

# THE ALIBI

BY  
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In a minute more Arthur knew that he could rise and steal away boundlessly through the sand—away around the building at his left—down the beach again—anywhere, just so it should be away from the unseen and unknown man.

At that very instant, however, the red blur of the pipe described an arc in the gloom, indicating that the owner of the pipe had removed it from his mouth.

Then, harsh above the murmur of the surf upon the beach, hoarse, raw and repellent, a voice came through the night to him:

"Hey, there! Who the devil are you? An' what are you doin' round here?"

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

Struck motionless by this direct challenge, Arthur remained where he was, unable to speak or move. A terrible anguish assailed him. At one blow his plans had all been shattered. Now in the very hour of probable success he was confronted by failure, ruin and destruction. The moment was bitter with the gail of defeat.

Again the harsh voice sounded: "Come along out o' that, you! Come along or I'll bring yuh!"

Arthur realized that evasion or attempted flight would now be worse than useless. He must face this unknown man and bluff or bruce his way through. With quick wit and a fat wallet, he might still travel far, despite everything.

And at the last resort he had the automatic.

On the instant all the softening, refining and ennobling influences of freedom, of night, of memories and hopes had once more vanished. All thoughts of Enid had taken swift flight. Now the cunning and the wiles of the hunted prisoner animal had dominantly surged back. At that hail, good had quitted the boy, and evil had once more laid its blighting, withering clutch upon him.

Arthur stood up, faced the unseen man with the pipe, and advanced toward him through the ice-cold sand.

"Who are you anyhow?" he demanded boldly.

The other ripped off a string of oaths.

"Say, you certainly got some nerve, you," he retorted, "to be askin' me who I am! Come on out o' that, now! I won't have no sneak thieves nor rummies hangin' round my place this time o' the mornin'!"

"Who's a thief and a rummy?" demanded Arthur, angrily. "You be careful!"

The smoker laughed brutally.

"Come here! Come here!" he reiterated. "Come and let's have a squint at you."

He rose from where he was sitting, advanced to Arthur and suddenly flashed an electric beam in his face. Startled, the fugitive blinked and stepped back a pace. The other laughed again.

"Got your goat, hey, kid?" he teased, clumsily. "Well, who are you an' what you doin' here?"

By the vague reflection of the beam Arthur sensed that the fellow was a

bulking, big-shouldered brute with an evil countenance. The rank pipe still between his jaws emitted noxious fumes. Arthur felt a strong impulse to draw his gun and shoot the ruffian down—some beach-combing tough, scoured off the city's dives and sums, no doubt. But he restrained himself. Even though this man stood squarely in his path to liberty he would not kill—yet.

"Who are you?" once more he demanded the beach-comber. "Strike me blind! Spit it out!"

Swiftly Arthur thought. To frame any kind of passable story, he knew, would be totally impossible. This type of man, shrewd and evil, would fathom any lie that he could tell. The only possible course must be the frontal attack of bribery.

"What's that to you who I am?" Arthur therefore parried.

"What's it to me? A lot! This here's my property; see?"

He jerked his thumb at the shack behind him.

"I won't have no—"

"Oh, forget it!" interrupted Arthur. "Your whole place isn't worth a minute of my time. I could buy out the whole string of dumps here and then some, and never feel it. If a man happens to have business out here and then happens to want to get back to the city, do you kick? Are you a wise guy or not?"

Silence a moment. The electric beam went out, and the pipe glowed strongly. The man was pondering.

"Say! What you givin' us, anyhow?" he suddenly demanded.

But though the words were hostile, Arthur sensed the change in tone. Al ready he had succeeded in establishing a line of communication.

"What d'yuh mean?" the tough challenged.

"That's nothing to you what I mean," Arthur replied, lowering his voice. "Anybody else round these diggings? Anybody rubbering?"

"None. Why?"

"D'you want a bundle of kale?"

The question, pontifical, struck the ruffian a heavy blow. The blow went home right enough.

"Kale!" he demanded, eagerly.

"Kale is right. I've got enough for us both."

"What for?"

"What do you mean, what for?"

"What do you want o' me?"

"A boat."

"A boat, hey? Getaway? Is that it?"

"You've got me right. How about it?"

The smoker pondered again, then nodded toward the doorway of his shack.

"Come along up an' we'll chew this thing out, kid," he answered.

His tone had greatly moderated now. Perfectly well he understood—or thought he understood—that he was dealing with some crook or dweller of the underworld. From that very moment his hostility was beginning to melt. A kindred spirit was developed. Arthur's line of action had been unerring; correct; the only possible one at all under the circumstances. The instinct developed by his weary months in Sing Sing could not fail him now.

Well pleased, he followed the man up to the rough porch of the ramshackle building perched on the dune. Already he felt that the situation was well in hand. How much money he had in the wallet he did not know, but whatever the sum might be, he would give it all if need were for escape. He felt it must surely be enough—more than enough for this emergency.

"Sit down an' let's have it," the fellow directed, flinging his hand at the edge of the porch. "Shut!"

"There's nothing to it except that I want a boat, and want it bad," answered Arthur, sitting down beside him.

"The other sucked at his pipe.

"How much is t'ere in it; for me, and where do you want to go?"

"Lead me anywhere in Brooklyn, or New York, and I'll split the bundle with you, Caa you do it?"

"Oh, I can do it all right, all right! I've got a twenty-two foot motor-boat in a cove back here. But the bundle—now hign does she run?"

"Search me! I don't know."

"What? Ain't looked at it yet? Ain't weeded the leather?"

"Haven't had time. Whatever it is I'll go fifty-fifty. Isn't that O. K.?"

Take a chance?"

"Sure I will!" the other exclaimed with elation. "You're right, I see. But you must want a boat some to put over an offer right that!"

"You're right, I do. And I want it quick. Get busy!"

"Sure I'll get busy. But we'll split first. Let's have a one-over at the package."

"That's fair. Give me your flash light here."

"Nothin' doin'! Come inside. I got to get some gas, anyhow, for the

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old boat. And some clothes, too. It's going to be some chilly sailing, ho. No; come in and we'll have a what you got. Say!"

"What?"

"Didn't I hear some firin' off there somewhere half an hour ago, or maybe fifteen minutes?"

"Firin'?" Arthur parried.

"M-m-m-huh! I just now happened to think of it. This surf here makes some noise. I didn't know for sure. Was there some gatts going, kid? Good play with the old pepper-pots, or how?"

"Search me!" denied Arthur. "I didn't hear anything."

"Didn't eh?" asked the other, suspiciously. "Well, maybe not. I kind of thought perhaps you was in on it. None o' my funeral, of course; but—"

"Forget it and let's get busy with that boat!" exclaimed the fugitive, standing up and waiting for the other to light the way in. "Nothing that's past amounts to a cuss now. I want your boat and I'll cough right up for it. So go to it!"

The ruffianly fellow grumbled a moment to himself incoherently, then turned and flung open a rickety door. The flash of the electric beam flicked white light on rough walls and disorder. Arthur, none too well pleased by this turn of affairs, yet in his desperation forced to chance it, followed.

Inside the door he paused, peering about him with the wise caution that had come to birth in him through his prison experience. At his right, a mulling fire of griftwood knots snowed a fireplace of rough brick. The dull glow of it lighted a squalid room, singularly disordered. Arthur had barely time to note more than this general impression when his host struck a match and lighted a tin lamp on the table.

The unshaded light of this revealed a wretched interior—a rough boarded room with a few nets hung on nails along the walls; a stove on three legs and a brick; a tumbled iron cot; dirty cooking-things; miscellaneous odds and ends of iron and ship-chandlery in one corner, gleaned from the beach; a barrel nearly full of corks near the door.

Beside the fireplace lay a heap of driftwood, drying. The only discordant note in the whole symphony of squalor was a telephone on the table, standing among unwashed dishes.

That telephone struck Arthur with a peculiar and disquieting force.

What could its use be? Why had it been installed in that lonely hovel out there on the edge of nowhere? What possible use could a broken-down beach-comber and casual fisherman have for a telephone?

Turning these questions in his mind, Arthur looked at the man himself, curious to know what manner of creature now held Fate in his hands.

The strange fellow was bent over the fire, poking at it with a huge iron bar that had once done duty aboard ship. Arthur could not see his face as yet. He had caught a glimpse of it when the man had lighted the lamp, but had not yet been able to form any clear picture of his host. Now, however, as the man turned, with some grumbled words of complaint about the chill dampness of the November air on the marsh, the fugitive saw him plainly and frowned.

His was, in fact, a face to give most men pause. In Arthur's plight it seemed doubly disquieting. Nothing good, everything evil was written there in lines of disease, vice, hardship and crime. King Alcohol had set his brand on that low countenance; and wicked thoughts and purposes, his deeds and criminal schemings had well seconded his work in making the man an object of repulsion and of fear.

The chin was square and bristled with a pepper-and-salt stubble; the nose was broken and twisted awry, as if by a terrific blow; a scar vividly weaved the right temple from the eyebrow up into the tangle of unkempt hair now disclosed as the man flung his sou'wester upon the floor and kicked it away into a corner.

All this was of ill augury; but his eyes were still worse—his eyes rather, for he had but one. The left had been gouged out in some of his obviously numerous battles, and now the lid drooped empty. The remaining optic blinked red, inflamed with drink and

smoke; an evil eye, if ever man possessed one; the eye of a human beast of prey.

Arthur surveyed this personality, clad in a reefer, a torn black sweater, and a necktie, supplemented by corduroy trousers, and sea-boots. So violently unpleasant was his impression that he could not entirely suppress its effect in his look. The beach-comber observed this and grinned maliciously, showing broken and yellowed teeth.

"I ain't such a much in the beauty line, am I?" he ejaculated. "No, strike me dead. I ain't no Venus de Medicine, and that's a fact. But what d'you expect? We can't all pin a high grade of work like you. Some of us has to pull the rough stuff. So what you kickin' about?"

"I'm not kicking," replied Arthur. "Cut it, cut it, and get busy! Get your things on, cop the gas, and I'll split even with you, whatever I've got. Go to it, now!"

For a moment the man seemed about to obey. He nodded, turned and shuffled toward the fireplace, the iron bar still in his hand. Then he stopped and once again faced Arthur.

"Suppose you make that two-thirds," he suggested. "The price of livin' is dognation high down here, specially gas; and what little I can pick up on the beach don't amount to a hoot. Corks used to bring—"

"Oh, forget it!" interrupted Arthur, his temper rising. "Fifty-fifty, I said, and that goes!"

"Nothin' doin'!"

"What?"

"It's my boat, ain't it?"

"See here, are you trying to skin me alive?"

"You can pay it—an' you're goin' to, see? Now, dig!"

No mistaking the look in that one glowering eye. Arthur felt his temper getting the other hand. The man obviously had determined to wring him dry or hold him up altogether. The drag of the pistol in his pocket gladdened him. A little more now, and—

"Well, how about it?" demanded the thug. "Are you goin' to cough, or ain't you? Maybe you'd like to hoof it up the bay with all the bulls scoutin' after you?"

"Is that right?" asked Arthur. "Two-thirds, and you do the job?"

The other nodded.

"When I say I'll do a thing I do it!" he growled.

He peered curiously at Arthur a moment, then again came nearer.

"Say, boy!" he demanded, roughly. "What is it now?"

"Where d'you get that hair-cut?"

"None of your business!"

"Up the river—eh, kid?"

"What of it? You've been there yourself, I bet a million!"

"Maybe I have, maybe I have! Some place, ain't it? Strike me blind, but it's some place! A con would come across with everything he's got, wouldn't he, to beat a dump like that?"

With a quick gesture of his left hand he knocked Arthur's hat off. Arthur flung up his arm, but too late.

The hat—Slayton's black felt—spiraled away and fell upon the dirty table.

"Some hair-cut! That's right!" gibed the ruffian. "I got your number, ho. That an' your white-paper face would give you a free pass back to Sing Sing any day."

"Just out, hey? And a fresh job on your hands? An' them after you? Say, looka here! No two-thirds goes now—see? You hand over the whole wad, widdo, or— Get me!"

He leered horribly at the telephone.

"Come across! Come across!" he menaced, squaring his jaw. "It's worth it."

Infuriated as Arthur was, trembling with passion and hate, he still recognized the infinite advantage this brute possessed. Without his help everything was lost. Against his opposition nothing could be done. Arthur knew that he must yield, even to the ultimate penny.

"Take it all, you bog!" he cried bitterly. "After it's all gone, you can't get any more, anyhow. Here—take it! And get busy! Now that you've cleaned me out, get busy, and be quick about it!"

He drew out the wallet, opened it, and pulled out bills—greenbacks, yellow-backs—without even trying to count them. He flung them on the table, all but a single "X."

"Here, you, quit holdin' out on me!" snarled the ruffian.

"You can spare me this to stake me when I strike the city. I haven't got a cent of my own, I tell you. You've got to let me have this ten!"

"Not much I won't! You got an overcoat there you can put up for a little coin. You got friends. You can make a touch. I need the coin—see? And— Here! Gimme that now! Quit your holdin' out!"

With his left hand—the right still held the poker—the thug snatched both wallet and bank-note. His brows wrinkled in a villainous, low expression as with his single red eye he stu-

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died the pocketbook. Then a change came over his face. His mouth dropped open. The yellow teeth showed. He stared at Arthur in amazement.

"Say, strike me blind!" he ejaculated. "If it ain't Slayton's leather!"

"What—what d'you mean?" gasped Arthur. "You—know him?"

"Know him! Do—I—know him!" belittled the other in a passion. "He asks me if I know him! Me, hired to watch an' keep him from—"

"What?"

The thug made a quick step, seized Arthur's overcoat, and flung it back. "His overcoat! His suit! You got his suit on!"

He turned, snatched up the hat from the table, and peered inside it. There appeared three little gold-paper letters:

W. H. S.

"His lid!"

Arthur faced him, livid.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow?" he demanded hotly. "Crazy, or what?"

"You've cleaned out Slayton!" roared the beach-comber, his face a study of wicked rage. "You've maybe croaked him, hey? You've croaked my meal-tick, have you?"

"Can that and get busy with the boat!" cried Arthur, shaking with rage. "You've got the wad; now go to it! Get to work!"

"Work! Ha! I'll get to work, all right, you lobster! But it won't be the kind o' work you mean. No boat for you, kid! Nix on the boat! The only boat you'll get will be the Black Maria. I'll boat you, all right, all right—strike me dead if I don't!"

Wheeling, he reached for the telephone. Arthur staggered back, horror-stricken.

"You—won't do that! Not that!"

"Went, hey?"

He brandished the heavy poker in a gesture of deadly menace.

"I won't! You just wait an' see!"

Arthur's eye measured the distance to the door. The ruffian stood between him and it with the iron bar in hand. A sudden madness possessed the fugitive. Something like a red haze seemed to swim before his eyes. Now, just at the very moment of escape, this hideous, vicious, degraded creature for some unknown reason was about to deliver him to the police.

Arthur's hand slid into his pocket. It closed over the butt of the automatic. On the instant the ugly black weapon whipped up into the air.

With a bestial cry the thug sprang and struck the iron bar smashed on Arthur's forearm just as he pulled trigger. The report crashed through the room; splinters flew from the floor.

The fugitive's arm dropped, paralyzed. He tried to duck to guard with the left elbow; but the swinging bar caught him. Fair on the head its crushing impact descended. No hair shielded the boy's skull. His brain took the full shock of the savage blow.

Reeling, he crashed against the table and fell. Black obscurity mercifully enveloped him in its pall.

(To be continued.)

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