims. He knew that they were out of action for hours. It was to the trunk that he stalked, the trunk in which was casketed the girl with the russet hair who shook now with a terrible fear.

She was on her feet, free of the gag and the lashings. She stamped her feet to restore prickling circulation, and gazed wide-eyed at the weird figure who had released her. „Red Finger!“ she gasped.

„Forget it,“ the man rasped harshly. „Forget that you have seen me or who I am. Back there, behind that screen, is a panel. It is where I hid, waiting to find out just what their devil's scheme was. It's from there that Garon and Fator returned to help their killer escape. The staircase goes down into the tunnel which passes under the Plaza to Sixth Avenue. The police forgot about it, as we

all knew they would. Get out that way, and get out of the Force. If the cops hadn't come just when they did I would have had to show up then to save you, and they might have succeeded."

"You?" she quavered. "You..."

"I'll follow. But I've got to take that bomb with me. It is more important that all this be covered up than that those fellows be brought to justice. They'll fix up some story that will satisfy the police. The people must never know what happened here. Or that song will be sung no longer. Go. Quickly."

"But—but will I never see you again?"

"Never! I have no right to—GO!" His shout was choked, shaken. It sent her flying out through the door to which he motioned—out of his life...!

THE next morning Ford Duane, sleepy-eyed, languid, unlocked the door of his second-hand bookshop on Fourth Avenue and bent to pick up the mail that had been thrust under it. Circulars. Bills. A small gray envelope addressed in tiny handwriting as clean-cut and beautifully formed as engraving.

Within, a card. "Never say never to a woman." That was all except for the signature. "The Flower."

