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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.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Four-and-twenty hours later, in the library of Walter Slayton's house at Oakwood Heights, Staten island, the last act in the cashier's life was coming to its culmination.

Seated at his desk, haggard, wan, and grim, the man was writing. A great silence reigned. No sound was audible save the ticking of the clock upon the mantle and the scratching of the nervous pen.

In front of him lay a tiny box containing the gray wig he had worn when he had murdered old Mackenzie, and an automatic pistol. A close observer would have seen it was the very same as that which two years before had sent the bullet crashing through Mackenzie's skull. Dr. Nelson after the trial had kept it as a gift from Roadstrand. Slayton had been instrumental in having Nelson called in consultation on the case of Knid Chamberlain. The case had proved most lucrative. Nothing more natural, then, than that the doctor had been willing to grant so slight a request as that of Slayton when he had asked for the automatic. Now there it was in front of him on the desk, blunt, competent and businesslike.

Slayton eyed it from time to time in pauses of his writing. Once he smiled. The sight of it seemed good in his sunken eyes. Maybe it brought him thoughts of rest and peace after two years of torture so acute that nothing in the Pit could equal it—who knows?

"Midnight," said he, nodding. "Midnight will be the time. I've got half an hour yet. Time enough to finish! Time enough!"

Then he went on writing. Carefully he wrote and well, weighing his words, making here a change, there an erasure. Under the vertical light from the hooded incandescent the ravages that fear and evil-doing had wrought in his face became terribly apparent. For months now, every time darkness surrounded the dead eyes of old man Mackenzie had seemed to stare at him, half open, glazed, hideous as he had seen them there that night in the bank by the light of the little electric flash-lamp that had fallen from the dead man's hand.

For months he had not dared sleep in a dark room. Feigning the nervous affliction known as skaphobia, in which a patient dreads the dark, he had had a tiny incandescent night light installed beside his bed; and always its burning filament had banished the fishy eyes of Mackenzie. Almost always—not quite. A few times those eyes had looked at him even in the light. They were most apt to lurk in corners, in dim corridors, in unexpected places, suddenly appearing—not reproachful, not angry, merely looking at him.

Slayton had been obliged to avoid going out at night on account of them. He had come to dread the walk from the station to his home of an evening. Certain peculiarities of his conduct, forced upon him by those eyes, had even started a bit of gossip going; not much, but still a little. Slayton was coming to be known as eccentric. Nodding. It seemed a kind of rough shack somewhat in disrepair, set down in the woods about two hundred yards from the river. In front of it the trees had been cleared away. At the rear a path

led to westward, probably to a road. The windows were all closely shuttered; but on one side one of these shutters had been pried loose, as if the place had been entered through the window.

Arthur pondered. This place was evidently some kind of a waiting or fishing camp. Probably it had not been used for a good while. Surely there could be no danger here. A thing seemed to be coming his way.

A few minutes later he was inside the shack. The place smelled damp and musty. A penetrating chill pervaded it, worse even than the cold of the open air. Save for a dim gray rectangle, where the blind had been thrown back, absolute darkness shrouded the room in which Arthur stood.

Crooping he explored. His heart beat rather fast; he breathed through his mouth as men will do under stress; his eyes, wide open, sought to pierce the gloom. No telling what peril might at any moment face him, unarmed, as he was, and alone.

The place contained little save some common furniture, a stove and a shelf with tin dishes. One, knocked down by his hand, clattered terribly on the floor, giving him a terrific start. For some time afterward he dared not move or even breathe deeply; but no harm had been done. Nothing happened. Nobody had heard the noise out there in the woods. Arthur, realizing the isolation of the place, felt vastly relieved, and now proceeded with greater confidence.

Could he find food there? Clothes? Anything of value? He would have given a great deal for even one match; but matches there were none to be found. A tin lamp without a chimney stood on the shelf with the dishes, and this, he found by shaking it, was half full of oil; but it only smoked him. Arthur, shivering there in the dark and cold, cursed the lamp and set it back on the shelf.

He explored everything for eatables, but discovered nothing. There were, however, some dirty dishes on the table, a carving knife with a nicked blade and a kettle on the stove with the remnants of some kind of porridge dried onto the bottom. Evidently food had been prepared and eaten here by somebody who had not taken the trouble to clean up afterward.

Mansfield made another round of the shack. On the walls he discovered fishpots and tackle, supported by nails. He came upon a door, opened it, and found another and even darker room. This on examination by his only possible means—his hands—turned out to be a sleeping-place. Two cots stood here with tumbled bedding half on the floor. Arthur's hopes revived. There might be clothing here!

Eagerly he investigated. He presently found a row of nails driven into the wall, but they were bare. His heart sank; luck was surely dogging him. The team-race sportsmen who evidently had used this place might at least have left some old clothes for him. He included them in the male-diction he had cast upon the lamp.

Moving away from these disappointing nails, he trod on something soft. He stooped, picked up the thing, and felt of it with intense eagerness. The joy he felt in recognizing the object surpassed almost any of his entire life. It was a coat!

Shaking with eagerness and shivering with cold, he returned to the window of the other room, and by the dim light from without examined the coat. It was a wreck, a ruin, tattered and torn; but still it was a coat! Arthur praised "whatever gods there be," and slipped the welcome rags upon his back. Then he hurried into the other room for more—if more there were.

body understood it but himself. Nobody else knew the truth—incipient madness. These eyes and old Jarboe's boundings—had they not been enough to drive anybody mad ten times-over?

No, it was not conscience that had ravaged Slayton in those two years. He felt no very deep pang of regret. A little, but not much.

The determining factor was and had always been fear—fear of exposure, fear of Jarboe's increasing extortions, fear of the Shylock's threats, fear of consequences in a few years at the outside in case Jarboe should not die and Slayton's continued thefts should be—must be—discovered. Fear of all these and other things; and, above all, fear of the dead man's eyes.

Slayton smiled grimly, nodding as he read what he had written. Something in his nature, some latent vanity perhaps, certainly a cynical quality of mind, perceived the tremendous sensation he was about to produce. The fact that he had misled and deceived a whole community, a State, one might almost say a nation—for the case had attained some national prominence—and that he had set law and justice by the ears, hoodwinked authority and conceived and carried out one of the most plausible hoaxes ever known, gave him a certain desperate satisfaction. Now, even in the face of death, he smiled.

"It was a big game while it lasted," he muttered. "And, now it's done, it's going to make a big sensation!"

Everything had befallen as he had planned it—everything save Jarboe's interference. Except for the accident of the wig, even that would not have come to pass. Well, that had been a scurry job of fate. Those six gray hairs clutched in Mackenzie's dead hand, had beaten him after all—those, and Jarboe's infernal intelligence.

He had played the game hard. He had found it not worth the candle. Sooner or later, he knew he must go quite insane under the various stresses. That would mean loss of mastery of the situation. Slayton intended to be master at all hazards.

There was only one way out, and he would take it. For that purpose he had sent his wife away. For that he had written the pages there before him on the desk. For that he had taken the automatic from its place in the top drawer of the chiffonier.

Despite all his cynicism, and all the cold-blooded, unemotional aplomb which constituted the keynote of his whole character, he could not now in this supreme moment put away the sick and gnawing fear that moment by moment was mounting on his soul. His eyes, hollow and blinking, followed the closely-written lines of the letter—the last he ever was to write. Even with the end of everything at hand, his methodical nature reasserted itself. Here he crossed a "t," and there dotted an "i." He was winding up his affairs and ending his life with well-calculated good order, just as he had always lived it.

The letter was to his wife. It said: November 15.

My Dear Janice:

This is my last letter to you, my confession and my statement of the very good reasons why I find life impossible. My death will not only free me, but will also set another sufferer at liberty. I refer to Arthur Mansfield, unjustly sentenced to life imprisonment through my activities following a crime committed by myself.

The case from beginning to end was a "plant," arranged by me and taken at its face value by all concerned. Mansfield's story was the absolute truth. That of the prosecution, based on materials arranged by me, was absolute falsehood.

Mansfield is innocent of that murder as a babe unborn. I killed Mackenzie, and by the time you read this I shall have paid for it with my life.

Five years ago I got into the clutches of a loan-shark, Christopher Jarboe. You can easily locate him and force him by legal means to testify to the truth of much of my story. He has known of my crime from the first. If this letter will not free Mansfield, Jarboe's evidence can; and I entreat you to have the State make use of it in doing justice to the unfortunate young man now in Sing Sing.

Jarboe entangled me to such an extent that I was forced two years ago to rob the bank of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in order to keep him from exposing my pecuniations and ruining me. Mansfield's bad luck brought him to our house that same night. You recall his story, so improbable and yet perfectly true. During the commission of the robbery Mackenzie discovered me—or would have had I not shot him. Following the crime, I arranged all the evidence to point to Mansfield.

Slayton paused in his reading to add a few more words of explanation in the margin. These did not satisfy him. He took another sheet of paper, and with great detail described exactly how he had planted all the evidence. This, he knew, would have

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the greatest weight in any action to free Mansfield.

When he had completed this and pinned the sheet to the letter he continued reading:

Only one piece of evidence confused the State, and that was the few white hairs found in Mackenzie's dead fingers. These constituted a grave peril to me. Let me now explain the mystery. I wore a disguise for the robbery.

Part of it was a gray wig—the wig that went with my costume for the Rosemount Club theatricals in 1913. In the bank I accidentally dropped that wig on the floor. Mackenzie picked it up. I shot him while he still held it in his hand. In pulling it away from him I unknowingly left a few hairs in his grasp. The puzzle that so vexed Dr. Nelson and Coroner Roadstrand is now clear.

In addition to all this I must explain that I discredited and ruined Sheridan, who was trying to defend Mansfield. I also wrote those anonymous letters to the Amalgamated Press, which helped turn public opinion against the victim. In fact, I engineered the whole thing. Through me a totally innocent man has been subjected to frightful punishment and anguish. In doing the least that I can do is to clear his name.

My dear Janice, I have wronged so many people—you, first of all, and Mansfield and his mother, Chamberlain and his daughter, Sheridan and others—in addition to having murdered on my soul and the lesser crime of grand larceny, that I spare myself the futility of any plea for pity or forgiveness. I imagine the only person really sorry to have me die will be old Jarboe, who has been royally blackmailing me for two years, forcing me to still further thefts and gradually driving me to a state of absolute desperation.

The change in my health and conduct you have noticed has not been physical but mental. There has been some remorse, but mostly fear. In dying I will try to be honest. Jarboe's exactions, thoughts of Mansfield and persistent hallucinations concerning the murdered man have combined to make life intolerable. I am glad and happy to be free.

Thank heaven we have no children to labor under this burden of disgrace. It will be hard for you to bear, but less hard than to have me living and disgraced, imprisoned, maybe electrocuted.

Yes, almost surely electrocuted. Exposure was bound to come sometime. I am only forestalling the executioner by taking matters into my own hands. In a way I am sparing you the greatest disgrace of all—that of being the widow of an executed murderer.

What I have been able to do for you financially I have done. My insurance policies are all paid up, and none can be invalidated by suicide as the time limit on all has passed. They will bring you approximately \$24,500.

You must keep this money. Do not let a misguided sense of honor induce you to give it to the bank. I now owe the bank \$217,000. Your note would be only a drop in the bucket. In dying I pay my debt. If you choose you can liquidate Mansfield's debt of \$1250, but I beg of you to do no more.

My last request is that you put this letter at once into the hands of the district attorney and insist on immediate action being taken to free Mansfield. I have no more to say. I am not skilled in literary effects, and shall omit them. All I want is to make my meaning clear.

I am the murderer. Mansfield is entirely innocent. In dying by my own hand I am paying my debt to you, to him, and to the bank as fully as possible. Let me atone in death for at least a part of the great wrong I have done in life.

Good-by.

Your husband, Walter.

The letter all revised and amended, Slayton put it into a long envelope, addressed it "To My Wife," and sealed it with care. The time was now growing short. Only a few minutes remained before midnight, the hour when Slayton had determined to pay his debt.

shot. So he must act at once, leaving no time for thought, for analysis, for fear, for hope.

Where should he put the letter now that it was written? At first the obvious answer was: On the desk. But this did not meet his approval. Mrs. Slayton would not return till the morning of the 17th. Meantime, somebody else might investigate. The letter would then inevitably fall into other hands than hers.

It might miscarry of its purpose. The thought occurred to him that he could mail it to her; but here two objections intervened. One, a slight chance existed that it might get lost. The other, it would give her a frightful shock away from home, and subject her to a large variety of disagreeable experiences while among strangers. Together, these objections decided him not to mail it.

Then, again, once he should leave the house and breathe the fresh night air, his determination might desert him. He might delay, postpone the deed, never again find nerve to do it. No, no! Definitely he would not mail the letter. But where then should he put it?

He thought a minute, and then nodded. Yes, that was a good idea. He arose, took off his coat, slid the letter into the inside pocket, and, going out into the hall, hung the coat in the little closet under the stairs—the very same place whence he had taken the old clothes for his disguise on the night of the murder.

Here, he knew, Janice would be positive to find it, and here it would probably be safe from other hands than hers. The arrangement was not perfect, but it would do.

Satisfied, he returned to the library and to his desk, where lay the black, ugly automatic.

At this same hour and minute a hungry and shivering but most determined tramp was making the last lap of the distance down the country road from the Oakwood Heights station to the cashier's house. Both hands were thrust deep in his pockets. The right gripped the handle of a knife there—a carving-knife with a nicked and rusted blade.

A coarse, woolen shirt, a ragged coat, and trousers grotesquely tattered did their best to keep him warm but failed. Pulled tight down on his head, a thoroughly ventilated old "dip" gave but mediocre shelter to a head otherwise unprotected; for this tramps' head had been lately clipped close, and now only a bristly stubble of hair covered its fine proportions.

In some ways the tramp seemed but an ordinary vagabond—one of the miserable bits of social flotsam cast up by the tides of civilization. In others, however, he seemed not true to type. His blue eyes, high and well-modeled forehead, the straightness of his nose, and the firm contour of his unshaven, bristling chin might have made an observer wonder how such a man, obviously well built and of unusual strength, should have come to take his furtive place in the army of the unemployed.

(To be continued.)

WEAK BOYS AND GIRLS

It is a mistake to think that anaemia is only a girl's complaint. Girls probably show the effect of weak, watery blood more plainly than boys. Delayed development, pale faces, headaches, palpitation, and feeling of listlessness, call attention to weak blood in the cases of girls. But many boys in their teens grow thin and "weedy" and have pimples on the face, showing that they have not enough blood. The anaemic boy is just as likely to become a victim of consumption as the pale, breathless girl with her headaches and worn-out look. Let the boy in this condition catch cold and he will lose his strength and his health becomes precarious.

To prevent serious disaster to those of the rising generation, let both boys and girls be given the new rich blood which Dr. Williams' Pink Pills are famous the world over for making.

When giving these pills watch how soon the appetite returns and how the languid girl or the weak boy becomes full of activity and high spirits. Remember that the boy has to develop, too, if he is to make a strong hearty man. Give both the boys and girls a fair chance to develop strongly through the new, rich blood Dr. Williams' Pink Pills actually make. You will then see activity boys and girls, instead of weakly children around you.

Dr. Williams' Pink Pills are sold by all medicine dealers or may be obtained by mail at 50 cents a box or six boxes for \$2.50 from The Dr. Williams' Medicine Co., Brockville, Ont.

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