

THE ALIBI

—BY—
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But where was the supply? And could Arthur, crippled as he was, start the engine and navigate that plunging turmoil of wild waters in a twenty-two-footer? Grave questions all, grave in the extreme.

But the fugitive did not hesitate. His mind made up, he went calmly to work in carrying out his plan. For the immediate present in that obscure hiding place he felt safe. The future—well, the future must look out for itself.

First of all Arthur cut the wires of the telephone. The shack was now wholly isolated. He took the instrument, carried it to the door and gave it a heave out into the rain-swept desolation of pools and dead grasses behind the building.

A barrel on horses under an old tarpaulin suggested gasoline. The suggestion proved correct. Now all Arthur needed was to find the boat itself.

This task proved not difficult. A few minutes of meandering through vague paths among the many rows brought him to a black mud-walled tidal slough along which a dozen or fifteen rickety wharves had been rudely built. At one of these rode the launch, innocent of paint or brass, but stoutly engine-driven. Arthur climbed down into it, hauled it out, examined the motor with care, found he understood it, and after five minutes' experimenting under the lashing November downpour, started it.

Having proved that the engine would serve him, he stopped it and returned to the shack. The injured ruffian on the floor was now beginning to show signs of life. He was groaning rather loudly, and from time to time his body twitched in spasmodic contractions. Arthur paid no heed to him, but sat down at the table and with Slayton's pencil wrote on the fly-leaf of a greasy old novel:

"Keep quiet and don't strain your self trying to get free. You can't. You

won't starve in twenty-four hours. I'll see that you are released. Thanks for the use of the boat. That about balances the wallop you gave me. Good-by."

This message, scrawled painfully with his left hand, Arthur laid on the floor close beside the fellow, so that he must in all probability see it when he should revive. Arthur then took a final look around to be sure he had left no incriminating traces of his presence there, carried the bundle of clothes down to the boat and tossed it in; returned and got a water pail, and in two trips filled the gas tank of the motor boat.

This done, he cast off, started the engine again, and with no further ado navigated under the pouring rain-drive and wild blustering November wind down the slough toward the tumbling wildness of the bay.

Five minutes later the motor-boat, nudged only by his left hand, was fighting through a savage surf, smothered in spray, shipping a bucket of cold brine at every wallow. That was a wild, ugly sea to buck, but Arthur held her nose to it, and through she went. Then, starting away northwestward, she swooped from crest to trough and back again, a wallowing, diminishing speck in the mad dance of the storm.

Presently the scudding mist and rain dimmed even this, then swallowed it completely.

Trackless, the fugitive still held a course toward—what?

CHAPTER XXXI

Shortly before noon a disabled launch started in convict garb, he had and navigated by a solitary waterman in tattered oilskins, limped painfully into a slip on the north river, and came alongside a flight of landing-stairs.

Cramped and numb, the waterman clambered out, made fast and looked about him with keen eyes under the dripping brim of the sou-wester. Buffeted by wind and rain, he stood there, peering with sharp intelligence. Two or three members of a tug's crew, loafing at the stokehole door of their craft in the slip, noted that his right arm hung in a sling.

"Some nerve!" growled one, "to take 'er out that way; worst blow we had in two years!"

"Nerve is right," answered another, "only I call it bushouse!"

They passed a few remarks, fully interested as the boatman climbed the stairs and vanished down the pier.

"He ain't left his boat in no very choice spot," the first speaker commented. "This ain't no public landing now. He's liable to get in a mix if old man Hawley sees that there launch hung in a sling."

The other answered nothing. A third man behind them asked for a chew, and the subject shifted to tidings whereof landlubbers were nothing.

The worst blow in two years he had indeed landed Arthur in a place he had not chosen, yet which after all might serve his purpose better than any half-way across the bay, engine trouble had weakened his power. Wind and wave had taken him with savage violence. He had been forced to run before them, straight up through the Narrows in the Upper Bay; and only when within a mile of the Battery had he been able to stop balling. Exhausted, he had steered his launch through a dangerous puzzle of harbor-craft into the North River; and so, knowing not whether he went, suffering agonies from his splintered arm, half frozen, drenched to the skin through his torn oilers—all in all a sick and broken man—he had come once more to land on the fringe of the vast, hostile, yet sheltering bays of noon, New York.

Under the very eyes of police and "bulls" watching cars and ferries, the disabled waterman passed, in safety he traversed the broad, cobble space of West street, between the pier-houses and the row of buildings opposite. The swinging blades of a low propeller swallowed him. Five minutes later, in the back room of that dive he was decuring a horrible beer stew mixed with "quax" and—very much awestruck his last, but surely the most innocent of hops it had.

After the wild and storm-racked experience of the past three hours and more, this haven seemed like a bit of Paradise, crowded with the roughest offerings of the waterfront—in "dinks" where a murder could be wrought for two dollars, for one day, even for a drink of beer—it still offered peace and rest and opportunity to pull together for the next step of this terrible pilgrimage through the wilderness of a society organized to lay hands on him and slay him.

Here, for a time at least, he was safe. Here he could eat and drink and sleep—for upstairs a vile doss house offered beds at fifteen cents. Here he felt the eye of observation would hardly reach him.



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His protean changes of disguise, largely forced on him by the extraordinary circumstances through which he had passed, seemed to him almost a complete safeguard for the present. Motor-boat, its engine skipping badly then became a hobo. He had shifted to a gentleman, and lastly to a waterman in oilers. No less than Sherlock Holmes, he reflected over his meal, would have been required to spot him coming—of all ways and in all places—via a motor-boat to that landing on the North River.

Had he planned all and been backed by unlimited resources he could have done no better; and yet all, or nearly all, had been the result of nothing but chance. Fate had played his hand for him, not by himself. Barren on Slayton, for which loss he had already grown profoundly grateful, mischance had passed him by. It was that a deep and vast thankfulness that he sat there among those vile, shrouding, ribald, cursing outcasts in that hideous "kip," devoured his nauseous food with his left hand, and thanked high Heaven that freedom still was his.

Too deeply schooled in the bitter wisdom of the underworld was Arthur now to make any false steps. He carefully refrained from laying his sou-wester aside, even though it seemed to band his head with a ring of heat and pain. The big, drooping-brimmed hat admirably protected from observation that clipped wound, aching pool of his.

Too wise was he to flash even a Y in that den of thieves and cutthroats. Had one of many there suspected his identity, piped that cranial or known even a fraction of the wad he carried, either he would have been snatched on in ten minutes for the reward, or "big Peter" would have been slipped to him in a knockout dose, or outright butchery would forever have ended his bitter quest for liberty.

Not the fugitive took no risks. He kept his tongue in his cheek, his sou-wester on his head and his wad in his pocket. He made no talk with any. He paid his score with a few loose coins from among those he had found in Slayton's coat—coat, overcoat and all now lay at the bottom of the Bay, sunk deep by that piece of junk-iron he had lashed into the bundle—and thereafter spent some hours in reading newspapers crammed with sensational misinformation about Slayton's "murder" and about Mansfield, the hideous criminal. During this perusal he consumed just enough beer and tobacco to entitle him to shelter from the storm.

Sitting there in hiding in the dark-

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out corner, he pondered many things—the curious ways of justice; the fate that had taken him, clean, straight whole, unscathed by any crime, and had made a hunted man of him, a man accused of two murders by the whole world, a man scared by the penitentiary, a man broken in body and embittered in soul, a man yet to be dragged down and buried to death.

He pondered on Enid too, now millions of miles away from him and forever lost; and felt tears start in his eyes and a lump choke him as he recalled her ways and words, her look, her gestures and endearments of the other, better days.

Had the still faith in him? he wondered. No, no! Impossible! Up to the end of his time in Sing Sing she had believed in him; this much he knew. She had continued writing and had never ceased protesting her faith and trying to instill hope into him that some time the vast wrong should all be made right. She had treasured the one letter a month which constituted his total writing allowance in the Pen. Through all she had "stood by." But now—

Now, Arthur sensed right well, the end of everything had come. His escape, the shooting of Slayton, all the circumstances now had surely condemned him even in her pure and trusting eyes. And as he realized and lost and felt the last strand breaking which had bound him to resolves for upright conduct he knew he was standing on the narrow brink of the Pit.

One impulse, one deciding factor now might plunge him in irrevocably. Society had condemned him, blameless. It had thrust him down into the underworld, and held him there. It now sought his life with blind and deaf stupidity as savage as it was unreasoning.

Well, there was the challenge. If society insisted on his playing that game, why not play it after all and play it hard?

No upward way beckoned, but only downward ways. Very well, so be it. The world had flung him out and spat upon him as an enemy. It had refused to hear him, to believe him, to accept him as anything but a foe.

Why not snatch up the gauntlet and—since the role had been forced upon him—play it hard and well?

Arthur suddenly aroused himself from these black musings with a start. He had just recalled the fact that the

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motor boat, still moored in that rain-swept slip, constituted a grave peril for him, a clue that might yet lead him to the chair.

How could he have forgotten it so long? Such folly seemed incredible, yet the fact remained; he had not disposed of the boat, and it must be made way with at once.

But how? He dared not leave the launch, suffer as he might with his cut head and his broken arm still swelling in its soaked bandages, he was determined to remain hidden there till night at least, perhaps for some days. Yet the boat must be got rid of. This new problem quite dispelled his melancholy musings on the injustice of society. He forgot to ponder future vengeance in his sudden anxiety to fend off present peril.

He glanced about him warily, seeking some face that promised compliance with his will. The hour was now past five. Outside, a rainy night had settled down, dun, chill and drear, the brutal glare of incandescents lit the bar garishly; but in the back room where Arthur sat only two or three were burning. By their light he observed the present personnel.

Sardid and low those unfortunates were—longshoremen, sailors and rousters of the worst types; a Portuguese or two; a Bermuda negro; a half-breed; a few miscellaneous bits of human riffraff cast up like debris along the lip of the sea.

One of the longshoremen appealed to Arthur's eye, now by reason of his prison-life well versed in gaging criminal character, as the fellow for his purpose. Arthur judiciously approached him, entered into conversation, and in fifteen minutes had the man coming. The prospect of a twenty-two-foot boat, given away absolutely for nothing, would have lured a more virtuous person than he.

Arthur furnished full data as to the place and appearance of the launch, frankly stated it was stolen and expected a promise from the longshoreman that he would never snitch and that before nightfall the boat would be safely hidden in some obscure, scarcely lagoon up the Passaic River. There came a change of some details would circumspectly disguise it. Arthur and the man had another drink together, and the man departed glad in his good fortune, leaving Arthur's mind far easier than before.

Next the fugitive's mind reverted to the beach-comber, in all probability still lying bound and helpless in the shack on the dunes. In justice Arthur might have left him there to starve and rot. But his promise had been given, and it must be kept. Not yet had all the feelings of humanity



been stifled in his heart. All the monstrous boundings of society had not yet been able to destroy his simple kindness and brave honesty.

Arthur now proceeded, therefore, to free the captive by the simple means of notifying the police. He got writing materials and a stamp from the waiter—who though gorilla-like yet appreciated the argument of a ten-cent tip—and, printing with his left hand, bent over the beer-wet table, produced this masterpiece:

Police headquarters, Dear sir, this is to notify you a man was held up on a robbard in a shack on the beach 1 1/2 miles east of station at oakwood bites, states land, this morning, about the middle shack in the settlement north of iron pier, the strong arm man made his getaway, the other one is tide hand an fact there an may die if you dont get him. This is no jelly but strait dops.

"Yours truly,
"Wise Guy."

This done, he sealed and addressed it:

POLICE HEADQUARTERS,
Mulberry St. city.

and, having observed a mail-box on the corner across the street, took a chance and posted it himself.

His duty now all done and more than done, he bethought him of a little rest. The morrow must find him ready for still other and greater exertions. Despite his broken arm, constantly growing more painful, he must push on, seeking fresh disguises. Once the police could rescue the beach-comber, his oilskins and sou-wester would be known and sought for. By morning, at latest, he must be afar in some other hole or cranny of the hive in other clothes and under different circumstances.

As Arthur paid his fifteen cents for the luxury of a night's doss he realized his preposterous folly in having written that letter; and yet he did not regret having written it. Had he left the beach-comber there to die he himself might have been safe for some days. Perhaps nobody would have discovered the man in a good while. Possibly not until old Jarboe should have investigated would anybody have ventured out across those marshes, flailed by the November storm. Meantime Arthur could have rested and recuperated at his ease. The price he now would have to pay for having saved that vicious, worthless life might be his own.

Had he only shot the man as impulse had dictated, how vastly safer now he must have been! Yet in his heart he rejoiced that he had not done so. He cherished the fange and the vision of Enid Chamberlain, lost to him now yet still living in his soul—the vision that had staved his hand, the vision that still seemed to guide him through the dark and formless ways of perdition and of flight. (To be continued.)

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