

SMOKE T&B TUCKETTS



# 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.

"That's it. Enid does anyhow; I know that much. That's what makes all this so terrible. If it ever gets out just think of what'll happen! It won't be only a case of about killing my father and mother, but Enid will have to suffer. I don't care what happens to me! It's—"

"Of course; of course! But enough of this, Arthur. Let's get down to specific facts. You've misappropriated funds, is that it?"

"Stolen, you mean?"

"The boy's head came up sharply. He faced the elder man eye to eye. Slayton's glance was first to fall.

"Stolen!" Mansfield repeated. "I'm a thief!"

His look belied him. Not shame now, but a kind of strange, wild pride burned in his face. At sound of the words Slayton changed color. Then, stammering and abashed despite his every effort, he demanded:

"What amount? How much did you—steal? And how did you take it? And when?"

"How much? Twelve hundred and fifty dollars. I stole it last week on Thursday afternoon and Friday morning. I can show you just how I got away with it to-morrow. I'll give you the falsified accounts. It was only a matter of a cipher or two, a decimal point or two. You know it's not very hard to do that sort of thing sometimes. Such things can be put through for a while."

"Of course, of course," assented the cashier, nervously. "Well, well, Arthur! The facts are out at last. Twelve hundred and fifty, eh? H-m! Not a vital matter after all. Not irre-

parable by a long shot."

"You'll give me a lift?"

"Gladly! On one condition."

"What's that?"

The boy turned a shade paler than before.

"What condition?" he asked.

"Tell me what you took the money for."

"No, no, Mr. Slayton! Not that! I can't tell you that!"

"Why not?"

And Slayton's eyes narrowed as he blew another lungful of smoke across the room.

"Why can't you? It can't be any more disgraceful than the fact of the theft itself. Come, come, Arthur! Make a clean breast of it! Nothing to play the races, eh? Nothing to the ponies, my boy; nothing to them! Or was it the little ivory ball on the spinning red wheel, or the pasteboards, or the bubbles in the tall grass, or the—"

"No, no, no! Nothing like that! Not a thing like that, so help me!"

Arthur's fist struck the table a smashing blow.

"Nothing at all like that! It's a clean reason anyhow. Absolutely clean. Yet I can't tell you. I simply can't!"

"But you must, Arthur. You must. Otherwise—"

"I can't! And you'll help me just the same, won't you? My Heaven! You've got to help me! If you don't, if you refuse to lend me enough to cover the deficit before the examiners call to-morrow—"

"The examiners?" ejaculated Slayton, startled out of his masklike pre-

tense of calm. "To-morrow? I—I forgot about that! Let me think, Arthur! Let me think!"

He felt a sudden, deadly, pang of terror. How could he have overlooked that vital fact? To-morrow was November 15. And the Federal examiners would be there!

The thought of this new contingency lashed him like a nagalaka. Money! He must have money to straighten out his accounts! If any theft were to be discovered it must not be laid to him! That note must not go to protest; no question must be raised as to his solvency.

Money! He must get his hands on it at once! He must have cash—hard white and yellow cash from the canvas bags or yellow-backs from the sealed packets. More than a hundred thousand he must have by morning from the farthest recesses of the vaults!

That meant only one thing: He must get to work at once. A fine sweat began prickling on his brow.

Unseeing, he stared at Mansfield. Past him and through him the cashier stared, seeming to see striped clothing, rows of cells, high-barred windows; to hear the clank and jangle of huge keys; to scent the foul carbolic-acid stench of the Pen.

To-morrow! To-morrow morning he must have more than a hundred thousand dollars!

The urgency of the situation dawned on him with fresh, full, terrible insistence. No longer could he cherish at the back of his brain any hope that perhaps the job could still be postponed another day or two. Even were Jarboe's note not due, this other contingency would force him to act at once.

And so, now suddenly struck by the instant necessity of the crisis, he stood there staring, making no answer to the agonized young man before him.

Mansfield's cry of despair hardly reached his consciousness—the cry of: "So, then—you won't let me have it!"

"What?" asked the cashier, confused.

"I can't tell you why I stole it—I can't, can't!" the boy cried in anguish. "It wasn't for myself anyhow. It was for—for—No, no! I can't tell!"

Dazed for a moment and unable to collect himself, Slayton shook his head in vague negation. A glint of lamplight on steel caught his eye.

"Here! Drop that! Drop it, you young fool!" he shouted, leaping.

"Stand back!" cried Mansfield in a choking voice. "Look out now! If you won't give it to me I've got nothing to live for! I'll lose Enid and disgrace her and everybody; I'll go to Sing Sing, and—"

Swiftly the cashier struck with surprising strength. The pistol spun through the air, clattered across the table and humped to the floor.

"You young idiot!"

And Slayton caught it up. "None of that, now; you understand? None of that here! No cheap melodrama in my house!"

He flung the weapon into the desk-drawer and slammed it shut. Mansfield stood there staring at him, white to the lips.

"I tell you," he quavered, "if I don't get the money I'll surely do it one way or another. There's plenty

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of deep water between here and New York, and—"

"Drop your nonsense!"

Slayton's voice had gone rasping and harsh.

"Suppose you did do it, you lunatic? What possible good would that do? It's stupid, to begin with, and the worst possible kind of wishful thinking. No thoroughbred quits that way. And talk about wreck Enid's life! What could possibly shatter her worse than that?"

"Would it accomplish anything? Would it clear your name, or—"

"Do I get it or don't I?" demanded Arthur, livid.

"You don't deserve to; but—"

"I'm going to get it!" You'll give it to me?"

"Confound you, yes!"

"Thank Heaven!"

"Better thank me, you fool! Come to my desk at nine in the morning, and take the envelope I hand you. You're saved temporarily. In a day or two I'll arrange—"

"Oh, how can I ever—?"

"Come now; come, come! Cut that! This is no philanthropy. I'm simply doing my duty, my Christian duty, that's all. I'll lend you the money. You can pay me in monthly installments. As I was going to say, we'll arrange suitable terms."

"I'll be your—your slave as long as—"

"Don't talk rot! I'm tired now. Here it is almost midnight. A nice time you've given me, I must say. Get out! I've seen enough of you. Go on—go home! And mind now, no nonsense! And be at my desk at nine, sharp."

"Not a word! Not a word! Get out—and please take you!"

CHAPTER IV.

Motionless, Slayton stood listening a moment to make quite sure Mansfield was on his way. The outer door thudded shut, receding through the silent house. Steps crossed the porch and made off along the walk with diminishing sound. These faded into silence. Mansfield was gone.

"Good!" ejaculated the cashier, nodding with contentment. "He's out of the way at all events. Nearly spoiled everything, confound him! But as it is things are turning my way again."

The prospect was indeed encouraging. This accident of fate might after all prove a blessing in disguise. Slayton was not slow to understand that the boy might prove wonderfully useful to him after all.

"If my brains haven't turned to ivory and my heart to water," thought the cashier, "I can use him on a pinch, and use him hard! Twelve hundred, eh? And all ready to blow his foolish head off for that trifle? And wouldn't tell why he stole it?"

Slayton rubbed his sleek hands together with satisfaction. He began to catch glimpses of some deep motive in the boy's actions—something far deeper than wine, women, song, than cards, roulette, the ponies. What that something was he could not even guess as yet; but he felt certain it existed.

And once he could discover that something he believed, he hoped—yes, already he definitely calculated that he could—mould young Mansfield to his purposes as a potter moulds his clay.

The clock striking midnight, startled him from his reflections. The time had come for action if anything were to be done to avert impending disaster. He produced a bunch of keys from his trousers' pocket, unlocked a lower drawer in his desk and took out a neatly-wrapped parcel. The very care with which this had been done typified the man. Methodical, cold, precise, and neat in all his ways, suave and outwardly impeccable, he stood for all that may be summed in the one word: "Respectability."

Slayton opened the parcel, took out a gray wig a false beard and mustache and pair of gold-rimmed glasses. These properties, saved from the amateur theatricals of the previous winter now bade fair to assume a role of great import.

In five minutes the metamorphosis was complete. With intense satisfac-

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tion Slayton surveyed himself in the glass. He had become wholly unrecognizable. Nothing now remained of the personality that had been, in place of the gentleman of forty-one, an elderly man of broken-down and feedy appearance stood there on the rug before the fireplace.

"Grand!" ejaculated Slayton. "Why, I might pass for my own father!"

He felt a sudden sense of security. Nobody could ever be able to assert that he had been out of his own house that night. He knew that if ever he were suspected of the crime he had now definitely planned to commit Mansfield's testimony would give him an alibi.

Mansfield could be made to swear that he had left Slayton at home close to midnight. He could be made to swear that Slayton had not taken the 12.17 train to St. George and the ferry, and this, Slayton knew, was the last train till morning.

Exultant, the cashier continued his preparations. He was just beginning to realize what a stupendous piece of bull-luck it had been all around that had driven Mansfield to see him. If the thing had all been planned in advance it could not have worked out more beautifully.

Slayton threw the string of the parcel into the fire, then carefully put back into the desk-drawer the paper that had enwrapped his disguise. One might have thought so slight a matter as a sheet of brown paper could pos-

sess no possible importance; but Slayton believed otherwise. Now that his mind had been fully made up to the deed he meant to do he intended no step to fail no link of the chain to show the slightest flaw.

His intelligence, logical and incisive to almost a superhuman degree, weighed every chance and analyzed every contingency. One possibility in ten thousand existed, perhaps, that the disguise might be called in question. By wrapping up the things again in the original paper that still bore the name of the dealer from whom he had bought them he could strengthen his case. He could establish a claim that the disguise had never been out of the parcel since the time of the theatricals. Ninety-nine persons out of a hundred in opening a package will throw away the paper. Slayton was the hundredth. He saw possibilities even in a sheet of manila.

Having locked up the paper for further use, he put on his boots and discarded his smoking-jacket. Then he went out into the hall, and from the closet under the stairs took a fireproof old coat and overcoat, also a battered felt hat—clothing he sometimes used for working round the garden, in rainy weather. He slid an electric flashlight into one of the pockets, and made sure he had a pair of gloves.

(To be continued.)

In the silent watches of the night the hands never speak as they pass by.

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