

# Locked in with Death

## A Red Finger Story

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

Published: 1936  
in »Secret Service Operator #5«



ISOLATED by some accident of time and tide from the rushing currents of the vast ocean that is New York, a certain drab block on Fourth Avenue is a doldrum of stagnation. Here Time moves slowly, if at all. Here dust stirred up in busier streets sifts down to film sidewalk cases that wistfully offer tattered books to browsers who look but seldom buy. Here gray, drowsy men are content to dawdle undisturbed in their grimy shops that are derelict as the rotting wrecks in Neptune's graveyard of forgotten ships.

Life moves slowly in this back-eddy of the seething metropolis, and Death seems to have passed it by—except in one dingy cubicle—and there Death is a livid, almost tangible presence.

Ford Duane's Second-Hand Bookstore is no different, even to the most observant eye, from other berths of this port of missing books. Most deliberately

it is no different in appearance from the shop of Radley Ransom on its left or that of Lazare Garreau on its right. But the shadows that lie heavily between its high stacks of dogeared volumes are the shadows of fear, and the quiet that broods in its dimness is the hush of an omnipresent dread.

One late afternoon Ford Duane stood, gawky and stooped, in the door of his shop. His shabby alpaca smock hung loosely on his lank frame, so that it seemed painfully, almost cadaverously thin, and heavy grooves were graven deep into his gaunt, expressionless countenance.

Duane's face was evasively youthful for this abode of the aged and weary. Yet his eyelids were slitted as though the effort to raise them were too great and every line of him drooped with bone weariness... Concealed by the lackadaisical folds of his gray apparel there was slender strength—muscles like steel springs, hairtrigger nerves that could instantaneously command those muscles to lightning-like action. Behind those lowered lids, eyes of the keenest blue were eternally restless, eternally watchful. That leashed power, that unrelenting vigilance, was the price of Ford Duane's safety—and the safety of a nation!

Hunter and hunted, stalker and stalked, Duane was far more than he seemed. There was a price on his head in more than one chancellery, but in a certain secret room in the nation's capital he was a number, and a name quite different from that which the tarnished letters on the streaked plate glass above him spelled out.

Ford Duane turned smoothly to a whistle that lilted along the street. His furtive look flicked to the whistler, and a muscle that had twitched along the ridge of his sharp jaw relaxed. It was only a grimy-faced boy in the dark blue of a telegraph company who was approaching.

The messenger-boy glanced at a sheaf of white and blue envelopes in his hand, glanced up at Duane's window. Stopped.

„Yuh Ford Duane?“ the youngster asked.

„Yes. I'm Duane.“

„Postal—ah—Telegraph. Got a message fer yuh. Postal—ah—Telegraph.“

THE phrasing was awkward. The pause between the two words of the name was awkward... A pulse pumped in Ford Duane's wrist.

„All right. Let me have it.“ There was nothing in the bookman's voice to betray his sudden agitation. But behind his untroubled brow his thoughts were whirring. Postal—ah—Telegraph. It had been repeated, making three words out of what should have been two. Three words whose initials were, P-A-T!

„Sign here.“

Duane signed the book. P-A-T. Those initial letters were a signal. Now and again they had been cryptically embodied in a peddler's cry, a street singer's appeal, a society dame's querulous berating of her chauffeur. They meant something to Ford Duane. They meant action, and danger... Death! Surely for someone. Perhaps—for him!

„Here's yuhr telegram.“ The boy handed it over, turned away.

„Wait!“ Duane's command had halted him. „Wait a minute.“ The book vendor was fumbling in his pocket for a tip, but his hand stayed there. There was startlement in the gray eyes that had sought his face. A sudden darkening in them. Of fear? No. Not fear, but some other obscure emotion. A lock of hair protruding from under the blue, red-braided cap was tawny.

„Flower!“ Ford Duane's exclamation was low-toned as he put a coin in an extended palm that was too white, too soft to be an urchin's. „Flower! I told you to get out of the game. It's too dangerous for a...”

„T'anks!“ The messenger had whirled again, and was striding down the street. Duane dared not run after her...

There is one army in which a woman can serve as well as a man. It is a wraithlike army that secretly wages a war that never ends; a war of underground strategy; of silent, unsung heroisms; of trickery and deceit; in which triumphs go unrewarded and the participants fail only once.

Because they must remain unknown to their antagonists, the soldiers of that secret army must be unknown to one another. That is the rule of the game. But they are human, nevertheless, and sometimes a mask slips, a disguise is penetrated. They are human, and though it is far better that they should not, they sometimes have human emotions.

The telegram was clutched in Ford Duane's right hand. His left pressed furtively against the breast pocket of his smock. Something crackled under that pressure, as dried petals crackle, and a vague fragrance came from it, the perfume of a russet rose. Weeks before that rose had been a wordless message from a comrade whose name he did not even know—except that he called her Flower!

They are very human, the men and women who are phantom fighters in a phantom war.

„Bad news, Duane?“ a voice asked, rustling and sere as dead leaves. Radley Ransom peered at him out of rheumy eyes. The old man had shuffled over from his own stall. White-bearded and senile, the only emotion left to him was curiosity. „T'aint often any of us gets a telegram.“

„I don't know, haven't read it yet.“ Ford ripped open the blue and white envelope, pulled out the sheet it contained. „No. Looks like a business message. I've been doing a little special trading lately for a couple of collectors. This is from one of them.“

Ransom made shift to get a view of the telegram. „Sure is a long one,“ he mumbled, and doddered away. Time was, he ruminated, when he too had hopes of building up a trade among bibliophiles. There was money in it.

Duane's thin lips were touched by the hint of a grim smile. This was a simple code, and effective because it was simple. Who would suspect the garrulous communication to be other than it seemed?

ADAMS SAYS THACKERAY ROMANCES OFFERED FOR SALE PROVIDED  
OFFER TENDERED TODAY STOP EVERHARD DESIRES ACQUIRE THEM  
FOR OSTLEY STOP UNDERTAKES REWARD TRADER WITH  
OFFENBACH'S THUCYDIDES EDITED NATIONAL ACADEMY STOP  
VIGILANTLY EXERT EFFORTS INCLUDE NORTON VELLUM EDITION  
SOCRATES THEMES STOP IMPERATIVE GET AHEAD TOM EVERHARD  
STOP

PAYTON A. THOMPSON

He read it again. Then his slender, strong fingers crumpled it and tossed it into the gutter. If there were, somewhere unseen, a stealthy observer spying upon him that gesture would convince him of the utter unimportance of the paper.

The second reading had told Duane all he need know. Disregarding the punctuation, the „stops“, he had read only the first letters of each word of the message:

ASTROFSPOTTEDATFOURTWOTENAVEEINVESTIGATEPAT

and then had separated them into new words:

ASTROF SPOTTED AT FOUR-TWO-TEN AVE E. INVESTIGATE. PAT.

Ford Duane straightened a pile of coverless *National Geographic* magazines in a box trestled in front of his store, adjusted a jagged-edged cardboard sign that said; YOUR CHOICE, FIVE CENTS. A vagrant breeze flapped pages of one of the magazines, a title struck at him—„*Lemuria: The Friendly Land*“.

Duane's thin lips twitched with secret, grim amusement. Yes, they were very friendly to tourists, the Orientals of Lemuria. They showed visitors their miniature gardens, their quaint houses, and smilingly sold them tawdry gimcracks in their picturesque bazaars. But in carefully guarded harbors were shipyards seething with activity. In mountain fortresses death lurked for those who dared to penetrate cuff-walled plateaus covered by acre upon acre of factories where steel was being fashioned into cannon, brass into shells, and fuming acids with bales of fleecy cotton made into merchandise of Hell. These things the tourists did not see.

Friendly, were they, the Lemurians? Smilingly they looked at Occidental Nations riven by dissension, weakened by long poverty, glaring at each other with hatred. Only America was still strong in the Western World. Only America still stood in the way of the scheme for terrestrial empire that brooded behind those smiling, saffron faces.

Still smiling, Lemurian fishermen cast their seines, and their sounding lines, off America's coast. Still smiling, Lemurian students conned books in American universities, and conned the American mind. Lemurian artisans labored in America's factories, attended meetings of workers, permeated every tiny vein and pulsing artery of American life. Smilingly, always smilingly, they sought out the secret of American strength—and the vulnerable spot every strength must possess.

So vast a network of espionage must have a single head. That head was the man known in the hidden chronicles of the secret war as Konyl Astrof. And if Astrof was in America, the Lemurians had found the weakness they sought. Their smiles were tightening into snarling, menacing grins!

The blue and white paper already mucked by the mire of the Fourth Avenue gutter put it squarely up to Ford Duane to wipe those grins from the saffron countenances of the Lemurian War Lords!

Gray dusk settled on Fourth Avenue from a leaden sky. „I'm shutting up early, Radley,“ Duane called to his ancient neighbor. „I'll have to get busy if I want to earn that commission. Everhard is a tough man to buck.“

THE street designated by the name of Avenue E is only two blocks long, cutting across the East River shore of Manhattan Island. Some decades-long litigation, some defect in title, dragging a weary way through weary courts, have kept it in a state of arrested development; so that the brick warehouses lining it

are unoccupied, their windows boarded up, their doors fastened by rusty padlocks.

Forty-two-ten Avenue E was cloaked in the fog that rolled oilily up from the River to make a dark, blind gut of the forgotten thoroughfare. The old warehouse might have been a tomb in some cemetery of giants for all the animation that was apparent behind its slime-sweating front.

One by one, three vague forms slid through the fog, seeming almost a part of it, so little sound did their movements make. One by one they vanished into the gloom-shrouded embrasure of forty-two-ten's high, unlighted portal.

No key could possibly have turned in the rusted padlock holding the great door closed. But there was a furtive scrape of wood on wood. Momentarily an oblong showed, blacker against the vertical black. And once more the niche was empty, and silent.

Slithering footsteps whispered within the stygian vastness of the ancient warehouse. A door softly shut. The sounds of furtive movement descended. Another door opened and shut. The darkness was close, and heavy with fungoid damp, with the fetid miasma of a catacomb. Breaths hissed. A scratch rasped the silence.

A match flame sputtered into being, low down. A lamp wick was edged with red glow, blossomed into steady light. The luminescence filled a small windowless vault and cast monstrous, brooding shadows up against the ceiling. The bare earthen floor was greasy and black with the seepage from the sewers that lay in their long graves close against the structure's foundations.

The man who had lit the lamp on the floor straightened. His shadow heaved above him, like some gargantuan, black creature of doom to whom light was a curse.

His mask was a wide, black bar across his face, but the ponderous, blunt jaw it did not hide; the square-sided, bony cheeks were eloquent of power, of an intellectual strength whose physical counterpart was manifest in his bull shoulders and columnar massiveness of frame. His mouth was thick-lipped, sensuous—sadistic.

The diminutive stature of the masked couple whom he confronted contrasted grotesquely with his bulk. A door of unpainted wood newly set into the wall framed them; and they were wiry as weasels, shrewd, cruel. A saffron tinge overlay what little of their skin that was exposed. Their pointed fingernails were tainted with a pallid blue cast. Those nails were like talons, like claws fashioned to tear quivering flesh.

„You are certain that you were unobserved coming here?“ The big man held his voice low, but it boomed in the confined space. „Absolutely certain?“

TWO yellow heads bobbed in assent as inhaled breath hissed between teeth startlingly white.

„Good. This is the last time I shall use this rendezvous. It would have been unfortunate had some carelessness of yours betrayed it. Unfortunate for you.“ Even under the saffron complexion of his hearers a sharp paleness was visible, a pallor of fear at the reptilian menace chilling the measured statement.

„The reports that have been brought here to me have been satisfactory. The transcontinental railroads have been mined, our men are posted at the strategic points to cut all telephone and telegraph cables, the static-producing radio stations are set up and ready to blanket the air. Our transport fleets are within

striking distance of the American Coast. It is you two who will flash the signal that will disrupt the American communications and give our forces time to do their part. You will do that at midnight, Eastern Standard Time, tomorrow. At midnight. Do not fail. With five uninterrupted hours in which to work, the Lemurian armies will be firmly entrenched at a dozen strategic points on the continent, and the flag of the Setting Moon will never be dislodged from its soil.

„Go now, and do not fail. For the Emperor.“

„For the Emperor,“ the Lemurians intoned, making the curious gesture that from time immemorial has signified utter abasement, utter devotion to their ruler who, legend says, has descended straight from the God of the Night. They turned...

Before they could reach the door it flew open. For an instant the aperture was a blank, staring orifice of black threat, and then a grisly apparition materialized within it.

„Not so fast, my friends,“ a sepulchral voice intoned. „Not so fast.“

That voice was muffled by a gray mask that made the speaker faceless under the gray mask save for narrow slits through which blue menace glittered. Swirling black draperies cloaked the immensely tall figure, making it shapeless, ominous. But that from which the Lemurians fell back in deathly terror, that which froze their leader to a motionless statue of dismay—was the hand from which jutted a thick-barreled pistol.

That hand was black as midnight, black as the lustreless draperies from which it protruded, except for one grim, blood-red finger that curled about the trigger.

A gasp from the big man broke the brittle silence. „Red Finger! Bozhe moy! Red... Finger!“

The face of him who stood in the doorway could not be seen, but he seemed to smile, forebodingly. „Red Finger, Astrof,“ the toneless voice murmured. „You should have remembered me when you planned to take over the United States.“

Astrof forced a smile to his colorless lips, a smile that had no humor. „How could I forget, Red Finger? One after another you have ended the careers of the best spies the world has ever known. One after another they have failed, and when the question was asked—*why?*—the answer always came whispered back, *Red Finger*. When I worked for the Tsar, you defeated me. When I moved on to espionage service of one, then of another nation, always you defeated me. Your name is the dread and the despair of all international intrigue. I should not have forgotten you when I advised my latest employers that I could conquer America. And I did not!“

The last words snapped like a whip, and like a whip a noose lashed down over Red Finger's head from behind, jerked taut to clamp his arms to his sides. Yellow fingers flailed to smash the thick-barreled gun from the black-gloved hand with the carmine forefinger. Diminutive Lemurians, three of them, swarmed over the counter-spy, bringing him down.

Astrof's big-chested laugh roared out, echoing in the gloomy depths of the old warehouse. „I did not forget you, Red Finger,“ he chuckled when that laugh ended. „I thought very carefully about you. And—cleverly. No, my friend? For years I have studied tales that were whispered about you. I learned that only one person knew who you were when you doffed that somewhat spectacular masquerade of yours, the little man in the secret room in Washington. I learned

that you were only called upon for action when the most feared of international spies were at work.

„Many men have gone after you and failed. I decided that I should make you come after me. So, my friend, I carefully allowed myself to be discovered entering this place. Who greater than Astrof could Red Finger send to defeat? And I made a little speech that would be sure to bring you into the open, thinking that you must act at once to save that pig's country of yours from disaster. Then—my men who were hidden took you unawares.“

„What are you going to do with me?“ Red Finger's captors no longer held him. But they had wrapped the rope around him so that only his head protruded from its coils, like the head of a chrysalis emerging from its cocoon.

„Do? Start now to build the set-up you heard me describe. But first,“ the chuckling triumph was gone from Astrof's speech, „so that I may be certain of its success, I shall—kill you!“

EVEN that did not break the American's stoic calm. „It was bound to come sooner or later. You might as well be the one.“

The Russian's big hands fisted, opened. Closed again. „Scheming to the last, Red Finger? Thinking that when your body, knifed, shot, drowned, is found, the hounds of your law will be let loose on Astrof. And though he is too clever to be caught he will be harried, his work rendered impossible. But you do not know how cunning is the man who has at last brought you low.“ He snapped an unintelligible word in Lemurian.

The little yellow men went out. Red Finger heard their small feet patter away through the darkness. He was alone with his enemy. „Well?“ he asked.

Astrof stared at him, a slow, foreboding smile creeping across his heavy face. A long moment of silence dragged. Then, „Listen,“ he said. „Listen.“

Silence again. Silence that was broken by the rapid *tick, tick; tick, tick* of a clock. It was somewhere in this room. Somewhere in the black shadows under its vaulted ceiling. *Tick, tick; tick, tick.*

„You hear it, Red Finger? One of my colleagues has switched on an infernal machine, a bomb, set within a recess where the keystones of these arches join. It will explode in ten minutes. You see, my friend, this warehouse is supported on a series of arches like these, each crossed, two holding up the others. When one pair falls they all fall, and the building will fall. When Red Finger is found, if ever he will be, the little man in the room at Washington will be sorry, very sorry, that he sent his ace into an empty building where no one was, and that his ace was caught by the collapse of that building.

„And now, au revoir. I will see you again—in that Hell where all spies go.“

Astrof launched into movement, quicker than his huge body seemed capable of. He stooped, snatched up a loose end of the rope that bound Red Finger, lurched out of the exit. The door slammed shut, pounding solidly into its jamb. The bound man heard a bar scrape down across it on the other side, another! He saw that the rope the spy-master had taken with him passed through an angled nick that had been cut in the door's edge.

And then the rope was snaking through that hole. It tightened, pulled at him. It rolled him over and over, unwinding from his body. It was gone.

Battered, dizzy from the giddy revolutions, Red Finger lay half-dazed against the door. Astrof was not to be caught napping. He had taken the rope with him so that when Red Finger's smashed corpse was found in the debris of a

structure fallen by its own weight, no suspicion of any human agency in his death would arise in the minds of his finders.

*Tick, tick; tick, tick.*

The rapid little clicking sounds pattered against the welter in the counterspy's throbbing brain. *Tick, tick; tick, tick.* Each tiny click clipping a half-second from his life.

No! Realization exploded him to his feet. His work was not ended, could not be ended. Astrof was free, to consummate his plans for America's destruction. Astrof was free, and the shrewd saboteur himself had said that Red Finger was the only one who could defeat him. Red Finger could not die. Red Finger dared not die.

*Tick, tick; tick, tick.* The Lemurians had searched him as they bound him, had left him nothing, absolutely nothing with which to break out of here. He hurled himself at the mocking, resinous wood of the door. It hurled him back, staunch, immovable. It was inches thick. The bars that Astrof had let down across it made it a part of the wall itself. Till that wall fell Red Finger's cell was inescapable. It would fall soon enough, but that would be too late.

*Tick, tick; tick, tick.* How much time had passed? How much time was there still to go?

The bomb was up there, where the arches joined in a point. If he could reach it. If he could only reach it. There was nothing to stand upon. The walls were rough, grooved where powdered mortar had sifted out from between the old bricks. Red Finger ripped off his gloves, dug frantic finger nails into one such groove. A brick grated, slid out. He shoved a toe into the niche it left, dug out another.

*Tick, tick; tick, tick.*

He was halfway up the wall. It curved out and upward. He gained a foot, another foot. Reached a shaking hand to pry at a new brick...

And fell, pounding hard into the black muck that floored this lethal chamber! He was no fly. He had no suckers on his feet, his hands, with which to cling upside down to a ceiling that otherwise gave no hold. He rolled, scrambled to hands and knees. Lifted erect. Time must be almost up. He would meet death upright.

*Tick, tick; tick, trsssssk.* The sound was changing. It was blurring, rasping. Was the ten minutes up?

That rasping sound was not from above. It was from outside the door. It was the scrape of the bars against the door, that was moving—swinging outward!

The swinging door uncovered a slim, boyish form... in the blue uniform of a telegraph messenger.

„Flower!“ Red Finger ejaculated, and literally hurled himself toward her. „Flower! Come on. Run. Run!“

„They're gone! It's all...“

He reached her, swept her up in his arms, not pausing in his stride as he hurtled toward the stairs down which he had crept, thinking himself unobserved. „All right be damned,“ he grunted. „The building's coming down.“ He was flying up those stairs, winged by a terror that somehow had redoubled with the presence of the girl. But even in his terrible haste, his terrible fear, he knew that the body in his arms was warm, and soft, and very dear. „They set a bomb and it may go off at any moment.“

A GASP answered him, and the girl he knew as Flower shuddered against him. He had reached the upper floor, was leaping, vaulting in desperate effort to attain the rear window he had jimmied to gain entrance.

„How did you get here? How on earth did you find me?“ Red Finger asked the question, not knowing if death would let her answer him.

„I read the telegram, hid near here. I was—afraid—for you.“

„You read...“ Here was the window! He thrust her through it, vaulted out: She was a slim, phantom figure running alongside him through the dark alley. She was—They were out in the street. Red Finger twisted to a shadowy, cubical bulk in the fog, far down the block. An auto. He sprinted toward it.

„I thought so,“ he gritted. „Astrof would wait to laugh when the building went down. That’s how he’s built.“

A crash, tumultuous, earth-shaking, obliterated speech. Dust rolled around him. Choking, spluttering, he lunged out of the cloud, groping toward the auto. A pallid oval was a face goggling out of a black roadster’s front seat, ten feet away.

„Astrof!“ Red Finger yelled.

Orange-red flame jetted at him. Leaden spray from a blazing gun. Red Finger left the ground in a tremendous leap. His heels pounded on a moving runningboard. He lay across the roadster’s half-door and his fingers clutched the gun. Astrof had not time to fire again, wrenched it out of the hand that held it.

Astrof was strong, powerful. But Hercules himself could not have resisted the lethal fury that inflamed Red Finger.

The gun crashed against Konyl Astrof’s temple. The Russian’s gigantic bulk slumped unconscious in the driver’s seat. A police whistle shrilled, far-off. Red Finger grabbed the steering wheel of the roadster, which in the lightning instant of that brief fight had been slowly gathering speed, twirled it. The car made a half circle in the roadway. Red Finger pushed down on a lax knee. The car leaped into sudden speed. At the final moment the counter-spy leaped from its running board and the black car crashed thunderously into the huge pile of shattered brick on which the dust raised by its collapse had not yet started to settle.

The policeman, coming on the run around the corner, saw a tall, slender man staring at the piled ruins of a condemned warehouse that had fallen at last and at the mangled wreck of a roadster that had smashed into it. „God,“ Ford Duane jerked out as the patrolman came up. „The damn fool. He almost dipped me, speeding a mile a minute. He must have been drunk, or crazy.“

„Drunk, I guess.“ The officer grunted, fighting off the shock of what he saw with a mechanical functioning of routine. „Comin’ from some damn masquerade, mebbe. Looka what fell out o’ the car.“ He held out black, torn fabric to Duane. „Musta been dressed up like a Ku Klux Klanner or somethin’...“ He broke off. Then—„Godfrey! I wunner if anyone was caught under there. I got to phone headquarters.“ He lumbered off.

Was anyone else caught under there? Was anyone...? The blood in Ford Duane’s veins was suddenly cold. Had she won free of the falling brick? There was no living soul, beside himself and the flatfoot in the street...

And then the forefront of a crowd surged around the corner. Before he was asked what he had been doing in deserted Avenue E, Ford Duane must slip

away. He reeled as he walked, as though he were half-dazed. As though the fog had seeped into his bones with the chill of death.

RADLEY RANSOM was just dragging his sidewalk stands into his store for the night as Ford Duane passed him. „Oh, Duane,“ he called.

„Yes.“ The younger man’s voice was toneless, tortured. „What is it, Ransom?“

„This telegram came for you ‘bout ten minutes ago. I signed for it.“

Duane snatched the envelope from him, ripped it open with shaking fingers. It said:

sale tuesday instead stop let layton include newton’s treatise stop have  
everhard going after my encyclopdia

and it was signed—FLOWER.

