

The IRON CLAW by ARTHUR STRINGER

(This serial story is being shown in motion pictures every Wednesday and Thursday at Colonial theatre. Read it in the Observer and see it at the Colonial Theatre.)

SYNOPSIS.

On Windward Island Palladori intrigues Mrs. Golden into an appearance of evil which causes Golden to capture and torture the Italian by branding his face and crushing his hand. Palladori opens the dyke gates and floods the island and in the general rush to escape the flood kidnaps Golden's six-year-old daughter Margery. Twelve years later in New York a Masked One calling himself "The Hammer of God" rescues an eighteen-year-old girl from the cadet Casavanti, to whom Jules Legar has delivered her, and takes her to the home of Enoch Golden, millionaire, whence she is captured by Legar, Legar and Stein are discovered by Manley, Golden's secretary, setting fire to Golden's buildings, but escape. Margery's mother fruitlessly implores Enoch Golden to find their daughter. The Masked One again takes Margery away from Legar. Legar loots the Third National bank, but again the Laughing Mask frustrates his plans. Legar sends Golden "The Spotted Warning," demanding a portion of a chart of the Windward Islands. Margery meets her mother. The chart is lost during a fight between Manley and one of Legar's henchmen.

SEVENTH EPISODE

"THE HOODED HELPER."

Margery Golden's serenely self-willed Aunt Agatha disliked animals almost as much as she disliked mysteries. And about her tranquil Cedar home she felt were transpiring events altogether too inexplicable to remain long to her liking.

So when Hannah, the plump but less practical-minded caretaker of that erstwhile abode of tranquillity, tremulously announced that a stranger in a yellow mask had left a bright-colored parrot, answering to the name of Tito, at the door for Miss Margery, the bird in question was viewed with open disfavor, and Margery was subjected to many disturbing interrogations.

None of the girl's answers proving satisfactory, however, her firm-willed maiden aunt proposed that they proceed with their interrupted game of "Preference." But a green parrot's instinct and enigmatic cry of "Look out for the Iron Claw" proved in no way consistent with so tranquilizing a game, and the owner of the house finally and firmly commanded the departing Hannah, who "slept out," to carry the disturbing creature off to her own cottage for the night.

This Hannah did, with much mumbling, and deposited it in her chicken coop.

There Tito would have spent a quiet and uneventful night, in all likelihood, had not a certain mildly-predacious jessima answering to the name of Jimima Watson, returned all but empty-handed to her suburban home.

For one of the by-products of this dusky lady's activities as a scrub-woman was the gathering of those trifles which find their way to the waste baskets and refuse cans of office buildings. And her only harvest, on this occasion, was a half portion of a time-worn code chart and map, which had blown from the dizzy balcony of the Central Tower building.



She Was Sitting in Front of the Suit of Japanese Armor.

Rastus Watson, Jimima's lord and master, flung the sheet of paper down on their kitchen table in disgust when it was placed before him as the extent of a day's "pickings."

Now, Rastus, who was of much portlier frame than his spouse, was a firm believer in the efficiency of forced feeding. And since the day's harvest had been a lean one, and the larder showed disturbing signs of emptiness, that plump-bodied negro possessed himself of a worn gunnysack and announced his determination of acquiring a few pullets while hunger ran high and the moon swung low. Instinct combined with fate to lead Rastus by the nose, take him stealthily over the backyard fence of the aforementioned Hannah, and from there to the door of the padlocked coop. In the excitement of the moment the lightness of one bird tossed into the

bag escaped his attention; it was perhaps due to the haste with which he had to make off with his prisoners. He was blinking cautiously about, to make sure the coast was clear, when a voice startlingly close to his own portly carcass called out with a sudden warning:

"Look out for the Iron Claw!"

"How's dat?" was the answering cry of the tingling Rastus.

"Look out for the Iron Claw!" repeated the voice so close behind him. "Wha—what iron claw?" demanded the sweating Rastus.

"I'll get you!" announced the bodiful voice behind him. And at that threat utter and unreasoning panic seized the terrified Rastus, who, with a throaty bellow of agony, charged across a newly-dug garden and bounded like a rotund jackrabbit down a moonlit alley bordered with shadowy fences.

At the end of this alley Rastus plunged through a narrow gate, and charged boldly into the peaceful beer-garden belonging to the roadhouse of one Antonio Dibello, where sat four men in quiet conference about one of the little iron tables well out of public ken.

These men showed prompt resentment at this unheralded interruption to their talk. But as the hole, with its head thrust through a parot in the gunnysack, repeated its shrill cry of "Look out for the Iron Claw," these men rose in a body to their feet. Their leader, who in even the dim light from the garden lamps showed himself to be a one-armed man with a strangely-scarred face, sprang for the terrified negro. Rastus, however, was in no mood for either interruption or argument. He merely emitted a whoop of reawakened terror and headed for home.

There he burst in upon the astounded Jimima and collapsed with a quavering groan of exhaustion. But before Jimima could either understand the nature of his ailment or investigate the contents of his gunnysack, a second and even more violent irruption took place. Legar and his men dragged the quaking and gasping Rastus to his feet, shoved him into a chair, and snatched up the gunnysack. From it they took out the loudly-protesting green parrot and wonderingly examined it.

"Where did you get that parrot?" was the quick demand of the man who wore an iron hook where a hand ought to be. Rastus merely wheezed and shook in the legs and showed the whites of his eyes. It was indeed, several minutes before he was so much as awakened to the fact that he was not in the grip of the law. But once convinced of that fact, he became voluble enough in his protestations to oblige the "white gen'tlemen" with any information they desired. He even led those white gentlemen back to the neighborhood of Hannah's chicken coop.

So engrossed were they in their discourses that they thereupon paid scant attention to Rastus himself, who took advantage of that diversion to disappear.

There were certain phases of that hurried pursuit, however, which had not entirely escaped the attention of a circumspect stranger who had motored casually about the quiet streets of Cedarton earlier in the evening. Aunt Jimima Watson, in fact, had scarcely recovered from the shock consequent upon the sudden invasion of her cottage when she discovered herself confronted by still another stranger. And the fact that this stranger wore a yellow mask did not add to her immediate peace of mind.

"All I want to know, my good woman, is where those men are taking your husband?"

"Dey's takin' him back t' whar he done got dat bird," explained the negro. The stranger explained for the door. Then he stopped, dead short. For lying overlooked on the floor, close beside a battered water bucket, he caught sight of a familiar-looking oblong of yellow paper. In another moment he had possession of it.

"Where did that paper come from?" he demanded. For he knew that it was the long-sought Golden chart which he held in his hand.

"Dat done come from mah offus sweepin's," explained the other. "But mah Rastus allows it ain't even wuf a green tradin' stamp!"

"Your Rastus may be right," was the stranger's quiet reply. "But it's worth this much to me." And Aunt Jimima found a ten-dollar bill thrust into her astonished pink palm. "That is yours, my good woman, if you do just one thing, and do it quickly. I want you to go to the sheriff's, wake him up, and get him to the house where that woman called Hannah works. Tell him to get there in a hurry, and to bring his men, or there'll be murder done in this village, or before the sun rises!"

ing "preference" in the light of a green-shaded reading lamp. But the man in the mask, preferring to leave that peaceful game undisturbed, stole quietly in through the back of the house, locked himself in a small room above stairs, and there adroitly but quickly made a facsimile of the map. Before that map could be completed though, strange events were already transpiring directly beneath where he sat. For Margery Golden, glancing up from her game, stared idly into the old-fashioned mirror of bevel plate facing her from the opposite wall. And peering in at the window reflected in that mirror she saw a boarded face which mirrored an unmistakable scar.

She did not scream aloud, as her first impulse had prompted, but she sat staring down at her cards, trying to study out the dilemma which confronted her. For the face she had seen was Legar's.

The move she quietly decided upon was to call the strangely reticent chauffeur of her strangely elusive deliverer and ask him to make ready for an immediate flight to the city. She watched that chauffeur as he threw on a heavy bear-skin coat and cap, wound a muffler about his neck, and started for the garage. She watched him as he stepped out into the darkness. Then the bear-skin figure became the center of strange and unlooked-for activities, for it was plain that several men, lurking there in the darkness, had sprung upon him. It was equally plain that they lost little time in overpowering him, for before the startled woman could rise from the card table they found that home of peace invaded by a group of audacious-eyed ruffians headed by Legar himself.

The latter bowed ironically to the white-faced girl as he confronted her. His advance towards her, though, was interrupted by the suddenly renewed struggles of the chauffeur, who, as he tried to break away from his captors, called loudly for help. Legar, looking



"Where Did You Get That Parrot?"

nonchalantly about, crossed to a door, swung it wide, and saw that it opened into a closet.

"Throat that grizzly in here until he learns how to keep quiet!" was their leader's crisp command.

"And now, my girl, I guess it's your turn again!" was his next sinister exclamation.

At the same moment that these words were spoken still another unexpected intruder entered the room. Only this time it was the oddly interruptive figure of that man of mystery known as the Laughing Mask.

"Not a move from any man here!" he cried out as he faced that threatening circle, gun in hand.

It was Legar himself who stepped back a pace or two, closely watching the automatic.

"Before we start any shooting around here," the Laughing Mask calmly suggested, "I want just a word or two, Legar, with you. I know what you're after. You want Golden's portion of a Windward Island chart. Well, I have that chart, and I have it with me. But there is no reason why women should be dragged into this fight. So the first thing you have to do, if you want that chart, is to allow Margery Golden and her mother here to return quietly to the city with my chauffeur, and return tonight!"

Legar's lip curled.

"And then you'll as quietly hand me over the paper, I suppose?" he scoffed.

"I'll hand you over the paper," agreed the Laughing Mask, for above all things he knew it was necessary to play for time.

"The gun and the map together," was the prompt demand.

that fool in the mask tries to move, plug him one."

He handed the automatic to one of the men and motioned to him to unlock the closet door. Then he ordered the chauffeur to step out.

"Now, you beat it with these ribs, and beat it quick!"

That chauffeur had not taken six steps across the room before a sudden cry broke from one of the men standing close beside the card table.

"Your map's gone!" was the bewildering message that fell on Legar's ears as he leaped to the table side. The man in the bear skins at the same moment stepped out through the door.

"That guy gave you a copy, a false copy done in disappearing ink."

Legar gave one glance. Then, with an oath, he leaped for the closet door, flung it open, and sprang bodily on the masked figure, dragging it out to the light as he tore away the band of yellow that covered the latter's face.

"That's the chauffeur!" cried one of the men. "They switched makeups in that closet, and the main guy's got away!"

Then came a sudden trample of feet, a chorus of shouts and the charge of armed officers of the law through the house. For the sheriff had at last arrived.

Legar, knowing what that meant, with one sweep of his hooked arm flung the green-shaded lamp from its table, jumped through a window and vanished from sight.

The Shell of Deceit. Margery Golden, all things considered, was once more in very excellent spirits. There were even moments when young David Manley considered those spirits as both deplorably and disturbingly excellent.

For the girl's happiness, he felt assured, was due to the presence of young Count Luigi da Espares.

He had come, as more than one impoverished young nobleman had come to America, to dispose of those canvases and curios which, if they had

not once graced his own ancestral halls, had at least been conscientiously made, on the far side of the Atlantic, after models bearing every earmark of the authentic. And one of the treasures which he had succeeded in disposing of to Enoch Golden was a full suit of medieval Japanese armor, complete even to the long-bladed Kagisaki dagger and grotesquely fashioned metal face mask.

That leering metal face David Manley had hated from the first moment he saw it in position at the far side of the sower Golden library. The ugliness of that metal monstrosity, in fact, seemed to accentuate the soft-toned canvas painting which stood immediately behind it.

"Just what do you see to like about that thing?" he somewhat brusquely inquired. The girl's face grew serious.

"That leering metal face makes me think of the Laughing Mask, and now I'm almost certain I know who this Laughing Mask is."

"Who?"

"Count Luigi da Espares himself!"

"I don't believe it!"

"Are you sure?"

"They were there thirty minutes ago."

"But are you sure?"

"Yes; I saw them."

"Then the first thing to do is to make sure that she is still safe."

Yet hurried as Manley's flight was through that quiet house, he took time to circle about to his own room and there thrust an automatic pistol into his pocket. Then he called Celestino, who was promptly sent to investigate Margery's boudoir. She returned with the disquieting report that the girl was not there.

Manley, with a sinking of the heart, continued his search through the lower regions of the house. And he did not breathe freely until, quietly opening the side door into the library, he caught sight of Margery herself, in a narrow-backed Jacobean chair, bent low over a book which lay open on her lap.

She sat clearly outlined in the bright fulcrum falling over her carelessly-poised body, leaving her in a luminous shadow from the single wall light, which she had left turned on immediately above her. This silvery shaft of light brought out the beauty of her heavily-massed hair; it brought out the tender lines of the white throat and neck, the wistful girlishness of the slender figure. Then Manley for the first time noticed that she was sitting directly in front of the suit of Japanese armor. He could see the polished metal of that armor flash venomously in the strong sidelight.

As he stood there, clinging to the portiere and continuing to stare at those two strongly-divergent figures, he found something almost hypnotic in the virulent brightness of the polished metal. Then a gasp of incredulity burst from his lips. For as he stared at the metal hand holding the long-bladed dagger, he saw, or thought he saw, that hand slowly raise, as though some miracle had endowed its insensate links and plates and vambraces with life. Then the very blood in his body seemed to curdle with sudden horror, for now there was no doubt about it. The mailed hand holding the glimmering knife-blade above the softly-breathing girl was slowly but surely being lifted, higher and still higher. And in another moment, Manley felt, it would surely strike.

Quick as a flash he caught the automatic from his pocket, swung it up, and trained the barrel on the glinting high lights along the mailed fist. Then he fired.

There was a muffled shout of pain, a short scream of terror from the startled girl, and answering calls from above-stairs as the uproar echoed through the midnight house. But to all of these Manley paid scant attention. With ten steps he had crossed the room. Then he flung himself on the suit of mail, twisting it about and sending it toppling from its stand. But one glance showed it to be empty. The framed canvas that stood behind it he jerked from the wall. Then an exclamation of wonder burst from his lips. For, in the wainscoting at each side of where the canvas had hung he discovered two holes cut, not a yard apart, and sufficiently large to admit of a man's arms being thrust through them. And as he saw them, and began to batter on the dark-wood wainscoting with his heavy pistol-but, he realized what had taken place.

Some enemy, secreted behind that wainscoting, had thrust an arm into the metal shell of an arm holding the dagger, and had lifted it to strike down the girl so close beside it. And that enemy, Manley resolved as he battered through the panel and crowded his way through into a narrow passageway, he would discover and capture or know the reason why.

Yet that passage, which led to the abandoned conservatory and from there back to a long unused butler's pantry, proved to be entirely empty. All that rewarded Manley's frantic search was a sleeve button and a shred of cloth torn from a service coat, caught on a nail where the passage itself ended against the wainscoting. And by the time he had pushed his way back to the library Golden and Da Espares and Wilson were already there.

"Where's Wrench, that new footman?" he demanded.

"I saw Wrench in the upper hall, sir, two minutes ago," was Wilson's prompt reply.

"But monsieur, what has happened to my beautiful armor?" demanded the softly-speaking Da Espares.

"I'll tell you that when we find Wrench," was Manley's curt reply. "Wilson, you guard the front door, and you, sir," added Manley, turning to Golden, "I'd advise to watch the windows there."

"And I, monsieur, what may I do to be of assistance?" inquired the imperturbable Da Espares.

"You go up those front stairs and stop anybody who attempts to come down. And mind you stop them! I'm going up by the servants' stairs. And he would watch the elevator!"

He was off the next moment, running with all his speed through the house, with his automatic in his hand as he went.

one glimpse at the sleeve of the service-coat from which a button had clearly been torn away, convinced him that all his vague suspicions of the past week had been only too well founded. And he wasted no words on argument.

He leaped to that startled figure, thrust his automatic against the waist-line of the service coat and commanded Wrench to back up against the wall. As he did so a sudden shout sounded from the doorway behind him and instinctively he glanced about to ascertain the meaning of this shout. Wrench, seeing his chance, knocked



Sprang Bodily on Manley.

the menacing automatic-barrel to one side and sprang bodily on Manley. As he did so an unexpected and strangely mantled figure glided into the narrow room. It was a figure wrapped and hooded in heavy velour and only a second glance at its strange coveries would have revealed the fact that it was a portiere quickly torn from its fastenings and improvised into a mask to conceal its wearer's identity. But Manley, as he fought with Wrench, had small time to register this fact, or the further fact that a rent had been made in the portiere to serve as an eye-hole for the head which so completely covered.

It was not until that hooded figure had joined in the contest that Manley became aware of the second portiere which his newer opponent carried. For this portiere was headily thrown over the young secretary's head and suddenly drawn tight about his arms. The white-faced and struggling footman, realizing that his final chance had come, promptly took advantage of Manley's momentary helplessness to fall back, leap for the open door and make good his escape.

Manley himself, maddened by the thought of that culprit's escape, swung about on his hooded assailant with a fury that sent the latter also retreating towards the hall. That unknown enemy even sought to escape as his colleague had done, but at the stair-head Manley overtook him. Together they went down the stairs, a tangle of limbs and striking fists and portiere ends. They fought and rolled along the lower floorway, fought until Manley had freed himself from the other's clutch and was struggling to tear the drape's head from about his neck.

But that enemy, frantically bent on remaining unknown, fought back with an added fury which brought the two swaying and clinging bodies full force against the stair-railing. That railing, under the strain, suddenly gave way. Manley, clinging desperately to the portiere folds, felt that voluminous drape's follow after him as he fell gasping over the well of the stairs.

He fell sprawling, tangled up in many yards of velour, and landed on the covering head and shoulders of the astounded Wilson, who, at that sudden assault, promptly and vociferously shouted for help.

When Manley, stunned for a minute or two by the fall, once more opened his eyes and blinked inquiringly about him, he saw both Golden and his wife and Margery herself clustered at his side.

"Did you get him?" he demanded.

"Get whom?" asked Enoch Golden.

"That murderous blackleg, Da Espares!" was Manley's reply.

"But Count da Espares has nothing to do with this," protested the girl, with a frown of bewilderment. "He's only been helping us, as he always helped us!"

"As he always helped you?" scoffed the incredulous Manley.

"Yes, as he will tell you himself!" For at that moment, suave and smiling, the count joined the wondering circle.

"Ah, monsieur, I keep watch above, as you ask," he explained with a shrug. "But nozing happen. I see nobody. Then, mon dieu, I hear the tumult, and come down to you. But I cannot comprehend. So tell me, monsieur, I beg, what has happen?"

Manley rose stiffly and slowly to his feet.

"You don't understand?" he asked as his fixed stare met the mildly questioning eyes of the count.

"No, monsieur," was the other's softly spoken answer, as he still gazed with solemn wonder into the scolding face of the American.

"But what do you mean by this, anyway, Manley?" demanded Enoch Golden.

"Oh, I guess he's merely the guy that put the laugh in the Laughing Mask," was Manley's embittered yet enigmatic retort.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)