

THE ALIBI

—BY—

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"But so far as the murder goes, that may have been done on the spur of the moment in a pinch. The old watchman probably discovered him unexpectedly—and got killed, that's all. The premeditated murder charge won't hold. It may even have been a case of self-defense. We don't know—yet."

"I see," assented the cashier, lighting his cigarette. You men fairly make my head whirl with your reasoning. I know I'm breaking the rules and setting a bad example to smoke here; but, confound it, in a case like this—"

He turned to Sheridan. "We've seen enough, I guess," he judged. "Don't you think so?"

"More than enough," assented the other. "I think we ought to have this taken away. Mr. Chamberlain would never get over it if he had to see it lying here."

"Right! Better take it now. I understand all you've shown me, and can testify to it if need be. So can Sheridan."

"Of course I can," affirmed the teller. "All right. Let's clean things up here."

"Very well," said Roadstrand. "And after that we'll look at two or three other interesting bits."

He summoned the policeman who stood near the door and gave a few curt orders. Presently, while the various employees, isolated and interned at their desks and in their cages, watched with silent awe—with now and then a hateful glance at Mansfield—a couple of policemen with a stretcher came in, clumping heavily over the tiled floor.

Two minutes later, under the white woolen blanket, Old man Mackenzie had forever left the bank, his duty done, his story at an end, and all his debts fully paid. The caker crowd about the doors experienced a momentary thrill at sight of that stark figure. Then the stretcher with its light burden was shoved into the motor patrol. The policemen climbed in after it and drew the doors close behind them. The machine accelerated, the siren screamed, the patrol plowed away through the throng and headed northward toward the morgue.

Old man Mackenzie, now but a piece of evidence, was on his way toward the autopsy-table.

Within the bank, Slayton inhaled a lungful of smoke and blew it out with nervous energy.

"Sheridan," said he, "have Anderson clean this up—if he can—and put fresh sawdust over it. We'll have new tiles laid in a day or two; but now tell him to do the best he can."

He turned to Roadstrand and the doctor. "Now then!" said he. "Let's go over the rest of the evidence. The quicker we get at the bottom facts in this terrible affair and have the murderer behind the bars the better."

CHAPTER XI

Roadstrand motioned toward the directors' room.

"It mightn't be a bad idea to have a little more privacy than we can get here," suggested he. "We've already got our hands on one or two matters of interest. Suppose we go in there to examine them—eh?"

"All right," assented Slayton. "Come on, Sheridan. You're in on this, too."

The four men approached the private room. Their way led past the safe door.

"Just a minute," said the cashier. He examined the combination, swung the door open, stepped inside the vault, and almost closed the door. For a brief moment he was there alone. Swiftly he cast a glance around, particularly at the floor.

Had he left any sign, dropped anything, given any clue or hint of the crime? No; he could find nothing. Relieved, freed of a small but insistent fear that, like an obsession, had for some time been gnawing at his soul, he opened the door again and peered out.

"Shot Mackenzie from here, you think?" queried he.

Nelson removed his spectacles, scratched his bald spot and nodded. "It looks that way," he judged.

"And after that robbed the safe? You think the robbery followed the murder?"

"Probably so. At any rate, the robbery was no hurried affair. The criminal evidently knew all about the

location of the different kinds of funds, and, moreover, he understood the bank's system of books and accounts."

"How so?"

"Why, don't you know? He took only one thousand dollar bills, and he also mutilated the ledger containing records of the number of those bills."

"No! You don't say so?"

"I do say so. That's why—that's one reason why—we've figured that only an employee of the bank could have done it; that, and the fact that the safe was opened with the combination. No finger-prints here at all."

Nelson touched the shining combination-knob. "No violence of any kind. The thing was all planned out by a man who had access to the cipher in advance, and was surely pulled off of the combination. That means a bank employee, doesn't it?"

Slayton raised his eyebrows. "I'm afraid it does," he answered. "I'm very much afraid it does. And if I'm not mistaken—"

"Well?" demanded Roadstrand. "Oh, nothing! We mustn't form any opinion at all without the evidence. Let's see, now."

He re-entered the safe. Sheridan followed him.

"What does the loss total, Sheridan, so far as you know?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand."

"All in those one-thousand dollar bills?"

Slayton pointed at the ravaged compartment.

"Yes. And—see here?"

Sheridan indicated an empty place in the file of the bank's books, standing on their carpeted shelf.

"He didn't take the whole record-keeper, did he?" demanded Slayton.

"No. It's in the directors' room. But all the pages with the one-thousand-dollar bill records are gone. You will see."

"H-m! A clever idea at that!" Slayton muttered. "We aren't dealing with any fool, believe me, gentlemen! We're up against a slick proposition—a long-headed fellow, and no mistake."

"Well, enough of this. Now let's see that ledger and whatever else there is that bears on the case."

They all proceeded to the directors' room. Slayton closed the door. Outside in the bank itself isolated anxiety continued to hold the clerks and officers in bonds of terrible suspense. Some were smoking, some making a pretense of work, some aggressively assuming indifference.

Mansfield was doing nothing of the kind. Plainly in a blue funk he was sitting at the desk, elbow on the blotter, face hidden in hand, a picture of the most absolute despair and misery. And back and forth passed looks from clerk to bookkeeper and from messenger to clerk; and here a raised eyebrow, there a dour grimace, yonder a shrug of the shoulder, told their thought.

Indifferent to it all, Mansfield sat there, buried in his anguish.

"I am ruined," he was thinking. "Position, honor, reputation—everything is gone. I am lost. End is now forever. Everything's all over now."

Through the glass of the door Slayton caught a glimpse of Mansfield, and saw a look that passed between Parker, the messenger, and the assistant bookkeeper, Holmes. He thrilled with joy. Even though he should say no further word, should never raise his hand to point at Mansfield, should never give this thing another moment's thought, he felt positive the boy would go to Sing Sing, maybe to the chair.

And, realizing the perfection of the frame-up, he felt a glow of pride. If this was not a masterpiece of deception, had one ever been conceived and executed since time began?

Slayton faced the others. Still cold and unmovable, his lean face snowed rather more than his usual color. Sheridan, of ruddy visage and portly build, frowned with anxiety and nibbled at a pencil with perturbation.

"Shall we sit down?" asked Roadstrand.

Slayton nodded. All four of them—Roadstrand, Nelson, Slayton, and Sheridan—drew up chairs about the broad oak table of the bank directors. The cashier lighted another cigarette. In spite of every effort of the will and every self-assurance of safety, he

found himself a bit nervous again.

All this savvy, all this seeming acquiescence with his ideas, might they not be only part of a trap to lead him on and snare him in the end?

He trusted nobody. Were he to come through this thing alive and free it must be through his own wit and nerve and energy. The slightest misstep might cost him liberty, might cost him life. Not for one second must he relax his watchfulness or leave the way open for psychic shock or physical surprise.

Thus, weighing the other's knowledge and motives, he sat there with them at the table. But on no face appeared the slightest tinge of ruse or suspicion. The doctor, the coroner, the paying-teller all seemed honest, frank, and unsuspecting. Slayton felt positive that, so far at least, he had made good his bluff and kept the assumption of his innocence intact.

"Let's see the ledger," said he. "That may give us some clue."

Sheridan handed it to him, bringing it from the mantel where it had been lying.

"H-m!" grunted Slayton, opening it and studying the mutilations with keen interest. "He made a clean sweep, didn't he? And, so far as I see, there's nothing here to tell us what hand ripped the leaves out. Is there?"

The doctor shook his head. "Absolutely nothing," he answered. "But as a piece of subsidiary evidence, to show the high mental calibre and keen wit of the criminal, the ledger possesses considerable value."

Sheridan took the ledger away. Roadstrand, meantime, had pulled a little bundle from his pocket. He now unrolled the rubber bands that held it and opened it out on the table.

"Here," said he, "is something of vital moment. It has already led me to form certain theories. Let me have your opinion and see if it coincides with mine—with the doctor's and mine."

Speaking, he took out a soiled, ash-covered glove, and handed it to Slayton.

"What do you make of that?" he asked.

"Where did you find it?" queried the cashier, suppressing his elation. "A great deal depends on that."

"Right! A very great deal indeed. Well, we found this in front of the furnace, buried in ashes."

"Have you got the other?"

"Not yet. I think we'll find nothing but the metal snap. Undoubtedly that will turn up in the ashes under the furnace, when sifted."

"You mean then, asked Slayton meditatively, "that the murderer meant to throw both gloves into the furnace, but in his hurry and excitement dropped one and the ashes fell over it when he opened the furnace door?"

"Something like that. Now do you recognize the glove?"

Slayton turned it and examined it carefully, then shook his head.

"No," said he. "There are no distinguishing marks. I can't tell anything about it. Hello! What's this?"

He pointed at the fingers. Three of them were stained with dull red, to which ashes adhered in minute flakes.

"That," answered the doctor, "is blood."

"So then—This is the very glove that was on the murderer's hand when he felt old Mackenzie's heart?"

"Good reasoning!" commended Roadstrand. "Now, if you can only prove the ownership of the glove!"

"Anything else?"

"Yes; several things. See here!"

He took a small button from the package and gave it to the cashier.

"That," said he, "was found about four feet from the body, near the grillwork."

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TORONTO

"Torn off in the struggle?" asked Slayton.

"Don't know. We don't think there was any struggle. The old man was probably shot from the safe, you remember. Death must have been instantaneous. Don't you think so, doctor?"

"I'm sure of it," affirmed Nelson. "So then, this button—" interrogated the cashier.

"Probably just happened to fall off. It must have been loose. Perhaps when the murderer thrust his hand into the old man's breast he scraped the button off. We don't know; can't tell; but here it is, anyhow. Can you identify it?"

The cashier studied it attentively, turning it over and over in his bony fingers.

"H-m!" he grunted, a world of meaning in the monosyllable.

Roadstrand and the doctor exchanged a keen glance.

"Well, whose is it?" demanded the coroner.

"I can't say positively."

"Have you an opinion?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I'd rather see some more of the evidence before making any statement."

"All right! Here's something of still further interest!"

Roadstrand unfolded a paper that had been inside the parcel and spread it out on the table.

"What do you make of that?" he asked.

Slayton, now for the first time facing the unexpected, beheld six or eight gray hairs, stiff and rather wiry. He blinked with involuntary alarm.

"What do you make of those?" demanded the coroner again.

"Make of them? Why, nothing. What are they?" countered the cashier, sparring for time, if only a few seconds, to collect his thoughts.

He failed to comprehend what was coming now; but with extreme wariness he was steeling himself against any surprise, trap, or attack.

"What are they?"

"Gray hairs, of course."

"Yes, I know; but what have they to do with this case? Where did you find them?"

"In the gripping fingers of the old man! How shall we explain that?"

Slayton felt suddenly very sick. In a flash he knew the truth, the answer to the riddle. Those hairs belonged to that wig he had worn—the wig that old Mackenzie had picked up—the wig that had been the direct cause of the crime itself. When he had pulled the wig away from the dead man's head a few hairs had come out. Now those hairs constituted a menace terrible in its possibilities; a deadly peril as unexpected as it might prove fatal.

The cashier realized only too well on how slight pivots the whole machinery of justice may turn, and how minute a bit of evidence may lead a murderer to the chair. Had he possessed a million dollars, he would have given them all, and more, with eager joy to have those few hairs in his keeping, to destroy them, to remove them forever from the searching ken of scientists and lawyers.

He knew that he was paling; he knew his face had altered, despite his every effort at indifference; and to conceal his emotion he took the paper with the hairs in it, bent his brows, and studied them with intense application.

Then finally he shook his head.

"I don't make anything of these at all," said he. "Unless, of course, the old man might—might have—"

He paused, seeking the idea that would not fully come. Then with inspiration he concluded:

"—might have clutched at his head in agony and pulled these out."

"Very good," put in the doctor. "But they aren't human hair at all."

"They're not?" ejaculated Slayton, terribly shaken.

"No! Even a cursory examination with a pocket lens convinces me of that. They belong to, well—"

"To what?" the cashier demanded. Sheridan leaned forward eagerly.

"Some animal, I think," the doctor said.

"Animal? But how the deuce could they get into his grasp then?"

"That's exactly what puzzles me," answered the doctor. "The circumstance is most baffling. What this means I frankly don't know. But, if rightly interpreted, this single bit of evidence might go far toward solving the mystery."

Though Slayton felt a horrible sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach, he managed to remain calm.

"This clue certainly ought to be followed," he suggested.

"It will be," affirmed the doctor, "to the end."

The room seemed swimming before Slayton's eyes, but he still sat there resolutely, staring at the diabolical little wisp of hair on the bit of paper. At the very outset, he realized, he had received a blow that might yet nullify all his plans and land him in the chair. To his mind occurred the old saying that even the cleverest criminal always leaves some loophole open, or drops some clue, that may convict him.

"That wig! That infernal wig!" thought he.

A thousand times better would it have been had he gone to the bank disguised than to have left this terrifying evidence in the old man's dead fingers.

Holding his nerve by a supreme effort, he shoved the paper back toward Roadstrand.

"I can't offer any suggestion about this," said he, forcing his eyes to meet the coroner's. "Let's leave it aside for a while. Have you anything else of value?"

Roadstrand drew out his pocket-book, extracted from it an envelope, and laid it on the table.

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"Here," said he, "is something of the highest importance."

Speaking, he folded the hairs up again in their paper and replaced them in the little parcel.

"We haven't succeeded yet in locating the pages torn from the ledger; but, judging by the use the criminal made of the furnace in the basement, we're pretty positive he must have burned them there. This envelope here—and Roadstrand took it up again—contains three bits of paper that he dropped when he tore up and burned something he knew had to be destroyed. We found these three tiny scraps on the basement floor about an hour ago. Can you identify them?"

Slayton prepared himself for a fresh shock in case this new evidence should also be something dangerous to him. He watched eagerly as Roadstrand shook the contents of the envelope onto the polished wood.

Then with relief he recognized the minute bits of paper he had purposefully "planted" on the basement floor—the little fragments of the cipher with which he had opened the safe. His heart leaped for joy. Here now was one more step toward the goal, one more factor in the working out of his plan.

He picked up one of the bits—another; then the third. He studied them and turned them over; then, trusting out his lower lip, he frowned and said:

"Why—it's the cipher! The combination!"

"It is, eh?" queried Nelson. "You recognize it, then?"

"I certainly do! See this 'S' here and this 'to'? I ought to know this carbon copy—I made it myself! Only two of these ciphers existed. Chamberlain's got the original. And—"

"What does that 'sto' mean, anyhow?" put in Roadstrand.

"It's part of the word 'stop'. The cipher read: 'R, so-and-so; L, so-and-so to stop'. The murderer just happened to let this piece fall, when he tore it up, and threw it into the fire. Understand?"

"Yes. That's what I thought it was—the combination. Nelson didn't quite agree, but I knew I was right. What I don't understand, though, is how the crook got hold of that paper in the first place. Where did you keep it?"

"Keep it? Why locked in my desk, of course," answered Slayton, sending a disagreeable measure of indignation in the coroner's question.

"Which drawer?"

"Upper right hand."

"And you're sure it was locked in there last night when you went home?"

"Yes!"

"All right. That accounts for it then."

"Accounts for what?"

"For that drawer being broken open. One of the things we established after the first essentials had been attended to was that your desk had been tampered with."

"The lock picked, you mean?"

Roadstrand nodded.

(To be continued.)

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