

# JUST PLANE MURDER

By LOUIS OWENS

*The Skibbies and Their Gestapo Pard Had a Neat Setup  
and They Didn't Figure on the F. B. I. Catching on!*



Drucker lurched forward, momentarily dazed

WHAT with Jap submarines off the coast, Axis saboteurs slinking in and out of war factories, and the populace generally in an uproar, I was in no mood for mellow conversation when the switchboard girl rang my phone.

"Golden speaking," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"Please," said the man at the other end, "I think maybe you better come down here, Mr. G-man. Something, she is wrong."

That did it.

"Now listen," I snapped, "this is the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We don't go after second-story men. You better call the police."

The foreign voice in my ear made strangled noises.

"But please," he insisted, "our boss—he not come to work. He not answer telephone. We send message to him, we get no reply. This is the Prestik Aircraft Company, please. You come right away, Mr. G-men! The situation, she is terrible!"

Now I was sweating. Prestik Aircraft was making the last word in stratosphere bombers for the Army Air Force. Prestik himself was a fussy little fellow, who had escaped from Czechoslovakia just before the war. He had his own fellow refugees working in his plant, his own guards, his own everything.

We in the F.B.I. had been given to understand he was somewhat of a screwball. But brilliant. The greatest aircraft designer since Anthony Fokker.

He'd come out here to San Francisco, built his own factory, begun his research where he'd left off.

His job was to produce the model high-altitude bomber, full-scale. Then he'd deliver the plans to Boeing and Douglas and Lockheed, and they'd put the plane out in quantity.

I grabbed the phone tighter and made my voice as calm as possible.

"My friend," I told the agitated man at the plant, "I am sure that nothing is really wrong. Probably Mr. Prestik is ill and doesn't want to be disturbed. But just to be thorough, I'll run out to his house and see that he's all right."

I let that sink in.

"Now, then," I went on, "are you really having trouble at the plant?" I held my breath for the answer.

"Oh, but yes!" my refugee wailed. "The bomber, she just sit there. We not can do anything without Herr Prestik's help. A problem in design has come up, and—"

At least nobody had set off a bomb.

"Fine!" I said. "Excellent. Now just keep calm, my good man, and *Herr* Prestik will probably show up this afternoon. Just keep calm."

I cradled the phone, mopped my forehead, and rushed for the elevator, almost forgetting my hat. In the lobby downstairs I remembered to check in the drugstore phone booth for Prestik's address. Then I hailed a cab, and told the driver not to worry about his tires.

We burned up rubber getting out to the Prestik mansion. It was a modernized red brick affair, with a gabled roof and comfortable, rambling porches. The whole place was surrounded by a high stone wall and tall trees. And it was on the top of a hill, overlooking the sea.

An estate. Or a fortress. Or—my heart began to pound—a prison.

PAID off my driver and began to reconnoiter. I tried the wrought-iron gates which barred the gravel road leading to the mansion, found they were not locked. I hesitated about whether to walk up to the house and announce myself, or whether to play it a little safer and scout the place.

You see, these Axis boys play all the angles. I was already convinced that Prestik must be under some kind of pressure, serious pressure. Maybe a member of his family had been kidnaped. Maybe they'd threatened to shoot him on sight, if he left the house.

So I walked up the suburban road as nonchalantly as I could manage. At the far end of the estate, I headed casually for the wall where overhanging tree branches gave me my first break. I jumped, caught hold and pulled myself up. I hadn't climbed a tree since I was a kid, but I keep in condition, and I didn't sweat too much.

Halfway up, I took my special pocket binoculars from my hip pocket and focused them on the mansion. I was just in time. There was Prestik, all right. I made out his stocky, heavy-set figure, as he worked in the garden. And beside him was a girl in shorts and a blouse, also digging dutifully away.

It was a perfect scene of domestic bliss—except for the Jap with the rifle. From that distance I couldn't make him out too clearly, but unlike most Skibbies he was fairly tall and well built. He paraded up and down at the far end, glancing frequently at Prestik and the girl, occasionally sighting the rifle toward the sky.

But there weren't any crows to shoot at. No enemies were prowling around. And nobody had seen me, as yet. So, I told myself, this son of Nippon is on guard. And the Prestiks are his prisoners.

I decided to tackle this case on my

own. Reinforcements might mean trouble. Maybe Prestik had made a deal with the Japs, to lie doggo and save some kidnaped member of his family. This time, I knew, I'd have to play my cards close to my chest.

I climbed down from the tree, made my way around to the iron gates, pushed them open, closed them carefully and went up the driveway to the mansion.

A Jap butler answered my ring at the door.

"Two Japs," I thought. "The plot thickens."

I cleared my throat. "Mr. Prestik in?"

The Skibby smiled blandly.

"Yes," he said. "But he is not seeing any visitors."

I tried to look frustrated.

"Well, you see," I persisted, "this is really rather important. I phoned the factory and they told me Mr. Prestik was home."

I drew a card from my wallet, which identified me as a car salesman for a San Francisco outfit which played ball with us.

"Of course," I went on, "if Mr. Prestik is ill, I'm not going to bother him. But I'd like to see some other member of the family. They'll pass on the message to him."

This Jap with the correct manners and the excellent English didn't miss a trick.

"Of course, sir," he said. "Won't you come in?"

He took my hat in the vestibule, and I went on into the living room. The drawing room, really. It was complete with grand piano, tapestries, heavy mahogany furniture, fireplace, vases and whatnot. I straightened my tie and tried to appear not unduly impressed.

**T**HE girl came in a couple minutes later. She was flushed from her work in the garden, and she pushed back a lock

of blond hair from her forehead with dirt-stained fingers. The blouse and shorts did everything but conceal her figure.

I made a note of that for future reference, and turned on my best auto salesman manner.

"Miss Prestik?" I said. "I'm awfully sorry to bother you."

"Oh, it's no bother," she replied, rather too quickly. "What can I do for you?"

The girl's attitude was unconsciously tense. From the corner of my eye I saw the Jap butler in the hall outside. He had a dust cloth and pretended to be hard at work.

"I'm a car salesman, Miss Prestik. I phoned the plant, but your father wasn't there. They told me he was home. So I decided I'd better get out here the first thing."

I put special emphasis on the last three words. Whether the girl caught on, I couldn't be sure, but her blue eyes widened.

"You see," I went on, "now that we're in the war, new cars aren't being made. So my company has switched over to reconditioning. We handle only late models. We overhaul the motor, whether it's necessary or not, clean the upholstery, polish the body, make certain that nothing's wrong."

I said the last five words so distinctly, the girl couldn't possibly miss the cue.

"Well," she said slowly, and her facial muscles twitched nervously. "I don't know whether I could say our car is exactly out of condition. But something is wrong. Perhaps you'd care to inspect it?"

I nodded. The three of us went through the house, down a flight of steps to the connecting garage. The girl. Me. And the Jap. He did it so naturally that I really had to admire the guy.

The Jap opened doors for us, of course. In the kitchen was a second Skibby, the

cook. In the basement, next to the garage, was a third, probably handyman. The fourth, with the rifle, was probably still in the garden outside.

A nice organization, I thought. A perfectly air-tight setup. If you get out of this one, Ted Golden, I told myself, you're good.

Fortunately the Prestik sedan was nothing to write home about. It needed a paint job and piston rings, I decided and so told the girl.

"But we'll give you four hundred dollars on a nineteen forty-one model," I said.

We argued about the cash allowance on the way upstairs. Either the girl was taking every cue, or else I was simply off my hat. So far I'd made all the innuendoes, and she hadn't offered a single tip.

But as she saw me to the front door, which the Jap butler opened—he never left us out of sight or hearing for a moment—the girl's brows knit as though something had occurred to her.

"I'll tell Father about your proposition," she began. "We don't like to spend the money just now, but perhaps it's best. Phone us in a day or so, and I'll let you know. You see, it depends mostly on whether we can sell the rugs or not."

"The rugs?" I said blankly.

**H**ER lips seemed to tremble slightly. "We managed to bring over a very fine collection from our home in Prague. But they're not doing us any good now, and Father wanted to sell some to pay his American income tax. Perhaps there'd be enough money left over to buy the car."

Then her whole body seemed to tense.

"The trouble is," she went on, "so many people have been advertising rugs and furniture in the papers lately, we probably couldn't get our price. You

Americans!" she laughed. "Always reading the want-ads for bargains."

It was a forced laugh. Nervous, uncertain, frightened.

I didn't know. I still couldn't figure out the answers when I got back to my office. And what made even less sense—why had Prestik ordered that delivery of old pine boards?

In eight-foot and three-foot lengths, the lumber had arrived as I was leaving the grounds. But it was old lumber, weathered, full of knot holes. Prestik was well-to-do. Why was he buying cheap lumber?

I left for my hotel around five-thirty that afternoon, my head aching. Why was Prestik selling his rugs? It must have cost a fortune to bring them from Europe. He couldn't be so broke as to be in hock for his income tax.

Then, like a quick shock, I had the answer. Why was a "sick" man like Prestik working in his garden?

I rushed over to the hotel newsstand, bought a paper. It had the best classified section in town. It also had this ad:

FOR SALE. Four Oriental rugs. Priced for quick turnover. Must be seen to be appreciated. Call for inspection after seven p.m. Prestik, 111 Bolton Lane.

I hurried over to a bank of phone booths and called the paper.

"This is Mr. Prestik," I told classified. "About my ad in the rug and furniture column. I don't recall whether I wanted that ad run two or four days. You see, I've decided it would attract too many people to the house. Two days should be enough."

Classified gave me the news three minutes later.

"It was your Japanese butler that placed the ad, Mr. Prestik. He said it was only for two days."

Good!" I said. "That's just what I thought."

I stepped from the phone booth, to be eyed suspiciously by a tall, elegantly dressed man in a bow tie, blue homburg and the coldest blue eyes I've ever seen.

He smiled at me politely, as he left the phone booth next to mine, and I nodded back as I live in a friendly hotel and that's the custom.

But those eyes said something else.

I sauntered off casually and went back into the lobby, found a chair and settled myself for a smoke. The gentleman with the blue homburg strode just as nonchalantly to a settee opposite my chair, made himself comfortable and outwardly paid me no attention.

But, from the corner of my eye, I saw him stiffen when a bellhop came around paging a "Mr. Drucker." Then he relaxed, called the bellboy over and took the telegram.

I SAW his lips thin to a hard, ruthless line. Then he sat down and continued his vigilance. I sat him out until six-thirty, but he still hadn't budged. So I got up finally, went up to my room, washed and left the hotel—by way of the service elevator.

Drucker was standing on the corner, like a bloodhound, where the alley merged with the sidewalk. His back was turned to me, but that fellow must have had eyes in the back of his head, because he got tense as I approached.

I paid him not the slightest attention, but walked around the block, ducked into an arcade, took an elevator in the building entrance to the fifth floor and walked downstairs. Drucker apparently had been shaken.

In the cab on the way out to the Prestik estate, I checked the automatic in my shoulder holster. It was a swell evening, and I turned down the door and side windows. That was a mistake, because it

gave me goose pimples. I heard the sing of tires on macadam, and sure enough a fast roadster was on our tail, and not making the slightest effort to pass us.

This time I had the cabbie drive me through the gate and up to the mansion. I told the driver not to wait. As the Jap butler let me in, obviously surprised, I heard the screech of brakes on the gravel road.

Prestik's blond daughter came out of the drawing room. Her face was drawn, strained.

"Oh, Mr. Golden!" she said.

"Yes," I told her quickly. "I think I've got a buyer for your rugs. So I rushed out here to inspect them. Could I look them over now?"

The girl stared at me, and then nodded wordlessly. I turned to the butler.

"Would you mind coming with us?" I asked him. "I suppose they'll have to be unrolled and they're probably pretty heavy."

He actually beamed! Now he knew I couldn't get the girl aside to talk with her in secret. Which was precisely the impression I wanted to create.

As we passed the drawing room, I saw a matronly looking woman sitting over by the huge windows which looked directly on the sea. Her face was pale, and she seemed distraught.

We went upstairs to the attic. The Jap switched on the lights—it was fairly dark now—and sure enough, the rugs were rolled up in cloth coverings, and we had quite a job getting to the first one.

As I was bent over, helping the Skibby to unroll it, with the girl standing off to one side, questions alive in her anxious blue eyes, the door creaked slightly on its hinges and in came Mr. Drucker.

**M**R. DRUCKER had a gun, and he was all ready to use it. Except that

Mr. Drucker had never gone to the F.B.I. training school in Washington, and didn't know all the angles. He didn't suspect that the moment I heard that door open, I was prepared for him.

I lunged for the Jap and grabbed him around the body, even as Drucker fired. The slug caught the surprised Skibby in the spine, and he let out the worst screech I've ever heard. Blood began to run down my left hand, where I held him, but I was already in action with my right.

My shot hit the target the first try. The slug brushed Drucker across the temple and he began to bleed like a stuck pig. He lurched toward me, momentarily dazed, his Mauser held uncertainly in his fist. I shot a second time, and the gun went spinning from his bloody hand.

He screamed with rage, and then I was on him. I threw him to the floor, in a panic to get at the other three Japs downstairs before they could start working on me or the Prestiks.

I kicked Drucker in the face, quick and hard. His teeth crunched in his jaws and he relaxed, limp, his mouth a bloody mess.

"Use a gun?" I snapped at the girl.

Paralyzed for those moments, she started. Then she sped across the floor, picked up Drucker's Mauser and followed me downstairs.

The other three Japs were there to intercept us. They were on the ground floor, one shielding himself behind the staircase, the second behind the drawing-room door, the third behind an overturned hall table.

"Cover me!" I told the girl, shoving her behind the second-floor staircase post. "Fire over my head!"

At least the stairs were carpeted and not too many. I launched myself headlong down those stairs, my automatic barking. Over my skull whistled a miniature barrage of slugs. One lucky shot caught

the cook in the arm. He yelled and his gun went flying from his hand.

That left only two. I fired right and left as I reached the landing. The man behind the table yelled with pain. I dived for him in a flurry of arms and legs, but he got his gun up and let me have it.

The bullet caught me in my left shoulder, but my momentum carried me through.

The next second I clubbed his Jap brains into a scramble.

That left only the son of Nippon behind the drawing-room door, the fellow with the rifle I'd seen through my field glasses. Except that help came from an unexpected quarter. There was a loud crash and a frustrated scream from the Japanese.

Mrs. Prestik, the white-faced, gray-haired little lady, had gone into action with a vase. I saw that later. It distracted the Jap for just that crucial moment. I picked myself up and went lunging across the hall, my gun barking.

One of the slugs had to be effective. It was. It caught the Skibby in the chest and he went down kicking, the shattered vase still crumbling in little pieces from his head, where it had opened up the scalp like a meat cleaver.

THE girl told me the rest as I lay in the suburban hospital, putting nature to work on my busted shoulder. I must have passed out after I got the last Jap, because it took me a while to get the score straight.

"So first you had two Japs," I said. "A cook and a handyman, both old servants. Then all of a sudden, two more marched in on you—the butler and the gardener. They kept you three prisoners in the house.

"And that lumber. For coffins, for you and your mother. They intended to kidnap your father, put him on a Jap submarine and cart him back to the Land of Diseased

Cherry Blossoms, where he'd design his high-altitude bombers for Uncle Hirohito—or else!”

The girl managed a smile, and her cool hand felt my forehead. Mr. and Mrs. Prestik sat rather anxiously on chairs at the foot of my bed. Come to think of it, after the blood I lost I wouldn't be precisely the picture of health.

“Don't worry about me, folks,” I told them. “You're the ones that really had to suffer.”

During the squabble, Prestik had been tied up in his room, and his wrists were still swollen. His wife, not quite recovered from her vase-throwing, still looked unconsciously belligerent, I thought.

“This Drucker, now.” I turned my eyes to the girl. “That ad in the paper was the signal for him to meet the Japs at your house. A Gestapo man, eh? He worked at your dad's factory, stole some plans and tonight was set to skip the country.”

“Yes.” She nodded vigorously. “He was known at the factory as Martisek, a Czech. It was he who contacted the Japs.”

That seemed to be about all. Except the payoff. I looked at the elder Prestiks and winked, slyly. They rose, a bit befuddled, and then Prestik came over and took my hand.

“If there's anything I can do—” he began, his eyes full of gratitude. His wife joined him at my side.

“Nothing, thanks,” I said, a little lump in my throat. “You're nice people. I'm glad to have been of help. Now—could I speak to your daughter just a few moments? We've a little—uh—unfinished business.”

They both began to smile, and I had an idea they caught on. Anyway, we are alone finally. I put my good arm around the girl. I didn't have to work too hard. She'd been in America long enough to know the ropes.

“Incidentally,” I said long moments later, “what's your name?”

“Ilona,” she replied, before her lips met mine again. “You G-men! You want to know everything!”