

THE ALIBI

—BY—
Geo. Allan England

Author of "Darkness and Dawn," "Beyond the Great Oblivion," "The Empire in the Air," "The Golden Night," "The After-Glow," "The Crime-Detecter," etc.

The moonlight died again. Arthur now found himself in the dark with his dead enemy. This fact did not disconcert him. He felt neither repulsion nor fear, but only annoyance.

Taking his bearings as best he could, he felt for and reached the desk, found the incandescent—still just as it had been two years ago—and turned it on. Some risks had to be assumed, and this was one of them. The fact that every curtain was close drawn, and that a profound silence reigned throughout the house and over all the neighborhood, was reassuring.

Swiftly Arthur now surveyed the room, taking in every detail with the quick precision that his watchful prison habits had taught him. Nothing had been disturbed in the library. No signs of a struggle were visible. Slayton lay between the desk and the cot-table, his head toward the desk and near the legs of the desk-chair, as if he had slid down from it and fallen there by his own weight.

In his right hand he still clutched a pistol, black and grim. Back of his ear an ugly wound showed whence life had fled.

"Suicide," Judge Arthur at once. "Nothing to it but that!"

He knew by all the signs, and most particularly by the manner in which the gun was held, that Slayton had come to death by his own hand. Dr. Nelson's testimony still remained clearly in his mind. It was most useful now, was it not?

With a start he recognized the weapon. He slid the carving-knife into his pocket, crouched down beside the body, and examined the automatic. Yes, it surely was his own, the very gun wherewith he had thought to end his life two years ago, the gun that had played so large a part in convicting him.

Should he take it or leave it there? Quickly he debated the question. The gun might be dangerous to him if left. His throat against Slayton was known. His escape had happened to coincide with the hour when Slayton had killed himself. Would the gun clear him or would it not?

"The fact that it had belonged to him and that it had his initials, 'A. M.,' cut into the hard-rubber butt, might be very prejudicial to him. Popular opinion, the press, and all would rise a terrible hue and cry against him on that account.

Even though it could be shown that Slayton had probably committed suicide, that would not matter. If Arthur were ever tried for his crime the State would show that he had simulated the cashier's suicide and that a real murder had taken place.

Arthur shuddered, glanced warily about, and listened for possible danger. The electric chair this time and oblong less was looming before him now. On just this one decision might hang life or death for him.

"I'll take the gun!" he suddenly exclaimed, and reached for it.

At all hazards he must have it. Not only might it be of tremendous value to him in case of pursuit, but it must not be left there. The accusing story that could be framed: How he had returned to the cashier's house, broken

in, found the gun and with it murdered Slayton, then put the weapon in the dead man's fingers—despite all the details of medical science—and fled, avenged, would be too utterly damning.

The gun must go with him. Quickly he loosened the dead man's hand. The body was still warm. Though the tensed fingers resisted, Arthur forced them open and slid the pistol into his pocket.

Now what next? Again he listened, but all was silent. He tiptoed over to the library windows, first one and then the other, and cautiously peeped out around the edge of the shades. Nothing could be seen. Night brooded undisturbed over the suburban quietude.

Reassured, he came back to the body and once more studied it. Probably there would be time enough for all he needed to do. As he wondered, looking down at Slayton, he smiled. The poetic justice of that death-wound did not escape him. He grasped the significance of the fact that the cashier had shot himself in precisely the same place where he had dealt death to old Mackenzie. He nodded with a kind of grim approval.

There was, however, scant time for introspection. Much had to be done at once. Arthur's forces were now well-nigh spent. He must eat, change his clothes, and make his getaway immediately.

He felt positive nobody could be up-stairs. Had there been, that person must inevitably have come down at sound of the shot. Without any question Slayton had been alone in the house when he had killed himself. Arthur, therefore, felt safe to proceed with his task of recuperation and flight.

Taking his bearings, he swept a glance about the room. Through a door at the rear he caught a glimpse of a polished oak dining table, and beyond it of a sideboard with cut-glass and silver, dimly visible by the light reflected from the hooded desk-lamp.

Cautiously he proceeded into the dining room. His nerve had now returned. He felt cool, unshaken, confident. Constantly he listened for any suspicious sound outside or upstairs. Hearing nothing, he made his way to the kitchen. Here he pulled down all the shades and turned on one incandescent. Next he carefully washed his hands at the sink, wiped them on a dish-towel, and was about to hang this up again when he paused, struck by a thought. He pocketed the towel, smiling. Experience had taught him much. No more evidence of any kind was to be left behind, this time.

Arthur now routed out an abundance of provisions—half a leg of mutton, some cold baked potatoes, bread, cheese and cake. A case of beer, half full, stood near the refrigerator, in which were half a dozen bottles on ice. Arthur found them there when he opened the little door, using the flap of his coat to turn the handle with.

"No finger-prints!" thought he. "And no beer!"

Plain water from the faucet—also turned without the contact of his fingers—better suited his need of keeping a clear head and steady wits. He ate ravenously, wolfing the food in huge bites as he walked to and fro in the kitchen. He drank from the running stream at the faucet. This avoided the danger of touching a glass with greasy fingers.

Satisfied in part, he next proceeded to hunt for clothing. The front hall, when illuminated by an incandescent, revealed many possibilities. A variety of hats and overcoats were hanging on the rack. Arthur chose an ulster and a soft black felt. The proximity of the dead man now disturbed him not a whit. He worked as calmly and methodically as if the house were his own, and he was all alone there.

So far so good. But he needed much more. The half-open clothes-closet under the stairway attracted his attention. He investigated, and found splendid possibilities.

Quickly he routed out shoes, rubbers and a coat, together with a waistcoat and trousers. He thrust his hand into the pockets of the coat. It touched a wallet and a folded paper in the inside breast pocket. For one second of time Arthur's hand rested on Slayton's confession. Then the wallet attracted his attention and he forgot the paper.

The wallet felt plump. Arthur smiled but did not investigate. Time enough for that later. Whatever it might contain would help in this emergency. Slayton owed it to him a thousand times over.

Arthur laid all his plunder on the seat of the hat-rack and scouted upstairs for accessories. His fear of interruption had now largely disappeared. He now knew that nobody was at home. Nobody was coming, he felt sure, from outside. Doubtless the whole night lay ahead of him to

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do with as he pleased. He had time enough, yet none to lose. The quicker he could be out of there and away the better.

The upper story fully supplied him. Fifteen minutes later, completely clad in the dead man's clothing from socks to tie and from boots to felt hat, Arthur Mansfield made his way back into the library.

In his hand he carried a bundle—every article of clothing he had taken off: prison shoes and underwear, tramps' rags, greasy "dip" and all. These things he intended to destroy. Not a trace of him must be left in the house.

But first he felt the inclination to gaze once more on Slayton. The body gave him a certain satisfaction as he stood there looking down at it; yet after all he felt less exultant than he had dreamed of feeling. For many months he had lusted after this moment, and now that it had come the effect was anticlimactic.

Slayton was dead, and he regretted it. He realized now that what he had desired had not been Slayton dead, but Slayton dying. He had not really longed to have his enemy destroyed; he had burned with passion to see the act of destruction.

And that pleasure had been denied him. The throat between his fingers had not been given him to feel. Not his to witness the spectacle of death. With an exceeding bitterness he turned away. Even in this he had been outwitted, cheated and rebuffed.

His eye swept the desk. It noted the disorder there—the blood-spattered papers where Slayton's head had fallen, the upset telephone, the spilled clips and pins, always neatly kept by the dead man.

He reached for the telephone and stood it up again, replacing the receiver on the hook. A frown creased his brow. Vaguely he sensed a certain uneasiness.

That telephone—how long had it been lying thus? Obviously since the moment the shot had been fired. But then might it not have given the alarm? Might not some investigator even now be on his way to the house to see what the trouble might be?

"Just my luck," growled Arthur. "He couldn't even kill himself without making a rumpus about it!"

No use, however, in execrating this evil fortune. It merely spurred him on to quicker action.

Was there anything else on that desk that he should know about? Swiftly he looked over it.

A black tin box caught his attention. He flung up the cover. Inside he saw something which at first he could not identify—something gray, like fur.

He dropped his bundle of discarded clothing beside the desk and raked out the contents of the box. In his hands he found a wig and some false whiskers.

What the deuce could these be? And why should they be there, on Slayton's desk?

Holding them in both hands, he studied them intently under the plunging light of the incandescent. All at once it seemed as if a flash of understanding dawned on him with swift clarity. The look and feel of those gray hairs recalled something to his fevered mind—but what?

A moment he stood there wrestling with himself to wrench this half-knowledge out into complete consciousness. Then all at once he knew:

"Those gray hairs in Mackenzie's hand—came from here!" he cried excitedly.

His eyes blazed with a wild joy. His face, wan with prison pallor,

switched in excitement. He understood the truth at last. He knew!

Trembling, he stuffed the wig and the rest of the make-up into the capacious pocket of his overcoat and flung the black tin box back whence it had come. Not yet could he fully grasp the entire possibilities of his discovery, yet he understood that here perhaps he held a clue of marvelous scope.

If this belief of his could be proved, what might not result?

But now he had no time for further thought. He must be off and away. He picked up his bundle of rags again, turned off the light, and without another look at Slayton returned to the kitchen by way of the hall, where, too, he left all in darkness.

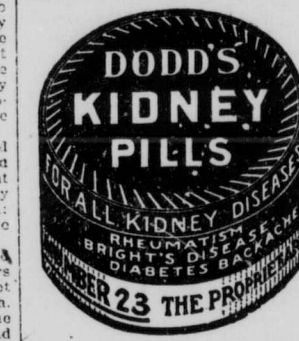
Nothing now remained for him to do save to rid of the telltale bundle of clothing and then escape from the locality. The little tin alarm clock on the kitchen shelf marked 1.10. He had spent only an hour in this house of death. It seemed an eternity.

Ahead of him he still had four or five hours of darkness in which to reach New York and go into hiding.

Arthur's two years' association with men of the underworld had taught him many things. Now, a fugitive, he recalled the old wisdom of the crook, the cunning of the criminal, and knew the city would receive and hide him in some "krip" or "ink-pot" until the storm should have blown over. The name and place of more than one such thieves' haven he knew.

Before having found Slayton, he had thought only of revenge, with no care for the aftermath. Now the desire for life, for freedom in itself, lay strong upon him. To win he must act quickly. He must be on his way.

He took matches, and, bundle in hand, descended into the cellar. Here he peered about by the feeble flame of a match till he discovered an incandescent. He went to the furnace, opened



the door, and peered in. Only a dull glow of coals was to be seen. Surely there was not fire enough to make certain that all the clothing, the boots—everything—would be destroyed.

He must have wood. By piling the furnace full of wood he could insure the destruction of the evidence that he, No. 3265, escaped, had been in that house. At his left he saw a bin half filled with pine-slab kindling. To this he went, stooped and gathered an armful, threw it into the furnace and jammed the bundle of clothes in after it. Then he returned for more.

He stooped again. As he raised another load, the folded paper and the wallet in the breast-pocket of his loose-swinging coat fell out upon the kindling, which slid across them.

Mansfield perceived this. He hesitated, uncertain whether or not to drop the kindling and recover the things at once. Chance decided him to wait, a moment. Quickly he returned to the furnace and shoved in the second armful.

A few pieces of pine dropped to the cement floor. These he picked up and tossed in. He squinted into the furnace, made sure the coals were hot enough to ignite the wood, and then closed the door. That job at last was done.

With both hands he brushed his coat, and turned back toward the kindling bin to recover the things he had dropped. But on the instant he froze to motionless attention, every sense alert and quivering.

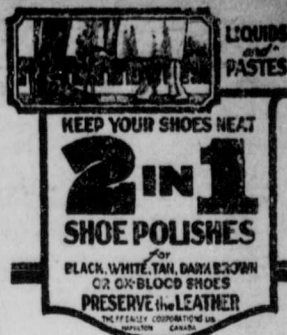
Outside, a footstep had just become audible. Through the half-open cellar window he heard it plainly, falling with staccato resonance on the walk in front of the house. And now he heard another—then a voice speaking, and another answering.

Listening, Arthur stood motionless, alert and tense. Would the men pass the house or were they coming here? On this question everything depended. He cursed the glaring incandescent in the basement. He knew, he knew, must be visible through the little cellar window—not the open one—at the front of the house. And he, too, would be visible to everybody coming over the lawn and peering in there. The fact that the upper part of the house was all dark and that only in the cellar was there any light might excite suspicion.

Bitterly execrating his evil luck, he remained there a moment, undecided, at a complete loss what to do. His hand, however, slid into his pocket and felt the butt of the automatic, and was comforted thereby.

Now the footsteps had become louder. They were rapidly nearing the house. The voices had fallen quiet. Listening intently, Arthur knew the men had turned in at the gate and were coming up to walk to the porch.

Desperately he tried to collect his nerve and rally his stampeded wits,



but for the moment failed pitifully. A kind of horrible stage-fright assailed and gripped him, numbing his limbs as in a nightmare.

The situation exceeded the limits of the appalling. Somebody was about to visit the house—the house where Walter Slayton lay newly dead. And he, No. 3265, was skulking in the cellar with the dead man's clothes upon his body and the dead man's pistol in his hand!

All at once the steps leading up to the porch echoed beneath rapid foot-falls; but these were the footfalls of only one man. The other—where might he be, and who? The porch itself thudded hollowly under the tread of the visitor. Now already he had reached the front door.

Arthur gulped with paralyzing terror. His eyes shifted wildly; their pupils dilated by fear till they looked quite black by the light of the electric lamp that swung near the furnace. He would have put that light out now had he dared; but he did not dare. That act might have betrayed his presence there. But before long if these men entered the house they would inevitably come down into the cellar.

Could he find a hiding place there he shot them as they came down hunting him? Could he fight his way to freedom? What was to be done?

A sudden passionate hate of the tele- and hope to escape later? If he could phone flared up in him, irrational and wild. That accursed thing, he knew, had given the alarm. Tipped over by Slayton at the moment of death, it had cried, "Trouble!" to the Oak-wood Heights Exchange; and now investigation was at hand.

Investigation—and that could have only one end for him. Investigation—and he was trapped like a rat in the basement of the house where suicide would surely be spelled murder, and where the murderer would inevitably be named No. 3265. Escaped!

(To be continued.)

HEAN LOAF.

Cook kidney beans enough to measure two cups. Add half a pound of grated dry cheese and a cup of bread-crumbs. Salt to taste and form into a loaf. Bake, basting with meat stock or with bacon fat and hot water. Serve with tomato sauce.

BANANA PUDDING.

Peel and chop bananas and mix them with an equal measure of rye bread-crumbs. To a quart of fruit and crumbs add a quarter of a cup of sugar, a tablespoonful of butter, the juice of a lemon and half a cup of milk. Steam for two hours and serve with any pudding sauce.

GYPSY STEW.

Cook together small carrots, new onions, green peas and potatoes until tender, then add two slices of dried salt pork, fried brown, to the drained vegetables and season well with salt, pepper and good rich milk heated to the boiling point. Serve hot.

NEW HEALTH FOR WOMEN

The most fateful years in a woman's life are those between forty-five and fifty. Many of the sex enter this period under depressing conditions, through overwork or worry about the home, or through a condition in which the blood is weak or watery and they suffer heavily. Among the commonest symptoms are headaches, feverish flushes, palpitation of the heart, dizziness, backache, depression and other well recognized disturbances of the health which signifies that the blood requires attention. Women urgently need rich, red blood all their lives, but never more so than in middle-life, when the nerves are also weak and overworked.

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Professor—I went to the railroad office today and got that umbrella I left on the train last week. His Wife—That's good. Where is it now? Professor—Oh? By Jove, I—really, my dear, I'm afraid I left it on the train.—Boston Transcript.

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