

# THE ALIBI

—BY—  
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## EMPLOYEE SUSPECTED OF BANK MURDER.

Could things be working out more admirably?

Slayton smiled to himself. He opened the gateway and entered, removing his hat, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Sheridan met him. Two or three others drifted his way. A hush fell on the low-voiced conversation in the group about old Mackenzie's body.

"Why didn't you phone me, Sheridan?" demanded the cashier. "The first news I had was through the papers when I left the boat."

"Phone you? We did! You must have started for town, though. Nobody answered."

"Missed me, all right. And my wife's away. Chamberlain down yet?"

"Not yet. But we've got him on the wire. He's started. My Heavens, Slayton, this is the limit. Worst thing that's ever happened here. A hundred and fifty thousand gone clean, and the old man—"

"I know. I know. They haven't moved him yet, I see."

"No. The coroner has just got through. Murder, of course. Person or persons unknown. And—by Jove, I'm glad to see you, though. Were all more or less up in the air here. Frankly I don't know what to do, and—"

"You haven't talked, I hope? Haven't said anything to reporters or the police?"

"Well— Sheridan looked embarrassed. "Not much. That is—"

"Nothing!" bade he. "And don't let any of the others talk. We've got to wait for Chamberlain. Time enough then. And, by the way, cable Williamson at once. We'll need him."

"All right. Mighty unlucky. I think that our vice-president should happen to be in the Isle of Pines when this happens. He's got some head for a case like this."

"Right! But it won't take long to get him back. Lverybody else here?"

"Yes." Slayton glanced round with a new sense of power. He was decidedly beginning to get his grip on the situation. The manner in which they were deferring to him as the highest bank official present was encouraging. Suspicion could not possibly rest on him, he felt positive. He was finding himself again.

"You say they're all here?" he demanded.

"Why, yes. That is—"

"Where's Mansfield?"

"Oh, Mansfield? Well, he's not down yet. I forgot."

"H-m! Not down? Isn't he late?"

"Why, yes. A few minutes."

Slayton seemed to ponder. His lower lip protruded; his eyelids narrowed. "H-m!" he grunted again, but said no word.

Sheridan regarded him narrowly. All at once, in so low a tone that nobody else could hear it, the cashier shot a question at him:

"How are Mansfield's accounts?"

"Why—all right, so far as I know."

"So far as you know, eh? No shortage anywhere?"

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"Not that I know of."

"Have you inspected his books lately?"

"Well, no. That's not part of my duties."

"Make it part of them, then. Look them over immediately. Give everything of his a careful going over."

"Why, sir? You don't suspect—"

"Never mind. Do as I say. Either inspect his books or have them inspected at once. Privately, you understand. And report to me then—"

"There he is now!" interrupted the teller, nodding toward the side door. Slayton turned sharply, his motion so acted as to give any beholder the idea that he and Sheridan had been discussing the young clerk.

Mansfield had just entered. At sight of him the cashier's heart leaped up with joy. Where he had previously felt ninety per cent. safe he now felt a hundred.

The boy, honestly upset by the news of the tragedy—which he had read with intense horror while on his way down-town in the subway—had hung up his hat and overcoat in their accustomed place, and now stood surveying the scene with mute wonder and repulsion.

His face, pallid and wan from the sleepless night he had just passed and the racking emotions of the crisis he had weathered, expressed astonishment and fear. His hair was rumpled. In his perturbation he had neglected to shave. His boots, muddy and unpolished, still showed signs of the trip down over the country roads at Oakwood Heights. His clothes were creased and wrinkled. He had not gone to bed at all the night before, but in his distress had paced the floor of his room until in exhaustion he had flung himself down for a little sleep.

From this he had awakened too late for any change of clothes. At nine he knew he must be at Slayton's desk to get that envelope—his salvation. Breakfastless, unnerved, and

haggard he had rushed down-town. Then, on top of everything, this ghastly news had capped the climax of utter confusion.

He knew the murder might prove fatal to him. His sorrow for old Mackenzie was overlaid by this stern fact. The deed might wreck all his plans for restitution. He must see Slayton at once and make sure of that money! Otherwise—ruin confronted him, the loss of his position, his good name, the girl, everything in life!

Yes; and the inmates of prison faced him, too. No more horrible calamity could have befallen him just at that juncture than this disturbance of the bank's routine. What wonder then that the boy stood there haggard and distressed?

But now his eye caught Slayton's. Yes, the cashier was certainly looking at him. The boy saw Slayton's head move and his eyes beckoning. The message was unmistakable: "Come here!"

Hope revived. The cashier then, in spite of everything, was going to keep his promise! Mansfield felt the well-springs of joy and gratitude gush up. He forgot all about the murder for a moment in the ineffable relief of that beckoning nod. His head went up again. Confidently now and with a firm step he approached Slayton and the teller.

But now, to his surprise, Slayton was regarding him coldly. Others were looking at him, too, with wonder and dawning mistrust. The coroner, leaving the body, was moving toward him.

Confused by all this, Mansfield hesitated. He realized that the moment was most inopportune. Even at the risk of exposure, he must not intrude at such a time. But Slayton had surely summoned him. Absolutely at a loss, the boy stood there, overcome by stage fright, a prey to harrowing indecision.

"Well, Mansfield, what do you want?" demanded Slayton curtly.

"I—Nothing, sir."

"Very well. Go to your desk."

"Yes, sir."

He stared at Slayton a moment, realizing that the man had betrayed him and that everything was lost. For a second a kind of shimmering black haze seemed to dance before his sight. His hand went out, caught hold of a chair, and gripped it unsteadily.

Then he pulled himself together, turned, and walked somewhat unsteadily to his accustomed place in the bank. He sat down heavily in his chair. A curious, light sensation seemed to have taken away all his strength. He had had no breakfast,



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and had slept but little. His physical weakness now gave free play to the ravages of the mental anguish assailing him. He swayed as he sat there. His head swam. The pallor of his face was terrible to look upon.

Every eye in the bank was on him. Already ugly suspicion had begun to raise its head.

But Slayton appeared to take no heed of this. He turned to the paying teller.

"Sheridan," said he, "please have the men go to their desks. Have the curtains lowered at all the grilles. We can't do business for an hour or two—maybe more. We've got to see just how hard hit we are financially, and get our bearings before we pay out another dollar. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Get busy!"

He faced the coroner, and held out his hand.

"Coroner Roadstrand, I believe?" asked he.

"Yes, Mr. Slayton?"

They shook hands cordially. Then Roadstrand turned to the keen-eyed medical man with him—a shrewd-looking doctor of more than middle age, with shell spectacles.

"Dr. Nelson, Mr. Slayton."

Another hand-shake.

"Dr. Nelson often helps me with my cases," explained Roadstrand. "I think we'll need him this time. Have you any theory? Any suspicions—any data?"

Slayton shook his head.

"Not till we've examined the evidence," he parried. His eyes—involuntarily, as it seemed—turned for a fraction of a second toward the pallid, shaken figure of the boy now fighting for self-control at the desk in the corner. Roadstrand and Nelson exchanged a significant glance.

"Quite right," assented the coroner. "Evidence is all that we must go on."

He turned toward the body, grim and rigid beneath its blanket.

"Evidence," he repeated. "Let's examine it."

CHAPTER X.

Under Sheridan's orders the book-keepers and clerks slowly dispersed to their posts. Miss Leavitt, the stenographer, and Miss McDonald, an assistant bookkeeper, who had just come in, were hidden to withdraw to the little room used by stay there till further notice. One or two of the men made so bold as to smoke. Though this was against the rules, the nervous tension of the moment drove them to it, so Slayton did not stop them.

Thus they waited, isolated from each other—waited with dread the inevitable ordeal now facing them. Each man knew himself absolutely innocent, yet the stress of the forthcoming inquiry weighed heavily upon them all. Evidence—circumstantial evidence above all—sometimes plays such fantastic tricks that not one of them felt secure from the possibility that the ultimate horror, the murder charge itself, might hang over them.

Mansfield alone among them all did not feel this fear. He sat there in the darkened bank under the gleam of incandescent lights for Sheridan had ordered all shades drawn to keep the mermaid crowd outside from peering in—and gave no thought to this new possibility of dread. As a matter of fact, it never even occurred to him. The stress of the actually impending

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ruin now precipitated by Slayton's treachery left no room for any other suffering. Anguished, he sat there, staring at the ink-stained blotter on his desk, his mind racked with visions of the inevitable destruction now close upon him. But of the murder charge as having any connection with himself he took no slightest thought.

Not so, however, the others. They had already fixed the guilt, passed judgment, and condemned him, as they took their places at their desks and counters, and as here or there a radio roller-curtain was pulled down before a grille, hardly one of them but turned curious eyes upon Mansfield—eyes hard with hostility, eyes of repulsion and accusation, eyes that expressed no sympathy, no pity. Not all his time, frank ways and hearty young manhood could stem the tide of that suspicion. Already the shadow had fallen athwart his head. Though he himself realized it not, already the meshes of the net were closing round him.

But of all this Slayton seemed to remain entirely unaware. He overheard no muttered syllable. He saw no look oblique with accusation. Dispassionate as Fate itself, calm and judicial as a supreme court justice, he had attention now only for the evidence that Roadstrand and the doctor could lay before him. However, the tides of opinion in that little world of his, the bank, might run, obviously he could not be influenced thereby.

"The evidence! That's what we want, and nothing else," he echoed Roadstrand's words. "The quicker we see what we've got now and what it all means the better."

He stepped by the body.

"Poor old chap!" he commiserated. "He died panic, anyhow. No widow to grieve, I'm glad to say. An old back. Brother in Troy, I believe. Otherwise without family."

He bent and drew back the blanket. His hand trembled a little, and for the fraction of a second a nervous twitch contracted his face; but his eyes held steadily as he examined the body, lying there stiffened in the blood he himself had spilled.

"The old man had fallen on his right side. The distortion of his posture was not great. He seemed to have died instantly—to have fallen prone, shot through the vital respiratory center behind the ear. The waxen rigidity of his face looked less appalling now than when half seen by the gleam of the electric flash the

night before. When Slayton realized that the ordeal of this inspection was one he could endure without flinching a great burden seemed as it lifted instantly from his soul.

Sheridan quietly returned as the cashier was gazing at the body. He joined the little group. The four men silently studied the corpse a moment. Then Slayton spoke.

"What was the idea in leaving him here so long?" asked he. "I suppose Anderson found his at seven?"

"Yes," answered Sheridan. "He notified the police at once. By seven-fifteen everything was under surveillance."

"Well, why wasn't the body taken away sooner?"

"It couldn't be moved, anyhow, till I'd seen it," explained Roadstrand.

"Oh, of course! And you were on a case?"

Roadstrand nodded.

"It's the deuce the way I'm rushed," said he. "We're all up to our eyes in work all the time. Think of a city the size of New York with only five coroners! I got here as soon as I could, anyhow, and after I'd viewed the body the doctor and I agreed we'd better leave it, too. That might have some bearing on the case."

Slayton shook his head.

"No; none whatever," he answered. "I'm sure Mr. Chamberlain would be very glad indeed to avoid any such experience. He's getting along in years, you know, and well—I think he can very well be spared this ordeal if it can possibly be arranged otherwise."

"You'd prefer to have the body removed as soon as you've seen all the available evidence? You'll be responsible for the bank in having us take such action?"

"Yes."

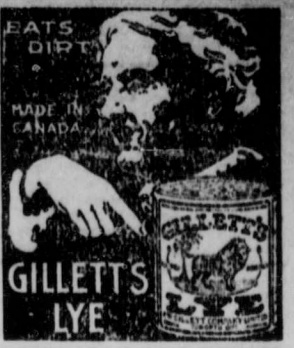
"Very well. As a matter of fact, Mr. Slayton, the body doesn't present much evidence of importance—only the wound itself and a few slight marks."

"Let me see."

And Slayton knelt by the body, keenly critical.

Dr. Nelson turned the old man's head a trifle, the shoulders moved; with it, for the full rigor had now set in.

"The bullet struck here, you see," he explained, pointing. "I judge it must have been fired from about twenty-five feet. Probably from the safedoor there."



He nodded toward the door, still open and guarded by a policeman in uniform.

"You see for yourself, it didn't come out again. It's in there somewhere. We'll find it, all right enough, at the autopsy?"

"Autopsy?"

"Of course. That bullet may be of great importance."

"When will you recover it?"

"This morning. At the morgue. I've already telephoned up for them to make preparations. We'll have that bit of lead before noon, at least."

"Good!" ejaculated Slayton. "You surely do get the facts in an efficient way."

His lean, pale face remained quite impassive. He blinked reflectively.

"Anything else?"

"Three marks on the breast," answered Roadstrand.

"Marks? Wounds you mean?"

"No. Just blood-marks—finger-marks—see?"

He opened the old man's shirt a little more. It already gaped where Slayton had torn it apart with his own hands. On the left breast the cashier now plainly saw the three marks he had put there with Mansfield's glove.

"H-m!" he grunted. "There must have been a struggle."

"No, not that," said Nelson. "The murderer evidently put his hand in there to see if the heart was still beating—to see if his life was extinct."

"That's right; that's right," assented Slayton, getting up again. "You professional men have it all over us business druggists when it comes to an analysis of events and so on. I'd have surely said there was a struggle. But I see how it was now. In some way or other the murderer got his hand into the blood here on the floor, and then put it in over the old man's heart. But then—haven't I got a valuable clue? Finger-prints there, and—on the knob of the safe?"

Nelson shook his head.

"No; none at all. None—worse luck!"

"How so?"

"The criminal wore gloves."

"Oh! Gloves, eh? It was all thought out beforehand, was it? Premeditated, and all that?"

And Slayton, once more casting a glance—a glance that was pure art—toward the annihilated Mansfield, drew out his cigarette-case.

"Premeditated?" repeated Nelson. "Not necessarily; that is, so far as the murder itself was concerned. The robbery, of course, was well planned. The criminal has left no footprints of any value. He took care to conceal those as well as his finger-marks—wore rubbers or something of the sort. Yes, he must have planned things very skillfully."

(To be continued.)

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