

The IRON CLAW

by Arthur Stringer

FIRST EPISODE

On Windward Island. The sea wind, freshening as the sun fell low, ruffled the shallower channels and struck inland to cool the heat-baked dunes of Windward Island.

On the most westerly lip of that island, shaded by a grove of rustling eucalyptus trees, a man and woman stood staring across the beryl-tinted sea-arm to where the shores of South Carolina lay low and dim in the distance.

"You were not made for a life like this," said the man, speaking with that full-voiced softness peculiar to the Italian voice.

"It's the only life I've known for nine long years," she answered, without looking at him.

"And it's the only life you ever will know," he declared with sudden boldness, "if you refuse to wake up to the fact that your husband is mad. I am a physician, and I know. No sane man brings a woman to an island like this, to an island that's only fit for clams and sea-gulls, and spends the best years of his life—yes, and her life—looking for a nitrate mine that never existed, and never could exist in such a place."

"But my husband's workmen have found traces of nitrate," protested Mrs. Golden, fixed in her determination of loyalty.

Palldori, the Italian, laughed softly. "And that nitrate, dear lady, was planted there by Golden himself. For your husband is deceiving you. He's searching for gold, yellow gold, millions of dollars worth of gold. But that gold he will never find, for it exists only in his imagination."

"I cannot listen to words like that," protested the azure-eyed wife; "I will not!"

"That's because you are afraid of the truth. Why do you suppose Golden has spent thousands and thousands in saving his miserable island from the ocean? Why has he put up seawalls and dykes, and constructed a great levee like that to keep the open Atlantic from encroaching on these precious sand fields of his, at every high tide? Why, except to keep the water back from that buried treasure of his? And what has all this madness brought to you?"

"I think I regret only the day that brought you to Windward Island," she quietly replied, as their eyes met.

"And I, too, shall regret that day if it means I must go away empty handed."

"I think my husband would kill you if he heard you speak to me like this!"

Palldori shrugged a shoulder. He is at least watching us from the porch of the manor house there," announced the Italian. "And that I must accept as a compliment."

"Then we must go back," said the woman, visibly alarmed.

"And you go back not believing in me?" asked Palldori as he walked beside her.

"I cannot believe you or believe in you! Even if what you say is true, how should you know his maps and papers are worthless?"

"If you doubt me, I merely ask that you hand me your husband's keys. Then I will bring to you a bag of this Chilean nitrate that he keeps hidden away in his inner study, that he scatters about in the plantation sands to salt his famous mine with. You hesitate, naturally. But if this is not true, why should that inner room be so jealously locked and guarded?"

"It is guarded only because the Golden jewels are kept there," was the triumphant retort; "jewels worth a king's ransom!"

"Yet his loveliest jewel is not kept under lock and key," murmured Palldori. "Unless you tell me you will bring that key to the shrubbery beyond the manor house I will take you in my arms here, under your husband's eyes!"

"Stop!" cried the unhappy wife, as she stepped closer to her.

"Will you bring the key?" for Palldori knew that jewels worth a king's ransom were also worth one final effort.

She hesitated, white-faced, as he repeated the command.

"Yes," she gasped, as a fair-haired child of six ran lightly from the manor house steps to meet her mother.

Palldori, lighting a cigarette, turned carelessly away and sauntered toward the shrubbery of the eastern point. Margory, the fair-haired child, chattered and fluttered birdlike about her silent mother as she approached the house and passed inside. But on the wide loggia Enoch Golden, stern-eyed and grim-lipped, paced back and forth, seared by the fires of jealous suspicions. He wheeled about and strode into the house.

He passed through the quiet room until he came to his study and rang for a servant.

"Ask Mrs. Golden to come here," he commanded.

"She's down in the shrubbery at the East point with Doctor Palldori,"

nervously acknowledged the old retainer.

Golden leaped to his feet. He strode, white-faced, through the silent house, hurried on along the narrow garden paths, and suddenly slackened his pace as he approached the thick shrubbery beyond. The sound of voices came to his ear. Creeping forward he cautiously parted the branches. There, screened from the world about them, Palldori stood gazing down into his wife's eyes.

"I cannot give you the key," he heard her say. "My husband still has it."

"Then what can we do?" asked the Italian.

"I will give it to you tonight. It will be safer then," was the quavering answer.

"Then you must give me more than the key," murmured Palldori.

Golden, dropping back, staggered away like a stricken animal and heard no more. His last hope had withered out. The worst was known. He reentered his home, like a man in a dream. He sat gray-faced at his desk, a sweat of agony beading his great body. Then, after an hour of silent wrestling with his soul, the natural belligerency of the fighting man awakened in him. Seeing only one course before him, he sent curtly for three of his retainers, three huge negroes whom he knew he could trust. To each of these he handed out a belt and holster containing a revolver. Then he briefly and coldly gave his orders. "This island," he grimly announced, "makes its own laws!"

And late that night, when the hour for his intervention drew nearer, he was almost able to exult in finding something against which to centralize all his earlier vague suspicions. He moved with both calmness and precision. He showed the quick instinct of the trained hunter in seeking cover behind the heavy portieres, for the French window beside him commanded a view of both the library within and the moonlit garden without. And along the shrubbery of this garden he soon detected Palldori stealing, carrying a traveling-bag in his hand and a coat over his arm. Through the softly lighted library, a minute later, the figure of Golden's wife slowly advanced. She crept out through the French windows, which stood open, stepped down into the garden, and passed on through the shrubbery to where Palldori stood waiting in the shadows.

The watching husband could see the two come together, he could hear the murmur of whispering voices, he could see Palldori's hand go out and clasp the woman's.

"I will not go alone. I love you, and I want you to be happy!"

The woman's answer could not be heard. But Palldori, stepping suddenly forward, clasped her in his arms, and forced back her head until his lips smothered the cry that rose to her own.

It was then that the planter stamped on the wooden floor, not with mere rage, but as a signal to his waiting servants. He could hear his wife's call for help, for already his three huge negroes had darted through the bushes and surrounded Palldori.

The Italian, drawing his revolver as he wheeled about, found his firearm suddenly knocked from his hand. Even before Golden could reach him he was seized and overpowered and held a prisoner. The master of the manor, once his path was plain, was not given to hesitation.

"Up that man," was his curt command, "and take him to the manor cellars!"

Then Golden turned to his wife. "You will come with me!" he said, as he pointed towards the open French windows.

It was not until she reached the center of the lighted room that she turned and regarded him with wounded yet pleading eyes.

"You have dishonored my home, and my name. That leaves you only one thing to do. You will go from that home," he cried, with increasing passion. "I want you to go, and go now, and never cross my path again!"

"Wait!" she cried, with her hand on her heart. "Listen to—"

"It is too late for words, I said. Until you leave this house, I cannot breathe in it."

"But I did nothing wrong. Oh, God, if I had only known! If I—"

"I want you to go!" he repeated. Golden's hand trembled as she passed out through the door, but otherwise he gave no sign of the feelings swaying him.

He took a great breath, strode across the room, passed down the silent hall, and threw open the massive oak door that led to the manor cellars.

These cellars were a series of gloomy chambers, almost dungeonlike in the massiveness of their walls, a relic of the older slave days when Windward Island was both a distributing point for the African traders and a raiding place for the Caribbean freebooters. In the largest of these chambers still stood the time-worn whip-

pling post, the archaic branding irons, the heavy oak stocks in which recalcitrants were punished, together with that flower of Inquisitional ferocity, the Spanish Screw-Jack, an elaboration of the thumbscrew, in which a prisoner's hand could be inserted and slowly crushed to a pulp. Yet cruel as seemed these old-time implements of torture, stained with the tears and blood of another country, they were no more cruel than the relentless light in Golden's eyes as he confronted his prisoner, tied and trussed in a black oak chair close beside the old Spanish Screw-Jack. The drunkenness of blind rage sang through the planter's veins as he watched his stalwart negroes thrust the ancient branding iron into its brazier of hot coals.

"That is the hand that polluted her body," his heart kept crying, as he commanded the blacks to force Palldori's free arm into the screw-jack. "And now crush it!" he called aloud.

He waited for some outcry as the screw tightened on flesh and bone. But the Italian remained silent. Golden, now white to the lips, ordered the negro beside him to take up the branding iron. "For that is the face," a voice within the frenzied man's heart kept crying, "that violated her face!"

The negro knocked the coal cinders from the glowing iron. Palldori's muscles hardened. But still he was silent. "Brand the dog!" commanded Golden. "And after today I warrant this handsome face will bring dishonor into fewer homes!"

Once, and once only, as the heated metal seared the flesh, Palldori screamed aloud.

"That's enough," Golden suddenly gasped, as he steadied himself against

"Tain't no use, masta," cried the terrified negro. "Dey's a'ready flooded more'n man-deep. And we'se all a'goin' to be drowned—O Gawd, we'se all goin' to be drowned!"

"Get down to those pumps!" thundered Golden. "And get those sluice gates shut!"

He had crossed the room, catching up his hat and coat as he went, and was already out through the door as he finished speaking. Twenty steps brought him to the loggia railing. And Golden knew that no time was to be lost, for already the sea had crept to the lip of the manor garden itself.

"Get down to the wharf-cut and bring the boats," he commanded. Then he swung back to his household servants, ordering them to carry above-stairs everything they could seize.

Then, as the water rose about his feet, he suddenly turned and rushed back into the manor house.

"Margory," he called, like a man gone mad. "Margory, where are you?"

But that call remained unanswered, for the old negro nurse, at the first shouts of alarm, had caught up the child and carried her out through the servants' entrance, on the way to the wharf-cut where she knew the boats to be moored. The child had proved too heavy for the quivering old arms, so she had left the girl, with her kitten still clutched to her breast, safe in the doorway of a cotton-shed, while she herself staggered out on infirm old legs to seize an empty punt drifting by on the rising water. But the current was too strong for her, and as the negroes and boat were carried away the water rose still higher about the child's feet. Yet, thinking more of her frightened kitten than of her own peril, as the flood crept closer



1—"Brand the Dog!" Commanded Golden. 2—Catapulted His Adversary Over Her Shoulder. 3—He Hurried Her Out of the Room.

the child clambered up the broken timbers of the cotton-shed to the roof. There she sat, calling forlornly for her lost nurse.

Golden, in the meantime, raged through the flooded manor house threatening and storming and commanding his servants to find his child.

He was still deep in that agonized search when three of his old servants appeared with a small surf boat and called frantically for him to come, while there was still time.

Golden, water-soaked and wild-eyed, refused their help, ordering them away and proclaiming that he would find his daughter. But as he stumbled amid the drifting wreckage and fell against the boatside the negroes dragged him aboard and pushed off, for already the water had weakened the manor foundations and the walls were falling about them.

Their progress was slow. It was with difficulty in those wild currents that they threaded their way amid the levee timbers, outbuildings and melancholy debris of the plantation. More swiftly-moving, in fact, was a second boat which one of the negroes suddenly caught sight of.

Golden, rousing himself at his servant's shout, saw that this second craft, rowed by a bearded white man, was bearing down on a nearby cotton-shed. At the same moment that he caught sight of his daughter Margory on the roof of this shed he made out the figure of Palldori himself directing the movements of the bearded man so frenziedly rowing the boat.

"My child—they will kill my child!" gasped Golden.

Open laughter showed on Palldori's sinister face, as with his sound arm he held the struggling figure in white close to his side.

"Have no fear of that," he called back across the swirling water, as his bearded confederate bent to the oars. "She will live. But she will live in a way that will leave you praying she had died!"

Twelve Years Later. Casavanti, the cadet, was a firm upholder of the pregnancy of apparel. He believed in keeping up appearances. He even reveled in his appellate of the Beau Nash of the Tenderloin. His clothes were of the latest cut and from the folds of his novelty cravat always flashed a "shiner" of the first water. There was, accordingly, almost a note of condescension in his manner as he received "Slim"

one of the cellar pillars. "Now turn him loose. And if he is seen on this island, after an hour's time, shoot him like a dog!"

A nervous sweat still showed in a scattering of high lights across the planter's sinewy face as he locked himself in his study and stared blankly about the empty room. The wine of rage had already ebbed from his blood. Exultation no longer shone in his steely eyes. He crossed slowly to the window and closed it. He failed to see, as he did so, the stricken figure that slunk like a wounded snake out through the garden shrubbery, the figure that nursed a crushed hand, yet, at the brink of the manor garden, turned wrathfully about and held his, uninjured arm above his head as he said: "May my other hand wither off, if you do not pay, and pay a thousand-fold, for this!"

But Golden neither saw nor heard, for all his being was centered about his own misery of mind.

His face was still buried in his hands when the old negro nurse opened the door and his little daughter, Margory, in her nightdress and holding a doll under her arm, crept in to her father's side.

"Where is mamma?" asked the child at her father's knee. Golden steadied himself with an effort.

"You have no mamma," he finally said, looking away.

"But mamma was here."

It was too much for the torn and passion-tossed father.

"Take her away," he cried out to the old negress. "For God's sake, take her away!"

Yet even when alone again his agony of mind remained with him, and again he sat in a stupor of misery before his desk.

He was roused by the sudden clamor of voices, the excited cries of running negroes. He stared stupidly about him, pulling himself together. Then he rose and went to the window. As he did so a negro, hatless and coatless, staggered in through the study door.

"Someone's done opened all the sluice gates. The sea's a-floodin' the island!"

Golden was already on his feet.

"Get Johnson and his men down to the East pumps, and start them working," he called out. "And you, Stark, get Stevens and his men out to those sluice gates and work them shut. Get them shut if you have to swim out to them!"

Legato in his meretriciously sumptuous sitting room. For "Slim," whatever his aspirations in crookdom, was still a mere underling.

"Who sent this?" demanded Casavanti as he took a note from his visitor's hand.

"Legar," was the answer. The cadet puffed languidly at a cigarette as he opened the note and read it.

The girl I spoke of will come tonight at twelve. You will find her a flower that is ripe for the picking. And once the flower gets in your hands I want it kept there.—Jules.

Casavanti restored the letter to its envelope. Then he stood thoughtfully regarding his visitor.

"Did anyone see you come here?" he asked.

"Not that I was wise to," was Slim's prompt reply.

"Then see that you get as quietly away!"

Slim Legato, accordingly, kept a weather eye open as he emerged to the street. Nothing suspicious met his gaze. It was not until he had descended the steps and reached the curb that a closed limousine, running as quietly as a frozen river, flowed along the pavement little more than ten paces away from him. At the first corner it turned sharply and stopped, obstructing the crossing.

The debonaire Slim drew up, blinking suspiciously at the mysterious vehicle. Then he blinked even harder, for from the open door window of the limousine a gloved hand had unmistakably beckoned to him. And the remarkable part of it all, to Slim, was the fact that the drawn car curtains concealed everything but that mysteriously beckoning hand.

Slim promptly decided to investigate. But he also decided to advance with caution. Before he could place a foot on the runningboard, however, and thrust a pertly inquisitive head into the hooded gloom of the car, that car began to move forward again. Yet before it passed from his reach the gloved hand thrust into his own an envelope.

On this envelope was clearly inscribed:

"Dr. Ludwig Palldori, Care of Jules Legar,"

and beneath these words Slim's bewildered eyes made out the unmistakable emblem of a laughing mask. What it meant was more than he could tell.

So inscrutable did this mystery seem, in fact, that Slim, after one minute of deep thought, promptly yet delicately slipped the blade of his penknife along the gummy flap of the envelope and forced it open. On a single sheet of paper he found written the cryptic words:

"Remember the Hammer of God, which smites, and crushes whom it smites!"

Slim, the gay cat and gangster, puzzled much over this message as he restored it to its violated envelope and adroitly revealed the flap.

"Now, who 'ell's gettin' his little knocker out fr the Doc?" demanded that bewildered worthy of himself as he made his guarded way back to the underworld rendezvous which was known to his confederates as the Owl's Nest.

The Owl's Nest proper was an unsavory cellar room in one of the most unsavory sections of the lower East side. Years before it had been a wine cellar, presided over by a Neapolitan of Mano Nero affiliations, until a federal shoo-fly, in search for "coliners," had been found stilettoed behind one of its casks of Marsala, whereupon the Neapolitan had vanished and in due time the Owl herself had taken possession of the quarters.

With the advent of Jules Legar, the mysterious center of a mysterious circle of evildoers about whom, she knew, it never paid to be too inquisitive, life had become easier for her. Her cellar, inconspicuous in a district so crowded with equally dubious warrens, had proved precisely the type of quarters the leader of the new circle was in need of. And as Legar himself stepped down into the cellar, advancing with his peculiarly padded tread as softly as an animal steals into its lair, the Owl remembered that the hour of her reward was not far distant. For she had proved a jealous guardian of the fair-haired girl whom Legar saw fit to keep hidden so long from the world.

It was plain to see that Legar was accepted as a leader by the half dozen dips and gangsters and moll-buzzers into whose midst he had so quietly slipped.

"Where's Legato?" he curtly asked as he glanced about the circle.

That question answered itself, for even as it was put Legato himself slipped down into the dim light of the Owl's cellar.

"What's this?" demanded Legar, as the new-comer, without speaking, handed the letter of mystery to his chief.

"That's what I want to find out," was Slim's retort. "A gink in a Fit' avenue go-cart hands me this and speeds off."

Legar tore open the envelope. His ferret eyes narrowed as he unfolded the sheet.

"The Hammer of God again!" he said with a sneer. But a troubled look crept into his face as he stood studying the message and the envelope in which that message had come. Then he laughed. But it was a laugh without mirth. "Palldori?" he muttered. "Why should I know anything about a man named Palldori?"

"Then we'll strike before the Hammer does!" he announced, with sudden determination. And with a gesture of impatience he commanded the Owl to take him to the girl, the hidden girl on whom still hinged his dreams of vengeance. "McTigue," he called back as he went, "get Tatano

and the taxi and be ready."

Yet he showed no exultation as he followed the hobbling Owl along a darkened passageway and up a flight of wooden stairs leading to the floor above.

Bent over a table beside the barred window he saw a girl, a girl still in her teens, a girl with a look of inalienable innocence still in her mournful eyes. And Legar, as he crossed to the table, saw that she was good to gaze upon. Yet at the sight of him she shrank back, letting the locket which she had just tied about her neck fall from her trembling fingers.

"Don't cower that way!" commanded Legar. "I haven't come to beat you. I guess the Owl gave you enough of that."

"Then why are you here?" the questioning eyes seemed to ask him.

"I've come to tell you I think you've had about enough of this sort of thing. It's going to be stopped, and you're going to see the world!"

"You're going to set me free?" gasped the incredulous girl.

"Free as a bird!" announced the ironic Legar. "And with as fine feathers as any bird that ever flew!"

"I'm to be free?" she repeated, still dazed.

"Sure! So get your things together, and do it quick. There's a taxi waiting downstairs. That taxi will carry you straight to my friend Casavanti. Casavanti is always kind to women, amazingly kind."

He stood, ferret-eyed and impassive, watching the girl as she feverishly gathered together her meager belongings. He hurried her out of the room, then along the passage and down the narrow stairway and out to the street where the taxi waited.

There McTigue sat ready for her. That worthy remained silent, however, as a sob or two shook the girl's body and a light of exultation shone from her timorous eyes. She too remained silent as they threaded their way through the darkened streets and drew up before a brown-stone house. Up to the door of this house McTigue led the still wondering young woman. There his finger played cryptically on the electric push bell, sounding Casavanti's pass signal, and a moment later the door mysteriously opened and the girl found herself alone. Even before the door could close behind her a silent-running limousine swung up to the curb and a hurrying figure stepped from its runningboard. But before that figure could mount the steps and reach the house entrance the heavy door had swung shut again. And the wide-eyed girl, following a footman in service uniform, mounted the stairs to Casavanti's private room.

Casavanti, as he looked up and saw her, let the cigarette fall from his thimble mouth.

"The Doc was dead right," he said under his breath. "She's a flower, all right!"

Then, still watching the girl, he said aloud: "Are you afraid of me?"

"No," was her answer.

"Then come here," he commanded. But she still stood gazing wonderingly about the room. A suspicion that all was not as it should be had crept over her.

"Why was I sent here?" she demanded, as Casavanti, white faced, stepped closer to her.

"For this," he replied, as with a sudden movement his arms went out and encompassed her shrinking body. She fought and struggled in that contaminating embrace, but her strength was not equal to her captor's. Casavanti, bending her body close to his, cupped his impassioned lips over her parted lips. It was several seconds before he lifted his head.

Before he did so, however, the closet door on his right opened and a figure stepped noiselessly out into the room. It was the figure of a man who wore a laughing mask.

"One word, you found, and it's your last!" said the quiet-toned voice behind the mask. But the revolver remained pointing at Casavanti's head as the stranger took the girl's hand and backed slowly towards the hall door. He groped for the door handle, leveled his weapon and still watched Casavanti. But the door, he discovered, was locked. Perplexed, for one short second he turned and looked for the key. But in that instant the tense-limbed Casavanti, beholding the revolver barrel waver from its target, saw his chance and leaped for his enemy.

The force of that impact sent the mysterious intruder staggering against the wall and the revolver itself clattering across the floor. The girl screamed in terror as the two contending figures fought and writhed about the room. Hurrying steps and voices were already sounding from outside the locked door, and Casavanti, knowing the slowness of his chances, was battling like a wildcat. But the man in the mask, with an odd and quite unexpected movement of the body, brought into play that familiar jiu-jitsu trick of catapulting an adversary over his own shoulder, depending on the force of the fall alone for any final result. And the fall in this case was not a gentle one.

Seeing that Casavanti did not move where he lay, the stranger took the doorknob from the stunned cadet's pocket and called out for the girl to follow him.

A moment later they entered the limousine and drove quickly away.

"I guess that's one on Legar!" murmured the still breathless man in the mask.

"Who are you?" demanded the young woman.

"I'm only a hammer," was the suddenly sobered reply. "The Hammer of God."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)