

SMOKE TACKETTS & B



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.

CHAPTER I.

Back and forth, back and forth a man was pacing the floor, caught in the coils of the inexorable catastrophe that now impended close. Lashed by fear, hounded by fate, up and down the room he turned, hemmed by walls of disaster. His feet, now impacting on the polished floor, now noiseless over the rugs, kept time to the mechanical repetition of the thought: "Ruin! ruin, ruin!" that ebbed and flowed in his racked brain.

Haggard and wan, whose blood-ruffled hair and eyes whose blood-shot glance bespoke long vigils. Save for his footfall and the busy impertinence of the clock that would soon toll midnight, the house—the house of Walter Haynes Slayton, cashier, was still. A numbing silence gripped it—a silence that could almost be heard, so deep it was. Outside hardly a sound disturbed the frosty November night, now moonlit, now cloudy, that brooded over the suburban solitude of Oakwood Heights.

Silence without, silence within. The night seemed waiting, big with woe. Yet through all the man's stress and torment passed a flicker of relief that his wife had not yet returned. In view of the approaching disaster, her absence on a visit was a signal blessing. His one wish now was that she might remain away till something could be done to stem the tides of ruin.

Back and forth—up and down—Then suddenly the man stopped, looked, and dashed his fist against his brow and groaned. Chill though the house had become he felt no cold. He burned with inward fires. A fever parched his lips and ravaged his blood. For to-morrow—to-morrow was his last day of grace.

"Liabilities, a hundred and eight

thousand," he huskily articulated. "Assets—"

He snapped his trembling fingers. "Not worth that! And Jarboe—confound him. I wish I had him here to-night! Jarboe's note—"

Walter Slayton cast a despairing look about his library, a look that minded one of the hunted glare of a trapped, prisoned animal.

"Jarboe!" he muttered. "He's reached his limit at last. He's surely going to put me through this time!"

With a curse he turned toward his desk, all covered with neatly arranged papers. One of the supreme rules of life for the cashier of the Powhatan National Bank was perfect order in all things. Not even this crisis could disturb his method, the habit of a lifetime.

Now even in the arrangement of the very papers that spelled complete annihilation, irreparable disaster and in all probability a frightful term in Sing Sing, his orderly arrangement of the data in chronological sequence was perfect. Month by month and year by year the horrible liabilities were sorted and tabulated, forming a trap, a web, a network of catastrophe.

He knew them all by heart, every smallest one. How long he had lived with them ever in his thoughts, seen them in his dreams, found them obtruding between his vision and every other thing—even between him and his wife's face! Yes, right well did he know those papers on that desk.

And best of all, he knew the Jarboe letter, keystone of the infamous arch. Once that arch should break no power on earth could avert a hideous collapse of the whole structure, burying him forever beneath the ruins.

In fingers that shook as with ague under the glow of the electric lamp Slayton picked up the trial balance he had struck, the reckoning of his terrible involvement, the sum-total of disaster.

"This is the end," said he in a dull, flat tone. "The end of eleven years of torment! The note I owe Jarboe will be the bomb that will blow the whole structure into the air. This thing mustn't happen! It can't—it shall not!"

Again he fell to pacing with the monotonous regularity of a prisoner in a cell. His tortured mind reverted to the first mistake, years and years ago, the first miscalculation, then swiftly ran along the well-remembered ways of progressive disaster, covered by deeper and still deeper involvement in the mire. Every struggle to free himself had only sunk him farther and more hopelessly. At times there had been hope; then fresh misfortunes had swamped him.

And all those weary years the hideous force of respectability, of outward calm and prosperity, of impeccable rectitude had had to be lived through. Worst of all, he had been obliged to face his wife with a smile when the heart had long since died in him.

Again the man groaned in anguish. Better anything now, even the ultimate catastrophe, than such a life!

Better anything? Even the prison cell, the striped garb of infamy? The living death of the penitentiary? No, no, not that! Never that! He felt that come what might, he would battle on and on forever if he could before he would submit to that!

Yet the Jarboe note was due to-morrow. It must be met in the morning. Eighty-four thousand dollars in cash must be paid. The last stand-off had been exhausted. No extension was possible. Cash was needed now—hard, cold, actual cash.

A shudder gripped him. His lean and rather clerical-looking face—a pious-seeming face that had long been of sovereign value to him in his pecuniations—twitched nervously. Its pallor bore a ghastly tinge in the greenish light that seeped through the electric-light shade. He blinked ominously. The glint in his eyes spoke volumes of evil.

This, he realized, was the crucial moment, the end of everything unless some bold play were made. In a kind of daze he stared at the merciless figures. He struck them with his fist. Nothing of all this must be known! The lie must still be lived!

His reputation, he knew, still stood intact. Nobody even suspected him as yet. As long as he could keep his hands on the books of the bank he might still be able to juggle the accounts.

One absolutely essential thing was to stave off the impending catastrophe of the morrow. It involved taking a long chance, but nothing else now remained to do. He still knew that a good fight remained in him. Before Jarboe should collapse and they should drag him "up the river" they should yet find how good a fight he could give them!

He shivered suddenly and drew back, glancing furtively about him as if the very walls had eyes. Close-drawn though the shades were, he feared lest somebody might be spying on him. Going to the windows he pulled the curtains down a little more. Then he returned again to his desk.

His thoughts were beginning to clarify themselves a little. He realized that he would go to any length to pay that Jarboe note. The Shylock should have his pound of flesh. The last step should be taken and the last card played. Then if he lost, the crash he would make in going down would prove him at least no petty thief.

Slayton flung down the balance again, and with a steadier hand unlocked and opened a little drawer at the right of the line of pigeonholes that topped his desk. From this drawer he took an envelope, and from the envelope a paper with a few figures in carbon-copied typewriting.

This paper he studied a moment under the light. It was one of two copies which alone existed in all the world. Chamberlain, president of the Powhatan, had the other one. Doubtless, thought Slayton, Chamberlain felt entirely safe. The cashier nodded satirically, and for the first time that night smiled. A wan, thin-lipped smile it was, saturnine and terrible to match his thoughts, as he studied the open sesame that would smooth his path.

"Now we're getting down to business," he murmured. "It's a long shot, but there's a chance at least. I'll have a chance to run; I shan't be trapped and done to death like a caged rat. A chance—that's all I want!"

He smote the table with decision. If he could only tide things over for a month or two all might yet be well. Hope revived in his face. A bolder look came into his eyes. He glanced round again, holding his breath to listen. Out on the front walk he seemed to have heard a sound. Keenly he save ear. Nothing.

He sneered savagely at himself. Could it be that he was getting nervous? With a strong effort he collected his forces. He folded the precious slip of paper and tucked it into his

pocketbook. Then, turning to a little cupboard in the corner, by the fire place, he took down a bottle and a glass.

But he poured no liquor. His wiser judgment, infinitely sane and quickly assorted itself.

"Absolutely not!" he exclaimed. A clear brain and a steady hand would be needed to-night if ever in his life.

"What's that?"

But he faced round. This time he had positive he had heard a step on the walk. It seemed hesitant and timid; but a human footstep had unmistakably fallen on the concrete.

"What the—?"

Flash-quick, Slayton sprang to the desk, jerked open the big top drawer and swept all the damning papers into it. Just as he shut and locked it the electric bell b-r-r-r-r-d stridently in the hallway, making an astonishing racket in the tomblike stillness of the house.

Savagely he faced the door with a "Flague take you!" on his lips.

Again the bell burst into violent alarm. With an oath more than half of fear—for Slayton's nerves, despite all he could do, were jumpy as a colt—he stepped into the hall, listened acutely for a moment, and then approached the door.

Outside he could hear an irregular tattoo of feet on the porch, sure sign of nervousness. Whoever it might be, the visitor lacked in calm self-possession.

Slayton's fear lessened. If the other man was nervous that was all the more reason why he should not be. After all, nobody in the world had anything on him. He had always managed to cover his tracks perfectly. Boldness and assurance were now invaluable assets for him. A grim smile curved his lips as he shot back the bolt and loosed the chain.

He pressed a button. The porch-light flooded down a sudden radiance. Then he swung wide the door.

At sight of the man standing there before him a sickening apprehension seized him. His mouth sagged open. Staring, he fell back a pace, his hand still gripping the big brass door-knob.

"You, Mansfield?" he stammered. "What—what is it? What on earth do you want here at this time of night?"

CHAPTER II.

The newcomer, obviously agitated in the very highest degree, made no answer, but stood in the doorway returning the other's stare.

"Thank Heaven, you—you're home!" he cried thickly. "Oh, thank Heaven!"

Under the downpour of light from above they formed a singular picture as they stood there, eye looking into eye, while the frosty vapors of their breath idled upward toward the light.

A striking picture—the middle-aged cashier, wrinkled and disheveled, in his smoking-jacket and slippers; the young bank-clerk, immaculate and trim, in balmacaen and olive-green felt hat. Different types in every way;

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yet the community of some unusual emotion drew them both into the same category.

Slayton, a nerve-seasoned and resourceful man, pulled himself together immediately. He thrust out a hand of welcome.

"Come in, Mansfield!" he ejaculated, cloaking his alarm behind a very natural astonishment. "You certainly did surprise me. What's the row? Anything gone wrong?"

The young man nodded, gulped and tried to speak. Words would not come. He seized Slayton's hand in a grip that, though trembling, still had good beef behind it. Slayton winced.

"Here, here, Arthur!" he protested, trying to force a laugh that rang wholly false. "Don't take my arm off! What's up anyhow?"

"I—I want to see you; want to talk to you a—few minutes!" Mansfield succeeded in articulating. "I beg your pardon for intruding at this—this ghastly hour and all that, but—but—"

"Don't mention it, my dear fellow," Slayton returned with something of his usual suavity.

(To be continued.)

PALE, LISTLESS GIRLS

Are in a Condition That May Lead to a Hopeless Decline.

Perhaps you have noticed that your daughter in her "teens" has developed a fitful temper, is often restless and excitable without apparent cause. In that case remember that the march of years is leading her onto womanhood, and that at this time a great responsibility rests upon you as a mother. If your daughter is pale, complains of weakness and depression, feels tired out after a little exertion; if she tells you of headaches and backaches, or pain in the side do not disregard these warnings. Your daughter needs the help that only new, rich blood can give for she is anemic—that is bloodless.

Should you notice any of these signs, lose no time, but procure for her Dr. Williams' Pink Pills, or her unhealthy girlhood is bound to lead to unhealthy womanhood. Dr. Williams' Pink Pills enrich the impoverished blood of girls and women, and by so doing they repair the waste and prevent disease. They give to storky, drooping girls health, brightness and charm, with color in the cheeks, sparkling eyes, a light step and high spirits. If your daughter shows any signs of anemia insist that she begins to-day to cure herself by the use of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills. Miss Grace E. Haskins, Latchford, Ont., says:—"It would be impossible for me to speak too highly of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills. A few years ago my health was such that my parents were seriously alarmed. I was pale, listless and constantly tired. I suffered much from headaches, and my trouble was aggravated by a bad cough. I tried several medicines, but to no avail, and my friends thought I was in a decline. Then Dr. Williams' Pink Pills were recommended and my mother got three boxes. They were the first medicine that really helped me, and a further supply was got and I continued taking them for several months until they completely cured me. Today, I am as healthy as any girl in Northern Ontario, and I am giving my experience that other girls may benefit by it."

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