

THE STANDING ALIBI OF H. STANLEIGH STORME

(By Wm. Hamilton Osborne.)

(Continued)

the next, and often doubled on his tracks. Suddenly he dashed around a corner. Then everything was still. They rushed around the corner in turn and found — nothing. He had completely disappeared.

They ransacked the neighborhood, and searched all the houses, but without avail. The burglar had escaped.

By the time they had finished their search, a man, footsore and weary, was walking in security some two miles away on the other side of town, his steps bent toward the Iroquois Club.

And as he walked he shook blood from his finger. "Good heavens," he said to himself, "how that bullet hurt!"

Of times in battle men are shot through their limbs, or even through the body, almost without pain. Sometimes they never know that they have been hit.

On the other hand, a stray bullet may clip a piece of ear or chop a finger off and cause excruciating pain. This man had been hit — painfully hit — but the bullet had merely clipped a small piece of flesh from the end of his middle finger.

The wound was not serious, but it had been painful — and had caused the involuntary shriek of anguish which he had emitted when the shot had taken effect.

The man thrust the injured hand into his pocket, and walked on in the direction of the Iroquois Club.

Meantime Burke and his men had kept the Iroquois Club well surrounded. They had watched there all night.

It was now after half past two in the morning. Still the man they were looking for had not appeared. But still they waited.

A policeman pacing slowly upon his beat passed the place where Burke stood half concealed.

"There's been a burglary up town," he said to Burke. "I just came out with the 20'clock squad and heard 'em talking about it."

"Not!" exclaimed Burke. "What, another one? Get out!"

"It's heaven's own truth," replied the man.

"Where was it?" inquired Burke.

"Up in the swell quarter," returned the other. "Family of the name of Dumont — lot of jewelry an'—"

The special caught the policeman by the arm.

"Dumont!" he repeated to the other. "Are you sure? Did they say Dumont?"

"Sure," answered the officer. "I heard 'em talking about it. I'm sure it was Dumont."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Burke. "Why—why, I was there tonight myself."

"That's where it was," went on the officer. "I'm tellin' you straight. Well, s'long. I got to go."

Burke himself had started away in the other direction.

"Well, s'long!" he responded. "I've got to go myself, for here comes my man now."

He had glanced toward the entrance to the club. A man came out.

The man stood for an instant under the bright light above the door. Then he descended the steps into the street.

He turned to his right and walked leisurely along. Burke and his men followed him.

As the man strolled away, he kept one hand, carelessly perhaps, concealed in the pocket of his coat — not as any man might do.

CHAPTER XI

The Police Investigation.

The Dumont robbery was the last straw.

The police department had been posted right and left by the press and the people, and it was even hinted that certain of the officers were in league with the gang of burglars.

It is due to the honesty of the force to say that they were innocent of the slightest information relative to the affair. They had tried their best to prevent the depredation, but without success.

Just as certain as they became unusually vigilant in one quarter, the burglaries burst out afresh in another.

Burke was their best man, and he was confident — or had been — that Storme was the guilty party. He had been instructed with the task of running him down. He had run him down as best he could.

The chief held a secret session at headquarters the morning after the Dumont affair. He called in the captains of all the precincts, and he also directed the attendance of Burke and his associates, and of the two officers who had been present at the time of the robbery.

They had not yet returned from the Dumont robbery.

He had suppressed from the morning paper any reference to the affair.

"Gentlemen," said the chief, "this is a serious matter. I propose to investigate it fully. The honor and integrity of this force have been attacked, and we are powerless to defend ourselves until we produce one or more of the members of this gang, and yield them up to punishment."

"I'm going to find out about this thing, if it takes a leg, and I'm going to begin right now. I want Andrews and Cassidy to step up here and tell their story."

They told the same tale.

Andrews was the officer on the Dumont beat. Cassidy was a round-up man. Their suspicions had been aroused the night before by the merest chance — the sudden lighting of Miss Dumont's room.

The illumination attracted their attention, and they distinctly saw the man in her room as he replaced his mask and leaped toward the light bulb on the wall. Prior to that they had not seen his face.

One of the men immediately moved to the rear of the house, mounted to the extension roof, and was about to enter the window as the burglar, a tall, well built man, dashed past him and leaped to the ground. They fired, and evidently hit their man, because along the line of chase they discovered drops of blood.

In their opinion they had wounded him painfully, and perhaps very seriously. And then he had disappeared.

They had done their best — and no man could do more.

"Now, look here," asked the chief, "did this man look like Storme?—you know the man I mean."

He scrutinized their faces carefully: he was not quite certain that the escape was altogether unavoidable.

"Well, sir," said Andrews, "As I said, we didn't see his face. But to tell the truth, Storme was the man that we were looking for—we had an eye out for him—and this man seemed to us to be about his build. We thought, sir, it was Storme."

At this juncture a man in plain clothes entered—a man with sunken eyes and weary frame.

It was Burke. He had not slept for thirty hours. He sank in an exhausted way into a chair.

"Where have you been, Burke?" inquired the chief.

Burke stepped wearily up to the front and stood before the desk.

"I'm dog tired," he announced with a smile. "I've been followin' H. Stanleigh Storme."

"What have you found out?" inquired the chief.

Burke shook his head.

"Nothin'—just nothin'," he replied. "Either we're away off or else he's dead on to us and is keepin' straight."

The chief turned a pair of suspicious eyes upon the detective.

"What the mischief do you mean, Burke?" he demanded. "Don't you know that Storme robbed the Dumont house last night?"

Burke started up as though shot.

"What!" he demanded. "What do you mean? Robbed the Dumont house? Never!"

"Do you mean to tell us," said the chief, biting his finger, "that he wasn't the man who did it?"

"Sure he wasn't," answered Burke. "Of course he wasn't."

"How do you know?" asked the chief.

"Well," replied Burke with a smile, "I ought to know. I saw Storme go into the Iroquois at about midnight last night, saw him take his place in the card room, and saw him sitting there all night till half past two next morning, saw him go home, and I've just now come from the Convent where he lives."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded the chief, "that you saw his face—saw Storme himself—in the Iroquois all night long?"

"I'll tell you," explained Burke. "I didn't see his face after he went in, but I saw it from his eyebrows up, and it was Storme's head all right, all right; and besides, the doorkeeper told me half a dozen times that Storme was there. He was there all right, all right, too. I'm sure of that."

The chief glanced uncertainly at the men before him, and then he addressed Cassidy one word.

"Did—did you see Miss Dumont in the room last night?" he asked.

Cassidy nodded.

"We did," he returned. "That's the reason Andrews climbed up. He was afraid the fellow might offer some violence."

The chief touched a button. An official entered.

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"You get a cab," commanded the chief, "and go up to Miss Dumont's house and bring her here. I'm going to have her down. She's the only one who can solve this mystery."

"I won't go up there where I'll be embarrassed. I'm going to have her down here. Tell her that she needn't be afraid to come. I'll see her in my room. We'll make it as easy for her as we can. But she must come—understand. It's for the good of the community. Bring her down at once."

Half an hour later another man entered.

"Miss Dumont is here," he announced.

The chief went in and saw her. He took Burke in with him — he wanted Burke to hear and see.

Miss Dumont was very pale — she seemed exhausted. The chief explained to her gently just why he had sent for her and just why this was a very important matter.

She replied that she understood and would render any assistance in her power.

"Did—did you get the man?" she asked—a bit anxiously, it seemed.

The two men answered at once. "No," replied the chief.

"Yes," answered Burke.

Burke's was the better answer of the two. He was talking no chances, even with Miss Dumont. He was not so sure but that she was trying to shield the burglar. The chief knew it as soon as he had made it. Burke, however, saw the necessity of reconciling the two replies.

"We've got a man," he responded glibly, "but not the man — although some of us think he is the man."

There was an added expression of interest in Miss Dumont's face.

"He's nothing but a tramp," continued Burke, "who had been injured in a row."

Miss Dumont breathed a sigh, perhaps due to exhaustion, perhaps to relief.

"Now, Miss Dumont," said the chief "tell us all you know."

She told him all there was to tell, from the time the burglar entered her window to the time that she saw him disappear in the gloom with Cassidy and Andrews at his heels, but she said nothing about the appearance of the burglar. Burke took quick note of that.

"Just describe this man, will you miss," he requested.

She described him—said that he was tall, well built, wore a black coat and a black hat, and in appearance was gentlemanly.

"You saw his face?" inquired Burke carefully.

He wasn't sure she had, but he was trying the experiment.

She hesitated imperceptibly, and then answered.

"I did. He wore a mask at first. Later he removed it. I—I turned on the light and saw his face, but only for an instant, for he sprang past me and broke the bulb. Then the police came, and he sprang out of the window."

"What did you say to the policeman at that time?" asked Burke.

"I—I forgot," replied Miss Dumont. "I called out something, and then I fainted."

"You saw the burglar well, then, for a short time. What did he look like?"

"He had a black beard," she replied, "and dark eyes."

Burke leaned across the table and looked her in the face.

"Miss Dumont," he said earnestly, gazing into her eyes, "do you know H. Stanleigh Storme?"

The color rose to her face as she replied.

"I do."

"Wasn't the man you saw in your room last night the man H. Stanleigh Storme?" Burke went on.

The girl raised her head and looked squarely at the man who asked the question.

Burke. "DO YOU KNOW WHAT A LIAR Burke?" he asked.

Her shock is heard.

"I think," resumed the chief, with an air of conviction, "I think the girl lied, for the first time in her life. She knows more than we think."

CHAPTER XII

AN Entry by the Front door, instead of through the side window.

The servants in the Dumont household had become timorous — the sensation of the night before had made them so.

The creaking of a stair or the whistling of the wind sent them into temporary spasms. They walked about the house in the broad daylight, each one casting apprehensive glances over their shoulder, fearing that something might spring out of the dark corners to pounce upon and seize them.

This fear was intensified as night came on. They went to the front door in answer to rings of the bell in solid phalanx—none would go alone, and none would stay behind.

Miss Dumont kept to her room.

"She's the only one that ain't afraid," they said down below, "and yet they say she saw the man, too. What d'ye think of that?"

"She's feelin' pretty bad, though, all the same," suggested the cook.

"Who wouldn't?" interposed the housemaid, "to lose all them jewels? I would myself."

"Lord save us!" ejaculated the cook. "Mercy on us, what's that?"

It was nothing but the ringing of the front door bell.

The phalanx — a regular formation by this time — started for the floor above. The servants peered through the glass door, unaware of the fact that though the man outside was invisible to them they were distinctly visible to him.

He smiled with amusement, and pressed the bell again. The maids jumped and shrieked and finally opened the door.

The man stepped in, and Miss Dumont's own maid stepped forward.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it is you, Mr. Storme. Come in. We weren't sure. We've been so much afraid since the burglars broke in last night."

Storme had been about to hang up his coat, but at the girl's last words he stopped and looked her in the face.

"The burglars!" he exclaimed. "Did—did they get in? Last night?"

The girl nodded.

"He got in," she said, "and he got all Miss Dumont's jewels, too, worse luck."

"Miss Dumont!" exclaimed Storme. "Is she—that is, was anybody hurt?"

"Nobody here, sir," returned the girl, "but they do say the man himself—whoever he might be—got shot. I hope he did for he deserves it."

Storme, to cut short a conversation which threatened to be long and tiresome—inquired if Miss Dumont were in.

She was, and the maid said she would announce his presence. She went upstairs to do it.

Storme scuntered into the little room just off the hall, where the fireplace was. He waited as he always waited, with his eyes fixed on the door.

"Miss Dumont says," announced the maid, "that she is not well tonight. She prefers not to come down stairs."

Storme looked intently at the girl. "Has—has Miss Dumont retired?"

come down just for a moment or two, he asked, in a strained voice.

"Would you mind asking her to?" the maid said no, she had not.

I—I particularly want to see her? Will you tell her that?"

The girl assented, and left the room. Storme waited once more.

Finally she came. Storme hardly knew her, she seemed so pale and ill. She halted on the very threshold and looked at him. Storme had started forward once again, but he checked himself.

"Helen," he said hoarsely, "Helen, what's the matter — for heaven's sake, tell me what is the matter?"

He had never seen such an expression upon her face before. What could it mean?

"Helen," he repeated gently, and with a note of pleading in his tone, "tell me what's the matter."

She put her hand up to the throat.

"Do you — do you ask me?" she queried. "After last night?"

"Last night?" exclaimed Storme uncertainly. "Last night?"

He acted for all the world like a man who had forgotten about last night.

"What happened—last night?" he queried. "What was it? Oh yes. I was called away. I had to go. I went somewhat too abruptly. I remember now."

As he spoke he looked straight at her. The light flared up and illuminated his face. And when the girl saw the expression there, she sprang forward and buried hers upon his arm.

"Stanleigh," she cried wildly, "then you are safe—safe. You are not hurt! They told me you were shot, that—"

She broke into a storm of tumultuous sobbing.

"You're safe! Safe!" she kept exclaiming.



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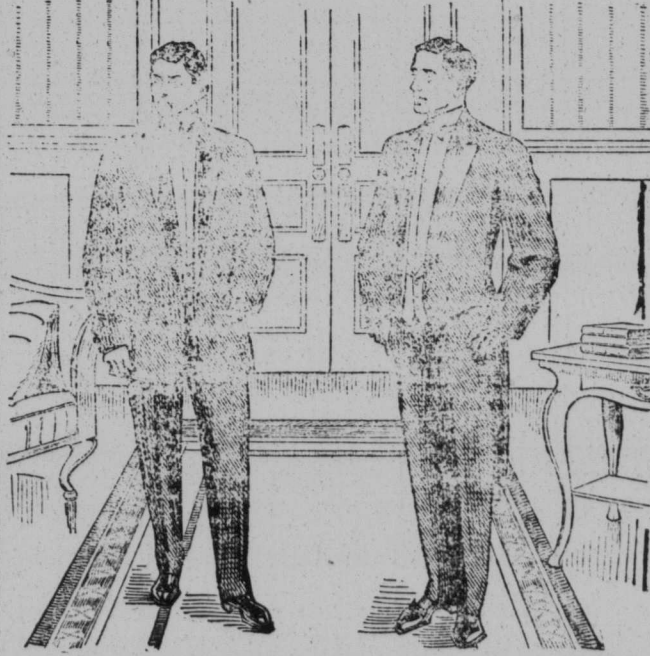
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