

THE ALIBI

—BY—

Geo. Allan England

Author of "Darkness and Dawn," "Beyond the Great Oblivion," "The Empire in the Air," "The Golden Blight," "The After-Glow," "The Crime-Detector," etc.

Every second now he was recovering his aplomb.

"Anything I can do to oblige you at any hour of the day or night, I'll be glad to do," he continued. "But say, it's cold out here. Come in, Arthur; come in. We'll go into the library, and—"

"By George! That's mighty good of you!" the young fellow interrupted. The sincerity of his gratitude was pitiable.

He followed Slayton into the hall. The cashier's discerning eye appraised him as wholly unstrung; as clinging to the ragged edge of desperation.

"You're mighty good!" the youngster cried. "Fact is, Mr. Slayton, I— I've come to see you on— important business. It's—"

"You're in trouble? In some kind of a scrape? Is that it?"

The cashier's voice tried to convey deep apprehension; but in it vibrated a strange, malicious joy.

Mansfield gulped and peered about him nervously as the outer door closed.

"We're all alone here?" he whispered in trepidation.

"Absolutely, my dear fellow. Now tell me; what's the row? Speak frankly and—"

"It goes no further?"

"Not an inch!"

"I'm just a junior clerk at the bank. I know, and you're the cashier. You're—"

"Never you mind about that, Arthur! It's man to man here now!"

The crafty glint in Slayton's eye seemed to have intensified. A subtly sly look crept into his face. Did he so soon forebode some dim eventualities, some nebulous possibilities turning to his behoof? Who should say?

His masklike expression of pietism grew dangerous and hard. On his pale lips the clerical smile widened.

"Speak out, Arthur, my boy," he bade. "Speak plainly as man to man!"

"I will! I must!"

Mansfield passed a hand across his eyes.

"Great Heavens, Mr. Slayton, there's not another soul—I could go to—for help!"

"Help! You need help?"

"Terribly!"

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Well, the fact is, I—I'm in a fix. A mighty bad fix, I guess. And I

don't see any way out of it except—"

"To get my help?"

"That's just it! Will you help me?"

"I surely will, Arthur! Freely and gladly as if you were my own son. That's the greatest picture I have in life, lending a hand whenever I can!"

A semblance of real sincerity made the dross of it seem almost real gold. Mansfield, in his intense agitation, accepted the base metal as pure, and looked at the cashier with eyes of unspeakable gratitude. Slayton meanwhile was thinking fast.

That singularly acute instinct that for so many years had helped guide him through many a shallow, through many a perilous way, now told him that all his advantage lay parallel with this trouble of the junior clerk's.

Could he but probe the matter to the bottom, learn its every ramification, and fully win the young clerk's confidence, great things might yet befall. A strong conviction rose in the cashier that he must lend a hand, or seem to, for in this way, as in no other now, might be safely for himself.

His relief was boundless at realization that Mansfield's coming—at first glance so inopportune—might after all veer to his success. When he had first caught sight of the young fellow from the bank standing there on the front porch a poignant dismay had assailed Slayton. Not even the appearance of a police officer, warrant in hand, would have startled him so profoundly. Though having already anticipated such a scene he had resolved to discount its emotions and had schooled himself to calmness. But to be confronted at precisely this juncture by a man from the bank itself had very badly shaken him.

Second thought told Slayton that the boy would, of course, know nothing of the vast, intricate and skilful system of theft in which he had become involved. But the mere sight of him had startled the cashier immeasurably.

And now, hearing the young fellow's plea and beholding his obvious distress, a tremendous sense of ease swept across Slayton's soul. His fears vanished like fog before the rising sun.

"Tada, you will help me?" questioned Mansfield again, with terrible eagerness. "You will, you will?"

"By all means, my dear fellow! That is, if I can."

Slayton smiled affably, with a glint of white teeth. Something feline, something ominous lurked in that smile; but Mansfield, standing there pale and distraught before him, beheld only friendliness and benevolence in the cashier's face.

"Thank heaven for a friend like you!" the boy exclaimed.

His blue eyes brimmed up with tears of reaction after long stress. Once more he gripped the elder man's hand. Slayton clapped him on the shoulder—a broad shoulder and capable-looking.

"Unload," said he. "Let's have it. What's wrong, Arthur? Give me the whole story."

"I will!"

Arthur realized his grip on the cashier's hand, took off his hat and flung it on the table, then paced a few steps up and down, much as Slayton had been pacing. The cashier's smile betrayed amusement now. To see another on the rack, was it not rare sport?

His eye caught a reflection of himself in the broad mirror over the mantel. With satisfaction he noted that he showed few signs of perturbation.

"Even the little success I've had in amateur theatricals," thought he, "is helping me now."

He felt a sense of gratitude for that experience. It might yet stand him in good stead.

Arthur stopped on the rug beside the table, confronted Slayton and squared himself for the confession that the cashier now forensed.

Mansfield's face showed strong lines, even though they were immature and not yet wholly formed—lines of nascent character that bade fair to be one day powerful and dominant. His head poised itself well; the chin was firm and good, the nose broad at the parting of the brow, the eyes steady. A touch of rather rebellious hair—yellow hair that contrasted well with the blue eyes, hair that inclined to curl despite every effort to make it lie flat—crowned intelligent brows.

This man, on the whole, stood well above the level of humanity. And as Slayton appraised him now more critically than ever before—for till now the cashier had noticed him as only one of three or four young clerks at the bank—and as he sensed the innate honesty and ingenious frankness of the boy, a thrill of exultation warmed his cold heart.

"Clay to my hand," thought he. "Clay that will harden to adamant in time. Fate knew I needed him. Fate

sent him. Fate is good!"

Unnaturally Arthur spoke.

"I—I am a thief!" he blurted.

"A—what?"

And Slayton, with well-feigned surprise, gripped the table-edge.

"A—what?"

"A thief! There! Now you know the worst! You know all there is to know—except why I did it. When I say that I say everything—the whole business. I've stolen—stolen money from the bank. It isn't much, but that's no excuse. To me it's a lot—a terrible lot!"

"It's more than I can pay for a year or two. But I'm going to pay it, every cent. Principal and interest! All I need is time—time, that's all. And so I come to you. You can help me through this. You can pull me out of the mud and give me chance to make good. To make good and be a man again—honest—square. For heaven's sake, help me—help me!"

His words, which had been rushing in a stream, grew choked and incoherent. They broke; they ceased. Mansfield suddenly covered his face with both hands, dropped his face and sobbed there racked with anguish. His pallor, the tremors that shook him, the wordless groan that issued from his lips all told the story of his crucifixion.

Unmoved, Slayton studied the young fellow with a cynical coolness, such as if he had been a peculiar biological specimen emplaced on a pin. Then the cashier nodded again, and once more the pale-lipped smile disclosed his teeth.

"As a bird into the net of the Fowler," thought he, "so are thou delivered unto my hand!"

CHAPTER III.

"Come, come, my boy," said he, his voice seeming to speak volumes of friendly comfort. "Brace up! Things can't be half so bad as you try to make out. You're unnerved, half-hysterical, far from yourself. You're exaggerating this trouble, whatever it is. There'll be a way out—there must be. If there isn't I'll make one for you!"

Overcome, Arthur clung to the other's arm.

"I—I knew you would!" he managed to articulate. "If you ever succeed in getting me out of this I'll owe you a debt of—"

"Nonsense, my boy! My natural liking for you, as well as my duty to-

ward my fellow man, dictates that I should lend a hand wherever possible. That's my code of conduct, Arthur, to do whatever good I can in life—that and the Golden Rule. So you see I'm only following my natural bent in helping you. Don't thank me, please!"

"But I do, I do!"

"You mustn't. Tell me the whole thing; that'll be more profitable. Let's have the story in as few words as possible. It's getting late. Why, bless my soul, it's nearly midnight! What's the trouble, Arthur? Out with it!"

He looked at the boy with as good a simulation of cordiality as he could muster, though inwardly he was cursing this young bungler who at an hour so very inopportune had dropped into the midst of all his plans. This interruption would surely delay and lay and might perhaps wreck his arrangements. Something must be done, and at once.

His mind alternated between rejoicing at the possible uses to which he could turn this incident and the certain loss of valuable time it involved. A returning sense of the imperative-ness of immediate action forced upon him the realization that unless he could speedily rid himself of Mansfield the few remaining hours of night would be forever lost. With the morning, should it find his plan unaccomplished, ruin would dawn.

A thrill of nervous anxiety, of sudden fear shot through him. Now that the diversion of his ideas by Mansfield's abrupt entrance into the scene had somewhat abated, a burning eagerness began once more to possess him. He must be at work. Every moment now was golden. But he held his grip upon his nerves. Biting his lip, steadying his voice, forcing a calm that belied his racing pulses, he once more exclaimed:

"Let's have it all, my boy! All, and immediately. The sooner you get this thing off your heart and conscience the sooner we can begin repairing the damage. Now sit down in that big chair and—"

"No, no; not there! I couldn't sit down, Mr. Slayton; indeed I couldn't—I—I guess I'm too nervous to keep still. You see it all started by—by—"

"Well?"

Mansfield floundered, flushed, paled, and remained speechless. The cashier showed a box of cigarettes across the table.

"Maybe a little nicotine might help?" he ventured.

"No, no. I've cut that all out,

along with—everything. No more. No, no. I've cut that all out, along with—everything. No more. I'm done!"

"So?"

And Slayton reached for the box. He lighted one of the cigarettes, inhaled deeply and gusted thin vapor toward the ceiling.

"That's good," he commented. "Glad to hear it. Do I infer that—er—a tendency to dissipation has got you into this—hm—this difficulty?"

"No, not that. Oh, I haven't been an angel, or anything of that sort! But since I—well, got to going with Enid—with Miss Chamberlain, you know—"

"Ah, yes, of course! You have been paying some attention to Miss Chamberlain. I forgot about that. Naturally that factor makes your position all the more difficult, it hasn't any direct bearing on this case, I hope? I mean in order to keep up appearances, you haven't—"

"No, no; nothing of that sort!"

And Arthur seemed to repel the idea by swiftly thrusting out his hand.

"Much as I—love—Miss Chamberlain I'd give her up a thousand times over, before I'd be a—thief to win her!"

"Very well said; very well indeed! It would be an odd situation—wouldn't it?—for a bank clerk to woo the daughter of the bank president with money stolen from the bank itself. That certainly would complicate matters."

"And by the way, Arthur," Slayton cided, with an attempt at merely casual interest, "just what are your prospects with the young lady? Pardon my asking. I do so only because it may—well, may possibly have rather an important bearing on the case."

"My prospects?" queried Mansfield. He passed trembling fingers through his hair.

"Well, I don't just know for certain. Pretty good, I guess. I've been entertained at their house five or six times. And then I've been their guest at the Edgemere Country Club, and once I went yachting with them last summer, as far as Mount Desert. They've been just bully to me! I—I guess they kind of look on me as—as—"

"As a future member of the family? Is that it?"

(To be continued.)

"What did I say when I was under the anesthetic?"



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