

# THE ALIBI

—BY—  
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"I'll take a chance," he grumbled. "Stretch now, if you want to. And don't forget I'm on the job, see?"

Arthur flexed and extended his free arm with inexpressible relief. Over his head he stretched it hard.

"That's fine!" he exclaimed in gratitude. "Now, if you could let me have a cup or two of coffee while we're waiting for the bank to open."

Nodding and grumbling to himself the brutish fellow turned toward the stove and began preparing the drink. "Time enough! Time enough!" said he. "Couple of hours yet. Make yourself comfortable, bo. You got a lively road ahead of you; but for now make yourself comfortable."

"Some doin's up at Slayton's, kid. I stopped there a while gettin' that paper. They're havin' a hot time. I guess the 'front office' has had the biggest dragnet thrown out they've got."

"They're after a trail they think they got of you in the city. Two or three have 'made' you in Manhattan already—an' you here stowed away safe an' sound in my cottage by the sea! Lucky for you I was here, kid. If I hadn't been—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake cut that out and let's look at the paper!" interrupted Arthur, maddened by the creature's formless monologue. "And then coffee! You owe me that much anyway, and more!"

Leering, the beach-comber brought Arthur the paper, then returned to his coffee-making. Arthur held the paper in his left hand and eagerly read the sensational account of the crime. Forgotten were his aching head and shattered arm for the moment, as his eyes devoured the columns of falsehoods, wild assumptions, wrong deductions from impossible premises and all the vicious tissue of lies once more flung out to tangle and to kill him.

He dropped the paper with a groan. The first case two years ago had been terrible enough; but not as terrible as this. The horror of it surged over

him—his near approach to escape, the fearful misfortune of his meeting the beach-comber, the calamity of his capture by this mercenary beast, the swift on-drawing of the inevitable end. Covering his eyes with his hand, he gave himself to bitterness of the spirit and to anguish of the soul.

The beach-comber roused him with a shake of the arm.

"Here's your boot-leg!" he exclaimed.

Arthur blinked up at him.

"Oh, thanks!" he answered, taking the cup—a heavy one of the ware known as stone china, a most unbreakable and of massive mould.

He raised his head and sipped the steaming liquid—a kind of chicory hogwash—with deliberation. Vile though the stuff was, it warmed and comforted him. The beach-comber stood there near the cot, hands on hips, peering at him with that one sinister optic. When Arthur had drained the last drop—

"More?" he asked.

"Thanks, yes. Just one."

"All right. Give us the cup."

He filled it again and brought it back, then sat down on a broken chair near the table, picked up the paper Arthur had dropped, and bending his one eye close to it, began reading the article aloud, halting, mispronouncing, mutilating it, and stopping now and then to chuckle with amusement and intense satisfaction.

"Twenty-five thousand bucks, hey? Some rhino!" he jubilated in great good humor. "I ain't never had in luck; but now I make good. Strike me dead if I don't—strike me dead!"

The phrase transfixed Arthur's vivid attention all in a breath of time.

"Strike me dead!"

The captive held in his hand the heavy mug, now half emptied of the vile liquid. Calculating its possibilities, not yet quite sensing its possibilities, but with some vague perception of them in his mind.

"Strike me dead!"

Why not? There sat the ruffian, hardly eight feet away, bent over the paper which he had spread upon the table by the pistol—the pistol to be used in case Arthur made one single move for freedom, one solitary act of resistance.

Close to the paper his one eye had been brought. The blind socket was toward Arthur. For the moment the captive was positively secure from observation. That moment might end; it might forever pass and be lost and done for. That golden opportunity, once fled, could never come again.

"Strike me dead!"

It rang and echoed in his feverish brain, seeming to pound in his temples with the pounding of his pulses like hammers on anvils.

"Strike me dead, strike me dead, strike me dead!"

Silently Arthur lowered the heavy cup beside the bed, and soundlessly poured out the rest of the coffee on the floor. He raised the cup again and swung it to and fro, taking careful aim.

The beach-comber, having finished one page of the paper, sat up, turned the sheet and then sank down again, without having glanced round. Arthur's heart in his mouth, again poised the cup.

There lay the gun. The threat was clear. Arthur knew death awaited him in case of failure. Either he must break that bestial skull with one blow, or the thug would inevitably pistol him as he lay there, bound and helpless, on the cot.

Swiftly he weighed all the chances, and came to a decision. Nothing but death awaited him at any rate—unfortunate, shameful, horrible death. If he died fighting that was better than to be snuffed in a chair, writhing with impotent and dumb abandon of unalterable torment.

Twice, thrice he swung the missile. His eye never for one second left the aimed-for spot—the right temple, where the cranial bones were thinnest—his only hope for liberty, for life.

Lashed as he was, unable to bring his shoulder muscles into full play, and obliged to use his left arm, the feat became well-nigh impossible, but on it life and death depended.

Four times he swung the cup, and five.

Suddenly the beach-comber raised his ugly head a little, as though he had finished reading. Slowly he began to turn with meditative deliberation.

A fraction of a second more, and Arthur's lost opportunity would be past and gone. The doors of Fate would clang shut on him forever and forever.

"Some rhino!" exclaimed the thug, chuckling with supreme satisfaction over his haul. "Some real rhino! Strike me dead if it ain't!"

Plunging into his strained muscles every ounce of strength and nervous energy his battling soul could muster.

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Arthur wrenched himself a little up from his bonds, aimed with desperate precision, and pointblank hurled the heavy cup.

Sped with the terrific force and accurate aim of desperation, the coffee-cup crashed home full on the scarred brow of the beach-comber.

Hardly a grunt he uttered, but fell backward, knocked clean out—if indeed not killed—while the heavy cup skidded across the table, dropped to the floor and lay there, blood-spattered.

Arthur, staring with wide eyes, trembling and shaking and with teeth that clattered in a chill of nervous anguish, began tearing with his free left hand at the knots of the cords that bound him. The man might be dead—he hoped so fervently—or he might be only stunned. His head looked a horrid sight as he lay there on the dirty floor. Arthur had won first blood in this battle at any rate.

Could he maintain the advantage? Could he yet escape?

Everything now depended on haste, should the ruffian be only stunned. In case he should revive before Arthur could get free, the end would come in short order. The pistol, lying there black and ominous on the table, vouched for that.

Savagely the captive toiled. His nails broke and the flesh beneath commenced to bleed, but he felt nothing. With a violent effort he managed to get one of the knots within reach of his teeth. Fingers and teeth together wrenched the cords, worrying them as a dog worries a rat. And all at once a knot gave. The supreme gratitude Arthur felt at that second had never been surpassed in his life.

One knot eased another. Desperately he worked and soon a second one was loosed—a third, a fourth. Now Arthur could fling back a whole coil of the stout netting-cord. He drew it round under the cord and attacked more knots. His shoulders were free now—and suddenly his hands seemed to fall away from him. Some master-knot had eased them all. He was free!

Numbed, lame, dizzy, with a horrible sick feeling in the pit of his stomach and a blinding pain in his bruised head he managed to drag himself out from the web of lashings that the scoundrel had hauled about him, and supporting himself with his left hand made shift to sit up on the edge of the cot.

To save his life it seemed to him he could not have immediately stood up and walked. His legs were paralyzed. The toes would hardly respond to his will as he tried to move them. It seemed as if the whole lower half of his body were dead.

He was experiencing the effects of great stricture long applied. Impotent to stand or take a step at this most terrible vital moment he looked upon the inert body of the beach-comber and from the bottom of his embittered soul heaped vitriol of malice on the thug.

The pain in his right arm drew his attention. He pulled back the sleeve, examined the bruise and purple flesh, observed the swelling and gingerly felt the bone. This caused him excruciating pain.

"Broken, all right," said he. "That's another debt you've got to pay!"

For the present he could do nothing about his injury. Whatever pain it might cause would just have to be borne with set teeth. Other and more urgent matters were at hand. It was imperative that he should recover the use of his legs before the ruffian

might revive—if, indeed, he still lived.

Arthur rubbed and massaged his own body, thighs and legs as vigorously as he could with one effective hand. Soon a prickling sensation commenced, and he knew that the circulation was starting in again. Recovery was rapid. In three or four minutes he could move them a little. In ten he had managed to get up on his feet and, by holding to the table, to drag himself far enough to get possession of the gun. Now, let the beach-comber revive if he wanted to!

It was obvious already that sooner or later the thick-skulled brute would come to. Arthur had not succeeded in making way with him after all. That massive skull and dull brain had resisted the blow, and though the ruffian's face and neck were seeped with blood, nothing had resulted save a flesh-wound.

Another man in Arthur's place might have put the automatic to that head and finished the job. Almost any other would have felt himself justified in that deed. But Arthur, despite everything, still shrank from taking human life. Twice falsely accused of it, hounded, harried, tortured, ruined for it, even now when murder might save his life and free him, he hesitated.

Twice he brought the gun to bear and twice turned it aside. It seemed to him somehow that Enid stood there between him and that prostrate bulk of vice and degradation which was still a living soul. Not for his life could he pull trigger. In a fight he could have shot the thug down, but he'd be absolutely safe.

Anxiety at his own weakness, he shoved the pistol into his pocket, with an oath. Kneeling beside the unconscious brute, he examined the injury. He saw it was superficial. The effects would soon pass. That meant Arthur must take immediate measures to restrain the beast when he should awaken from his stupor.

Leaving the beach-comber where he had fallen—indeed, to have tried to move him now would have far exceeded Arthur's shattered forces—he gathered together a quantity of the netcord, took a case-knife from the table, and set to work making the man his captive.

Arthur's right hand and arm dangled helpless. The blow, beside having broken the radius, seemed to have paralyzed the whole arm—a condition by no means improved by the subsequent cruel lashing on the cot. Arthur could barely move it at all. With his

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left hand he raised it and thrust his hand and forearm into his shirt, thus making a temporary sling. Later he would attend to the injury, but for the present he must work and work fast to trice up the fallen thug.

With some difficulty Arthur drew both the man's hands behind his back, and then began binding them. Round and round he passed the cord, hauling it tight with all his strength, which now in some measure had begun to return. Unminding his wounded head and throbbing arm he labored.

The process was slow. He had to crouch there, using his right elbow to hold the man's hands down, while with the left he pulled the cord tight. But he persisted, and after a while got his erstwhile captor firmly trussed.

This done, he bound the thug's feet together, knotting them hard. He next poured water on the lashings to set the knots and swell the cords. Then he stood up, surveyed his work and knew it was good.

Considerably recovered by now, Arthur set immediately to work to put himself in shape for flight. He bathed his wounded head, examined the gash as best he could in a jagged bit of mirror tacked to the wall of the shack, and decided that his injury, though ugly, was inconsequential. Choosing the best of the beach-comber's few surplus garments, he painfully disguised himself therein, assuming the final appearance of a rough-and-tumble waterman. The blankets and sawdust could not have been improved upon as a make-up. A pair of big sea-boots completed it.

He broke in pieces a wooden box that had held canned goods, cut some splints and with great difficulty applied these to his forearm, which he wrapped with net-cords. He fastened a sling out of a bit of tattered sailcloth and through this slipped his arm.

He next emptied Slayton's clothes, which he had discarded of their contents. He found a few valuables: papers and memoranda, which he burned; some loose coins, a silver match-box and some other miscellaneous. The idea came to him that perhaps the wig might help disguise him; but having tried it he found he could not make it fit, and therefore had to abandon that plan.

He stuffed the wig into an inner pocket of the ruffian's clothing he had put on, saved the matches and coins, and did up all the dead cashier's

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clothing, with the match-box, in a compact bundle weighted with a heavy piece of junk-iron and securely lashed with net-cord.

He now was ready for the urgent business of flight.

The hour, marked by the beach-comber's alarm clock, was just a little past eight. Outside wind and weather still were rising, and the rain came hurrying against the shack in lons, driven curtains that half obscured the sea. Rather formidable waves had begun to build in the Lower Bay. Standing at the leaky window a moment, peering out, Arthur watched the ravenous curl and slaver of their tongues, anxiously yet without real fear. Better to end life there and now, he was thinking—indefinitely better—than a few weeks later in the chair of infamy and torment at Sing Sing.

He turned back into the room, poured some more hot coffee and drank two cups of the stuff. Bread and cold meat stood on the foul shelf that served the beach-comber as a pantry; but Arthur, reeling and in pain, could force himself to eat nothing. He stewed the man's drinking water with soap, and, though at first confined himself to liquid that had been boiled.

If he were to get away at all he knew he must test himself. His original plan, still valid. He was still determined to try for the Long Island shore, to enter Manhattan through Brooklyn. Not all the trains and cars could be watched. The police could not take cognizance of everything. Once on Long Island he felt positive he could enter the city undetected; the more so as the fellow had told him the police were working on a clue that reported him already in the city.

First of all Arthur needed money. He proceeded to "frisk" the ruffian with great thoroughness, and very speedily recovered the wallet. This time he counted the contents. They assayed to the color of one hundred and eighty-six dollars. The thug's own pocketbook yielded eleven.

Arthur smiled, well pleased. On this one could travel far. Even though justice were denied him he might still win life, escape from persecution, a chance to stand erect once more and be a man somehow, somewhere, some time!

The launch, now—where might it be?

"Out back there in a cove," the fellow had said.

He had also remarked that it needed five.

(To be continued.)

END YOUR Catarrh TO DAY!

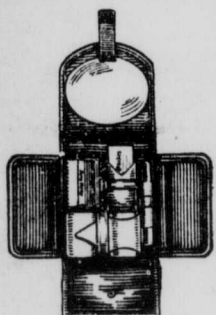
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