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DEVIL'S DEN

by

Timothy Ashby

PROLOGUE

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Sunday, June 17, 1923

It was a place of ghosts.

Thomas Gahagan could almost hear the battlefield cries, sixty years after the war's end, as he trudged along the uneven ground outside the little town of Gettysburg. Self-doubt began to edge out the curiosity that had brought him to this old charnel house in the depths of a sweltering summer night.

The elderly man supposed he could have ignored the letter; his passion for the cause had evaporated more than half a century ago—it was 1923 for God's sake. Most people today, himself included, were more interested in moving pictures, aeroplanes and radio shows than in dredging up what may as well be ancient history, he thought. But the note had contained a code he hadn't seen in six decades. Which of his former comrades had asked to meet him here with such urgency, such secrecy? Intrigued again, he soldiered on through the maze of boulders and twisted trees that had become a national landmark, reminder of an earthly Hell.

The Devil's Den. *Good name for it*, Gahagan thought.

Even with his cane, he now found walking difficult. Several times he stumbled and nearly fell, cursing his age and infirmities. He paused and looked over his shoulder, but saw only shades of darkness. A half-moon provided enough light to continue down the path laid out for the tourists but not enough for him to read the dial of his pocket

watch.

Wheezing, he stopped again in a clearing and leaned against a boulder that reflected the moonlight like a giant's skull. Being back in Devil's Den unsettled him mightily, and his heart thumped like the first time he had gone into battle against the Rebs as a fresh-off-the-boat bog-trotter all those years ago. Annoyed with himself, he fretted while waiting for his breathing to slow, wondering if he was late for the midnight rendezvous.

A noise—real, not imagined, he decided. He cupped a hand around his better ear and listened carefully, thinking maybe it was a distant locomotive. Then the gentle breeze shifted and he knew it for the sound of a person whistling. When Gahagan recognized the tune he grinned. "*Begorra*," he said softly. It was the once popular song "We Are Coming Father Abraham," used in grim irony by the members of his group as a recognition signal. He tried to pucker up a few answering bars but his withered lips would not respond. Giving up, he called out, "Over here, friend."

A cloud covered the moon as a human form detached itself from a narrow passage between two huge rocks and shuffled towards him. Another more agile person followed the first, keeping a few paces behind and carrying a shielded kerosene lantern.

Gahagan stepped forward, meeting the leading figure in the middle of the clearing. They stopped about a yard apart. The man with the lantern hung back, although Tom could discern that he was wearing a peaked cap and dark uniform.

The newcomer's voice was gravelly with age. "Hello, Gahagan."

Despite the heat, the slightly stooped speaker wore an overcoat and a homburg. Gahagan squinted, trying to make out the man's features. The moon reappeared and

he saw the face, dominated by a handlebar mustache of the type favored by soldiers in the last century. Now Gahagan recognized him, and unconsciously straightened to the closest stance of attention his aged body could achieve.

"How are you, Captain?" he asked.

The one called Captain ignored the courtesy, searching Gahagan's face with an intensity some had described as fanatical.

"So Gahagan, I see you are still among the living."

"So I am, so I am. And it's pleased I am to see that you can be counted among that number too, sir."

The Captain fumbled in his coat pockets for something. His companion hovered in the background, swiveling his head to watch the woods and the monolithic stones surrounding the meeting place.

"Sorry I didn't get a chance to say hello when we all got together here back in 'thirteen," Gahagan continued. "Saw you up there by the speech monument with all them other bigwigs. I was thinking how, well, *strange* it all was."

The other elderly man scowled. "What do you mean by that?" he snapped.

Gahagan was surprised at the former officer's vehemence. "Didn't mean nothin', Captain. At the time I just wondered what all them others would think if they *knew*."

The Captain found the paper he was searching for in his pockets. He unfolded a letter and thrust it towards Gahagan.

"What's this, then?" Gahagan squinted at it.

The man in the peaked cap - a much younger man, Gahagan noticed - stepped forward and exposed the lantern, illuminating the paper.

"Don't *you* know?" the Captain demanded.

"Specs, need me specs." Gahagan hooked a pair of glasses over his ears. He took the paper and read slowly, mouth forming the letters. Finishing, he looked at the Captain.

"Powerful words, ain't they," he said, handing the paper back.

"Whose words are they, Gahagan?"

Gahagan was irritated by the Captain's imperious tone. It had been many years since he had been the man's subordinate and he saw no reason to endure the old codger's blather again. "They sure as hell ain't mine, if that's what you're askin'."

A twig snapped behind him. He looked around, noticing that another man had entered the clearing from the same path he had taken. The Captain took a step closer. Gahagan caught a whiff of the man's cologne, the same scent that had caused derision among the enlisted men when he wore it during the War.

"If not you then who, Gahagan? Are any of the others left? You're the only one I was able to locate."

It began to dawn on Thomas Gahagan that he may have made a bad mistake coming here this night. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the third man edging closer.

"Could be we're the last ones, Captain," he answered warily, thinking to protect his friends. "It don't really matter no more, anyway."

The Captain looked at the other elderly man searchingly.

"You're wrong, Gahagan," he said finally. "It *does* still matter."

He turned in awkward parody of a military about-face and shuffled back the way

he had come, preceded by the man with the lantern. Gahagan watched as the pair disappeared into the night with only the lantern's glow marking their passage like a lost soul wandering the battlefield. Then it too was gone and Gahagan was left alone with the silently watching man who had trailed him into the clearing.

The last time Thomas Gahagan had experienced mortal fear had been in the spring of 1865, during a desperate Confederate cavalry raid on his regiment's camp outside Richmond when a Rebel's saber had missed skewering him by inches. Now, as the stranger drew something long and metallic from a sack, Tom felt again a cold terror surge up from his belly.

Gahagan's throat constricted, and his voice emerged as a harsh whisper.

"Friend, leave an old soldier to go in peace. I beg you!"

Almost nonchalantly, the man walked up to Gahagan, who dropped his cane and tottered backwards until his back jarred against a boulder. The stranger stopped in front of him, features expressionless under a derby.

Gahagan could not look at the man's hands but he knew what they held. He tried to make a sign of the cross but his arms felt paralyzed.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," he whispered, "pray for—"

The blow slammed the old man against the rock. He tried to draw a breath but it wouldn't come. In the last moments of his life, as he lay on the battlefield of Gettysburg, he thought the sky turned bright as day and saw around him his old messmates, as young and fresh as on the day they had perished more than half a century before.

CHAPTER 1

Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, June 19, 1923

The shots woke Seth Armitage from his dream of poppies. Blood-red poppies sprouting from...scattered corpses? *What battlefield was this?*

More bangs. *Another Hun trench raid?* He grabbed for the Colt .45 on his bedside table, finally recognized the noise was just a Tin Lizzie backfiring in the street outside.

He closed his eyes and focused on the familiar sounds of an awakening city to quiet his pounding heart -- the clip-clop of the milkman's horse, a newsboy hawking *The Washington Star*, the distinctive honk of a Model T horn hurrying the old horse aside as if eager to consign it to the unmechanized past. But his unease remained even as the nightmare's images faded.

Snores from Mrs. Treadwell's other boarders drifted in through doors left open in

vain hope of a breeze. The summer heat and humidity had begun early; perhaps that's what had triggered the nightmares. Seth's own airless chamber felt too much like the boiler room of the troop ship on which he had returned home four years earlier. He had slept little despite a couple swigs of Glenfiddich, tossing and turning on his sweat-soaked sheet. Oh well. He dragged himself out of bed.

Seth shocked himself awake with a cold wash in the communal bathroom. No, he admitted as he absently stared at his reflection, it wasn't the heat. The dream's setting was different, sure, but his flask of Glenfiddich was nearly empty, and that hadn't happened in one night. The past few months he'd taken at least a few belts a night to stop his mind from racing, clear out the apparitions.

So what. He'd get past it.

Time to get a move on. He dressed in an Irish linen suit. He had filled out since he had the suit made back in '20, so the shoulder holster left a bulge under his arm when he tucked the semiautomatic into it. He crept down the stairs, plucked his straw boater off the hat tree on his way out the door, turned onto E Street and strolled towards the White House. Ten minutes later he entered the eight-story building on the corner of Vermont Avenue and K Street that housed the U.S. Justice Department.

After the Red bombings of '19 the Justice Department had authorized the hiring of a dozen additional uniformed agents to stand guard at the entrance to its K Street headquarters. As usual, Armitage saw nobody there.

He shook his head, remembered his dream. Was *this* what he had fought for?

Those highly trained invisible bulls must have been on the same payroll as the 30 phantom workers responsible for cleaning the filthy lobby along with the rest of the

building. Seth couldn't secure the building himself and he sure couldn't do anything about the lobby, but he had personally hired a woman to clean his office. Partly because he couldn't help it – he'd been fastidious about cleanliness long before he became a Marine officer - but probably mostly from some vague idea that helping an elderly negress earn a few extra bucks made up in some way for the salaries of the never-hired cleaners that lined the pockets of the political highbinders.

Armitage scowled at the cigar butts on the floor and stabbed the elevator button. No, make that 42 invented names on the payroll; he forgot to include the non-existent guards with the phantasm cleaners.

He got off on the fifth floor and walked around the corner to his office, glanced towards the desk of his former partner. The desk, though empty for the past few months, now held a pile of racing forms, magazines, a box of cheap cigars and other personal effects. Armitage vaguely wondered who his new office mate was.

He hung up his hat and jacket and was just opening a window when he heard someone come into the office. Armitage didn't have to see him to recognize the distinctive odor of Archie Coleman's hair pomade. He unhurriedly turned to the young assistant to William J. Brooks, Director of the Bureau of Investigation.

Coleman pointed his index finger toward the fly-specked ceiling. "He wants to see you."

"Who?"

"The Director. Hurry up, he's waiting."

CHAPTER 2

Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, June 19, 1923

Armitage gave Coleman a hard stare, waiting for an explanation. Even though the Bureau was small, in his three years there he had never met privately with Brooks, his boss. But the smaller man's sour face gave nothing away. Coleman turned and marched out into the corridor as Seth slipped back into his jacket and followed him into the sweltering stairwell.

When they entered Brooks' office on the top floor, Coleman disappeared into the Director's inner sanctum. Seth eyed Brooks' secretary, Mamie, who was watering the potted palms in the outer office and humming "Yes, We Have No Bananas." Seth covertly admired the girl's legs, which were exposed by one of the shortest skirts yet seen publicly in the District of Columbia. Mamie turned and grinned at him.

"Hey, how ya doin' today, handsome?" she said.

"Better now," he replied, smiling slightly.

He sat beneath a large oil portrait of President Harding on the opposite wall while

Mamie prattled about the honeymoon of Harold Lloyd and Mildred Davis. She was telling him that she preferred Fairbanks' looks to Valentino's when Coleman reappeared in the doorway and motioned Armitage inside.

The Bol Director's office was like a gentlemen's club, filled with leather-upholstered furniture, dark paneling, and the aroma of fine Havanas. Armitage took in the credenza arrayed with silver-framed photographs of a burly, grey-mustached man posing with President Harding, Attorney General Daugherty, Henry Ford, and the movie star Mary Pickford. At the far end of the office, the same man sat behind an enormous desk.

William Brooks rose and shook hands. "Armitage, my boy," he boomed like a genial uncle.

The Director told Armitage to sit, then flapped his hand at Coleman like a man shooing away flies. "See you later, Archie. We've got detective business to discuss."

Brooks chuckled implausibly and mopped his face with a big handkerchief as Coleman departed. Still smiling, he opened a file with Armitage's name hand-lettered on the cover.

"Well, Armitage, that was fine work you did on that Louisiana Klan case. You know, the Attorney General himself followed that one closely. Yes, sir. Commendation in your file here. Fine work."

Seth's eyes narrowed.

"Thank you, sir, but that verdict was a travesty. The Attorney General should order a new trial in a Federal Cour--."

The Bol Director flapped his hand imperiously.

“Forget about it. Too bad about your partner but the Bureau never should have got involved.

Armitage said nothing, fighting back a familiar rage as Brooks continued leafing through the file.

"Let's see. You're a Southern boy, aren't you? Well, we're all friends now, aren't we?" He chuckled again. "Good service record in the Great War. Boy, I bet you had some fun with them little Mademoiselles. Let's see, rank of first lieutenant, D-S-C, Purple Heart. Fine background, Armitage. Just first class."

What was this all about?

The Director mopped his face again. He was sweating heavily, though he wore no jacket over the shirt and waistcoat strained by his stomach. Closing the file, Brooks looked at notes scrawled on a sheet of Bol letterhead paper. He cleared his throat.

"I understand you're working as our liaison to the Prohibition Bureau on one of those bootlegger cases. Well, I've got an assignment that needs taking care of right away, so I'm sure the bootleggers will keep 'til you're finished. Because of your experience on those Klan murders, I want you to take on a new homicide case in Pennsylvania."

Seth drew a deep breath but held Brooks' curious gaze.

"Think you can handle it, Armitage?"

He nodded and pulled a notebook and pencil from his pocket.

"Do you have the details, sir?"

He saw a look of relief suffuse Brooks' face, quickly replaced by smugness.

"Yup, not many though. The body of an old man was found yesterday with a

bayonet through his heart. Pretty unlikely he put it there himself, so it's homicide, sure enough."

"Why is the Bureau involved?"

Brooks hesitated. Seth read deception in the Director's expression.

"Well," Brooks answered, "it's, uh, because the body was found on federal property – a national military park – and he may have been a Civil War veteran. So we're going to take over the investigation from the local sheriff's department."

Armitage knew better. Considering the Bureau's limited personnel and budget, such a routine murder case would normally never come to the attention of the Justice Department, much less result in the assignment of a BoI agent to its investigation. Besides, Seth was fairly certain that in its short history the Bureau had never been involved in homicide cases in government owned parks unless federal officials had been involved.

"Which federal property was the body found on, sir?"

"Gettysburg." Brooks' face held the glimmer of a smirk. "Ever hear of it?"

Seth remained expressionless, but his mind raced. He needed to pick up a real case again; he had about as much enthusiasm for pursuing bootleggers as he did for watching whitewash dry on a barn. But *Gettysburg*? Sure would have been nice to go somewhere less personal, so soon after Louisiana. He knew he hadn't let that one go yet. He wasn't sure he ever would.

"You with me Armitage?" Brooks broke into his thoughts.

"Yes, Mr. Director. I've never been there, though."

"Well, it's easy to find." Brooks handed him the sheet of paper with his

handwritten notes. "Here're the particulars and the name of the sheriff up there."

As Seth scanned the paper, the Director drummed his fingers on the desktop. He seemed to be searching for words.

"Now, Armitage," he said after clearing his throat loudly. "I have reason to believe that this case may turn out to be ...um, *broader* than appearances might suggest. So I want you to report *only* to me on your investigation and not discuss it with anyone else. All the evidence is to be taken into custody by you and brought back here. Understand me?"

Armitage paused before answering, studying Brooks' blinking eyes. Something really didn't smell right here, even if he couldn't put a finger on what it was. Seth was amply familiar with the Bureau's seamier side -- politically motivated spying, blackmail, the deliberate cover-up of crimes committed by wealthy businessmen and elected officials. He knew, too that the situation had grown worse under Brooks' stewardship.

But he had kept his own nose clean, maybe helped by the fact that during his three-year BI career, he had not yet been overtly ordered to take part in anything unethical. Was he being asked to do so now? Hard to tell. He'd let it play out, for the time being.

He nodded.

Beaming again, the Director pressed a button under his desk. Coleman was instantly at his door, resentfully staring at Armitage over his high celluloid collar.

"Archie, I want you to make sure that Special Agent Armitage here gets everything he needs to help with his investigation. All our resources are at his disposal, understood?"

With a last amiable wave, Brooks watched Coleman usher Armitage out.

As his office door closed, the Director's smile vanished. He fished a cigar out of a humidior on his desk and went through the comforting ritual of cutting and lighting it. He walked across the office and slumped on a leather sofa, blowing rings of fine Cuban smoke as he thought about this latest in a long series of special favors powerful men had asked of him.

Stubbing out his cigar, Brooks sighed, rose unsteadily to his feet, and returned to his desk. He found the telephone number in his diary and asked Mamie to connect him, tensing as he waited.

The telephone conversation was brief. Brooks was cut off mid-sentence and the phone went dead. The Bol Director sighed and buried his sweaty face in his hands.

Senator Matthew Tichenor savored the act of terminating the telephone connection with Brooks. He enjoyed humiliating the arrogant political appointees who came and went in Washington DC, reminding them of his power as a member of Congress for longer than most of them had even been alive.

One call to the Attorney General, Harry Daugherty, had been all that was needed to ensure that the Bol Director would do his bidding without hesitation. The Special Agent that Tichenor had chosen could have been problematical given his reputation as a straight arrow, but Brooks had just confirmed that Seth Armitage agreed to conduct the murder investigation.

Tichenor had heard about the Bureau's meddling with the Klan from the senior

Senator from Louisiana, an Exalted Cyclops of the KKK. The Louisiana congressman had found it especially galling that the surviving Bol undercover agent who had taken it on himself to testify against the Klan was a Southerner.

“Boy’s a traitor,” he had drawled. “A disgrace to good Christians and his nation. Needs to be taught a lesson like the Knights did to his partner.”

Like his colleague, Tichenor was incensed by the Justice Department’s interference in a state’s local affairs, especially when it came to maintaining the supremacy of the white race. Despite his service in the Union Army during the Civil War, he – like many Federal officers – had been vehemently opposed to the emancipation of slaves. Senator Tichenor liked to recall the words of his personal hero, General McClellan: “I confess to a prejudice in favor of my own race, and can’t learn to like the odor of either Billy goats or niggers.”

. Tichenor had also heard rumors that Armitage had not emerged from his encounters with the Klan unscathed. “Shell-shocked,” “volatile,” were the words his sources had used. But the Bol agent had also been described as a “helluva a detective” and “a good soldier” (whatever *that* meant).

Tichenor had no idea whether any of it was true, but if the man was unstable, so much the better. Armitage was expendable, another small pawn in the arcane chess game of Washington politics.

And Senator Matthew Tichenor was that game’s Grandmaster.

CHAPTER 3

Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, June 19, 1923

“Hey, watch it!”

Exiting Brooks’ office, Armitage nearly bumped into J. Edgar Hoover. Seth apologized while Hoover looked him up and down appraisingly. For a moment, the two men locked eyes, then Hoover nodded and continued down the corridor.

Is Hoover involved in this?

The Bureau’s assistant director was 28, two years older than him, but Seth had heard that even Bol Director Brooks was afraid of the secretive little man. Armitage knew that despite his youth Hoover had amassed considerable power during his previous position as head of the Justice Department's General Intelligence Division. Hoover's collection of files - originally developed to track suspected subversives - was now rumored to include senior administration officials, members of Congress and even Bureau employees.

What was that line Seth had heard from a comedian at the Gayety Theater on Ninth Street a few weeks ago? “Why are politicians like bananas? When they come here they’re green, then they turn yellow, then they’re rotten.” The joke got a big laugh, but Seth couldn’t help thinking at the time that the audience might have found it less funny if they knew just how true it was.

When Armitage returned to his office, a man in shirtsleeves was sitting at the other desk, reading a copy of *The Racing Times* with his feet resting on the desktop. The man put down his newspaper and stood with outstretched hand.

“Gus Bassan.” He bared tobacco-stained teeth in a smile. “Guess we’re gonna be cellmates.” He shook Seth’s hand with a bone-crunching grip. Bassan was a big man, standing a good four inches taller than Seth’s six feet, with massive shoulders and a sallow face under black, heavily oiled hair.

The Bureau was small, so Seth had seen Bassan a few times. He had heard the man was an ex-policeman from Newark, New Jersey. Like many other agents, Bassan apparently answered to no one at the Bureau and could be relied upon only to show up on alternate Fridays to collect his paycheck. Rumor had it that Bassan owed his job to a government bigwig, but then more than half of the Bol’s employees could be best described as hired guns rather than professional federal agents.

Armitage was in no mood to make small talk with amiable fools. He checked one of the railway timetables in his desk and left.

En Route – Washington to Baltimore

Seth thought that if Dante had been a passenger on the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Railroad in mid-summer, he would have used the experience to depict one of the circles of Hell...

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