

# THE ALIBI

—BY—  
**Geo. Allan England**

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Within a convict was standing. A convict—the convict. The boy that he himself, Walter Slayton, had put there for the term of his natural life.

At first Slayton could hardly recognize him. The clipped head, the formless striped clothing, the wan and yellowed face—already tinged with the unmistakable marks of prison pallor—had altered Arthur almost beyond recognition. Mental anguish, wretched food, lack of exercise, and the deprivation of light and air had all taken their toll of him.

But his shoulders were still erect and strong. The fine, broad brows had not altered. The wide-set eyes were still the same. No, not quite—for now as they peered out at Slayton, standing there immaculate and trim; they glowered with a light the cashier never yet had seen there—a smoldering flame eloquent of hate that nothing short of death could ever satisfy.

For a pregnant moment the two men gazed at each other, while the guard looked on with only an indifferent interest. Life for him held far too many such scenes for them to possess any meaning. The very air he breathed was blended with human tragedies and sorrows past all telling.

Arthur gave no sign and made no sound. He simply stood there at the inner grille, did No. 3265, his fingers hooked over the wires, peering out at Slayton with silent hate. Slayton coughed nervously and glanced about him. His eyes could not meet Arthur's.

"What do you want here?" asked the boy suddenly, his voice trembling a little.

"My duty—compels me—"  
"Your—Christian duty, I suppose?"  
"My duty to my fellow man, my brother in distress."

Arthur turned toward the warden. "Have I got to listen to him?" he demanded. "On top of all I have to suffer here, have I got to see this fellow and hear his confounded hypocrisy?"

The guard shot him an ugly look. The "you" that Slayton had so wisely slipped to him was potent. "Cut it, cut it," he retorted. "You ain't such a much to throw up a holler against nobody, much less him!"

No. 3265 made no answer, because he knew that nothing he could say would possess any weight. Once more he peered out at Slayton silently. There fell a strange, tense quietude between these enemies, now so unqually matched. Slayton broke it.

"Arthur," said he in his most unctuous tones, "this is a most painful occasion, but highly necessary. It grieves me to the heart to see you here. But duty demands it. Where duty leads I follow. I am here to speak to you without animus or ill feeling."

"I cannot forgive you your crime. Only God can do that. But whatever wrong you have done me personally, whatever accusations you have made, and whatever violence you have inflicted on me, I can and do forgive." Arthur laughed—a shuddering and terrible laugh.

"You—forgive me?" he asked.

"I do," answered Slayton, feeling the sweat start on his forehead, although the air of the room hung dank and chilly despite the July heat without. "Fully and freely I forgive you. But that's not what I've come to talk with you about, Arthur. I'm here to ask you reasonably and honestly to repair what damage you can, and to make good whatever can be made good now."

"What do you mean, Judas?" demanded No. 3265.

Slayton blinked angrily, as if about to repel the epithet, but thought better of it and made no retort. Instead, adopting a meek, conciliatory tone, he answered:

"I mean just this, Arthur: Give back the money!"

"The—money?"

"Yes; the one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You can't restore poor old Mackenzie to life again, but you can make restitution of the stolen funds. The bank has felt the loss, Arthur; no denying that. In spite of it," he could not refrain from adding, "the directors have materially increased my salary and bettered my prospects. I am grateful, naturally, for this recognition of my services at the time of the—er—tragedy. I want to do my duty by the institution. I owe the bank a great deal, Arthur; a very great deal—"

"You're damned well right you do! You owe it one hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Swiftly the words shot across the gridded space, winged bolts of hatred.

"Eh! What?" stammered Slayton, his lean face puckering strangely.

"I said," repeated Arthur, "that you owe the Powhatan National Bank one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And I add that the man who killed Mackenzie with my gun is standing in front of me now. And on top of that, Slayton, I tell you that I'm going to get out of here some day; and when I do—when I do—look out!"

Slayton, gasping, turned toward the warden.

"You hear him?" he demanded.

"Sure I hear him! He's woody—buggy, you know! Must be to throw that kind of bull. Maybe a touch of the cooler might bring him out of it. He's liable to get it, all right."

Arthur laughed again.

"Put me in the cooler all you please," he retorted. "I'm giving you facts."

"Arthur!" cried Slayton, strangely shaken. "Your conduct surpasses every limit of tolerance. Mr. Chamberlain had intended to interest himself in your behalf, and so had I; but now—"

"Now you know that I know all about the inwardness of the case," interrupted the boy. "I've got the whole thing on you, Slayton. You got away with the money, you killed the old man, you framed me, and sent me up for life!"

"Safe now, aren't you? Safe, with me buried? Guess again! The story's not finished, Slayton. It's not done yet. There's going to be another chapter some of these days, and the ending will be different from anything you've doped out."

"I'll wait for it, Slayton! I'd wait fifty years to get my fingers on you, windpipe! So now you know what's coming. I've said all I'm going to. Get out and let me alone!"

The cashier holding on to the outer grille to steady himself, made no immediate answer; but stood there, pale as a ghost, with a look in his eyes—those blinking eyes that never held true.

"Arthur," he managed to say at length, while the boy still fixed a look of intense malignity upon him— "Arthur, my duty forces me to forego these slanders and overlook these accusations. Nothing that you can say about me can matter to the least. Your idle vapors are impotent to harm me. My only concern now is the recovery of those funds."

"I know your better judgment will not wish to see the bank hampered in any way, which must react upon—"

"Not a word about her! Don't you dare to speak her name, you skunk!"

"Upon Miss Chamberlain—Enid—as I was saying," persisted the cashier, smiling with cold malice. "Therefore, I beg you again, my dear boy, let us have the truth. Nothing can matter to you now. You are here, unfortunately, for life. You have done much evil. Do what good you can now; tell me where that money is."

Arthur pondered a moment, pressing his forehead to the grille. Slayton, meanwhile, regarded him with cold and cruel pleasure.

Suddenly the boy raised his head again.

"All right, Slayton! I'll tell you," he exclaimed, "if you'll promise to go then and get out of my sight—and not come back. Never come back here again; you understand?"

"You—you'll tell me?" demanded the cashier, surprised. "Ah, that's fine, my boy—that's fine! I knew

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you'd be reasonable. I knew you'd listen to argument!"

He smiled with a glint of teeth. Things were breaking well for him that day. Against all expectation Arthur was about to make a statement which would absolutely clinch the case and make Slayton's position forever secure. Just to get rid of him, thought the murderer, Arthur was willing to tell any falsehood, no matter how damaging to himself. I separate and hopeless, he was about to drive the last nail in his own coffin.

"Where is the money, Arthur?" queried Slayton, eagerly. "Where?"

"I don't know where all of it is," answered the boy, in a peculiar, strained voice that shook a little, as if by main force he was holding it back from a raging outburst of passion. "I can't tell you where it all is. But I know about a part of it."

"Part will be better than none, Arthur. Tell me! Where is it?"

"Well," said Arthur, slowly, "some of it has gone into those smart new clothes of yours, Slayton. Some of it is in your pocket-book there, I guess, and he jabbed a forefinger at the cashier. "Some you've probably sailed away. And the rest has most likely gone to square up money sharks and others that you must have got mixed up with before you made the break."

"Now you've got it, Slayton. You've got the answer. Keep your promise and get out of my sight! Get—out!"

Dazed by this smashing right-and-left attack, which crashed home on him with shattering force, Slayton stared for a long, silent minute at the boy's pallid face which showed through the grille, contracted in a grimace of hate and loathing.

Then, shaking his head, he turned to the guard.

"You hear that?" he queried. "No use talking to this man. He must be crazy!"

"Crazy is right! We'll soon cool him off, believe me!"

"No violence, I beg. The poor fellow's mind is affected. He needs kindness and attention."

The guard grinned significantly.

"That's our only treatment here, sir," he answered. "Kindness and attention is Sing Sing's middle name!"

"Take me out, please. I've had enough."

"All right, sir. This way, please."

As the door of the reception-room opened to let Slayton out, the voice of Arthur snarled after him!

"Don't forget! You owe me something—something that I'm coming to collect some day!"

### CHAPTER XXII.

Chamberlain heard Slayton's report on the interview that evening with infinite sadness and regret. The cashier, greatly shaken by the clear, voyant precision of Arthur's accusations—most dangerous in their possibilities—even though as yet believed by nobody—and by the threat he well knew Arthur would try to carry out if ever the boy recovered liberty, returned to New York in a state of extreme depression. Only one thing stood clearly forth: Arthur must at all hazards be kept behind bars. Every attempt to win a pardon, now in the distant future, must be undermined, combated and overthrown.

"You mean to say he refused to

give any information concerning the stolen funds?" asked Chamberlain, when he and the cashier had seated themselves with tobacco in the library of the president's house on Riverside Drive. "He wouldn't tell me anything."

"Not a word, not a word."

"H-m! That's bad, very, very bad. I'm afraid the loss is going to be total. I was hoping he might be willing to make some partial statement for his crime by restoring at least a part of the money."

"He isn't, and probably never will be willing to say a word. Perhaps it was a mistake to have me see him at all. He seems to entertain the most deep-seated antipathy for me. If you'd been able to go, perhaps—"

"No, no, no!" And Chamberlain raised a negating hand.

"I'm sure I couldn't have done a thing with him. He knows I believe him guilty. He probably figured that I've tried to turn Enid against him—which is perfectly true. I know he'd never talk to me. You, Slayton, have consistently befriended him. He owes you a debt of deep-post gratitude. If he won't tell you, then the money's gone forever."

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr. Chamberlain. Very, very much afraid you're right. But don't, I beg you, talk of gratitude in connection with that fellow. He doesn't know the meaning of the word. Instead of being grateful to me he'd like to kill me if he could. I tell you, sir, there's a hard, vicious type for you. An old, evil head on young shoulders."

"If ever a man got what he deserved it's Mansfield. Nothing saved me from assault and probably murder except a steel grill-work between us. You know how he struck me down at the bank. Well, he'd have killed me this morning right there in the prison if he could have got at me! There's the man you used to receive into your home, Mr. Chamberlain. There's the man your daughter's still defending!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" exclaimed the banker, much distressed. "How very distressing! You say he threatened you?"

"Absolutely! He swore to kill me if he ever could manage to get out."

"What? You won't say!"

"I do say! I can prove every word of it by the guard who stood beside me all during the interview. The fellow got so abusive I had to withdraw."

"Ts, ts, ts!" clucked Chamberlain with his tongue. "This certainly puts a still worse light on the whole matter."

He drew at his cigar and gazed on the cashier with wrinkled brows.

"H-m! What a viper I did cherish in my bosom, so to speak! I'm afraid we've all been very grievously deceived in Mansfield from the very beginning."

"Deceived isn't the word for it, Mr. Mansfield. The man is a criminal; from the word go. His father was a crook before him. He's of bad stock. Rotten, clean through."

"Yes, yes; of course. Odd though, how clean and fine he managed to appear."

"A finished criminal; very smooth, that's all," said Slayton. "One of the slickest propositions alive. In a way perhaps you got out of it cheaply. If he hadn't made this break and got caught he'd have gone on and on deceived you. He'd have inevitably continued hoodwinking your daughter. He'd have induced her to marry him."

"Then he'd have entangled you in ways too vast for imagination. He might have entirely wrecked the bank and got away with a million or two. And if you'd stood in the way he'd have shot you down like a dog—or maybe given you the more subtle treatment of a slow poison in your own house."

"Quite likely," assented the banker.

"Well, Slayton, there's a silver lining in every cloud. There's good in every evil. Perhaps this tragedy, after all, is for the best. Maybe it's saved the bank from destruction, spared my life and rescued Enid from a life of anguish and appalling disgrace."

"It's amazing at the smoke of his cigar. It's all for the best. It's shows us the duplicity of human nature. It's given us a chance to do our duty. Hard as it's been for all of us, especially for you—"

"It has been hard, Slayton!" interrupted the president, his eyes watering with sudden emotion—for senility was creeping fast upon him. "This affair has taken hold more deeply on me than I can possibly tell you. Especially Enid's sorrow and her uncompromising attitude of blind faith in that scoundrel, her—"

"You don't mean to tell me she still clings to him?" demanded Slayton, leaning forward with mock surprise.

The fact was perfectly well known to him; but it suited his purpose to pretend ignorance thereof.

"I'm afraid she does," admitted Chamberlain.

"In spite of everything? All these oceans of proof?"

"In spite of everything. Nothing has had the slightest weight with her. Not even what you've just told me would have any effect, I'm sure. She's formed a certain heroic concept of him that nothing can change—nothing whatsoever. Looks upon him as a martyr, a victim of some kind of a plot; has all kinds of fantastical vapors and ideas, you know."

He spread his trembling hands, palms outward, in despair.

"You don't tell me!" wondered Slayton with arch-hypocrisy.

"Yes, yes; it's the truth. Women are like that, you know, at times. They get an idea and worry it to death; hang on like a bulldog; nothing can ever make them let go. Enid is absolutely obsessed by her belief

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in Mansfield.

"And what can I do about it? Nothing, sir; absolutely nothing. She's of age; has her own independent fortune; is a free agent. I can advise, plead, appeal; but beyond that—nothing."

"Very unfortunate. I'm sure," agreed the cashier. "Too bad she's not a minor."

"Too bad, indeed. But she isn't, and I'm helpless."

The old man looked it indeed as he sat there in the huge leather chair, sucking feebly at his cigar.

"I've tried to get her to go South or West or over to Europe, but she won't stir. In spite of the fact that she's got downright nervous prostration and is a sick woman she still remains here. Clings to some sort of idea that somehow in one way or another something may yet turn up to free Mansfield. And—"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Slayton, starting.

"Claims the 'conspiracy' will yet break down, and—and all kinds of notions of that sort, you understand. I don't know, Slayton; I don't know what to do, indeed I don't."

He relapsed into silence. For a moment or two the men smoked, each peering at the other across the library table. Old Chamberlain shook his white mane deponently. His face, now much more deeply wrinkled than it had been six months before, drooped impotently. Slayton enjoyed the glimmer of tears in the old man's eyes. A keen, hard, malicious look of calculation came into his own.

He was thinking:

"Chamberlain can't last long at this rate. Even if he doesn't die he'll have to retire. I don't give him five years more at the outside. And then—a new president! Why not Walter Hayes Slayton?"

Slayton's terror of old Jarboe had probably caused him more acute suffering than any Chamberlain had experienced. Then, too, the cashier's continued thefts to meet the Slayton's demands had given him many a sleepless night, taken flesh from his bones, and put wrinkles in his face. Yet after all Slayton was a young man and could stand the gaff infinitely better than Chamberlain.

Fate might yet be kind. It might strike down Chamberlain and exalt Slayton. And once in the president's chair, Jarboe's leechings would no longer be serious—unless, indeed (the chill dread sometimes came upon Slayton), the blackmailer should raise his "insurance-rates" to meet the rise in salary.

All this and more passed through his mind as he sat facing the old man, smoking there in the library. And again the thought occurred:

"Jarboe is very old. Jarboe will die before long. The real and vital danger is Mansfield!"

Mansfield, at all hazards, must be kept in duration. Only through one agency might he ever be set free—and that was Enid.

Enid, then, at last analysis constituted Slayton's greatest peril. His prehensile mind, grasping this fact, turned it and analyzed it with precision. Something must be done at once to forestall any continued action on the girl's part in Arthur's behalf. In some way, at all hazards, her mind must be poisoned against him.

(To Be Continued.)

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