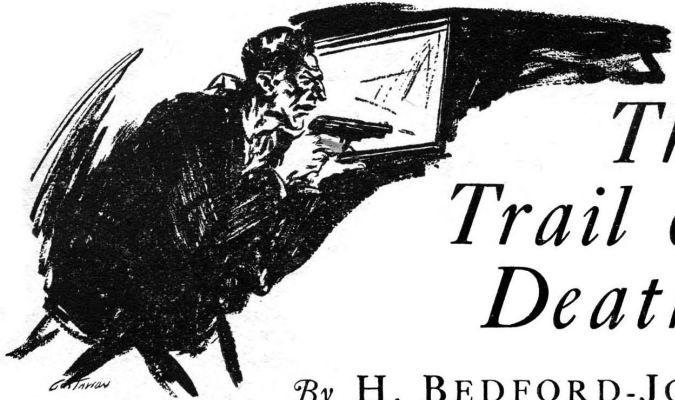


The Trail of Death

By H. Bedford-Jones

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson



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By H. BEDFORD-JONES

With a wild laugh, he thrust out the pistol and fired.

“Over Abbeville,” the second in this remarkable series, includes one of the most unusual and exciting scenes ever described—a fight to the death waged in the narrow cabin of a London-to-Paris passenger plane.

Durant stood at the rail, watching the gleam of the Land’s End light twinkle across the night. The *Tyrania* was on the last leg of her voyage; at dawn she would be just off Plymouth, and all those who could change at the last moment would go into the lighter instead of on to Cherbourg, for dirty weather lay ahead of her. Durant had changed, but for other reasons.

A light step, and Durant turned to find the slender figure of Baroness Glincka at his side. Known aboard ship as Mrs. Robinson, her unhappy story was hidden with her name; only Durant knew how her dead husband’s cousin, Boris Makoff,

held her gripped in tentacles of blackmail, forcing her to aid his little schemes, making her an unwilling but helpless member of his Paris coterie of genteel crooks. It was for her sake that Durant had wormed his way into this organization, getting the confidence of Makoff—waiting!

“You got the message?” she asked in the darkness.

“Yes, and changed. You’ll get off at Plymouth too?”

“Yes. Boris is planning something at London, before going on. I’m not sure what; but the victim is that white-haired man who keeps to himself. Larson, the name is. Boris introduced him to me tonight, using my real name. He’s a nice old man.”

“And a game’s on, eh?” Durant knew Larson by sight—a stiff, bronzed man with white hair and mustache, and shrewd, kindly old eyes, traveling alone.

“Something. Boris wants you to come into the smoking-room, and meet Larson. I think he’s a Dane who’s made a fortune in America and is taking a trip to Denmark—that’s my guess. I suppose Boris means to wring his neck in London by your help and mine.”

“Pleasant prospect,” said Durant.

“What will Lewis say when he learns the truth?”

“He won’t learn it. I’ve arranged—at a little expense. You’ll see in the morning.”

“Then you’re a magician!”

“Borrowed magic—from your beauty.”

She laughed a little and was gone into the darkness. Durant stared out at the gleaming light on the horizon, and thought over the past, back to those Paris days when he, a clerk in an American branch bank, poor, half-starved, struggling for life and health, had seen the beautiful Baroness Glincka come in three times a week to the next window.

And now he knew her, was fighting for her—was a crook for her sake! An odd turn of destiny. An almost forgotten relative dead, a legacy of almost forgotten land in Florida, a trip home—wealth! Then he headed back for Paris, to take his ease where he had starved and fought and sweated. So he had thought—but work had come to him.

“That you, Durant?” It was the voice of Lewis, who came quietly out of the darkness, a cigar-tip glowing redly. “First sight of England, eh? I’m leaving you in the morning.”

“But I’m going up to London too, instead of on to Cherbourg.”

“Good! Shall I see you in London?”

“No. Wiser not—wait for Paris.”

“Right. I’ll give you my address there. I’m going right on—taking the afternoon plane over tomorrow.”

Lewis fumbled for a card-case. He was a smallish man, very alert—a wholesale druggist from the Middle West, now engaged in smuggling a suitcase filled with cocaine into France—a task in which Durant presumably was aiding. True, Durant had saved him from Boris Makoff, had dumped the cocaine into the Atlantic and substituted baking soda for it—

and for these services, known and unknown, Lewis was an ally. Once in Paris, he promised to be a most important ally.

“Thanks.” Durant took the card thrust at him. “You’ll hear from me as soon as I get settled—if not before! I’ve a rather big game to pull off, and there’ll be pickings in it. They’ll go to your friends who help me. I’m not in it for money.”

He did not say that he was not in it for crooks’ money—he had no intention of injuring the feelings of Lewis just yet. The two men separated, and Durant headed for the smoking-room, filled to bursting with the usual last-night crowd.

Makoff had a table and lounge in one corner; with him was the silent, rather offish Larson—impeccably dressed, as usual, and only a little less lonely. Helen—or Baroness Helena Glincka—had rejoined them and was drawing Larson into almost lively conversation. Cards lay waiting on the table.

Durant approached, saw Makoff make a remark, saw the eyes of Larson sweep to him with almost eager interest. He could not understand it, but came up to the table. Makoff rose.

“Ah, Durant! Let me introduce you to Mr. Larson of Toledo—Mr. Durant. What about a rubber, if your packing’s done?”

“Glad.” Durant bowed to the Baronne, and shook hands with Larson, in whose mild blue eyes rested that same curious, scrutinizing expression. Then and later his manner toward Durant was almost deferential, though as a rule his air was brusque enough. That he was quite captivated by the Baronne, too, was soon evident.

There was no opportunity for private conversation until, a few rubbers ended, Helen departed under pretense of having to pack. Larson also rose, and shook hands with Durant.

"If you're alone," he said, "we might go to London together in the morning."

"I'll be glad," said Durant, finding himself liking the old man. "See you at the pier, eh?"

So they parted. Left alone, Durant met the gaze of Makoff with inquiring eyes.

"Well? What's the game?"

The bold, aggressive regard of the Russian dwelt upon him for an instant, and in those dark depths Durant read startling, baffling things.

"Tell you later," said Makoff calmly, with a gesture at the room. "Get up to London with him, ask him to visit you for a day or so—until Monday, say. The week-end. Tell him your car will meet the train."

"My car? But I haven't any!"

"Your mistake," said Makoff, and smiled. "Your chauffeur, Giles, will meet the train." And this was all he would say.

In the drizzling rain of a dark gray dawn, the *Tyrania* disembarked her passengers into the lighter, while the rattling, banging winches sent aboard the nets of hold luggage. Durant stood in the rain on the upper deck of the lighter, watching.

"I've been looking for you." The Baronne emerged from the cabin, joined him. Her face was pale, anxious, her sky-blue eyes wide and filled with alarm. "I've learned what's up—"

Durant, touching his hat, turned suddenly to the rail. "Look!" he broke in. There was a swift commotion forward—angry cries, orders, a medley of voices. One of the nets had just come down.

"What is it?" she demanded, frowning at the rain-wet scene. Durant laughed.

"That," he said, "is the pet suitcase of our friend Lewis going over the side. It's gone! Here's the sequel." And he opened his hand to show a twenty-pound note. "But you were going to say—"

She came close to him. "I've found out about it," she said rapidly in French. "I think Larson's to be murdered—I'm not sure. He's carrying a large sum—got it from the purser—in cash."

"I'll take care of it," said Durant, and took her hand. He smiled into her eyes. "Out of the rain, now! All's well that ends well. *Au revoir!*"

The last Durant saw of Lewis, the little rascal was involved in heated argument at the Customs shed with sundry porters. Durant laughed and passed on. His own trail was covered; the cocaine and substitute alike were gone; and the past was closed. The future remained.

Closeted in a first-class compartment with Larson, Durant arranged about breakfast, took his companion into the

restaurant car, and thawed him out in no time. Returning, they lighted cigars and became more or less confidential. Durant found himself treated with the same curious interest he had noticed the previous evening, but could not penetrate to the reason.

Larson was shyly eloquent regarding the Baronne. A shrewd old man, manufacturer and banker, he was yet in some ways diffident and unsophisticated as a child—and Makoff had obviously found the way, though Durant was slow to realize just where it lay. Comprehension came slowly.

“Perhaps you’ll stay the week-end with me?” asked Durant. “I’m not going on to Paris at once, and I’d be very glad. You see, I’ve been rather alone.”

“Like me,” said Larson. “Yes, I noticed. Queer we’d run together the last day! Why, about the visit—I don’t know, Durant, I don’t know. I’d like to mighty well, but I expect I’d make a fool of myself. I’m not acquainted with the way you do things over here.”

Durant was puzzled, the more so because he himself was acting in the dark, not knowing what Makoff intended.

“And she was a real baroness, eh?” Larson chewed his cigar. “Well, well! And to think of you—but I suppose you don’t imagine that I know who you are? But I do. That’s why I’m afraid to accept your invitation. I’d like to, because I like you; anyone can see you’re straight as a string, in spite of what they say about nobility. Now, I’m not so sure about that Russian chap—”

“Nobility?” repeated Durant. Larson broke into a laugh.

“Oh, I know about it! That Russian told me. You see, so long as you’re Durant to me, it’s all right. We get on fine. But when you become Lord Northcote—gosh, man! I’d be proud enough to bust, to think I’d visited you—but think of the breaks I’d make! I wouldn’t know whether to call you ‘My Lord,’ or ‘Mister,’ or what! And being all alone, with my wife dead, I’ve no one to steer me around. Not but what it’s tempting—”

Durant laughed, largely to conceal his startled amazement, for the old man’s loneliness struck him as pathetic. Lord Northcote!

“So I’m a lord, am I?” he said. Larson chuckled.

“Oh, he warned me you’d perhaps be angry—but I’ll say nothing about it. You just keep on being Durant, see? If you will, I’ll accept the invitation. How about it? I’ll have three days in London anyhow. Leaving there Monday.”

“Done,” said Durant.

He probed carefully, anxious to make no slip, and came upon the amazing truth. Larson, a Continental by birth, had profound respect for nobility; now, old and wealthy, going back to Europe, the idea of mixing with titled gentry was fascinating in the extreme to him—it was his weak spot.

And lurking in the background behind all this, was black murder.

Warn Larson? Impossible. Against his plans and hopes for rescuing Helen Glincka from the blackmail grip of Makoff, Durant would have let a dozen Larsons go to death. Being a

party to it was another matter altogether, and here he could act as events gave him clue. He was well assured that Makoff would have made careful plans by wire, for the Russian had a very able criminal organization to back him up; warning Larson, then, might only precipitate the disaster.

Sooner or later, a break must come with Makoff—indeed, Durant meant to attack the man mercilessly, pitilessly, upon reaching Paris. There he would be on familiar ground, and would have friends among the dope-ring, thanks to Lewis; he could fight fire with fire. Until then, he must inform himself as fully as possible about Makoff's crowd, arm himself with every possible weapon, prepare!

"I'll have to play my part, save Larson if possible, keep under cover with Makoff," he decided. And aloud: "My car should meet the train—have you any luggage?"

"Just my two suitcases." Larson pointed at the rack. Then he smiled. "I'm keeping close to them, too! One of 'em has a big roll of currency—more than I could carry, for I have my pockets full besides."

"Eh?" Durant stared, wondering at such recklessness. "You're not serious?"

Larson chuckled. "Think it queer, eh? Well, it is! But in the old country, you know,—and all over Europe for that matter,—American money is badly wanted. Not in gold, because it's not pure, but bills. So I'm bringing back a small fortune in hundred-dollar bills. You've no idea what can be bought with hundred-dollar American bills in Europe! I'm going to make my whole

family comfortable for life, I can tell you. It may be foolish to carry them, but that's all bosh. I'm careful."

"Yes," thought Durant, "you're blessed careful! You don't even talk about it!" Something eluded him here—he could sense it. Larson was right enough about the American money being in keen demand; yet there was some subtly felt note in the whole thing that rang queer.

Durant, cynical enough about most things from his years of bitter struggle with the world, believed in luck. Luck, and no doing of his, had brought him his present affluence. Luck had brought him into contact with Helen Glincka; luck had shown him her story, had given him the chance to serve her. And now, as the boat-train roared on Londonward, luck suddenly bobbed up with the most amazing twist of all.

"Another three-quarters of an hour," said Larson, glancing at his watch. "Hm! Fifteen years since I've been in England, and it looks the same—the same—"

The man's face changed suddenly. His words died. He jerked his hat a little lower, then turned, staring from the window. Durant blinked at him, wondering at his manner, wondering at the odd something about the man. Then he glanced up.

Outside their compartment door was standing a man, looking in. An ordinary Englishman, clipped gray mustache, lounge-suit, square chin, heavy-lidded eyes—only the eyes were not ordinary, for they were the eyes of one who gives orders. A retired army man, perhaps.

He pushed open the door, and came in. His gaze swept Durant, seemed to comprehend him at once, went on to Larson. Durant moved over to make room—the man had come in to smoke, no doubt, as this was a smoker, and the train was fairly full. Next instant, however, Durant realized his mistake. Upon the little compartment settled an atmosphere tense and terrible.

Sitting opposite Larson, the Englishman produced a cigarette and lighted it, indeed—but his eyes were fastened upon Larson, with a grimly humorous expression. Larson gazed at him blankly an instant, then looked away, yet with an effort.

“A bit older, old chap, aren’t you?” said the Englishman suddenly. “I fancy we both are, what? Fifteen years—devilish long time, eh?”

Coming so soon after Larson’s remark, these words startled Durant, showed him something lay under the surface here. And in the eyes of Larson, he saw it was tragedy.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” said Larson.

The Englishman laughed, and at the sound of it, Durant stiffened.

“Really, now? Quite a stroke of luck, this—looking for some one else, you know. So your memory has gone off a bit, eh? Most extra’nary, memory! Now, the moment I saw you, I told myself there was my old friend Gunnar Hanson. And what may you be doing in Blighty, Gunnar? Hadn’t you fancied it might be a bit unhealthy here, eh?”

"I—I'm going through," said Larson in a strangled voice. "To the Continent. I've made my pile in the States—I'm going through. Not stopping at all."

"Ah, but you're mistaken about that!" said the other pleasantly. "Badly mistaken, old thing! A little matter—what was the name? Inspector Bagwell, wasn't it? I remember his funeral quite well. I promised his widow that I'd bag you some day!" Smiling cheerfully at his victim, the Englishman put his cigarette between his lips and puffed at it—unfortunately for himself. For Larson, though white as a sheet, lashed out a blow as swift and unexpected as the stroke of a snake.



Larson lashed out a blow as swift and unexpected as the stroke of a snake

One short, swift blow—no more. To it, the Englishman crumpled up and sagged limply to one side. Larson's fist showed the gleam of knuckles, as he darted up and to the door. He drew the blue curtains, then whirled, and stared at Durant with a face of desperation.

Durant was laughing—the mad humor of it struck him in a wave. Here was a murderer, a criminal with a record; and Makoff had picked on him as an innocent victim!

“Well, what about it?” snarled the voice of Larson. The latter was suddenly transformed—the shrewd, gentle, unsophisticated old man had become a crouching, desperate enemy of society. “What you going to do, huh? My only chance was to stop his mouth. You heard him—it was fifteen years ago! They'd nab me for that. You're a lord—you can save me or not. What about it?”

Durant's mirth was abruptly banished, and he stared at Larson. The man actually believed Makoff's story, then.

“I'm no policeman,” he said. “I suppose you've been a virtuous angel the past fifteen years, eh? Really a manufacturer?”

“Hell, no!” snapped Larson, wide-eyed. “You mean it—you'll give me a chance? I ain't lying. I'm a crook—but you invited me. You liked me. Now, will you stick to it or not?”

Shrewd, this! Thinking Durant an Englishman, a mistake no Briton would have made, and really a lord,—a mistake only an American could have made,—Larson was appealing to his pride, his sporting instinct of fair play and word given.

“What the devil are you?” demanded Durant. “A Dane, as you posed?”

“Yes, by birth. I’m a naturalized American now. Yes or no?”

“Yes,” said Durant, “—provided you don’t murder this chap.”

“Done with you,” said Larson.

He darted to the prostrate man, frisked him quickly and efficiently, snapped the steel bracelets around their owner’s wrists, emptied the pockets into his own, gagged him with handkerchiefs, stretched him out along one seat after throwing up the arms. To Durant it was a revelation—it showed the man as nothing else could have done. Crook, eh? Then Larson was no petty scoundrel. He knew how to do things.



He snapped the steel bracelets around the owner's wrists and gagged him with handkerchiefs.

Once more the humor of it smote Durant hard, with added force after Larson's statement. The man was a professional crook, self-admitted, and Makoff had selected him—but wait! Crook or not, he had swallowed the bait and was hooked, thus to an extent justifying Makoff's judgment. And Durant himself had been completely deceived by the rascal.

"Just what sort of crook are you?" asked Durant, extending his cigarette-case. He gave no heed to the senseless detective—Durant had little pity for inefficiency. "Bank-robber, confidence-worker or thug?"

Larson grinned, as he flung his overcoat over the unfortunate Englishman and settled down in comfort.

"To tell you the truth, a little of anything," he said frankly. His shrewd old features settled back into their usual kindly wrinkles. "I've touched all sides of the game—but while I'm with you, I'm straight. That goes! I shouldn't have stopped off in England at all, but I thought it was safe enough—and I was tempted. Now, if you and I go together, say by air, we'll get out of the country. That is, if you'll help me so far! Otherwise, I'm done for. It'll be almost impossible for me to get out of England now, unless—"

He made a gesture toward the shape beside him. Durant shook his head.

"None of that. I'll get you out, all right. So you've made your pile in the States, eh? In what game?"

“All kinds,” said Larson, and laughed. Then he sobered. “Look here! We’ll have to make a quick get-away when we get to the station—Waterloo, is it? Or Paddington? Porters will come through to get luggage and see if anything’s left in the cars.”

“Don’t worry,” said Durant calmly. “My chauffeur should meet us there. And to you, I’ll be plain Ralph Durant, understand? What’s more, I’ll keep your secret. Is it agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Larson, and put out his hand. “I’ll be on the level with you.” Durant meant his words. He had no intention whatever of telling Makoff anything, and he shook hands gravely with the murderer and criminal opposite. As a matter of fact, he much preferred the man to Makoff.

Durant had hitherto seen Makoff as a man of culture, energy, ruthless ability; but in the ensuing hours he began to realize why this man could hold his cousin’s widow in bonds of blackmail and force her to give not only money, but service, to his cause.

He knew Makoff could have had less than twenty-four hours to prepare for his *coup* against Larson. He knew, too, that Makoff was scrupulously anxious to keep any breath of police suspicion from his activities; much of his work lay among the upper strata of society, and he could not afford publicity or suspicion. Therefore, even granted that he was in touch with some criminal organization in London, his achievement was marvelous.

Having only hand-baggage, Larson and Durant slipped out of the train and down the platform in all haste; they would have

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