



With a bound, Gibson was upon him, toppling Erichstofer off balance

# Little Old Lady

By OWEN FOX JEROME

*Signora Pochitelli had two sons in the Army, but she had to prove that she, too, could fight to defend her America!*

THE first time Tom Gibson saw her was on the morning the news broke in Little Italy of the capitulation of the Axis forces in Tunisia. She was standing on a street corner, a slim little figure in a long black dress and a fringed shawl gathered about her head and shoulders. She was crying.

This, in itself, was not amazing.

Many excitable Italian-Americans were running around the neighborhood, laughing, crying, shouting, chattering volubly—reacting to the war news in their own particular manner.

Gibson halted an excited fruit vender who was trundling his cart along the street

and tossing cherries and oranges to the children in sight, reckless of expense.

“Who is that little old woman on the corner, Tony?” he demanded.

The fruit vender looked and then flashed the plainclothes detective a dazzling smile of white teeth.

“That is Mama Pochitelli, Mister Gibson,” he said. “She has two sons in Africa. This is a happy day for her.”

“You mean, in the Italian forces—or the American?” Gibson wrinkled his brow in faint perplexity.

“In the American Army,” exclaimed the vender indignantly. “Pepe and Giovanni grew up right here in New York. They are

the sole support of their mama.”

“Signora Pochitelli is a widow?”

The vender shrugged with a typical Latin gesture. “Who knows? Her husband went back to Sicily fifteen years ago. Who knows what the accursed Nazis may have done to Luigi Pochitelli?”

OTHER events served to crowd Signora Pochitelli out of the busy detective’s mind in the days that followed. Because he lived in St. George, he was assigned to the detail cooperating with the F.B.I. in a certain investigation going forward on Staten Island.

Vigorous, active, thirty years of age, Tom Gibson would have been in Tunisia perhaps himself had it not been for Violet and the kids. He might yet be in it if the war lasted.

Meanwhile, he did his duty as best he could, and consoled himself that he was a soldier on his job here in America, just as much as though he were at the fighting front. That was why he was especially interested in the Staten Island case. It was espionage, with a sabotage angle.

Somebody was getting word to the Axis U-boat pack in the Atlantic about convoys leaving New York harbor, and various little items were adding up to center police and national interest in a certain section of Staten Island which overlooked the Narrows. Spies, traitors—call them what you will—could watch shipping from this vantage point despite dimouts and other precautions. And, if there were some clever way of relaying their knowledge, could pass on the vital information to the enemy.

It was on the Staten Island ferry that Gibson next saw the little Italian woman. She was carrying a basket this time and was vending apples to the various passengers. Instantly Gibson remembered her. The incongruity of her presence here and her occupation did not strike him very forcibly at the time. He stepped up to her and spoke.

“I’ll take an apple, Mother,” he said, fishing a dime out of his vest pocket.

She flashed him a swift glance out of jet black eyes, and then selected a shiny red apple for him. He studied her with interest.

He saw now that her hair was almost snow-white. And her features had a fine and delicate patrician cast that somehow didn’t go with the usual emigrant stock. And when she spoke, her English was good and with just the trace of an accent. Her voice was sweet and gentle. Here, indeed, was a lady.

“This is a lovely apple, sir,” she said, offering it to him.

“Thank you Signora Pochitelli,” he replied, paying her.

She started slightly and looked him over more carefully, almost fearfully. “You know who I am?”

“Yes,” he answered, smiling. He started to ask her if she had a peddling permit, and refrained. Instead, he said: “You have two sons in the Mediterranean battle area. Pepe and Giovanni.”

Instantly she straightened her slight form, and her eyes became proud—and lovely. She faced the railing and breathed deeply of the salty air. She pointed one hand toward the statue on Bedloe’s Island.

“Yes,” she murmured. “I have two boys in the American Army. They are fighting for her—for Liberty. But—but how did you know?”

Gibson told her. “I am a plainclothes detective,” he added. Somehow, it seemed right to tell her, to speak with her as a lady of rank and intelligence.

“I see,” she said, smiling faintly. “In your way, you are a soldier, too, Mister Gibson.”

He didn’t see her again after the ferry entered the slip, and once more pressure of circumstances made him forget her. For it was that day, in a tavern at St. George, that they arrested Friedrich Schwartz and Morton Miller as Nazi agents.

Schwartz was a naturalized citizen of the United States and had lived on Staten Island for five years. Under the expert inquisition of the F.B.I. men on the job, he broke down and admitted that he had been spying on shipping and passing the news along in innocuous letters written in invisible ink. Miller had been his assistant.

"But that is a slow although deadly method of passing information," said Edwards, the G-man in charge of the case: "That doesn't explain how U-boats in the Atlantic learn how to strike so swiftly and unerringly at our convoys. Schwartz' letters would, if anything, reach Axis agents abroad too late for noted convoys to be attacked en route."

"How about air mail?" asked Gibson.

"Okay," said Edwards, "only we have been able to trace no airmail sent by Schwartz and company. I'm afraid we have struck prematurely and muffed something in this set-up."

Nevertheless, the newspapers made a field day of the apprehension of the spies, and as far as the American public was concerned, the case was successfully closed. Gibson, however, like Edwards, felt that something had been missed.

**H**OW could Schwartz and Miller have contacted U-boat fleets in time for them to prey on designated convoys? There was only one answer the detective could think of—short-wave radio. But thorough search of the Schwartz home had revealed nothing in the nature of radio equipment.

Detectors picked up an occasional code message, but triangulation only led the investigators to empty fields, or a barren roadside shack, or a desolate spot on the coastline. It was most annoying and fruitless.

Until the evening there came a light tapping on Tom Gibson's door. Violet was just getting the two children ready for bed.

They glanced at each other, and his wife smiled reluctantly.

"A night call for you, Tom?" she murmured.

"I don't know, babe," he answered, opening the door. "Probably just a neighbor who— Ah! Good evening, Signora Pochitelli. Won't you come in?"

The little old lady glanced hesitantly around and then stepped with birdlike grace into the house. Her eyes lighted up at sight of the young woman and the two tousled-headed children.

"Ah!" she murmured. "You have the bambinos, also, Mister Gibson."

"Yes," he said proudly, "Great little tykes. This is my wife, Signora Pochitelli."

The signora acknowledged the introduction gracefully. Then she clutched her fringed shawl tighter about her head as she refused the young woman's invitation to sit down.

"No, no," she said. "There is not time. Mister Gibson, I know you have been working on—on the Staten Island espionage case. I—there is something I must—*must* tell you."

Instantly Gibson became gravely attentive. He remembered now how out of place this little Italian lady had seemed peddling apples aboard the ferry.

"What must you tell me, Signora Pochitelli?" he asked.

For a long moment his visitor stared at the two children. There was a tender, far-away look in her black eyes. Then, a queer sort of hardness coming over her face, she turned back to the detective.

"Do not ask me how I know this—not now," she said rapidly, "but there were three treacherous spies operating here on Staten Island. You and the Federal men got only two of them."

"So there was a Brichstofer, after all!" Gibson exclaimed. "We got the name of a

Hans von Brichstofer, but we never located such a person.”

“Yes,” said Signora Pochitelli firmly. “There is such a man. He is still at large. He it is who sends the shortwave code messages. He has his instrument in a little truck which he runs to different spots on the Island to make his calls. He—he pretends to be a radio repairman in the town of Stapleton. I have come to take you to him. Oh, he must be stopped before he does more damage!”

“Wait right here,” said Gibson, turning toward the telephone. “I’ll call the station.”

“No!” cried Signora Pochitelli sharply. “Only you. This man will be alone. I will take you to him so you can surprise him. Please! It—it must be this way.”

Gibson hesitated only an instant. “Very well, Signora,” he agreed tersely. “I’ll go with you.”

“Tom!” cried Violet in apprehension. “Oh, you mustn’t! It may be a trap.”

Gibson looked from his wife to the little Italian woman. Signora Pochitelli was caressing the curly head of little John.

“I’ll take the risk,” said Gibson. “Come, Signora. I’m at your service.”

He kissed his wife and led the way out to his coupe in the little garage.

**S**IGNORA POCHITELLI was silent and aloof as he guided the car out of St. George and in the direction of Stapleton.

It was a moonless night, but sharp and clear. There was plenty of light from the stars to offset the dimout regulations.

At last they reached the outskirts of Stapleton, and the little old lady spoke for the first time. “Turn here,” she said. “Take the side road up to the top of this hill.”

Without question, Gibson obeyed. There was something grand, majestic—compelling—about this little woman with the inscrutable black eyes.

At her further direction, Gibson parked

the car, loosened the gun in his shoulder holster, and followed his guide to the darkened little house overlooking the Narrows. Surprisingly enough, she pulled a key from a pocket in her dress and noiselessly opened the kitchen door.

On silent feet they made their way toward a room where a seam of light showed beneath the door. The light but firm touch of her hand on his forearm held Gibson in check for a moment while she listened.

“He is here and alone,” she whispered. “Make him your prisoner.”

Gambling completely on the little woman’s word, Gibson turned the doorknob, flung the door wide, and stepped into the lighted chamber. Signora Pochitelli followed him as quietly as a ghost.

A hulking figure of a man was seated at a flat-topped desk in the room which had the appearance of a sort of library. But the most incongruous part of the entire amazing business was the appearance of this man with the close-cropped skull.

He was dressed in the military uniform of a Nazi colonel, complete even to the armband with the inverted swastika emblem. At the sudden intrusion, he started violently and came to his feet.

“Hold it, Hans von Brichstofer!” rapped out the detective, advancing. “I am arresting you in the name of the United States Government!”

“Ach!” exploded the man in the Nazi uniform, and he reached for the gun holster at his side.

He never made it. With a bound, Gibson was upon him, gripping his right wrist firmly, using his own right hand for a straight-arm shove in the face that toppled Brichstofer off balance and back into his armchair behind the desk.

At the same instant Signora Pochitelli darted forward and seized the Nazi’s undrawn pistol. With a surprising display of wiry strength, she jerked it out of its holster.

Her face was an inscrutable mask as she stood there with upraised gun.

"Very well, schweinhund!" sneered Brichstofer, regaining his aplomb. "I surrender as a prisoner of war."

"You're nuts!" growled Gibson. "What's the idea of that trick stage costume?"

"It is not a trick costume," raged Brichstofer. "It is a genuine uniform of the *Fuhrer's* troops. I am a Colonel in the Nazi army. I have the uniform with me on purpose. I am wearing it. You cannot arrest me as a spy. I am a prisoner of war."

"A snide trick, if I ever saw one," said Gibson curtly. "And much good it will do you. Whenever you are up to some of your deviltry you wear a Nazi uniform, eh? I guess you ride around Staten Island in your radio truck dressed up like that when you send your code messages, too?"

Brichstofer suddenly became aware of the presence of Signora Pochitelli. He twisted his head to glare around at her, and in that moment he looked like a trapped Mussolini to the watching detective.

"So you dared to inform!" he snarled, contemptuously ignoring the gun in her hand. "Very well, we shall go to prison together."

Gibson was drawing a pair of handcuffs from his pocket as Brichstofer turned back toward him. Then he uttered an exclamation of alarm and lunged forward as he saw, too late, what the other was doing.

Brichstofer had jerked open the top drawer of his desk, exposing an electric switch, a coil of wire which led off somewhere, and a pair of dry cells.

"You won't live to take me prisoner, dumkopf," he began. "I—"

**E**VEN as his hand touched the knifeblade switch in the drawer, Signora Pochitelli swiftly thrust her gun into his ear and pulled the trigger.

There was a dull report, the left side of Brichstofer's head got messy, and the Nazi colonel went flaccid in his chair.

Stony-faced and glassy of eye, Signora Pochitelli slowly offered Gibson the gun. It was a wicked-looking Luger automatic.

"I had to kill him," she said dully. "He would have blown us all to pieces. For me it doesn't matter. But for you—and the wife—and the little bambinos—"

Tom Gibson felt shaky in the knees. This was tough and violent stuff for a New York detective to be led into by a mild and gentle little old lady with a shawl over her head.

"It isn't murder," he finally managed to say. "You got a Nazi rat who resisted arrest."

The way she looked at him was sheer agony. Then she spoke slowly through stiff and gray lips. "He was more than a Nazi rat. He was a double traitor, Mister Gibson. A traitor to this wonderful America and a traitor to Italy. He was born as Luigi Pochitelli. If only Pepe and Giovanni may never know—that—that—"

Shocked, Gibson took the automatic from her cold little veined hands and carefully wiped off her fingerprints. Then he put his own thereon. After this, he picked up the telephone transceiver and called the St. George police station.

"Hello," he spoke into the instrument at length. "Mike? This is Tom Gibson. Yeah, I'm over in Stapleton. Get hold of Edwards or one of the other G-men and send them over here. Tell them I've just tried to arrest Hans von Brichstofer. Yeah, the missing Brichstofer. I've got him all right. But I had to shoot him to death in making the arrest. Sure, I'll wait here."

He pronged the instrument and turned to smile encouragingly at Signora Pochitelli. Then he uttered an exclamation.

The little old lady had fainted.