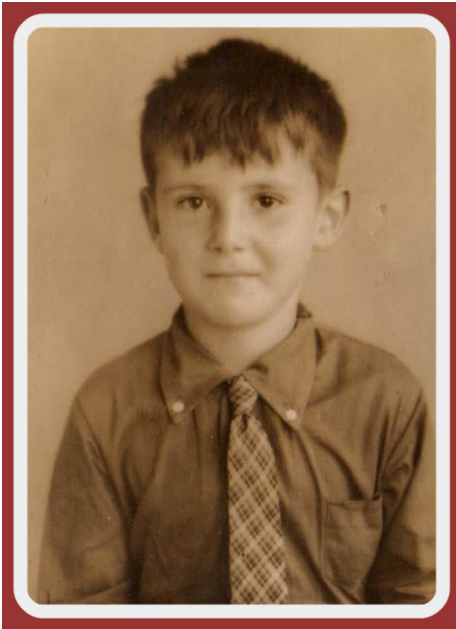


## The Secret of Sagamore: A Christmas Mystery

(A Quint Coppi Adventure written by Denny Hartford)

The sky was clear and Christmassy that night with a full, white moon lighting up the snow-covered town. It was very late and therefore very quiet. Sagamore was asleep. Way out in Buzzards Bay, eight miles to the west, St. Mary's historic bells had clanged out the news that midnight had come. It was officially Christmas Eve.

But young Quint Coppi didn't need church bells to tell him that news. For despite the lateness of the hour and more than two hours of honest trying, the eight year old boy (well, eight next spring, anyhow) just couldn't get to sleep. He had said his prayers (more than once). He had counted sheep. He had pretended very hard that he *was* asleep. But nothing had worked. He was more awake now than when he had first gone to bed.



Quint wasn't sure why he was so restless. It could be the excitement of Christmas vacation. After all, today had been the last day of school for *two* whole weeks. And he and his pals (not to mention his family) had plenty of plans. Of course, it could also be the expectations of Christmas dinner and the presents beforehand. Times were a bit tough but he still thought he had a pretty good chance of getting that ball glove he'd been hoping for. Yes, it was probably all of the Christmas anticipation that was keeping him awake. Or, then again, might it be something else?

For the past few days, young Quint had been bothered by a few other things too -- things that were not only a bit extraordinary but which seemed downright suspicious. First of all, there had been so many strangers around, people that looked anything like normal Massachusetts working stiff. And what about that light that he had seen from the Valenti house -- two weeks *after* they had moved out and gone to New Hampshire? And what about those four men he and George had seen on the dark boat underneath the new Sagamore Bridge? It was pretty clear that one of the men had been taking pictures. What would someone want to do that for? Nothing innocent, he was willing to bet. In fact, they could easily be agents of a foreign power preparing for sabotage.

And then just today there was a new mailman on Bridge Street. A mailman who claimed not to even know Joe, the old mailman. And who ever heard of an ordinary mailman bearing a dueling scar? No, all these things were just too queer not to mean *something*. Considering this collection, Quint concluded that his sleeplessness was probably more from these things than from Christmas. He would have talked to his Dad about it but he knew what his Dad would do. Smile. Rub his head. And say, "Quinto, you have such imagination! I think you read too much. Now go out and play."

Quint needed to think. He got out of bed, put on his slippers, and padded over to the window. The snow was still falling and everything looked so pretty and peaceful. Except for the moon. It was so big and bright tonight that it was almost alarming. Like a portent of some grave danger. He pulled off the top cover of his bed and wrapped it around him. And there he sat for a long time.

It was interesting that his father should mention Quint's reading too much because Quint believed that it was that very predilection for reading that had opened his eyes to the unusual happenings that had been going on around Sagamore. In fact, they coincided almost exactly with his reading *The Secret of Skull Island*, *The Curse of the Java Queen*, and the Sax Rohmer novels about Dr. Fu Manchu. Those books had been very exciting adventure novels, to be sure, but they had been more than that to Quint. For they had also opened his eyes to the grand and mysterious world that lies just under the surface of the seemingly dull and normal. He could tell the difference already: he was more aware, more perceptive, and more eager to do his part to protect the American way. And it was these novels about adventure and espionage and mysteries that were proving to be so helpful. What incredible luck that he had such a rich supply so ready at hand.

Indeed, what other boy in all of Massachusetts lived right over a library!

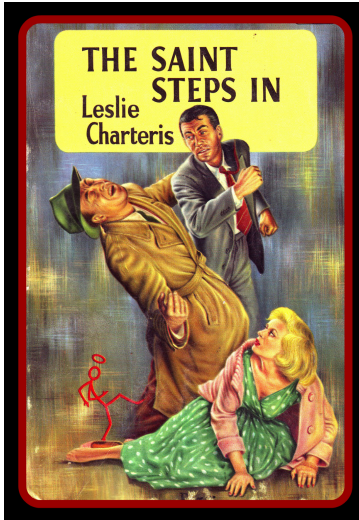
That's right. When Quint's father sold the furniture store formerly occupying the ground floor of their building, he found a new and eager renter for the space; namely, the town library. And so, although there were other kids who could boast of living over the store, like Guido and his father's bakery or Theresa and her uncle's typesetting business, only Quint had access (day or night) to encyclopedias, history books, biographies, maps, poetry, and inspiring novels by the hundreds.



For all intents and purposes, young Quint had his own personal library. No wonder then that his imagination and mental alertness were improving by such leaps and bounds.

Reading too much, indeed!

Quint smiled at that thought. And, as he did, another one came to him. He wasn't sleepy yet and he didn't have to get up early tomorrow morning for school – why not slip down and grab one of those books to read a little bit right now? Perhaps the Sherlock Holmes collection that he had started around Halloween. Or maybe one of those books that Mrs. Morris had laid out in that special Christmas display next to the life-sized nativity scene. There were some there that looked very interesting and he loved Christmas stories, especially those written by Charles Dickens.



But then again there were a couple of the Leslie Charteris books he hadn't got to yet. And John Buchan. And John P. Marquand's Mr. Moto series. Yes, I had better grab one of those latter books, he decided. After all, besides the excitement, they were educational. They might help me think through all the funny things going on around here lately. Yes, I'll go down and get one of the books about The Saint.

And that's just what he proceeded to do. He put on pants and a light jacket over his pajamas, eased back into his slippers, grabbed a candle and matches from the window sill, and tiptoed his way past his parents' closed door to the stairway. He went slowly, not wanting to light the candle until he got down into the library, but the moonlight through the window was more than enough to see by.

Normally, the library was a familiar and comfortable place for Quint but being there alone, very late at night, and seeing things through the glow of a candle was a bit disconcerting to the young boy. But only for a few seconds. He was soon distracted by the Christmas books he started leafing through and forgot about the eerie atmosphere.

The first to catch his interest was a Christmas mystery featuring super sleuth Ellery Queen. It looked good. So did another starring Hercule Poirot. Soon the small pile of books he planned to take upstairs included these two plus Dickens' *The Haunted Man* and a prose version of *The Nutcracker*. And he hadn't even started to check out the titles he wanted from the adventure section. He started to rise when his eye lit on a Christmas-themed Captain America comic book. Now that deserved a little attention too. He sat back down.

Now, it could have been the dim lighting that tired his eyes or the dryness of the air down there in the library. Maybe it was simply that the hours had finally caught up with Quint. Anyhow, he hadn't flipped through many pages of the comic before he dropped off into sleep. But just for a few minutes. For he awoke with a start when he heard the click of a pistol being cocked. So this is it, he thought, and he turned calmly towards the sound. It was a pistol all right, a steel-blue German Luger that was pointed right at him. And holding the gun and grinning in a way that made his dueling scar even more gruesome was the fake mailman.

The visitor spoke in a whisper. "Not one sound from you, boy. Not one little sound. Otherwise you are going to hear one very big noise. And that will be the last thing you ever hear."

Quint said nothing and the villain spoke again. “We suspected you were on to us, little Quint. I had reports that you had possibly spotted our reconnaissance activity underneath the bridge and that you may have even guessed that our hideout was in the vacant Valenti house. But it was when I saw your steely gaze penetrate my disguise yesterday that I knew for sure you had figured things out. Smart boy. And alert. But I’m afraid you will pay dearly for those talents.”



Quint only smiled. “I may only be a boy, Lazaro...Oh, I see that you are surprised that I know your real name. I know more than that, you dastardly rogue. And so do my colleagues. In fact, Lazaro, the Feds have been on your trail for months. And this very night the Saint is stealing that list of your agents from your safe in Boston while Mr. Moto has led the police to Fu Manchu’s lair in Honolulu. You’re finished, Lazaro – you and your whole, rotten scheme.”

Lazaro was crazed with fury. He bit his lip so hard the blood ran and he stuttered out, “You, you...”

Quint interrupted him. “Who am I, Lazaro? I’m just a kid. But, by golly, I’m an American kid and there’s millions like me who will stand in the way of whatever evil designs you and your dirty kind dream up. You can count on that. So, go ahead and do your worst. I am, after all, a patriot and no coward. And I take great satisfaction in knowing that whatever you do to me now is too late to aid you. You’re done for.”

Had Lazaro not been so enraged by the composure of his young adversary, had he not been so affected by the disappointment that his seemingly invincible plan had been exposed and defeated, he might have aimed his shot better. But he didn’t. The bullet missed Quint’s head by just inches. And, in the split-second before Lazaro realized his error, Quint had knocked over the candle and dove behind Mrs. Morris’ desk. In the relative darkness and ignorance of the library’s layout, Lazaro panicked and tried to make his way to the door. The kid he would deal with another day. His priorities now were flight and safety.

He stumbled his way through the stacks, making little headway but a lot of noise. Therefore, when he finally made it to the front door, the slipper-footed Quint had made his way through the stacks and met him there. Using the large wooden crook that up till a moment ago had rested in the arm of the nativity scene shepherd, the young man more than evened the score. A swing like Dimaggio and the shepherd’s staff connected with the villain’s brow. He crumpled like a straw doll. Within minutes, and using the heavy twine that Mrs. Morris kept in the back room, Lazaro was trussed up like a Christmas package. Quint then went to the telephone.

“Operator, could you connect me to Bayside 4397? Yes, thank you...Hello, let me speak to Simon Templar please. It’s urgent...Mr. Templar? This is Quint Coppi down in Sagamore. The code name is Blue Heron. I’ve got a very special package for you. And the package’s name is Lazaro. That’s right, Mr. Templar. He’s a bit the worse for wear but quite compliant. Even more important, I found the information we needed in his coat pocket. Normally I would use the Little Orphan Annie cipher to transmit this but there’s no time to spare. Are you ready?”

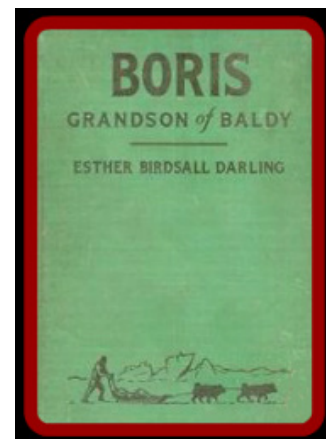


“Here goes,” Quint began. “The Norden high-altitude ionic pulsometer that Moriarty stole from the Chicago Limited courier will be moved down Highway 6 tonight, Christmas Eve. It is being transported in a lead-lined Chevrolet coupe by three of the rogues we have most hoped to bag: Cueball, the Sheriff of Nottingham, and the Mouse King. At 9 o’clock they will meet Captain Nemo’s submarine in Cape Cod Canal just under the Sagamore Bridge. Bring in the troops at the appropriate time and we’ll have the whole lot of them.”

On the other side of the line, Templar spoke quickly, “Excellent work, Blue Heron. We’ll take this end of the stick. But you need to get ready yourself for Round Two.” Quint asked what he meant. “I’m afraid that Lazaro wasn’t the only one assigned to take care of you. And if he’s been out of commission for any time at all, his colleagues, those wretched weasels of the Wildwood may be rushing to his rescue at any time. You must guard your prisoner and keep the weasels from discovering that we know about their plans to smuggle the Norden high-altitude ionic pulsometer out of the country. Do you have a weapon that you can use to hold them off until Richard Hannay and Greenmantle get Badger and the rest down there to help out?”

“Certainly,” replied Quint. “I have a single shot .22 rifle with which I’m quite capable. In fact, just last summer I killed a particularly fearsome wildcat in the backyard. Shot him right between the eyes. And whatever happens, I’ve already hidden the information where the scoundrels won’t find it. It’s tucked into the third chapter of *Boris, Grandson of Baldy*. Just look in the Boy’s Adventure section.”

“I’ll remember that easily enough,” said Templar. “I love that book. In fact, I have a first edition from 1936 signed by E. B. Darling herself. Good choice. Okay, Blue Heron. I’ll sign off for now. Again, you did a great job so far. Now hang on to Lazaro. And merry Christmas!”



Merry Christmas...Merry Christmas...Merry Christmas.

When Quint's father found him the next morning, he was fast asleep in the chair, sprawled out near the Christmas book display in the library downstairs. His head lay peacefully atop a Leslie Charteris novel and in his hands was a Captain America comic book. It had been a frantic search upstairs but now that he found his son safe and warm, he wasn't in a mood to be cross with him. "Merry Christmas, my boy. Come wake up and let's go back upstairs."

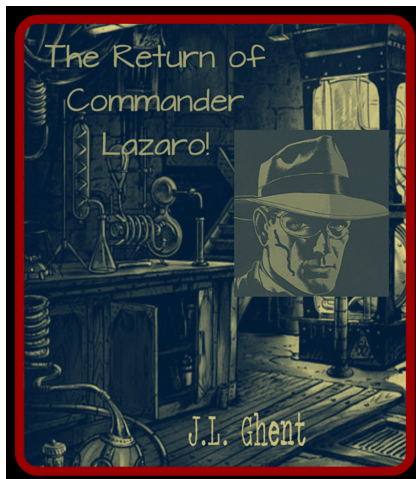
Quint struggled to clear his head and, while his father helped him to his feet, the young boy muttered a bit about spies and weasels and some saint. By the time they got to the stairway leading back to family, breakfast and the excitement of Christmas Eve, the young adventurer had awakened completely. "Oh, Papa, did I ever have a crazy dream. The craziest ever. I came down here to read...oh, it was very late, after midnight...and I had a candle and I was selecting books to read...and I guess I fell asleep and dreamed that I was Blue Heron, a great American agent and I was up against a dangerous international gang of thugs who wanted to blow up Sagamore Bridge and..."

"Yes, yes. Quinto. Let's go upstairs to breakfast and you can tell Mother all about it. Then you can go back to bed for a few hours so you'll be ready for the rest of the day, okay?"

"Okay, Papa." Quint said. "I am kinda' sleepy. My dream must have tired me out quite a bit." And that's just what he did.

Later on, Quint's mother and father looked in on their much-beloved son. He was sleeping quietly and peacefully, his dark hair splayed out on the pillow. His mother sighed. "Isn't he an angel? A good boy, a smart boy, a boy that will make his parents very proud one day."

"Yes," said the doting father. "He's a very good boy. But he reads too much."



A dream, that's what this story has been about. A Christmas Eve dream experienced by an imaginative, adventurous young boy...who perhaps did read too much. However, it should also be said that no one was ever able to explain to Mrs. Morris the .30 caliber bullet that she found on her desk the day after Christmas, a bullet that had apparently passed clean through the book she had put on her desk to offer to young Quint Coppi upstairs...a book by one J. L. Ghent entitled, *The Return of Commander Lazaro*.