



Duffy handed Bill an automatic, butt first

# Companions of the CORPSE

By FRANK JOHNSON

*When Bill Hunter found a pal murdered on the beach, he knew it was time to move against his fifth column killers—and did he move!*

**B**ILL HUNTER stood with the wind blowing the damp, salty air against his face and bitter hatred lingering in his heart. Out there in the bleak darkness of the cloudy night, the booming of the surf was a throbbing undercurrent to the bitter thoughts racing through his mind.

Again Bill Hunter switched on the flashlight in his left hand. The face of the dead man lying on the wet sand was yellow in the glow. The dried blood and the bruises, the way the lips were still twisted in a grimace of pain showed that Tom Crawford must have suffered a lot before he died.

"I'll get them, Tom," said Hunter harshly. "Those rats can't kill a G-man and get away with it!"

The light in Hunter's hand went out as he pressed the catch. For a moment he stood there, a vague figure in the shadows. There was nothing he could do for Crawford now. The less that was known about his even having found the body, the better.

There had been reports of lights seen at night along this lonely section of the Long Island beach front, lights that were suspected of being the work of fifth columnists. Of what use was all of the effort to dim out the entire city of New York when there was still a bright flare of light coming from the beach that was visible for miles out to sea?

Crawford had been working along the beach, as had the men of the coast patrol, but evidently the Federal man had discovered something which had cost him his life.

He had been on the job for a week, and tonight Hunter had arrived to work with Crawford. But Hunter had found the rendezvous deserted. It was only when he had gone exploring farther along the beach that he had found the corpse.

Abruptly some instinctive warning of danger made Bill Hunter whirl around. But he was too late. He caught a fleeting glimpse of dim forms lunging toward him out of the darkness, saw the faces of three men that were little more than white blotches, and then something crashed down on his head. The night grew blacker than it had been before as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

"We kill him as we did the other?" asked a cold voice.

"Not yet," said another man. "Perhaps he may be able to give us more information than could the unfortunate Mr. Crawford. Take him along, Hanz."

Two of the men picked up the limp form of the unconscious G-Man. With the third man following, they disappeared into the shadows. Behind them the body of Tom Crawford remained deserted and forlorn on the wet sand.

AN HOUR later, Bill Hunter opened his eyes. His head throbbed. It felt as if part of it had been sliced off by some great, keen-edged blade. Instinctively he raised one hand and felt his scalp. His head appeared to be all there after all.

"You are better?"

Hunter turned his head as he heard the words. It dawned on him that he was lying on a bed in a nicely furnished bedroom. There was a portly gray-haired man seated in a chair near the bed with a black physician's case open on a table beside him.

Since there was no one else in the room, it was obviously the gray-haired man who had spoken. Hunter stared at him blankly.

"Who are you?" Hunter muttered. "Where am I?"

"I'm Doctor York," said the gray-haired man. "You'll be all right now. Someone hit you a terrific blow on the head that knocked you out. It's a good thing that some of my servants found you and brought you here."

"Three men attacked me out on the beach," said Hunter. "I don't know why. Did your servants see them?"

"No." Doctor York shook his head. "But you must not worry about that now. You try and rest. I'm afraid what's happened has made you feverish." He reached into a vest pocket and drew out a medical thermometer in a metal case. He pulled it out of the case and leaned over and thrust the thermometer between Hunter's lips. "Let's see if you have a temperature."

Hunter relaxed and remained there on the bed with his head on the pillows. Doctor York took Hunter's right wrist and held his fingers on the G-Man's pulse. The room grew silent. Somewhere in the distance Hunter could still hear the roaring of the sea. Downstairs a door slammed. A gruff voice said something, but Hunter could not distinguish the words.

"Your pulse is fine," said Doctor York as he released Hunter's wrist, and stood up. "Keep the thermometer in your mouth. I'll be back in a moment."

The stout man went to the door and stepped out, closing it behind him. Bill Hunter frowned as he found himself alone. He did feel a bit feverish. He drew the thermometer out of his mouth and looked at it. It registered 99 and four-fifths. His eyes narrowed as he looked closely at the words printed on the little glass tube, then quickly thrust it back into his mouth.

The door opened, and Doctor York stepped into the room. He appeared annoyed about something. Without a word he walked over to the bed, took the thermometer out of Bill Hunter's mouth and looked at it.

"Normal," he said. "You'll be all right. But you must rest. There is danger of concussion from that blow on the head you know."

"It sure aches a lot," said Hunter. Suddenly he sat up in bed and glared wildly at the doctor. "That dead man I found out on the beach! Who was he? Why did they kill him?"

"Dead man?" Doctor York frowned. "I know nothing about any dead man. I'm afraid you are having hallucinations, Hunter. Perhaps I had better give you a sedative."

"But there *was* a dead man," said Hunter. "I saw him, I tell you!"

"Of course you did if you say so." The doctor dropped some powder into a glass

of water. "Here drink this. We'll talk about the dead man later."

Bill Hunter took the glass and then poured the liquid into his mouth. Then he handed the glass back to York and dropped back on the pillow. For a few moments he lay there staring at the stout man. Then his eyelids fluttered as though he could not keep them open. Finally they closed and remained shut.

"That's better," said Doctor York. "*Ja*, very much better."

He went softly out of the room, and this time the key turned in the lock as he closed the door behind him.

AS SOON as he was gone, Hunter's eyes opened. He leaned over and spit the water he had been holding in his mouth into the empty glass.

"Afraid I don't trust a doctor whose thermometer is marked 'Made in Germany'," said Hunter softly. "I'm getting out of here fast."

He was glad he had been placed on the bed fully dressed with the exception of his coat. That was hanging neatly over the back of a chair, and his hat was on the bureau.

Hunter got up and put on his hat and coat. He went to the window and looked out. It was still night and quite dark, but there were lights gleaming through the windows of the lower floor of the house, and he could see that it was not much of a drop to the ground.

He was just about to leave by the window when a strange noise halted him. He paused and stood listening tensely. It was the sound of a woman sobbing and it seemed to come from the room adjoining.

"A woman," muttered Hunter. "Who is she and what is she doing here? I'd better try and find out."

He went to the door of the room, found it locked from the outside as he had fully

expected it would be. There was no connecting door from his room to the one in which he could hear the woman crying softly.

Hunter returned to the window and looked out. He saw that there was a space of about four feet between the end of the ledge of his window and that of the window in the next room. He climbed out onto the ledge and stood erect. He was a fairly tall man and by clinging to the edge of the window frame, and extending his left leg as far as he could, he managed to place one foot on the ledge of the other window.

Shifting his weight, he finally edged his way to the opposite ledge, peered into the room. He saw a slender dark-haired girl lying on a bed. She was dressed in a red suit, and her hands and ankles were tied, but she was not gagged. She was still crying softly.

She stopped crying and gasped as Hunter swung into the room through the lower half of the open window.

"Who—are you?" she murmured. "What do you want? Who—"

"Never mind the imitation of an owl," said Hunter softly with a smile. "We can talk later. Right now I've got to get you out of here fast."

**H**E DREW a penknife from his pocket and hastily cut the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles. He had found that his gun was gone, but the rest of his personal belongings were still intact. Evidently he had been searched while unconscious, which was how Doctor York had known his name.

"How are we going to get away?" asked the girl in a whisper. "The door is locked. I'm sure of that."

"You're right," said Hunter as he tried the knob. "It's locked all right. We'll have to use the window."

"How far is it to the ground?" asked the girl calmly.

"About twenty feet," answered Hunter. "Think you can make that much of a jump?"

"I'll try." She glanced at the bed. "But wouldn't it be easier if we knotted some of the bedclothes together and got down that way?"

"Smart girl," said Hunter. He knew they had to work fast. There was always a chance that Doctor York would return. "We'd better hurry."

She had torn the bedclothes off the bed and was swiftly and deftly knotting the corners of two sheets together. Hunter fastened the corner of the spread to the other end of one of the sheets, then tied the other end of the spread to a bedpost. He gave a hard tug. The improvised rope appeared strong enough.

"I'll try it first," said Hunter as he lowered the two sheets out of the window. "If it will hold me, it will certainly be strong enough to support your weight." He grinned at her. "What's your name?"

"Sue Sterling," she said. "What's yours?"

"Bill Hunter." He swung over the window ledge and caught hold of the sheets. "Here goes."

He slid down without any trouble and landed safely on the ground. He glanced up and motioned for her to come down. She swung out on the sheets and began to lower herself to the ground sliding a little way at a time and then slowing up a bit.

Just as she reached the ground there came a bright flare of light from the beach beyond the house. Both Hunter and the girl were clearly revealed in the white glow, and he saw that she was holding some square, flat object under one arm.

From the beach came an excited shout, then a gun roared as the men who had set off the flares saw Hunter and Sue near the

house.

"Run, Sue!" shouted Hunter as a bullet whistled by his ear.

The girl did not hesitate. She dashed back behind the house, running like a panic-stricken antelope. Hunter raced after her as another bullet buzzed dangerously close to him. In a moment or two they had ducked around in back of the house and kept right on running.

They finally reached a road, paused to regain their breath and listen for sounds of pursuit. Behind them it grew dark again as the light from the flares died.

"Doesn't appear to be anyone following us," said Hunter finally. "There must have been a ship heading out to sea or they wouldn't have set off the flares so enemy subs could spot it against the light."

"But how can they do it without being seen by the Coast Guard?" demanded Sue.

"Probably set off the flares on a different part of the beach each night," said Hunter. "By the time the Coast Guardsmen get to the spot, the fifth column gang is gone. We've suspected that old house might be the hideout, but we've investigated. A nice elderly couple live there—have for years. I believe they have a daughter who is away at college." He peered at Sue in the darkness. "Good Lord, I just remembered their name is Sterling."

"I know," said Sue. "That nice elderly couple are my mother and father. I came home from college a few days ago because I was worried about not having heard from my parents for a week."

"And when you reached the house you found that Doctor York and his gang were holding your mother and father prisoners, and they also captured you," said Hunter. "Is that it?"

"Yes," said Sue. "That's just what happened."

They were walking along the road,

leaving the house farther and farther behind them. Still there was no sign of pursuit, and Bill Hunter was puzzled until a thought struck him.

He realized that if he reported what he had learned about the house being the headquarters of the gang, the police and the F. B. I. would raid the place at once. If that happened, he felt that the chance of finding Sue's parents still alive was a slim one.

"What's that you're carrying?" he asked the girl.

"A studio photograph of Doctor York," said Sue. "I thought it might be useful if there was ever a chance to identify him."

"A photograph of Doctor York!" exclaimed Hunter delightedly. "You used brains in bringing that along. We can use it, and how!"

"But what about Mother and Dad?" demanded Sue. "Aren't you going to tell the police about them being held prisoners? As long as they stay there in that house they are in danger."

"I know," said Hunter. "But I'm afraid if we get the police to raid the house tonight they will be in worse danger. The doctor might try to kill them in order to keep them from talking. We'll have to wait, Sue, but I'll figure a way out of this as soon as possible."

"Two hours later, they were back in Manhattan. Hunter took Sue to the apartment he shared with his elder sister, and the two women liked each other at once. Hunter then took the picture of Doctor York and went to see the managing editor of one of the morning papers."

Johnson Randley, the managing editor listened intently as Bill Hunter talked and finally nodded.

"It's a crazy idea, Bill," he said finally. "But I'll do it. We can run it for one edition anyway and see what happens."

"Thanks, Johnson," said Hunter with a sigh of relief. "That's a load off my mind. Here's the picture. Good thing the doctor is so vain that he carries his own picture around with him."

Hunter departed and visited the F. B. I. office and police headquarters, then returned home to await results, which he knew would not be forthcoming before morning.

THE coming of another day brought the usual orderly bustle in the Lower Level of Grand Central Station. People were constantly passing to and fro, heading for the trains or just arriving in town from them. Some of them gathered at the lunch counter for a quick bite, others paused at the stands to buy papers and cigarettes.

At the shoe shine stand built against the wall not far from the Madison Avenue ramp Mike Duffy, the head bootblack, kept an eagle eye on his four-man crew. He was a stocky man about forty with a rugged face and thick brown hair always neatly combed. Like all of the bootblacks of his crew, he wore a grayish-green jacket.

Duffy smiled as a slender dark-haired man dressed in an expensive gabardine double-breasted suit appeared with a pretty dark-haired girl beside him. The bootblack had never seen the girl before, but Bill Hunter was one of his special customers. Duffy always shined Hunter's shoes himself.

"Morning, Mike," said Hunter as he climbed up on one of the seats of the stand after helping the girl to the one next to him. "This is Miss Sterling. I told her that I had to have Mike Duffy shine my shoes or my day wasn't complete."

"I believed him of course," said Sue. "And I couldn't bear to have his day spoiled, so I came along while he got a

shine from you."

"Boy, is that the old applesauce," said Duffy as he started to work on Hunter's shoes. "Say, Bill, have you seen anything of Tom Crawford?"

"Yes, I saw him last night," said Hunter. "Tom's dead, Mike. They finally got him."

"Gosh, I'm sorry," exclaimed Mike. "Crawford was a swell guy. You know who done it, Bill?"

"I know," said Hunter.

He glanced at Sue, who was sitting beside him, holding a morning paper in her hands.

"Who was it?" asked Duffy.

"Fifth columnists," said Hunter. "A funny thing happened to me in the subway this morning, Mike. Somebody picked my pocket, but all they got was my gun. Didn't even touch my wallet."

"Looks like somebody wants to get you in a spot where you ain't armed and put a slug in you, Bill," said Duffy.

"He says the nicest things," remarked Sue as she unfolded the newspaper and looked at the front page. "I think your friend Duffy is jolly, Bill."

Hunter did not say anything. He was staring at the stout gray-haired man dressed in a pin-striped blue suit who was casually walking toward the shoe shine stand. It was Doctor York, and he was much too calm to suit Hunter. There was something sinister about the approach of the head of the fifth column gang.

A QUICK glance around told Hunter that, with the exception of York, there was no one within fifty feet of the shoeshine stand. The doctor drew closer, then halted and stood looking at Hunter and Sue.

"Good morning," said York quietly. "I wondered what had become of you two. I was sorry you had to leave so hastily last

night. I had planned so much for the three of us to do together.”

“So sorry we had to leave, Doctor,” said Hunter ironically. “But we felt it best. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course.” York nodded and then smiled. “I have been informed that you lost your gun this morning. You have been watched closely, and I know you have not had the opportunity to secure another revolver.”

“Who is this man, Bill?” demanded Sue glancing at the doctor and then turning the front page of the paper so that it was visible to York. “He looks just like this picture!”

Doctor York glanced at the front page of the paper. A headline read, “*Spy Escapes*,” and beneath it was a large picture of the stout man just as he looked at the moment. York cursed in a guttural tongue and for an instant turned his back to the shoe shine stand as he reached inside his coat and drew out an automatic.

Hunter saw four hard-looking men casually walking toward the stand. He was sure they were members of Doctor York’s gang for the simple reason that they were trying to make their approach seem too casual.

Mike Duffy fumbled in the drawer where he kept his shoeshine material. At present, the four-man crew had left the stand to get their breakfast, there were no other customers and just Hunter, Sue and Duffy were at the stand.

“Here, Bill.” Duffy glanced over his shoulder and saw that York still had his back turned. Then he handed Hunter an automatic, butt first. “Let’s get going.”

York swung around with his automatic in his hand. But before the stout man could raise the weapon to shoot, Hunter fired. York howled in pain as the bullet caught him in the arm. His gun clattered to the floor of the lower level.

The four tough-looking men rushed forward, then halted abruptly as they found themselves covered by the gun in Hunter’s hand and a second automatic that Mike Duffy now held ready for action.

Station police came running to the spot, attracted by the sound of the shot. A crowd was swiftly gathering. Hunter leaped off the stand and flashed his badge at the station police.

“F. B. I.,” snapped Hunter. “Place these men under arrest, and we’ll take over afterwards. They’re fifth columnists.”

CITY police appeared, seemingly coming from all directions. In a few minutes the crowd had been dispersed and Doctor York and his gang quietly taken away.

“But I don’t understand,” said Sue after the excitement had died down. “How did the story about Doctor York being an escaped spy get into the paper, Bill?”

“As a matter of fact he’s a Nazi spy who escaped from Canada two months ago,” said Hunter. “We’ve been looking for him. But since he got away, he has been in disguise. He has grown much stouter, had his hair bleached white and raised a mustache.”

“And you recognized him?” demanded Sue.

“No.” Hunter shook his head. “But when you stole that picture of him and brought it along, it got me wondering. I was willing to admit that Doctor York might be vain, but that wasn’t enough reason for his having had that picture made and carrying it around with him. I had a hunch that he might be disguised, and perhaps the picture and more like it were to be used to tip off men working with him as to what he looked like now.”

“What about the newspaper story?” said Sue insistently.

“Oh, I talked a managing editor I know

into running that story,” said Hunter. “I had two reasons for doing it. One because, when they looked at the picture, every policeman and F. B. I. man in the city would know what York looked like and be able to pick him up if they saw him. Two, because I knew that it would either drive York into hiding and stop the lights on the beach or he would come after me.”

“Evidently he was so busy looking for us that he did not even glance at a paper this morning,” said Sue, and then looked worried. “What about my family?”

“What about Mr. and Mrs. Sterling?” demanded Hunter as Duffy stepped out of a phone booth and joined them.

“They’re safe and well,” said Mike Duffy. “Some of our boys raided the house this morning as soon as they were sure that York and most of the men had left.”

“But who are you?” demanded Sue looking at Duffy in amazement.

“Just another G-Man working under cover,” said Duffy. “We figured that this would be a good spot to have a man planted to watch out for spies and fifth columnists. Some people talk a lot and don’t pay much attention to bootblacks.” He grinned. “Tom Crawford was a pal of ours, so we were glad to get the guys who killed him.”

“That’s right,” said Hunter somberly. “You might say we were the companions of the corpse.”

“But how did Doctor York know we would be at the station this morning?” asked Sue.

“He probably got my address when he went through my pockets at the house,” said Hunter. “Then had some of his men watching the apartment building and trailing us when we left this morning. That’s how they got my gun.”

“You think of everything, Bill,” exclaimed Sue admiringly.

“Yeah, he’s smart,” growled Duffy.

“But the next time *he* is going to take the undercover job—and will I make him shine *my* shoes then!” He grinned. “Go on, beat it. Here comes my crew back from breakfast, and the morning rush will start soon. We got work to do.”

“Come on, Sue,” said Hunter. “I’ve got to take care of Doctor York and his gang.” He grinned at Duffy. “Besides we’ve spent enough time with the hired help.”

Mike Duffy paid no attention to them as they walked away. Customers had appeared on the stand, and all of the bootblacks were busy shining shoes.