

THE STANDING ALIBI OF H. STANLEIGH STORME

(By Wm. Hamilton Osborne.)

Just after midnight.

CHAPTER I.

It was half past twelve on the twenty-third of May.

The tall young man with the long dark coat, a coat that enveloped him completely, reached the corner at the same instant that the electric lights went out. They went out for the same reason that lights go out on all stormy nights—a reason that few men ever knew, and these few have forgotten.

The man stood there for an instant looking up and down the street.

He may have been waiting for a car. If he was, he was disappointed. In the distance the faint light of an electric gleamed through the moisture. It was receding, of course, as is the habit of street conveyances.

The young man breathed a sigh.

"A beautiful night," he exclaimed all to himself in a pleasant, well-circulated voice.

It didn't seem to worry him. He said it with the same easy nonchalance as though it were the finest of evenings.

"So much the better," he continued in the same happy frame of mind.

Nevertheless he drew his coat the closer about him and turned up the collar. Then, removing his opera hat, he shook the rain from it and replaced it upon his head.

But although the storm continued with unabated force, he did not seek shelter, but still stood upon the corner, glancing repeatedly up and down the cross streets, peering into the darkness to see what he could see, and thrusting his head forward and to one side, to hear what he could hear.

He stood thus for some four or five minutes—a long while to stand and look and listen. And he saw nothing and heard nothing.

Finally he thrust his hand into the depths of his long coat, and from the inside half pulled out a watch.

He did not look at it for two reasons, first because the rain would have ruined it; second, because it was too dark to see it. Instead, he pressed a small spring. It was a repeater, and it struck the hour.

"Quarter to one," he remarked softly to himself: "I'm just in time."

"That's a good watch," he continued, "one of the best, I'll wager, in the old man's stock, and a first-class stock he carries, too—or did, up to night before last."

He laughed noiselessly to himself, and then, with an upward glance at the corner building, he moved over towards it, as though seeking shelter from the storm.

It was a bank—one of the old-fashioned kind, with a high corner stoop covered by the conventional species of portico.

Another man would have ascended this stoop and taken his stand under the portico, which furnished ample protection from the wet. But not so this man.

Instead, with unheeded footsteps, he moved half way down the length of the bank on the side street and paused in front of a ground-floor window.

There were six windows on that side. He selected the third one, after examining it with care.

As was the case with all the others, this window was barred with iron bars. They also were old-fashioned, somewhat wide apart, and ran from top to bottom with no supporting plate between.

Having completed his investigation, the man in the long coat straightened up and stood with his back to the window, and once more looked about him.

It was a bad place to stand. The water from the roof poured down in a steady stream upon his head.

He never heeded it, however. After looking and listening for another instant, he merely wrapped a long scarf about his neck and drew his coat still more closely around him, and then again stooped down and—what?

No one knows! Turned up his trousers, perhaps.

If it were that, it took some time, and required considerable care.

Again he straightened up and again looked still. Not entirely, though, for he kept one heel tap-tap-tapping upon the flag basement.

And as he tapped a rasping, grating sound became perceptible, slight, but still distinct. It came from behind him.

Who, says he, speaks.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "what does that mean? These new automobile headlights have come to be. The man in the long coat discovers a place where the inventor of the typewriter and the sewing machine and the electric light. They do the business of the world, and he is with the best.

to write the fellow a testimonial and have it published—over my signature and under my portrait. I will, too, if ever I—if the worst comes to the worst. I've got the nerve to do it."

But he kept on tapping. Suddenly there was a sharp whirring sound and then a loud snap.

"Number one!" he exclaimed.

Again he stooped and made another adjustment. Having done this, he once more examined the window and the bars.

As he did so a small gleam of light played around the bottom of one of the long bars. It came from a tiny incandescent lamp held in the hollow of his palm.

This new inspection seemed highly satisfactory. Again he resumed his tap-tap-tapping.

After a time there was another snap and another snap.

"Number two," he remarked in a tone of delight.

Then he sprang aside.

"Great Scott!" he continued, "what's that?"

For he had indistinctly heard upon the heavy moist air the steady tramp, tramp of a man around the corner.

The man in the long coat hastily took from his pocket a small piece of putty, filled the hole with it, and then with a miniature pencil shaker dusted the putty with fine lead pencil scrapings—this to restore them a metallic appearance.

Then he blew away the dust with his hand and noiselessly disappeared.

The watchman—his it was because he came around the corner, tried the front door, then the back door, and turned into and up the side street.

All was well, the man in the long coat, glancing up and down, saw under his breath at the top and the bottom, shook his head and went on his way.

Two minutes later the man in the long coat was at the top of the street, the rasping sound being heard at the end of twenty minutes. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Number four!" he was able finally to announce to himself.

He had cut two wires completely through, both at the top and at the bottom. He removed them quietly and laid them gently down upon the pavement.

The window was now an unobstructed one, consisting of two panes with a middle bar. It would have been a simple thing to force the catch, but this man knew better.

Holding his body as a shield against the framework, he flashed his light along each edge, and particularly along the middle. He then cut two small holes in the glass, and, inserting an instrument, cut a number of wires that ran around the sash.

"Blamed idiots!" he muttered to himself. "These people leave their wires in plain sight. This is a cinch."

Having cut the wires, the rest was easy.

He slipped the catch, raised the lower sash and entered. From the inside he carefully replaced the bars in their former position, wedged them tight with small steel disks, filled the spaces with putty and dusted them as before.

Then he inserted the circular disks of glass where they belonged, and dipping a brush in a small vial, he applied to the cut edges a thick, oozing, colorless fluid. A bottle of this was long afterwards discovered in his dwelling.

It was found to be Canadian Balsam, a fluid which, possessing the same degree of refraction as does glass itself, is capable of uniting two pieces of glass together so that the point of contact is well-nigh indistinguishable.

It is impossible to describe the deftness or skill with which the man worked—and he worked so that there were absolutely no traces of the job he left behind him.

He had just closed the window and fastened it when he was once more startled by a bright light which entered the room.

In an instant he realized that it had not yet lighted upon himself, and he threw himself face down upon the floor next to the wall. There he waited, without a sound, scarcely even breathing, until he heard the steady tramp, tramp of footsteps receding to the distance.

It was a policeman who had searched his light upon the window. And the policeman saw nothing—nothing except the regulation iron bars and a window pane with heavy drops of rain trickling and oozing down it.

The man in the long coat jumped to his feet.

"That was a narrow escape," he

CHAPTER II.

Two A. M.

"Now for the vault," said the man in the long coat.

Once more he struck his repeater. It was exactly 2. The policeman, who was not regular, had just gone.

But it was time for the watchman again. He was compelled to wait a bit—for the outer door of the vault was illuminated by the rays of the electric lamp, and was visible from the small hole in the outer door of the bank.

After the tramp, tramp had died away, he stepped boldly into the full glare of this lamp, but whatever he did, he kept his back toward the outer door of the bank.

The light shone strongly upon him. He was no longer a man in a long coat and an opera hat. He had doffed both of them.

For the first time his figure and his features were distinctly visible. He was young, tall, broad shouldered. His face was handsome, but a bit too florid, perhaps. He wore a conventional, but very becoming, Van Dyke beard.

His appearance was, upon the whole, distinguished. He bore the stamp of the coin that would pass current anywhere.

His apparel was fruitless—he wore evening dress of the most approved cut and pattern; he was immaculate from head to foot.

He lit a cigarette and went to work. He wasted no time—he had none to spare.

He knelt down and grasped the handle of the combination lock. This, in keeping with every other thing about the bank, was also of a by-gone age. It was one that worked upon the letters of the alphabet.

Slowly turning the handle of this lock, the man placed his ear to the safe just outside the circle of letters and listened to the clink, clink of the pieces of metal falling into place.

To him their slight metallic clatter constituted just so much intelligible conversation. He talked to them soothingly and seemed to coax them into place.

"If it is, then," he mused to himself, as he heard the first piece fall unmistakably into its proper place, "S-T-A—a blame long-winded combination they've got, too," he complained.

Then he started to his feet.

"What's this?" he exclaimed.

But he kept turning on and on.

Suddenly, with firm grasp, he turned back the knob with a sharp click, then stepped to one side and swung open the door.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed, "the nerve of these people!"

He pulled, shut the door again, and the knob to throw it off once more, and then rapidly turning and slipping it to letter after letter until the slightest hesitation or difficulty, clicked it back once again, and a second time swung the big door open.

"By George, I was right! The nerve of them!"

For the letters to which he had turned, and which constituted the bank's combination for the safe, were the following sixteen letters of the alphabet:

H STANLEIGH STORME

"And this," he continued, with a genteel bow to the contents of the safe, "is what it is to be the best known man about town."

"Well," he finally admitted to himself, "it's their business, I suppose. They have the right to use a depositor's name or any other name as they please, though the one they've selected is a deuced long one. Not a bad idea, though."

"By the way," he went on, pulling down a book marked 'Ledger,' "while we're about it we'll figure up H. Stanleigh's balance in this bank—I'd forgotten almost that there was one here."

It was a few hundred dollars only. He replaced the book.

"Now for business," he resumed.

He forced every door and every drawer in the vault. In but one did he find what he was after.

This contained six bulky packages of bills. He laid them on the floor outside the vault, and then once more hastily inspected the interior.

There was nothing else worth while. Then he laughed a low, musical laugh.

"This is great business," he remarked, "for H. Stanleigh Storme. A depositor, by the mere use of his own name, which he happens to know how to spell, walks into his banker's vault and robs his banker—and himself."

"Still," he added, "I'll not lose even the few hundred, for the bank can stand this loss, and if they don't pay me my account, I'll—by George, I'll sue them! I'm just the man to do it, too. Great Scott!" he exclaimed.

"What's that?"

He had to turn back to have been a bit too late, and he groaned.

For outside the vault, the clink, clink of a night watchman's walk—the tap, tap, tap of his boots—but of an outer door.

It was meant for the bank!

He hastily glanced back, picked up his packages, and slipped the keys into the lock of his coat, and then stepped through the shadow to the bank.

Then he looked back. The coast was clear, at least temporarily, at least.

"The front door!"

"I'll try the front door," he said, "if it's the best way to get out. I'll have four ways to get out, first."

He stepped to the door, took him some time to get it open, and the process was somewhat noisy—although the chances were that no one outside could hear him.

The bolt slid clumsily. His skeleton keys effected the rest. He unlocked the door, fastened it open, and stepped into the vestibule.

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