

THE ALIBI

—BY—

Geo. Allan England

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"It could and was, I tell you!" the fugitive insisted.

"And yet it might!"

"No other possible hypothesis will explain those six hairs, doctor, in that dead grasp!"

Nelson pondered a moment, eyeing Arthur with sharp intelligence. Mentally he was weighing the other's truth or guile. Could a man possibly have fabricated so ingenious and consistent a story and have capped the climax of it by that theory of the wig? For a moment Nelson was almost convinced.

But just on the verge of it his old belief and certainty came rushing back—the wholly conclusive mass of evidence that had swamped Arthur in the beginning, now once more asserted its power over the physician. He shook his head and frowned.

"You found that wig on Slayton's desk, you say?"

"I did!"

"That's too thin, Mansfield. You might have got that wig anywhere, and—"

"Make a microscopic comparison of some of these hairs and the ones that figured in the trial. That will be absolute proof, won't it?"

"Not necessarily. You may have had the wig yourself the night of the murder. You seem to know a lot about it, Mansfield. How can I tell but what you took it when you were at Slayton's house and—"

"And kept it hidden all this time and went and reclaimed it after my escape? Nonsense!"

"Stranger things have happened, as matters of record. You're asking me to throw away a most tremendous mass of evidence, to stultify all my conclusions, to call the law a liar and a fool and to acquit you as blameless on the strength of what? Just your own story and that wig! No, no, Mansfield; there must be something more than that. It's not quite enough; it won't do!"

Arthur clutched the table desperately. Beneath him the ground was falling fast away. His calculations had miscarried his supreme effort had ended in doubt and impending failure. A bitterness as of death gripped his soul. Ashen-faced and trembling, he leaned across the table.

"Doctor," he exclaimed hoarsely, "I swear to you that I'm telling the absolute, unvarnished truth. You can't give me up to the police now with even the doubt in your mind that I've awakened. You can't do it—you mustn't. I've established enough of a case so that I can and do demand protection—"

"Justice is all I'm interested in," coldly interrupted the physician.

"Protection for a day or two until I can prove more. That's all I want; just a couple of days in this house to pull together, collect some more proofs, go over the story with you again and let you cross-examine me. I guarantee on my honor that if you can pick hole or flaw in my story or my reasoning or prove it false in any detail I'll let you give me up without a struggle. We're not at the bottom of this case yet."

"Give me two days. That's all I ask. Do I get them or not?"

The doctor considered.

"I don't want to shelter a fugitive from justice nor yet compound a felony," he slowly answered; "and yet I can't make up my mind to refuse you, Mansfield. Personally, I still believe you guilty of two cold-blooded murders. Still, certain factors puzzle me. Why you didn't kill that beach-comber who stood in your way I can't understand. A man who has done as I believe you have wouldn't have hesitated a second in that case. So much is in

your favor.

"Again—and he checked the second item on his forefinger—"your coming here at all is a favorable symptom—indication, I mean. Third, this wig has possibilities. On the strength of these points—yes; I'll give you shelter for two days. Do your best till Friday. After that we'll see."

Arthur bowed his head, kept a minute's silence, and then raised his eyes to the doctor's again.

"You'll make an examination of those hairs?" asked he.

"Yes."

"Then I can ask nothing more."

"Nor will I offer anything except to take care of your hurts, as I would those of any other patient, and let you lie hidden above-stairs. No word or sign of mine shall betray you. In return for this assurance I demand a promise."

"What promise?"

"That you won't try to escape. Even though the verdict goes against you, you'll stick? You'll take your medicine?"

"To run away would be a confession of guilt—and I'm innocent!"

"You'll stick?"

"I will!"

Nelson put out his right hand. Arthur's left grasped it in a firm clasp.

"All right, then. Agreed! And now—"

A sudden stridor of the telephone interrupted him.

"Hello! Hello!"

"Yes, this is the doctor speaking now."

"Important developments, eh? In what line?"

"Yes, I can handle that, I guess. Chirography is something of a hobby with me, you know. I say, Inspector! Have you any guaranteed sample of his writing?"

"Oh, that letter to his wife, eh? That's right. I forgot that. Very well; I'll be down at once."

"Good-by!"

The doctor hung up briskly, and swung toward Arthur with a smile.

"Always something to do, you see," he commented. "I've got to go down to Headquarters. Don't be alarmed, I won't betray you. I think you're a consummate murderer, Mansfield, but my word's been given and I'll keep it. You'll have the benefit of the doubt for a couple of days. If you can clear yourself nobody'll be more pleased than I!"

"You forget Enid, doctor. You forget me!"

The doctor vouchsafed no answer, but showed his guest to a room at the back of the house on the third floor, and bade Arthur turn in.

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his wife on the night of the Mackenzie murder. The letter you mentioned to me just now over the wire. Why do you ask?"

"It's his writing, positively?"

"Positively. That was proved at the trial."

"And you could identify it in another specimen?"

"Yes. That's part of my job, identifying writing."

"Well, then?"

The inspector passed over a page of the writing he had been examining under the lens.

"Now tell me, doc, what's that?"

With hardly more than a glance at it Nelson answered:

"Slayton's writing, of course."

"Sure of it?"

"I'm never sure of anything till I've applied the methods of exact science; but so far as humanly speaking goes, without the exhaustive tests of the chirographic expert, I'd back that writing for Slayton's against the world."

"So would I!" exclaimed the inspector, bringing his fist down hard on the desk. "That's what's got me all up in the air. That's what is going to put the double-crossed kibosh on the department and on all of us, make us look like six plugged nickels, and give us the ha, ha from here to Hackney! If this was only a forgery, now!"

"A forgery? What do you mean? You wish it were?"

"Do! Some! It would let us all out, then. But now—suffering cats, doc! We're all of us in bad, from A to Z!"

"What are you driving at man?" ejaculated Nelson, reading a few words of the paper he held in his hand.

"That paper there," the inspector answered in extreme dejection, "was found late this p. m. by Jaffrey and Howard in the basement of Slayton's house at Oakwood Heights. They were digging out clues of the man that did up the cashier and got McNulty through the leg in that pistol-battle on the marsh."

"Well, doc, down there in a kind of wood-bin under a lot of kindling, what do they get hold of but this thing? Nobody knows how it got there, but the outrageous part is that it was there with bells on, all right, all right."

"Outrageous? How so?" queried Nelson, reading a few lines with contracted brows.

"How so? Well, if it proves us a bunch of E. Z. Marks and come-ons, isn't that outrageous? If it shows us up as a lot of muttonheads and clears the man suspected on this last case—the man already safely 'buried' for life on the first case, track 13 and a washout—Isn't that outrageous? If it—"

"Hold on, there, hold on!" cried the doctor, his impersonal face reddening slightly, a sure sign of the greatest degree of anger he ever permitted himself to enjoy. "What are you driving at anyhow? What do you mean?"

"Read that and see!" cried Burton, showing two more sheets into the doctor's hands. "I just gave you that important part there for you to 'make' the writing. Now you've got the whole infernal thing. Read that and tell me you wouldn't give your hand to have had it burned before those two lunatics found it and read it

all through and brought it here to me, grinning like chesty-cats, confounding 'em!"

"You mean it's something that possibly may reserve the case and work some measure of tardy justice in an irreparable wrong?"

"Yes; you've said it! And where do we get off then, I'd like to know?"

The doctor surveyed him a long moment through his glasses with a scorn so withering that even Burton's thick hide smarted. Then with a marvelously eloquent "H-m!" he found the beginning of Slayton's extraordinary confession and started reading.

Hastily his keen eyes passed down the paragraphs, absorbing the dead cashier's farewell to his wife, the statement of the causes of his trouble, the explanation of the "plant" to convict Arthur, and the confession of the murder itself.

They paused a while over the matter of the gray wig. The doctor's face grew coldly analytical as he read and reread this paragraph, weighing its truth, unmoved by any blame or ridicule that might fall upon himself for the terrible miscarriage of justice he had engineered. Burton meanwhile fumed and muttered oaths, lighted a cigar, forgot to smoke it, and, finally standing up, began pacing the floor in a growing rage.

"Sit down, you idiot!" snapped the doctor. "You keep me from understanding just how big a fool I've been myself!"

Burton subsided, and the physician continued his reading, ending with the personal details about the disposition of the dead man's property and his urgent request to have the confession put at once into the hands of the district attorney.

When he had quite finished he sat there pondering a silent minute, then glanced sharply at Burton.

"It's genuine!" he snapped. "We're all fools! The boy was innocent all the time—as innocent of Mackenzie's murder that he was ruined for, and served two years of torment for, as he is of Slayton's death that he's being hounded for this minute! We're all a pack of blazing lunatics and have been all the time. Slayton made monkeys of us all from you and me right up to the district attorney himself. And now—"

"And now! Now that Jaffrey and Howard have read this, how are we going to stand from under?" Burton demanded, fuming.

"We aren't!"

"If they hadn't read it we could make 'wax' with it and not be laughing stocks for all—"

"You cur!" he cried again, his eyes blazing. "Here's a good, clean, honest boy has been through torments and at this very moment is sick, wounded, desolate, and wrecked—has lost name, place, prospects, and even his chance at happiness with a girl that is a girl—all because science played us a scurvy trick and because Slayton, the black crook, made suckers of us all!"

"Here all this happens, and now we know the truth; and instead of crying: 'By Heaven! How can we make it right with him?' you whine and cringe and slobber for your rotten reputation, and want to make 'wax' with the evidence and think how you can stand from under!"

"Bah! You sicken me! And to think the detection of crime and the administration of justice ever touches your hands! Holy heavens, what a farce! Look here, Burton! In the course of my work I have to inspect microscopic specimens, some of them only one one-thousandth of an inch in diameter or less—often much less. Beside your heart and soul these specimens as whales, mammoths, megalosaurus! Now you know what I think. Good night!"

Without another word, but with a look of infinite scorn, the doctor seized his hat and strode toward the door. Open-mouthed, Burton stared after him, a kind of sickly, ashen hue spreading over his usually red wattles.

Then, all at once energized by the sight of that confession in the doctor's hands now leaving his possession, the inspector sprang up with a cry.

"Here, doc! Where you going with that?" he shouted, angrily.

"Going? Home!"

"You aren't going to take that? You can't! It's—"

"It's mine for the present!" retorted Nelson, turning at the door and shaking the papers at him. "Perhaps you'd like to have me repeat what you've just said, eh? No! All right then! Keep still!"

The door banged, and he was gone. Burton stared round in dumbfounded amazement, then sank back into his desk chair, and murmured:

"Well, by all that's holy!"

Nelson meantime was hastening to the telephone.

"Hello! 24679 Riverside!"

Impatiently he waited, the papers still clutched in his hand, which, despite all his scientific aplomb, now shook a little.

"The cur!" he muttered. "The swine!"

Somebody answered the phone.

"Hello, hello! Is this Mr. Chamberlain?"

"Yes. See here, Chamberlain. Has Enid gone to bed yet? No? All right. Something of the most extreme importance has just happened. No, no; I can't tell you over the phone. Won't under any conditions. No; it



can't wait till morning. Positively can't!"

"Now see here, Chamberlain! I've got to see you and Enid at my office immediately. It's only 10.45. You can come down in the car in no time. I insist. Hurry her! Heaven bless you, man, not No, no, no! I prescribe it, I tell you! I'm a physician, am I not? This is a part of my treatment! The most important part I've ever given her!"

"It doesn't matter whether you understand or don't understand. I tell you I've got to see Enid to-night, right away, and you've got to come with her! No, no; this is imperative!"

"All right, then. I'll be there. Good-by! Mind now, you both come as quick as the Lord will let you, or, by Jove, I throw up the entire case! Good-by!"

Nelson hung up with a bang, stuffed the papers into his pocket, and—blowing his nose rather hard, while his solemn eyes winked with unusual rapidity—hastened out to his car, jumped into it, and, with a single command: "Home! Quick!" slammed the door as if that act afforded him relief.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Sped quickly homeward by the powerful machine, Nelson flung off hat and coat in the front hall, and, with unusual celerity—for he was of deliberate tendencies—mounted the stairs to the room he had given the fugitive.

The house was still. Mrs. Nelson had already gone to bed. The servants had departed to their own place. Through the mansion calm and quiet reigned, as befitted the well-bred house of well-bred people. Nothing could have been farther from the spirit and the tradition of that house than any strong emotion, any disturbance, anything, in fact, but just well-ordered rationality and a harmonious peace.

Nelson rapped twice on Arthur's door.

"Come!" sounded a voice.

He entered. The fugitive was sitting on the edge of the bed, still dressed, with his left arm clasping his injured right and his head bent in dejection.

"Hello! Not in bed yet, sir?" demanded Nelson, trying hard to give his voice the same impersonal tone it had possessed in his previous conversation with the boy. "I don't allow my patients to disobey me! What does this mean?"

"It means that nothing matters," answered Arthur. "I was just sitting here thinking, that's all. Thinking how infernally peculiar it is that a man can tell the truth, the exact truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and the whole world will rise up and call him 'Liar!' Yet, the whole world—even its best thinkers and keenest analyzers, like you, doctor, isn't it worth pondering?"

Nelson blinked and rubbed his chin. He was boiling inwardly with desire to haul out that confession and thrust it into Arthur's hands, with a:

"Look! Look here! You're free!"

But he restrained himself. He had his plan, had Nelson, somewhere under that cold, formal and precise exterior still lurked hidden fires. Beneath the mask of science still lived a man.

"Worth thinking about, isn't it, doctor?" the fugitive repeated, fixing a keen blue gaze on his host. "It's the one great problem that has been gnawing at my vitals for two years, and now is keener than ever because the events of the past few days have doubled its scope. Seems to me a man might go insane stewing over a thing like that, an injustice like that, and—"

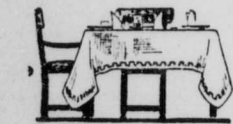
"Please try to forget it, Mansfield," the doctor begged, lifting an inhibiting hand. "What I'm here for just now is to ask you a question or two—a purely hypothetical question, you know. Suppose by any means or other you should be cleared of the two charges now resting on your name and be rehabilitated in public estimation, what attitude would you assume toward the world? What profession would you follow—banking again, or some other? And—h-m! h-m!—in regard to Enid—Miss Chamberlain—"

(To be continued.)

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