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THE ALIBI
—BY—
Geo. Allan England
Author of "Darkness and Dawn," "Beyond the Great Oblivion," "The Empire in the Air," "The Golden Blight," "The After-Glow," "The Crime-Detector," etc.

Fortunately for the tramp's peace of mind, there were no observers at that hour and on that road. All the day before he had lain hidden—still fasting—in a deserted waterman's hut out on the Hackensack marshes near Leonia, where at daybreak an Erie brakeman had ejected him from a gondola at eighteen miles an hour. At nightfall he had ventured forth from his lair, had managed to jump another train—blind baggage on a passenger this time—and had struck Jersey City not long after.

He had left this train in the dusk under a big bridge where it had been held up by adverse signals. Sheltered by the bridge embankment, he had found a couple of knights of the road engaged in warming their numb fingers over a little fire of tie-chips and other refuse. Admitted to their society by virtue of his rags and greater poverty than theirs, he had presently come into possession of half a frankfurter and a piece of biscuit—the first food to pass his lips since he had taken such unceremonious leave of his gray granite boarding-place far away up the Rhine of America.

More valuable even than this largesse had been the discovery that the railway on the bridge was a through line to Elizabeth, and that in half an hour a freight would halt a mile to the westward at a crossover. The tramp had thanked his new comrades and had departed toward that spot, eager to be on hand for the freight.

This train had landed him in Elizabeth about quarter past eight. He had left it in the outskirts of the town, and by making judicious inquiries—always of children—had managed to find his shivering way to Elizabeth port, and later to Hayway, where the tracks cross on the long trestle over to Staten Island.

Once en route, he had seen a newsstand with a copy of the News-Clarion displaying his picture with big headlines; but he had not paused to read, and penny he had none to purchase the paper. Several times he might have snatched food from shops, but not once had he risked any such attempt; nor had he begged.

Famished though he was, and racked with cold, he was determined to risk nothing till he had settled with Walter Slayton. The slightest mischance now might baffle him and forever lose him the chance for which his soul lust.

After the account had been squared there would be time for everything else. Till then his one consuming passion had been to press on—foot-sore, shivering, starving—to the goal. With a supreme rallying of all his forces he had made the distance, tramping straight across the island from Port Ivory to New Dorp and thence to Oakwood Heights.

Fatigue he had not felt. The raw blisters on his sockless feet he had never even heeded for an instant. The piercings of the cold, the gnawings of famine had been powerless to stay or hinder him.

For now the village of the Heights lay behind him, and he was plodding down the outlying road where dwelt the man he sought. Now the burning dream of many terrible months was about to be realized.

Now already he had won within striking distance of his arch-enemy, Walter Slayton.

CHAPTER XXV.

Keenly Mansfield observed the scattering houses of Staten Island, strung out along the road at considerable distances from each other. Slayton's, he well remembered, was the last one before the roadway turned toward the distant salt-marshes and became a mere trail to the timber-littered beach.

As he beheld the vague bulk of this house afar off, isolated from its nearest neighbor by three or four hundred feet, a curse mounted to his lips. The moon broke through a rift and cast a pale illumination on its gables. It made black shadows beneath its porch, and glinted from its upper windows.

Mansfield halted a moment with lips drawn back and teeth showing. His face was changed to that of a brute. His right hand clenched the handle of the carving-knife in his pocket with ferocious energy.

Cautiously he peered up and down the road, saw nobody, and once more came on. At that late hour and in that scattering suburban community the chances of detection were slight. He thrilled with hate and exulted with confidence. Once he could effect entrance into that house he knew he could take vengeance on the coward and the monster who had wronged him dry and flung him into the pit.

Now the house lay hardly a quarter mile down the road from him. Only a single light was showing in it—a crack of light at the front window—the library window—the very room where two years ago Slayton had falsely promised him aid and had thus lured him to ruin.

Mansfield's heart leaped with savage joy. Slayton, he felt was probably all alone in that room—reading, no doubt; enjoying the luxury resulting from his crimes, thinking himself safe in the security he had bought by having sent his victim to a living death in Sing Sing.

"Just a window-pane now between him and the eight-inch knife!" muttered the fugitive, creeping down the road under the shadow of the trees.

Suddenly he stopped. The light in the library had all at once gone out.

Mansfield pondered a moment, then came on again. A moment later he thought he heard a distant, faint detonation, hardly audible; but to this he paid no heed.

Drawing the knife from his pocket, he slid along the road, silent and ominous. A smile parted his lips—the first smile in weeks. For now close before him stood the house of Slayton, goal of all his hopes and dreams, reward of all his agony and toil.

The cashier, firmly determined on death by his own hand, returned from the hall to the library, after having hung up his coat in the closet, with the confession of his crime in his pocket.

A glance at the clock showed him he had only three minutes to live. Though extremely pale, he was holding his nerve. A certain unnatural calm after the storm of terror and indecision now possessed him. After all, it would soon be over and done with. When life is no longer possible death becomes a blessed refuge.

Slayton sat down at his desk, took the pistol in his hand, and glanced about him for the last time saying farewell to the familiar room, the books, the desk, the telephone, the lamp—all the commonplace little things of life that through long years

of use become, as it were, part of ourselves.

He reached out with his free hand, took up a silver frame containing a small photograph of Janice, his wife, kissed it twice, and put it back methodically in its place. Curiously he turned the black gun to and fro, peering with a kind of eager wonder at the round, ugly muzzle whence two years ago he had sent death to another and whence he now planned to give it to himself.

Nervously he blinked, as was his habit, took off his glasses, and laid them on his desk, and then pulled the little chain that controlled the incandescent.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "I can't do it in the light, anyhow. That's too much—too much!"

The clock on the mantel gave its little premonitory click that told it was about to strike the hour.

Slayton swallowed thickly and wiped his left hand across the forehead, where the sweat was beaded heavily. His lips twitched unsteadily; a kind of shuddering quiver trembled through his whole body.

None the less, with considerable coolness, he raised the automatic to his head. He brought the muzzle round to his right ear and just behind it, to that most vital spot where a bullet infallibly brings instant death—the same identical spot where he had shot old man Mackenzie.

Now that the electric lamp was out, a ribbon of pale moonlight fell across the floor from above the window-shade which flitted imperfectly. Slayton fixed his eyes upon this ribbon, the last light he ever should gaze upon. It was just such moonlight as that when he had done the murder—and just such a night.

A sudden, hot impatience swept over him.

"Why the devil doesn't that clock strike?" thought he desperately angrily.

As if in answer to his question, the first of its twelve chiming strokes broke the stillness.

Motionless, the cashier waited till the sixth had sounded, his hand tightening on the butt of the automatic, his fingers squeezing the trigger with cumulative force.

Then just as the seventh stroke came, marking the exact beginning of the new day, that finger swiftly tensed.

A hard report shattered away the silver striking of the clock. Slayton pitched forward on the desk, knocking the telephone over. He slid from it, collapsed on the floor, and lay there motionless, the pistol still in his right hand.

He had just done the only courageous act of his whole existence.

So far as he could ever pay, his debt was paid.

Over the dead man's face the ribbon of moonlight streamed, cold, wan, ghostly. It alone, it and the busy little pendulum of the gilt clock above the fireplace, now moved in that quiet room. Save for the moonlight and the clock, all was motionless and still.

Thus a few minutes passed. And now the moonlight faded. Some vagrant cloud had drifted athwart the moon. A velvet gloom shrouded the library. But still the garrulous clock kept telling its story of time to ears that heard not—heard not, for time had ceased for them, and eternity had begun.

All at once a plank creaked somewhere beneath a cautious, furtive tread. Where was it? Hard to tell. It seemed, however, to have sounded on the porch. Yes! Surely it must have been on the porch.

It was a momentary sound. Silence followed. Silence that lasted now full five minutes.

Then, slightly scratching, a little noise—all but inaudible—began to develop at the front window. It came, ceased, began again—a sound as of some implement being cautiously forced in between the two sashes near the window-catch.

Now it paused two or three minutes as if somebody were listening there outside. Whoever the intruder might be, he heard no disquieting sound; and presently the blade of a long, rust bitten carving knife exerted a strong, steady pressure on the catch, forcing it back.

This manoeuvre produced a slight squeak, which was followed by another period of profound quiet. When the man outside had obviously satisfied himself he had not been heard he once more began his labors.

Almost noiselessly the lower sash of the window began to rise, an inch at a time. Soon it was fully open. A hand now grasped the bottom of the shade, and after two or three attempts raised this also without any very appreciable noise.

In the aperture, vaguely graced by a dim ghost of moonlight filtering through cloud-banks high and chill, the form of a man became dimly visible there at the window.



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Crouching, he stood there, listening intently. One hand gripped the window sill. The other held a long, slim object—an eight-inch blade set in a hardwood handle.

Still no sign, sound or hint of detection, opposition or danger reached the straining ears of the intruder. Cautiously now, moving with the utmost deliberation, he raised one leg and put it over the sill, feeling for the floor within with his foot.

He found it, rested his weight on the advanced foot, and—holding to the window-jamb—clambered silently into the library. There, now fully inside the house of the man he hated with a hate unspeakable in its virulence, Arthur Mansfield remained perfectly motionless for at least two minutes, listening for any possible sounds from above stairs.

Slayton, he figured, had turned out his light and gone to bed. Very well, either he would seek and find the cashier upstairs, or he would lure him down. In either case the end would be the same.

But where was Slayton? Mansfield could not yet be sure. At all events, it seemed certain the entrance into the house had passed unnoticed. Turning with great care, Arthur lowered the window again and slowly pulled down the shade. This done, he smiled grimly with savage exultation. The long-hoped, eagerly desired moment now lay close at hand—the moment when he could feel Slayton's life spilled out by his hand—the moment when, if only for a second, he could gaze upon that Judas corpse and spit on it and laugh.

Cautiously now, moving with extended hands, Arthur advanced across the library floor. The hardwood strips were solid and the rugs thick. No plank creaked. Arthur bitterly contrasted this warmth and comfort with the foul cage into which Slayton had flung him—as the cashier had hoped for life. And a vast, overwhelming joy blazed up in him now to be here in this very room where the initial treason had been wrought on him—to be about to deal out justice, swift and sure, by his own hand in this same room to that traitor, coward, and wrecker of his whole life.

No thought now of mercy could find entrance into that inflamed and raging soul. If any thought of ending, longing him to stay his hand, violently away. Obsessed by this one idea, indifferent to past, present and future save as these bore on this one thing, he stalked his prey.

A moment he advanced in darkness, but only a moment.

All at once, moving with extreme caution, he felt his right foot strike some heavy and inert thing lying in his path.

This thing was soft and strange. It gave slightly under pressure, but made no sound. Puzzled, Arthur stirred it with his foot, and wondered what the thing might be.

Then he stooped to touch it.

Just at that moment the moon slid from her veiling bank of cloud. A pallid band of light drew itself across the floor—across the floor and over the peculiar object of his wonderment. Arthur beheld a black something lying there; then he saw white—white and red.

Blinking, perfectly unable to grasp the slightest idea of what he so imperfectly saw, he crouched closer, extended his hand—and touched a human face.

The band of moonlight all at once revealed to him as he moved slightly and let it shine full on his face a glazed, unmovable eye that with dull fixity seemed to be regarding him. Just what he saw—the vague black-and-white object; the face with the strange red blotch on it; the filmed eye.

A quiver of panic twitched through all his limbs. Again he groped for the thing. He drew back his hand, back into the ribbon of misty light.

His fingers were smeared with red. The light strengthened. Now he recognized the face, the dead and lusterless eye so cynically fixed upon him.

Slayton! Dead! he stammered, recollecting.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Hardened against fear Arthur had become in the two years of his imprisonment, and proofed against all weakness of nerve or sensibility; yet the dawning horror of that apparition lying there before him, dead and blood-drenched on the library floor, came nigh to shattering his self-control.

He barely stifled a harsh cry. Stumbling back and away from the body, he collided with a chair, half fell to it, and subsided, quivering. His hands clutched the chair-arms. Shaking and horror-stricken, staring at the motionless thing there in the moonlit ribbon, he sat there stunned.

This first spasm of unreasoning horror lasted only a brief moment. No longer was Arthur the ingenuous, impressionable boy of other days. He had grown wise, resourceful, strong. Almost as the terror came upon him he fought it off again. Once more he mastered himself, and with quick aptitude began formulating plans for action under these dazlingly unexpected conditions.

A thousand questions assailed him. What had happened? Who had done this murder, and why? Where was the murderer now, and who might he be? Was he still in the house?

And Mrs. Slayton, what of her? Was she still living—or had she, too, met the same fate? Had the alarm been given? Was urgent peril near?

Useless to outline a hundredth part of the overwhelming problems now confronting him. Arthur faced them, reeling, yet full of fight. All he could be sure of now was just this: The fact that through some jest of Fate—just such another scurvy trick as the one which had first branded him a murderer and flung him into servitude—he had now been not only cheated

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of his heart's desire, revenge, but also stood in utmost peril of a fresh accusation which this time must inevitably land him in the electric chair. Arthur realized there was no moment to be lost. Slayton had escaped him. By a few minutes he had lost that for which his heart and soul had lusted. Now nothing more remained to be done. The only matter of importance was his own safety.

He advanced to the body, the knife still in his right hand, his blood-stained left at his side. A swift vision of the situation brought a grim smile to his lips.

"No alibi possible this time if caught here," he muttered. "As a situation, some situation!"

Again he stirred the body curiously with his foot. The face moved slightly in the moonlight; the eye seemed to be looking at him. Yes, there lay Slayton dead before him; but now he had lost all desire to spit on the carcass. Death, even in that form had suddenly invested the creature with a certain inviolable dignity. The helplessness of the arch-enemy—traitor, perjurer, and murderer though he was—formed a supreme appeal. Arthur shook his head.

"You win, damn you!" he said with a consuming bitterness.

He sensed the weakness of his fingers, and instinctively was about to wipe them on his rags, when caution stayed his hand. No; he was wiser now than once. Instead he stooped over and cleaned his fingers on the dead man's coat. Presently he would find the bath-room and wash himself with care.

No alarm as yet had been given. There might be a few moments' time yet for him to get his bearings. Nothing could be more ill-advised than for him to depart in haste without plans, ignorant of just what had taken place here. By all means he must wait a minute or two before retreating.

(To be continued.)

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