THE ALIBI

—BY—

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Next he tok one of the gloves—the right—and dabbled three of the fingers in the old man's clotting blood. He then loosened Mackenzie's coat and waistcoat and ripped open the old watchman's shirt. He took off his own right glove, put on Mansfield's and thrust the blod stained fingers in against the dead breast over the heart. Then he withdrew his hand, making sure the glove was leaving its mark.

This done, he replaced the boy's glove with his own, took the gloves and the revolver and prepared to descend to the basement of the bank-building. He had two doors to unlock before he could reach it, but he knew where Mackenzie always kept the keys hanging and so had no difficulty. Thus he soon found himself confronting the steam-heating plant, with which he now had business.

The fire in the furnace, banked by the janitor before that worthy man had departed for his home on Canal street, now glowered dully. Slayton opened the furnace door and tossed in the pages torn from the ledger. A considerable quantity of ashes fell out. With these he buried one of the gloves—the one with the blood on it—leaving only a bit of it exposed. He then threw the other glove in upon the red coals and watched it shrivel and blacken to a crisp. After this he tore up the paper with the cipher of the combination and burned it, all save three small fragments. These, he made sure, had some of the carbon-copied typewriting on them. He dropped them casually on the basement floor.

Then he threw the revolver with which he had shot Mackenzie— the revolver that belonged to Mansfield—over behind some ash-barrels. He pondered the whole train of evidence, smiled, nodded, and returned upstairs.

"It will do, I guess," he judged. "There's no flaw in it anywhere that I can see. it will do."

He now made ready to depart for his home at Oakwood Heights. All at once a thought struck him. One weak link in the chain might be fatal. And he had just realized that there existed one such link among those he had so carefully forged.

Where had Mansfield got the cipher with which to open the safe?

In this frame-up the possession of that cipher was going to possess great weight—or rather proof that the paper had been in Mansfield's hands. Slayton's claim, of course, would be that he had kept it locked in his upper right-hand desk-drawer, which it had never left. If Mansfield had got hold of it the boy must have forced the lock. Very well, then; obviously that drawer must have its lock forced.

But Slayton had no tools with which to force it, and time was growing terribly short. Only a few minutes for action still remained. If he should miss the 2.55 boat to Staten Island he could not regain his home, and he would have to appear at the bank in new clothes just purchased. That circumstance alone would throw suspicion on him. It was imperative that he reach home! Not a minute was to be lost.

That meant that he could not return to the boiler-room to look for tools. He must use whatever he could find.

Slayton swept his light over Mansfield's desk again. A steel letter-opener was lying there; a little tool with "A. M." rudely scratched on it. He caught it up, returned to his desk, unlocked the upper drawer, and inserted the point of the steel tool in the lock. There he broke it off short. He then dropped the broken opener into the pocket of a coat that hung on a hook near the assistant bookkeeper's desk—a coat belonging to that bookkeeper, a man named Holmes.

The last step had now been taken, the last bit of evidence rendered conclusive. With a rather extraordinary finesse Slayton had even made it appear that Mansfield had tried to lay the blame on Holmes.

He chuckled to himself, rubbing his smooth hands together. Rather neat he thought the arrangements. Rather phenomenally neat, indeed!

An idea suddenly occurred to him. Unless the usual "O. K." were rung in on the watchman's alarm-system the police might become suspicious and send over an officer from the nearest precinct station-house to investigate. Slayton accordingly rang in this alarm, puncning the clock as Mackenzie would have done. He nodded and smiled with satisfaction at his extraordinary keenness.

He now resumed his disguise, made sure he had left no incriminating traces, and finally let himself noiselessly out of the bank after having once more turned on the incandescent in front of the safe and put up the shades again. Under the shelter of the doorway he listened keenly, peering about for any possible danger. He saw none, and so issued forth boldly on to the sidewalk.

Thus with one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in his inside pocket and shielded by a profound conviction that his own personal safety was secure, he proceeded confidently homeward. He made no effort to avoid anybody. The few pedestrians afoot hardly vouchsafed a glance at him. He passed a couple of policemen, one on Cedar street and one near Bowling Green, but neither one molested him.

And the glimmer of the harbor, with here and there a dim-eyed moving blur of red or green, gave him a strange sense of liberty, of vastness, of escape. Freedom now from debt and hounding and threats; freedom from the long years of subterfuge and deception; freedom from Jarboe's prying investigations—all had been won by one bold coup and by one single shot. He could have run and shouted for very joy! Now he could pay off Jarboe's note of eighty-four thousand dollars and all his othertwenty-odd thousands of obligations—all—all—and more too!

No sense of guilt and fear rose up in him now, as he reached the ferry and made his way aboard. Leaning over the rail, watching the black water that asked his age-old questions, never-answered, he felt no drawings of remorse. The dead eyes of the old man gazed not at him, searching out his soul. No; calm, cool, resourceful, he succeeded in shutting out all such disquieting memories and introspections. Other things more vital still had to be thought out; and above all surged and soared the glory of that new and splendid exultation, Freedom!

Slayton settled himself in the men's cabin, lighted a cigar and plunged into thought. He deeply pondered the inevitable events now impending. For a time he weighed the possibility of incriminating Mansfield still more by forcing the boy in some way to leave New York at once. When the young chap should appear at the bank in the morning, all unconscious of the charge now certain to be raised against him, some slight possibility might exist that he might succeed in freeing himself. He might conceivably prove an alibi. The finger of accusation might turn toward Slayton himself. If the cashier could only concoct some scheme which would force Mansfield to run away, that would set the keystone of proof in the arch of assumption.

But no; Slayton decided this would be quite impossible. Moreover, Mansfield was of fighting stock. He would not run, in the first place; and in the second he was no quitter. He would fight. Even if he could be made to leave New York once he should be accused, he would hurry back to face the charge and see the thing through. And that, in itself, might react in his favor. No; decidedly no; there could be no advantage in trying to stampede him.

The boy must be let alone to walk into the trap that had so cleverly been baited for him. Only by absolutely overwhelming him with masses of damning evidence could he be beaten down. Well, Slayton would overwhelm him, that was all.

The cashier realized, with a thrill of anticipation, how perfectly all the lines had been laid. He felt content to await the outcome of the morning, confident that not one chance in a thousand existed that Mansfield ever could get clear.

Thus he returned home to the dark and deserted house in Oakwood Heights, unseen, unnoticed and secure. The hour now was just a little after 3.30 a.m. First he took off and hung up the old clothes in which the murder had been done, making certain no spot or touch of blood had sullied them. He then wrapped up his disguise in its original paper and locked it into its accustomed drawer in his desk. He burned a number of incriminating papers relative to his indebtedness—now on the morrow to be wiped out.

Finally he sat down at his desk and wrote a letter to his wife, taking good care to date it "Wednesday, Midnight," and to say that young Mansfield had been down to see him. Slayton mentioned nothing of the boy's errand, but said he had just gone back to town on the last train. As a bit of subsidiary evidence this letter—calm normal, familiar, betraying no slightest hint or sign of nervous perturbation—might have considerable value.

Slayton went out and posted this in the box on the corner. Then he returned and went to bed as if nothing wnatever had happened. He took good care, however, to set his alarm-clock so that he should run no risk of oversleeping in the morning. Should anything prevent his putting in an appearance at the bank at his accustomed hour, serious results might ensue.

Resolutely putting away all thoughts of the murder now blackening his soul, he slept. His self-control surpassed belief. With that fresh crime but a few years old, he slumbered quietly, soundly, restfully.

But Mansfield did not sleep. Burning as with fever, haggard and pale, haunted with terror, he passed a night of fear, remorse and agony in his boarding-house room.

Would Slayton really help him? Mansfield asked himself a hundred times. Would he keep the shameful secret? Or would he crush him, after all?

Would ruin be Mansfield's portion—ruin and the loss of name, of future, of good repute, of Enid, of all that made life worth the living? The bitterness of the Pit he plumbed that night, and drank the dregs of pain.

Thus he, innocent of the greater wrong that soon was to be laid on him, agonized in the long hours of that fatal night. Thus Slayton, his hands reeking with blood-guiltiness, slept calmly on.

And as the one kept vigil and the other slept, old Man Mackenzie lay silent, rigid, terrible, on the bank floor, his dead eyes glazed, his limbs now stiffened in the rigor mortis, his blood now clotted in a back poll beneath his shattered head.

CHAPTER VIII.

The cashier was awakened, a bit dazed and logy, by the clattering of the alarm. The first shock of remembrance startled him rather severely; but, strong of nerve and will, he presently mastered his emotion and in a businesslike manner began preparing for the inevitable ordeal.

Like an actor making up for a difficult role, he set about preparing himself for the part he must act in the drama to be staged at the bank. His make-up in this case meant one of the most exacting of all dramatic tasks—the assumption of an absolutely natural appearance and demeanor under hard stress.

A cold bath, followed by a vigorous rub-down, a shave, and clean linen throughout, made him fit and keen. At his accustomed hour, absolutely normal, so far as the outer man was concerned, he set out briskly for town. Sixty-five of the one-thousand-dollar bills he left in his bedroom, securely hidden behind a picture, against any possibility of the house being searched. He knew that, tucked in between the thin board backing of the picture and the print itself, they would be absolutely safe. In his pocket he carried eighty-five thousand dollars, with which to meet the note he owed Jarboe. Whatever happened, that matter must be settled at once.

On his way to the Oakwood Heights station he met Ashley, of the International Life. He walked along with the insurance man, talking on indifferent matters. With satisfaction he noted that Ashley observed nothing at all unusual about his speech or manner. He could tell positively that he was attracting no attention. Inwardly he congratulated himself on his success so far.

The trip to the city passed without event. He breakfasted at the restaurant he usually patronized when his wife was away, and simulated interest in the paper he forced himself to read—the paper that as yet contained no news of the murder.

As he was leaving the place, cigar in mouth, the first real blow went home on him. Only with difficulty could he hold his composure. The nasal cry of that newsboy on the corner: "Bank Murder! Bank mur-der!" shot a bolt of apprehension through his soul. He felt suddenly as if everybody were looking at him, pointing at him, mocking him and mouthing one terrible word:

"Murderer!"

The thing was, of course, an illusion, an absurdity; nobody in the world knew anything of the truth. He, Walter Slayton, was perfectly and absolutely safe. And yet—and yet—

A fine perspiration began to prickle out all over him. His eyes grew dim for a moment; he turned a sickly leaden color. He realized now, for the first time, just what he was facing. The murder was known, of course; he knew it would be known long before he could reach the bank. The papers had it already, in their special editions. Already reporters, police, detectives would be swarming. Already there would be a morbid, pushing crowd around the place where he—Heaven help him!—must thrust his way in, acting that part of his, always acting that part, for very life's dear sake.

And at realization of all this, now definitely borne in on him, a kind of cosmic weakness seemed to take possession of him, a loosening of all his bones and joints and muscles, a disintegration of the soul, a terrible, sick fear—stage-fright, in a word; only on how vast, tragic and fatal a scale;

As a drowning man fights to grip some support, so the cashier fought now to recover his nerve and strength. Life and death it meant; no question about that. Once the very slightest act of his should awake suspicion, two and two would be put together and he would be watched. Detectives, police, experts would fasten on him as weasels fasten on a rat; and all the complex, potent machinery of science, of chemistry, of blood-analysis— things terribly dreaded by the layman, who overestimates their possibilities — would be used to drag him down to death.

In a second's glimpse Slayton saw how crude, after all, his "plant" had been. Or so it now seemed to him. Once the great, steady eye of investigation should turn on him he knew he would be lost.

Could he, guilty, compete in the appearances of innocence with the boy? He knew he could not. He understood that once any charge was made against him he must break and wither under it.

A terrible fear and hate of Mansfield was born in him. He feared and hated those clear blue eyes, that healthy, normal face, those manful, brave voice and inflection of the voice. Everything about the boy, he felt, would cry out: "Innocent!" whatever might befall. And should the boy and he be weighed in the balances, one against the other, only too well he knew the outcome.

But then this thing must never come to pass. No suspicion must arise! The charge against Mansfield must come with such sudden and crushing force as to sweep all before it like a bayonet-charge, leaving no force behind it to attack him, Slayton.

Yet could all this be done? The cashier, shaking now, seemed lost and sunk in boundless abysses of despair. That one blow, that shock of the cry: "Bank murder! All about the Powhatan Bank murder!" had in a flash shot him to pieces with its terrible connotations of what he now must face.

Slayton stood there as if transfixed, unable to go ahead, powerless to move. One or two men glanced at him curiously. His lips twitched in a sickly smile. He understood perfectly well that if he remained there much longer he would become conspicuous and awaken comment. Yet he could not move. And still the newsboy's raw yell of "Bank murder!" pierced his ears. Slayton could have smitten the urchin down and trampled him. This boy here was flinging Slayton's crime to the whole wide world—and must he, the murderer, hear the horrid accusation?

A film passed before his eyes. He put his hand out blindly, grasped a railing and steadied himself. Then by a supreme effort of the will he walked on up Broadway. And ever that cry: "Murder! Murder!" rang in his soul and other cries re-echoed it: the whole city seemed howling "Murder!" at him. "Murder!"

Cursing, he turned aside and entered an office building to get out of the glare of daylight. The light, he thought, was what distressed him most. Everybody could see him so plainly in the light. An obsession got hold of him that there was a spot of blood on his right hand, inside the glove. He knew that there was no blood there, but still he could not convince himself of that fact.

And he dared not bare his hand to look at it. For even in that half-lighted hallway he felt that somebody would notice and interpret the act. Torture wrung him between fear of looking at his hand and burning eagerness to look. He swore again, and stood there trembling and panic-stricken.

The hallman, he now felt positive, was observing him with curiosity and undue interest. He turned to go again. Just as he reached the revolving doors a newsboy thrust a paper in his face.

"Paper boss? All 'about th' bank moider!"

Slayton caught a glimpse of huge black type with other type below in vivid red—the paper then, was printed in blood? The curse he launched against himself for his folly in entertaining such a vagary made the newsboy stare.

"Gee! Some nut, hey?" muttered the boy, as Slayton emerged once more on the street—the merciless, pitiless all-seeing street, Broadway, under the light of a pale November morning.

The cashier realized that he had not yet mastered his fears. But he must act; he must move; he must keep going. Only in motion now could he find safety and a chance to pull himself together.

(To be continued.)

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