

THE STANDING ALISH OF H. STANLEIGH STORME

(By Wm. Hamilton Osborne.)

(Continued)

thought and thought. Outside in the garden, concealed by the shrubbery, that same man, whose name was H. Stanleigh Storme, stood a man — an unseen man.

He was a part of the chaotic blackness of the night. He only knew now he came to be there, or whence he came.

He was motionless and invisible. His skin may have been white, but if it were it did not show, for he wore a black mask and dark colored gloves.

His clothes were black. His coat collar was turned up. Miss Dumont did not see him.

This man had a keen ear, and he was using it to the best advantage. He was waiting for absolute quiet within the house. And when that quiet reigned, he waited many minutes longer before he stirred.

Finally he made an imperceptible movement, and somewhere, within his apparel a small bell struck the hour. He sighed with relief.

"I'll try it now," he exclaimed softly to himself. But still he did not move.

"Let me see," he mused. "I want to get this straight. I must make no mistakes. From what I have learned, the thing is safe. There are six people in the house."

He checked them off on his fingers as he spoke.

"The girl, the old lady, the man, and three servants. The three servants are on the upper floor, but they sleep, and they don't count — they never do. The man is on the ground floor — that eliminates him. The old lady in the front room — she's too far off to be dangerous.

"That leaves no one but the girl to face — and if she hears me, why then — I can get away in time, at any rate. This thing seems safe — safer than many others. It's worth trying, and I'll try it. Here goes."

There was an open space of eighteen feet between the shrubbery and the house. The man, who up to this time might have been a shadow or a tree, now disappeared from view beneath the bushes.

An instant later he emerged from the protection of the leaves. By means of some clever burglar's trick, he wriggled, half prostrate, across the open space — he was a passing shadow, a bit darker than the others, nothing else.

Once across he became a portion of the house — he became again unseen.

This man did nothing at random — he did not reckon beyond host. He had made himself carefully acquainted with the details of the job before him. He was an expert in his line.

Night after night he had lurked in the vicinity of this house, alert and wide awake to everything that went on. He knew now all about the outside and all about the inside of the house; he understood the habits of the occupants.

He had determined the exact location of his booty; if surprised, he knew just which way to run. He was prepared for all emergencies.

Outside a policeman swung along with easy gait. He stopped and peered a moment into the shrubbery and then passed on.

The man alongside the house breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly he shook with uncontrollable but silent laughter.

"I presumed," he remarked softly to himself, "that Burke and his gang through."

Then he started in to work. In five minutes he had forced a cellar window. He was — Stanleigh Storme — Senior No. 3.

Having done this, he crept into the house and dropped to the cellar floor, closing and fastening the window behind him.

Once inside, there was no trace of him or his work left without. All that he had to fear now were the occupants of the house.

"This is a cinch," he muttered under his breath.

But not so much of one as he thought. He had to break an entrance through three doors before he stood upon the ground floor. Once there, however, he felt his way cautiously to the pantry where he knew the butler slept.

The door was wide open, and a gas jet in the room was turned down low. Loud snores proceeded from the bed. The butler lay upon his back, his mouth wide open. The man with the black mask was pleased to note that much.

It is said that the chloroforming burglar is a myth — or, if not a myth, a failure. Chloroform gas and stifles — it is bound to wake its victim.

But the man in the black mask

knew his business. He took all chances, because of this fact.

He was ready for the kasp, the cough, the gurgle — he anticipated the fact that his victim would wake, listening carefully to the respiration, he crasped his arm by the throat and time there was an explosion of air and sprayed the vapor down his throat as he received his grasp.

There was a second — there was a third — but the butler was in such a state of unconsciousness that the action of the man in black, the struggles, the hand made his fainter, and the man on the bed succumbed.

For ten minutes the burglar kept his chloroform can in place over the other's face, and then gently magnetized him and tied him hand and foot to the bed where he lay.

Then he softly stole upstairs. Every bedroom door was locked. The recent burglaries had made every body timorous.

"It's just as well," he laughed to himself.

He carefully secured each door from the outside with ropes tied to the handles in such manner that it would be impossible, by the exercise of ordinary force, to open them at all.

At each door he listened carefully, but heard no sound. Then he crept stealthily to the rear hall window and stepped out upon the extension roof.

A rap upon the flags outside startled him. It was nothing, though, but a roundman on his rounds. The man on the roof felt perfectly secure, for he was unseen from the street below.

Without a sound he crept warily across the roof and paused just before he reached the farthest window. He fumbled once more in his waistcoat, and the mysterious little bell tinkled again.

"I must hurry up," he told himself, "for in just an hour I'm due to leave the club."

He laughed noiselessly, and then stepped to the open window and raised the mosquito bar.

Then he disappeared within.

CHAPTER X

Miss Dumont Solves a Mystery. Helen Dumont had not retired upon the departure of her guests. She sought her room and threw herself into a large chair facing one of the two side windows.

She was in no mood to sleep. The night was close and sultry. But there was something else that made her wakeful, and prayed upon her mind. "What can it mean?" she kept repeating to herself, "what can it mean?"

Yes, there was no mistake about it. Once more she scanned the three letters. They were in the same handwriting, each one of them.

She read and re-read them. There was nothing in them that appealed to her. All were cold and formal.

The first two to herself, mysterious as they were in text, contained no hidden word of endearment, nothing which she could call her own. And why was it she asked herself, that this man, who had thus come into her life — why was it that he clothed himself in mystery?

Yet she still had faith in him — or would have but for this last strange note.

Why should he write a note to himself, to call himself away? Why had he done that? What was it all for, any way?

The devil, doubt, crept into her mind and possessed it, until in moving the small lamp she caused its rays to fall upon a photograph of Storme that stood upon the table.

She gazed at it eagerly and looked longingly at it. It was a good face — the face of a man of honor and of honesty, or at least so it seemed to her.

She swept the letters into a drawer, and kept her glance fixed upon the portrait. And as she looked, tenderly she bent down and kissed it.

"I believe in you, H. Stanleigh Storme!" she said.

And then she extinguished the light, and sank once more into her place by the eastern window.

Suddenly she heard a noise in the hall without. It was the noise of a man creeping stealthily — at least so it seemed to her.

She went to her door and listened. Then she unlocked it and threw it open. "Who is there?" she called.

There was no answer. And then of a sudden she saw what it was.

A slight breeze had sprung up, and the curtain of an open window in the hall was rising and falling with the wind. That, she reasoned, must have been the noise that she had heard.

She smiled at her fears, and shut

and locked her door again, and she more resumed her seat. How long she sat there she did not know.

It is said that fishermen mesmerize themselves by watching a cork bob up and down upon the subtle wave — and that the heavy hours pass almost like minutes with them. Miss Dumont sat in her room in the dead of night, wide awake, and yet dreaming day dreams.

She forgot time and the hour — and forgot herself. She sat awake and open eyed, but she saw nothing immediately about her.

Her thoughts were upon herself, and Storme.

Suddenly she came to herself. What was it that had startled her again? She looked hastily around and tried to collect her thoughts. The air had become chill, and she shivered.

But she did not move. She did not dare — she could not stir. For there, at the northern window, was a human hand, carefully, stealthily, noiselessly raising the screen that retarded entrance.

Miss Dumont would have spoken if she could, but her voice failed her. She would have sprung to the door, but her limbs seemed paralyzed.

For at the window, that which had been a hand became an arm, and the arm lengthened rapidly into the figure of a man, who leaped silently, subtly, stealthily, into the room — the figure of a man in a long black cloak, with a black mask — a man who seemed part and parcel of the night itself.

Suddenly across the blackness of the room there shot a gleam of light. It issued from a lantern in the hand of this silent figure.

Stupidly she watched it play across the bed. Then there was darkness once again.

The dark figure moved silently away from her, and towards the chiffonier.

"This room," it muttered to itself, strange, I thought —

The man had not flashed his light in the corner where the girl was sitting. He had thought to find a sleeper on the bed.

He must now have concluded that the room was empty, for he became less stealthy in his movements.

The man moved her and there with certainty and rapidly, and never slipped or stumbled.

Assured apparently that he was alone, he raised his hands to his head and with a little click unfastened the mask which concealed his features.

The girl sat speechless and motionless. She did not stir.

The man once more flashed his light but this time directly upon the chiffonier.

He was looking for valuables — that was clear. He first stripped the top of everything that lay in plain sight — among them the jewels that Miss Dumont had removed that very night. Then he opened each drawer, and with deft fingers examined the contents.

And as he worked, each jewel that he appropriated in turn sparkled in the strong light from his lantern. Every jewel that Miss Dumont possessed was in that chiffonier, and the burglar made a rich haul.

But still she did not move.

Suddenly he turned to the dressing table. He opened a drawer. His light fell upon three letters lying loose within it.

They were the three letters written in the handwriting of H. Stanleigh Storme.

He glanced over the first two carefully, and laughed as he read them. "They were wise precautions," he remarked to himself.

He started when he saw the third. "Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "what a fool — what an idiot — to leave that here." He placed it with a quick movement in an inside pocket of his clothes. And then he turned once more to his work.

But as he did so, the light from his lantern shone full into the mirror that stood reflection shone full into his face.

"Henry!" he cried a faint voice, issuing from the glass.

The man turned in the direction of the voice. He found his light upon the girl, and for the first time saw her.

He started in surprise. But he recovered himself.

"You called some one," he said in a well modulated voice. "Is there any one else in the room?"

The girl did not answer his question.

"Henry!" she exclaimed again, in an agonized voice.

The man took a step towards her. "Whom do you call?" he demanded calmly, but in a low voice.

The girl, by a heroic effort, regained full possession of her faculties. She stepped quickly to the wall and turned a button. The room was flooded with electric light.

"I called you," she replied, facing him. "I called Henry Stanleigh Storme."

The man looked at her stupidly. He stared widely.

He looked as a man does who steps from darkness into light. He stood there gazing at the girl uncertain.

"My name," he responded, "is not Henry Stanleigh Storme."

He said it in a compressed sort of way, as though he were confronted by a novel situation.

And the girl kept looking at his eyes. What was there about them that made them look so peculiar — that made the man look as though he had just wakened out of sleep.

An ordinary observer would have said that he was dazzled by the sudden light. Perhaps that was all there was to it — that was more than likely so.

But the girl, agitated as she was, jumped to another conclusion. She said to herself that the man before her was asleep — fast asleep. That explained all.

The man did not move. He still stood regarding her stupidly.

She sprang to the table and picked up the photograph of H. Stanleigh Storme. The man watched her for an instant, saw what she was doing, and then suddenly readjusted his mask to his face, leaped toward the electric bulb and smashed it.

Then all was dark. He moved stealthily toward the window.

He made no attempt to touch the girl. He half suspected what was in her thoughts, and knew perhaps that he was safe.

He reached the window and placed one foot outside. But as quickly he withdrew it.

For there, dimly outlined in the darkness, he saw the head of a uniformed policeman peeping carefully above the roof.

The burglar, once more within the room, and now regardless of the presence of the girl, stepped hastily to the inner door. He would make his exit by another way.

He hastily unlocked it, and tried to throw it open. But he was foiled by his own petard.

His rope outside was fastened to the knob, and the door would not yield. He stepped to the eastern window and looked out.

On the lawn below was another officer standing motionless with something glinting in his hand.

The burglar swore beneath his breath. He halted for a moment and debated with himself.

Then stepping to the foremost of the eastern windows, he put out his head and let forth a blood-curdling scream — a scream that might have been a woman's, so shrill was it in its intensity.

The attention of the officer below was attracted to that window. The burglar immediately dashed out through the northern window upon the extension roof, and brushed aside the officer who was prepared to make an entrance there.

He leaped and sprang to an arbor at the back and jumped to the ground.

The officer fired a shot in the air. "Halt!" he cried in a loud voice.

The burglar laughed a mocking laugh and sprang upon the low wall, cleared it, and disappeared. But as he did so the officer took aim and fired.

The shot was followed by the shriek of a man in agony. The bullet had reached its mark.

But the burglar, though he shrieked with pain, never halted for an instant. He sped on his way.

The officer kept on firing. Then he was startled by the faint scream of a woman.

"Don't — don't shoot that man," pleaded the girl in the window. "Don't shoot him. He's not himself. He's not awake. He's fast asleep. Don't shoot."

Fortunately for her, the officer cared but little of this. His duty was paramount.

His fellow officer was already peeling after the culprit, and the man on the roof lost no time in following.

The girl's voice trailed off into incoherence, and she slipped down, sliding to the floor. The household was aroused, only to find that the officer's duty was to the man in agony, and not to the girl.

The neighborhood was aroused, and came to their relief. The butler was found just waking from his stupor. Everybody was scared to death.

Away down the street the burglar made good use of his heels. If he had been asleep, he certainly had woken up, for he flew like the wind.

For a while the officers kept sight of him, but finally they lost him. They heard his footsteps, however, and followed on.

He dashed up one street and down

(To be continued)

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