

# Alphabet Coup



*Crouching against the wall like an animal at bay stood the man*

***Correlli's Criminal Mob is Smashed—but the Mad Dog Who Led the Pack is Still at Large, and it's Up to Larry Brent to Get Him!***

By JACK D'ARCY

*Author of "The Den of Skulls," "Winged Diamonds," etc.*

THE night was hideous with sound. The savage crackling of a machine-gun drilled through the darkness with the dry noise of a rattling snake. Stabbing yellow flashes punctuated the darkness.

Men's voices were raised in command and agony.

Death stalked this night, and his scythe was red with killing.

Brent, Larry Brent, of the United States Department of Justice, Bureau of

Investigation, stood grim-faced, half hidden by the bole of a heavy oak tree. In his hand he held a smoking .38. The expression in his eyes was harder, more threatening than the weapon in his hand. Blood stained the left shoulder of his coat. His face was wet and dirty.

Carefully, he raised his revolver. Carefully he sighted it at a dimly lighted window of the cottage fifty yards away. Then, for a fleeting instant, he perceived a black shadow against the window pane. In

that instant, his finger constricted upon the trigger.

The shadow disappeared from the window. Brent's jaw set grimly. Over to his left the machine-gun kept up its murderous chatter. From the house a second typewriter took up a stuttering answer.

Suddenly above the roar of battle, Brent's keen ear heard a throbbing alien sound. It appeared to come from somewhere to the rear. He twisted his head around and glanced over his bloody shoulder. In the darkness he saw a white face peering from behind a tree to his right.

"Rawlins," he hailed. "What's that back there? Sounds like an auto engine."

"I can't hear anything," the white face shouted back at him. "These damn guns—"

The rest of the reply was swallowed up in a fresh burst from the machine-gun. Brent, ignoring the biting pain in his shoulder, stood, his revolver ready, trained on the window pane, waiting for another of the gang to show himself.

Abruptly, the machine-gun ceased. Brent's eyes narrowed. He tensed himself for the order he knew would come. A moment's relative silence ensued. Then he heard his chief's voice raised in command.

"All right, boys. Get ready to rush 'em."

There was a moment's pause. All firing from the besiegers ceased for an instant. Then the chief's voice cracked out like a whip.

"Now. Rush 'em!"

The trees surrounding the ancient farmhouse suddenly disgorged a dozen fighting men. Larry Brent was in the first wave that reached the rickety old porch. At his side, grey-haired but still in the thick of the fray, was Elkhart, the chief of division.

As they gained the steps the tommy-gun once again blazed out from within the house. Brent threw his body sideward into

that of Elkhart. Both of them crashed to the floor. A score of bullets howled across their heads.

"Get that gun," grated Elkhart. "It's in that window to the left."

The second wave came up, as Brent silently moved to the left of the porch. Back of the opened glass pane, a hard-faced man wearing an expression of unholy delight upon his misshapen features sat behind the Thompson gun.

Brent's .38 cracked once, and a dead man's finger was on the trigger of the machine-gun. At the same moment Elkhart's revolver shattered the lock on the door. G-men poured into the house.

The large living room of the farmhouse was a shambles. The shattered glass of the windows was scattered on the floor. Furniture was overturned. Three dead men lay upon the floor, grotesque, contorted figures wallowing in their own blood.

Another sat propped against an upturned chair. Blood streaked down his coat. Agony was written in his eyes. Eight others, two of them unscathed, stood about the room, their arms upraised over their heads. Sullen hate shone in their faces.

ONE of them spoke, bitter despair in his tone.

"All right. We quit. You got us."

"Dead to rights," said Elkhart. "All right, boys, disarm them. Load them in the cars. Leave the dead here. The local authorities can pick them up in the morning."

Landers, the white-faced youth, who had partaken in his first battle as a G-man turned an exultant face to Larry Brent.

"Well, we got 'em, didn't we. Nailed the whole mob. I guess that's the end of the Correlli gang."

Brent made no answer. His keen grey eyes scrutinized the faces of each man in that room. A dark frown crawled across his

forehead. He turned to Elkhart suddenly.

"Correlli's not here," he said swiftly. "Our tip indicated that he would be."

Elkhart frowned. The expression of triumph fell from his face.

"Landers," he said. "Wilcox—search the house. And be careful. Find Correlli."

The man who sat dying up against the fallen chair laughed dryly.

"You ain't going to find Correlli," he said in a thin, weak voice. "He's halfway to Cleveland by now. You ain't going to find Lemmers either."

Larry Brent and Elkhart exchanged glances.

"Who's Lemmers?" asked Brent.

"Correlli's right-hand man," replied Elkhart in an undertone. "His front, as a matter of fact. We've never been able to get anything on Lemmers. He's got no record and can appear in places where the rest of the gang can't go."

The gangster spoke again. A harsh, ironic note was evident in his husky voice.

"A great guy, Correlli. A great guy till things get hot. Then he scrams out of here. Leaves us holding the bag. I—"

A glazed, vacuous expression came into his eyes. His head slumped forward on his chest. He did not move. Elkhart took a step forward. He stopped before a sullen-eyed Italian who stood with his hands above his head.

"You heard that, Marinelli," he said. "Correlli left you guys to take it, while he saved his own skin. You know that, don't you? Then, tell us where he went. Where is he now?"

The Italian muttered an oath.

"I'd like to tell you where he went. I'd like to be there myself with a knife in my hand. Correlli's a dirty, doublecrossing rat. But he's too damned smart to let anyone of us know his hideouts. I don't know where he went. I wish I did."

"But how did he get out of here?" said

Brent. "We had men entirely surrounding the house."

Marinelli laughed bitterly.

"He pulled a sneak on us. I didn't even see him go, but I can tell you how he got out, all right. There's an upstairs closet with a stairway which leads down to the basement. In the basement there's a passageway which takes you out five hundred yards from the house. Correlli was leery of a raid by you guys. He kept a car parked down there where that tunnel comes out. In the middle of the brawl he said he was going upstairs for ammunition. Him and Lemmers.

"That's the last we seen of them. It's the last you guys'll ever see of 'em, either."

"Maybe," said Elkhart. "Come on, men. Get the prisoners outside. Let's get going."

Swiftly the G-men herded the gangsters into the cars outside. Brent went about his task gloomily, aware of the stinging ache of his wounded shoulder. True, the battle had been won, but the zest of victory was nullified by the flight of the killer that had led this mob through a series of lethal depredations.

Correlli had flown. His gang no longer existed, but the mad dog who led the pack was still at large.

"IT'S going to be a slow job," said Elkhart in his office the next morning. "And a tough job, but it's your assignment, Brent. Get Correlli. I don't know where he is. But get him. Take a year if you like, but don't fall down."

Larry Brent nodded. He lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"I'll get him," he said quietly.

"I've got one thing for you," said Elkhart. "And if the breaks are with us, it may prove the lead that'll nail him. Now listen. According to the reports we have, Correlli must be damned nearly broke. He's got a savings account in New York.

The Second Federal Savings Bank. Almost five thousand dollars. We've been so hot on his trail for the last five months, he must be nearly broke."

Brent nodded again. "You think he'll try to get his hands on that money?"

"I don't think he'll be sucker enough to go there himself. But he might send his front, Lemmers. I'll have a detailed description of Lemmers in your hands before you go. You know what Correlli looks like. Go to New York. Play the bank. God knows where the trail might lead you. So I'll instruct everyone of our divisions to give you whatever you ask for at all times."

Larry Brent rose. "Okay, chief," he said. "I'll fly to New York in the morning. Will you have Lemmers' description sent to my hotel?"

"At once," promised Elkhart. "And good luck."

The two men shook hands cordially. Brent saluted, turned on his heel and left the office.

**F**OR a long impatient month, now, Larry Brent had haunted the portals of the Second Federal Savings Bank in New York City. It had been a long lonely vigil. He had taken a room at a small hotel. He had deliberately avoided visiting any of his friends in the metropolis.

Each day from nine o'clock in the morning until the bank closed at three in the afternoon, Brent waited and watched for any sign of Correlli. As Elkhart had observed, it was highly improbable that Correlli himself would call for his money.

It was far more likely that he would send some henchman of his to the bank with a written order to draw the cash. It might be Lemmers, of whom Brent had a detailed description. It might be another.

Brent had already made his identity known to the officials of the bank. On the deposit card belonging to the gangster's

account, there was a written notation. The teller had explicit instructions that whenever anyone attempted to draw money from that account, the bank was to insist upon the thirty days' notice clause which was its privilege.

Furthermore, the teller was to wave a swift signal to Brent if and when a demand was made upon Correlli's account.

Brent himself had made no plans. That was not his method. Brent made plans as things happened. Too often had he seen elaborate devices go wrong because of circumstances which the planner had not foreseen. In a general way, he had decided that perhaps the best method would be merely to trail the person who called for the Correlli account. In that way he might be led to the lair of the killer.

The second month had passed the halfway mark. Inherently a man of action, Brent was chafing impatiently at this assignment. The big clock on the bank indicated noon. Brent sighed and lighted a cigarette.

As he lowered his head to the flickering match, he failed to notice the taxicab which drove up to the building. A dapperly dressed man disembarked, paid the driver and hastened into the bank. A moment later he presented himself at the teller's window.

Idly Brent leaned against the doorway, puffed his cigarette, and watched the pay window mechanically, as he had done for forty weary days. He saw the teller take a slip of paper from the man outside the cage. Automatically, the teller flicked through the huge index file at his side.

He removed a card from a million others like it, glanced at it for a moment.

Then, deliberately, he lifted his left hand and slowly pulled at the lobe of his right ear.

In a single instant all the boredom, all the ennui which had accumulated within

Brent for over a month, vanished. His heart picked up a beat. His right hand dropped to his coat pocket and touched the butt of his gun. Then, with assumed casualness, he sauntered slowly toward the teller's window.

As he approached, his eyes took in the short, stocky figure of the man. It was not Correlli. The Italian was a good foot taller. His shoulders were not as broad. Perhaps it was Lemmers. Thus far the description fitted, although Brent had not seen the man's face.

As he neared the window he heard the man snarl, "Well, do I get the dough? I'm in a hurry."

The teller's eye was on Brent. He leaned forward in the cage.

"The bank must have notice of withdrawal," he announced. "Then we can release—"

He did not finish the sentence. At that moment the man turned around warned by some sixth sense. His eyes bored into those of Brent. His eyes traveled over the German's body. He saw a bulky object in Brent's right-hand pocket. He did not doubt for a moment what it was.

"Damn you," he snarled. Then he spun on his heel and ran toward the door.

**B**UT even as he moved Brent's foot crashed against his ankle. The man went down, crashing to the marble floor. While he was falling, his hand went to his hip. Brent saw the gesture. In a split second his own revolver appeared.

Two shots echoed through the vaultlike bank. One spun crazily through the air and ricocheted off the marble wall. Brent's bullet clanged sharply against the metal of the other's gun, knocking it from his hand.

The man on the floor grunted in pain. He clutched his twisted wrist with his other hand. Brent took a step forward and jerked him to his feet.

"Come on, Lemmers," he said. "I've got a few questions to ask you."

Brent showed his Government badge to the special policeman who had come running with drawn gun at the sound of the shot. Then he dragged the cursing Lemmers to a taxicab outside. He gave the driver the address of the Metropolitan office of the Department of Justice, and sat quietly at Lemmers' side as they were driven there.

An hour later, Lemmers sat sullenly in a chair, surrounded by three men.

"Go ahead," he said in a surly tone. "Do your damndest. I ain't going to talk. You'll get nothin' out of me. You got nothin' on me anyway. I tell you I don't know where Correlli is."

Brent lighted another cigarette and sighed. Thus far Lemmers had absolutely refused to open up. And Brent, who knew men, recognized the stubborn streak in him, and doubted if the man could be made to divulge the whereabouts of the Italian gangster.

Richards of the New York office turned to Brent with a frown.

"Then the only thing to do," he said, "is to shoot this telegram to the decoding department in Washington. There may be a clue there."

Brent shook his head. A thorough search of Lemmers had revealed nothing save a wire sent to him that morning from Pittsburgh. It was written in code.

"That's not much good," he said. "By the time we get it back, Correlli will be leery. Lemmers won't have communicated with him and he'll figure we've picked him up."

He frowned and paced the floor. He shot a blazing glance at Lemmers who sat coolly in a chair, a mocking smile upon his face. His chin was cupped in his hand, and casually Brent's gaze fell upon the watch he wore upon his wrist. He noted the time

there. Then, mildly surprised, checked it against his own timepiece. It was precisely two hours slow.

He sighed and turned again to Richards.

“Let me see that wire,” he said. “If it’s not too damned hard, I might be able to figure it.”

Richards handed him the telegram. Brent took a pencil from his pocket. His brow screwed up in thought as he grappled with the deciphering of the code.

Slowly he worked over the telegram while the others watched him. It read as follows:

GSRMTH TVGGRMT SLG SVIV  
HGLK NVVG NV DSVIV BLF XZNV  
UILN ZG GSIVV ULPI VRTSG HRC  
HRCGS HGIVVG HGLK DROO DZRG  
DVVP HGLK XZMXVO ULINVI  
ZIIZMTVNVMGSH

The message was unsigned. The line at the top showed that it had been sent from Pittsburgh. It had been addressed to Lemmers care of Western Union. Undoubtedly it had been arranged that he should call at the office at a certain time to receive any instructions that might be there.

After two minutes of concentration a light came to his eyes. His pencil flew over the paper.

Then he turned triumphantly to Richards.

“I’ve got it!” he cried. “It’s a simple substitution cypher.”

Richards bent down over the desk.

“What do you mean?”

“Look,” said Brent. “First take this recurring four-letter word, HGLK. That appears three times in the telegram. It’s a rather safe bet that those four letters represent the word STOP. Look at those double v’s—and incidentally v is the most used letter in the message. Since in the average English sentence, e occurs more

than any other single letter—and is frequently doubled in short words—it is a safe guess that v here is e. Now we know definitely what four of those letters are and we have an even chance on one more. Get it?”

“Not all of it,” said Richards. “Go on.” “Well,” said Brent. “I went ahead at first on the guess, that ‘a’ was Z, rather than R. If ‘a’, then is Z and ‘I’ is R, it indicates that the alphabet has merely been reversed. For those two letters would be represented thus if it were. Furthermore the four letters STOP would come out the same way. Look.”

He held up a piece of paper upon which he had written two alphabets. One read normally from left to right, the other was reversed.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
YZ

ZYXWVUTSRQPONMLKJIHGFEDC  
BA

“All right,” said Brent. “Now take the letters in the lower line and let them read for the letters in the upper line that they fall directly beneath. Now what have we got.”

He scribbled rapidly with the pencil.

THINGS GETTING HOT HERE  
STOP MEET ME WHERE YOU CAME  
FROM AT THREE FOUR EIGHT SIX  
SIXTH STREET STOP WILL WAIT  
WEEK STOP CANCEL FORMER  
ARRANGEMENTS.

Richards grinned, pounded Brent on the back.

“Good work,” he cried. “Get the first plane out for Pittsburgh and you’ve got him.” Brent raised his eyes. He glanced at Lemmers. The man still sat calm and unmoved in his chair. He did not seem

perturbed that his code message had been read.

Again Brent's eyes noticed the watch on the man's wrist. He rose slowly. He walked to the telephone booth on the side of the room. Five minutes later he emerged.

"Well," said Richards. "Are you going? There's a plane to Pittsburgh in two hours."

"Pittsburgh, hell," said Brent looking hard at Lemmers. "I'm going to Chicago in an hour."

At that moment Lemmers was shaken out of his air of tranquility. His face paled. He half rose in his chair. An oath contorted his lips, as Brent raced out the door.

**B**RENT rang the doorbell of the cheap brownstone rooming house on Chicago's South Side. A moment later an ancient slattern opened the door. She regarded the G-man with a suspicious air.

"Well?"

"I'm looking for a room," said Brent. "I thought perhaps—"

"All full up. There's not a room in the house."

She tried to slam the door. But Brent's shoe was in the jamb. He pushed into the hallway disregarding her protests.

He stood in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs and cried out:

"Correlli, there are half a dozen men surrounding this house. I've come in to get you. You can't get out. Come down the stairs with your hands up."

He stood there for a moment, tense and silent. His gun was in his hand. Well he knew the danger in this house. Yet it had been his assignment. He had insisted that those men he had brought from the Chicago office remain outside.

"One G-man against one killer," he had said. "That's odds enough in my favor."

The crone who had opened the door disappeared down the basement steps, fear written in her eyes.

Brent put his foot on the bottom step.

He tensed as he heard a soft footfall from above.

"Correlli," he shouted. "Come down. Come—"

A blazing shot punctuated the sentence. A bullet plowed into the stair at Brent's foot. His own gun leaped to life. Two shots hurled themselves upward.

Brent pressed his body against the wall. Like a cat he raced up the stairs. As he rounded the second landing another savage bullet went whizzing over his head. Brent thrust his hand over the banister. His finger constricted on the trigger. He heard a howl of pain from the landing above.

He rounded the staircase at top speed. Above, crouching against the wall like an animal at bay, stood Correlli, bleeding, his dark face black with rage and hate.

"Damn you," he snarled. "They might get me, but I'll get you first."

His .38 came up. Its muzzle drew a bead on Brent's heart. With the speed of light, the G-man threw himself to the floor. His right hand jerked his automatic up. His finger touched the trigger.

Two shots smashed out as one. The slug from Correlli's gun nicked a fragment of flesh out from Brent's right ear. Brent's bullet traveled straight and true. It hammered with terrific force into the Italian's chest. Correlli slumped against the wall, sank slowly to the floor.

He was still alive when Brent reached his side. From below, he could hear the shattering of the door as his comrades, alarmed by the shots, broke into the house.

Correlli, in the agony of death, snarled as Brent came up.

"That rat," he muttered. "Lemmers talked."

**B**RENT shook his head. "Lemmers didn't talk, Correlli. I decoded your telegram."

“So what? I figured that might happen. I didn’t mention what town I was in. I said meet me where you came from. Lemmers flew in from Chi. But how the devil could you get that from the telegram?”

“It wasn’t so hard,” said Brent.

“Lemmers’ wrist-watch was two hours slow. That struck me as an odd thing. Then I figured that if he had just flown in from somewhere he might have forgotten to change his watch—to set it ahead. I knew he hadn’t come from Pittsburgh, because that town’s on Eastern Standard Time, which would only make an hour’s difference with Daylight Saving in New York. I knew damned well that Lemmers had come from one of the Central States.”

“You couldn’t have known which one,” muttered Correlli weakly.

“I didn’t,” admitted Brent, “till I called the airport. They reported a plane from

Chicago in at eleven o’clock. That gave Lemmers an hour to get to the bank when he did. Furthermore, they remembered him when I described him over the phone.”

Half a dozen men came racing up the stairs. A heavy-set G-man put his hand on Brent’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Brent nodded.

“And Correlli?”

Brent nodded toward the bloody inert figure on the floor.

“He won’t bother us again,” he said gravely. “I think he’s dead.”

One of them examined the motionless body of the gangster, then straightened.

“Well,” he said. “That’s one less.”

Brent nodded and walked slowly down the stairs. As he went, he wondered if that same epitaph would some day be applied to him.