

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 Pallidori 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. Pallidori floods the island and kidnaps Golden's little daughter Margery. Twelve years later in New York a Masked One rescues Margery from Legar and takes her to her father's home, whence she is recaptured. Margery's mother fruitlessly implores Golden to find their daughter. The Laughing Mask again takes Margery away from Legar. Legar sends to Golden a warning and a demand for a portion of the chart of Windward Island. Margery meets her mother. The chart is lost in a fight between Manley and one of Legar's henchmen, but is recovered by the Laughing Mask. Count De Espares figures in a dubious attempt to entrap Legar and claims to have killed him. Golden's house is dynamited during a masked ball. Legar escapes but De Espares is crushed in the ruins.

NINTH EPISODE

Arrows of Hate.

Doctor Anstett stared down at the bundle of delicately carved arrows. They were as slender as a bistoury blade and scarcely longer than a darning needle. Then he looked up at his visitor.

"So you really object to telling me your name," he said as he carefully restored the fragile darts to their receptacle of capped bamboo.

"Unless it's essential, I'd prefer not to," was the stranger's quiet-toned reply.

"Then why did you bring these things to me?" asked the doctor.

"Because I understood you were the most eminent toxicologist in America. And I was anxious to know whether or not those innocent-looking arrows in your hand were really poisoned."

The doctor's smile was a grim one. "Well, they were poisoned, all right! It is difficult, of course, to say just what the nature of this venom is. But that does not interest me as much as the question of where you obtained possession of such remarkably deadly little missiles."

For a moment or two the stranger remained silent.

"To be quite candid, doctor, these arrows were stolen."

"But from whom?"

"From the foreign valet of a man who has unmistakably proved himself an enemy to society."

"And is that why you have asked me to clean and neutralize them with such scientific exactitude?"

"It is."

"And now that their fangs have been drawn, so to speak, what do you propose to do with them?"

"Return them to their owner."

"To what end?"

"To the end that any nefarious plan which he may be about to execute will not bring death where that criminal desires to bring it!"

The abstracted-eyed doctor watched the visitor as the latter prepared to take his departure.

Had Doctor Anstett been less interested in remarkable poisons and more interested in remarkable persons, he might have kept on the trail of this mysterious stranger, and, in doing so, he might have discovered that these envenomed arrows of mystery were the rightful property of one unrighteous Mauki, the personal servant of that elusive master criminal known as Jules Legar.

Legar's campaign to discredit the Laughing Mask was a characteristic



The Huge Slatternly Figure Hurlled Itself Upon Him.

tically audacious one. It even embraced a number of artfully forged letters, duly signed by the Laughing Mask and left in surroundings which caused both perplexity and alarm to the city police.

One note, found beside the body of a murdered miser, briefly explained that crime by the declaration that the dead man had always robbed the poor and so earned the end which overtook him—even though this included the carrying away of a not inconsiderable portion of his worldly wealth. A gambler and a government inspector met

a similar fate. The complex machinery of the law was set in motion and far-reaching efforts were made for the rounding up of this somewhat too autocratic Laughing Mask.

One of these efforts included a visit on Enoch Golden by Lieutenant Kibby and three of his men from the detective bureau. Golden, the lieutenant pointed out, was in a position to help the authorities out of a predicament by telling all he knew about this same mysterious stranger.

"But I don't know any more about this Laughing Mask than you do!" protested the old financier.

"Surely you have at least some theory as to the identity of the man."

"I thought I had, once or twice. And my daughter thought she had. But we were off the track, each time."

"One moment, please," cut in the lieutenant as he suddenly rose to his feet and strode across the room. He stepped out through the portered doorway, stared down the hallway, and returned to the room again. "Are you aware of the fact that a young woman has been standing there listening to every word we said?"

"The deep-lined face of the aged financier showed no perceptible change. "My daughter, undoubtedly," retorted Golden. "For the girl's about as interested in this case, you see, as we are ourselves!"

Margery's interest in the mysterious case of the Laughing Mask, indeed, would have been brought promptly home to that somewhat puzzled police lieutenant had he been able to give less attention to Enoch Golden and more to the puzzled-eyed girl who had stood momentarily arrested at the entrance to her father's library. For as she moved on down the shadowy hallway she found herself confronted by that interruptive but all too familiar figure of the Laughing Mask himself. He made a gesture for silence as she started back in alarm. Then he nodded his domineering head in the direction of the library door.

"Now, perhaps, you will understand why it has not been easy for me to explain just who I am!"

"But you must explain," gasped the bewildered girl. "They are saying terrible things about you, things which I know to be untrue."

"Do you trust me?"

"I want to," was the whispered answer.

"Then will you continue to trust me?" asked the man in the mask.

"I don't think I can," was the girl's hesitating answer, "until you can trust me!"

"You mean that I must unmask?" But Margery Golden's reply to that question was never uttered. For as she was about to speak, her volatile maid, Celestine, stepped into the hall behind her, beheld the mysteriously masked figure, and promptly filled the house with a ringing Gallic scream.

"Mon Dieu, it is the Laughing Mask!" she shrielled as she ran down the hall, giving the alarm.

And her alarm, unreasoning as it seemed, was fully shared by the Laughing Mask himself. He swung about, darted through a doorway, and disappeared from sight as Golden and his retainers and his official visitors came flocking out to the scene of that disturbance.

Two minutes later Margery Golden, hearing a shout from Kibby's men above stairs, followed that officer to the scene of the sudden tumult. There, to her alarm, she saw three men struggling with a figure which she promptly recognized as the Laughing Mask himself.

"We've got him!" gasped one of his captors as Lieutenant Kibby confronted him.

"What'll we do with him?" asked his other captor.

"First thing, tear that fool mask off!" commanded the lieutenant.

But that command was not carried into execution. For Margery Golden, catching sight of the Laughing Mask's fallen revolver, ran to where it lay and took possession of it. The next moment it was leveled straight at the heart of the detective whose hand had been lifted to the yellow domino covering his prisoner's face.

"Stop!" commanded the girl.

"Put down that gun, you!" promptly commanded Kibby, purple with indignation.

"Not until your men release that prisoner," was her deliberate response. "Yes, you, both of you," she continued, menacing the officers of the law with the revolver. "Stand back from him! Still further back! Now you," she added, turning to the Laughing Mask, "walk out through that door! Go out, and go at once!"

So intently did she watch that disappearing figure that the movements of the adroit and much-experienced Lieutenant Kibby, sidling stealthily along the wall beside her, entirely escaped her attention. When he leaped for Margery Golden's tense figure, he made sure of his distance and sure of his mark in doing so. He promptly and none too gently wrested the revolver from her grasp, at the same moment that Enoch Golden himself came panting through the open door.

"I hope you understand now why you've never got your Laughing Mask!" was the irate officer's cry as he swung the girl about so as to face her equally irate father.

"Well, we'll get him," thundered the grim-willed old millionaire, "or he'll never walk out of this house alive!"

Even as he spoke the renewed sound of shouts came to them from above. It was Wilson the butler who called to Golden and the group at his heels as he went floundering up the stairs.

"He's gone into Manley's room, sir!" cried that vastly disturbed old servant. "And he locked the door as he went!"

"Well, Manley himself's in there," panted the owner of the house as he hurried on to his secretary's door. "He's typing my international director's reports."

But the sounds that came from within the room in no way suggested such sedentary pursuits as typewriting.

"They're fighting, sir!" called out Wilson, with his old ear cocked close to the door panel. "My word, sir, but they're at it, 'ot and 'eavy!"

By the time one of Kibby's detectives had caught up a chair and battered in that door all sounds of combat had ceased. And the astonished group, crowding into the dismantled chamber, saw only an open window, an overturned table and a room empty of all life.

"But Manley, where's Manley?" demanded the still panting owner of the house.

"Wait!" cried Kibby himself as he crossed to the closet door against which leaned a "high boy," for about this door his trained eyes had detected certain betraying tremors and agitations.

It took him but a moment to push the "high boy" to one side. Then, flinging open the door, he had the satisfaction of beholding the recumbent figure of David Manley, bound and gagged on the closet floor.

Helping hands soon released the unhappy prisoner.

"I tried to stop him," he said, a little thickly. "And this is what I got for it!"

But Lieutenant Kibby was no longer interested in Manley.

"Two of you men go out through this window," he commanded, "and round up that man before he gets

you're really the best friend I have, the best friend I could have!"

"But friendship, don't you see, is hardly enough," he declared as she turned quietly away.

"Then some day, perhaps, it may even be something more," she called softly back to him before slipping out through the open door.

The Deadly Decoy.

If David Manley was blindly and unreasonably happy, all that day and the next, he succeeded in keeping his happiness to himself. It was not a propitious time, he knew, for the airing of emotions so essentially personal. There was still a shadow over the house of Golden, a shadow which gave small promise of passing away until fate or accident ended the activities of one Jules Legar. There was, too, a shadow in Manley's heart, a shadow of doubt as to how far he was justified in accepting Margery Golden's words as he had accepted them. So as he talked with her the following day he was conscious of a vague constraint which reminded him there were still reservations to be respected and confidences to be withheld.

This was brought keenly home to Manley as Wilson carried in to the girl sitting so close to him a sealed note which she opened and read in silence. That this note brought a somewhat disturbing message to her was only too evident. And whatever that message, it was equally evident, she intended to keep it to herself.

"No bad news, I hope?" remarked Manley, rather dejectedly studying her face.

"Not altogether," was the girl's evasive reply.

Margery Golden smiled a little as she folded up the note. She was still smiling as she tore the paper in two, again and still again. One small piece of that paper fluttered from her fingers and fell half way between her and the still frowning young secretary. He stared down at it captiously, almost sullenly. Then his eyes slowly widened, for clearly inscribed on that scrap of paper he saw one-half of the sign of the Laughing Mask.

She then walked slowly across to the open fire and tossed into it the note which she had already torn into fragments.

Manley stood watching her as she ordered Train and the limousine and



He Knew Even Before She Spoke That It Was Margery Golden.

away! The rest of you people get a cordon round this block before it's too late!"

They were off again like a pack of beagles striking a new scent, leaving the dilapidated and somewhat disconsolate Manley to his own thoughts and devices. As he sat there, feeling about his bruised body with a gently interrogative finger, Margery Golden stepped timidly in through his still open door.

"Don't get up," she said quietly as she crossed to his side. But before she could speak again the two detectives came clambering and puffing in through the open window. Their mission, it was plain to see, had been a fruitless one.

"You can be thanked for this," cried the heavier of the two men. "You, flashin' a gun on officers o' the law when they're tryin' to do their duty!"

"And you're goin' to pay for gettin' free with fire-arms, young woman, or I'll eat my hat!" avowed his equally indignant companion.

But David Manley suddenly stanchoned that flow of accusatory declamation.

"You get out of here," commanded that irate and somewhat dilapidated youth, "and get out quick!"

"What have you got to do with that girl?" demanded the heavier of the threatened officers.

"I've got a lot to do with that girl—as I'll show you if you don't get where you belong inside of three seconds!"

"Aw, leave the gink to his ravins!" said the shorter man, wearily, as the two left the room.

"I guess I was wrong there, when I started to crow about having so much to do with you and your affairs," Manley said as he looked a little wistfully into her slightly smiling face.

"Why do you say you were wrong?" she asked.

"Because every time I do try to help you out I only seem to make a mess of things," was his disconsolate answer.

"You've succeeded in proving that

then called for her hat and coat. He had much to say, but for once he saw that silence was golden.

The moment he was alone, however, he quickly crossed to the fireplace, dropped down on his hands and knees, and there peered closely at the charred remnants of the note which had been tossed on the coals.

Three or four of the fragments he even rescued with the help of a brass fire shovel. He turned them about delicately and studied them patiently. On one he deciphered the words "you will come." On another he managed to make out "am ill." The only remaining portion of unscured carbon on which he could discover any trace of writing had lost its center. But on what remained of it he could read "63 Washi—re."

"63 Washington Square!" he announced. And five minutes later found him seated in a taxicab.

He had just crossed Fourteenth street, sweeping south, when he caught sight of the Golden limousine, empty with the exception of Train at the wheel, sweeping northwest.

This disturbing discovery, once he had reached the square, took him up the stone steps of a ruinous mansion long given over to artists' studios and workshops of a meaner order.

He had climbed three flights of stairs, and climbed them with all the stealthiness of a flat looter, when he came to a door which held out more promise than the others. For behind this door he could distinctly hear the sound of voices. As he squatted down and peered through the keyhole he heard a girl's muffled scream followed by a throaty laugh of triumph. And the moment he heard that laugh he knew it to be Legar's.

Yet at the same moment he made a second and even more diverting discovery. This was that a ponderous and brawny-armed woman, advancing with elephantine lurches along the half-lighted hallway, was shouting out shrill calls of warning as she came.

Manley for one brief second nursed



Leveled Straight at the Heart of the Detective.

the delusion that those warnings were intended for his own ear. It was not until the huge and slatternly figure flung itself upon his still crouching shoulders that he awakened to the fact that he was being attacked, the startled eavesdropper found himself flung bodily through the suddenly opened door, even before he could draw his revolver. For he knew now beyond doubt that he was in the territory of the enemy. He knew that still another trap had been set for the unwary. He knew it, even before he caught sight of Legar himself and Margery Golden shrinking close to the wall at his side.

It was on Legar that he fixed his eye as he whipped out his firearm and steadied himself with one hand against the broken wall.

Legar saw that revolver leveled at his body. He saw the look on Manley's colorless face. He knew what was coming.

He did not stop to argue; he did not even turn to flee. But as he stood there, with his deep-set eyes fixed on Manley's face, his long right arm shot out and caught at the arm of the girl, still crouching so close to the wall beside him. But even quicker was Manley's discovery of Legar's intentions to swing the body of the girl about in front of his own as a human shield. And Manley, while the path was still clear, leveled his gun and fired.

There was a shout, half of horror and half of rage, as Legar went down in a heap, his wooden arm-end thumping on the rough flooring like a mallet as he fell. And at the same moment that the brawny-armed amazon boldly struck Manley's right arm up towards the ceiling, that startled band of Legar's followers united in a rush for the assault of their leader and chief.

In the first two minutes of that altogether hopeless struggle Manley had lost both his gun and his coat. In the next minute he had lost his breath. In the next his liberty itself was gone, for those worthless lost no time in tying and trussing him up as neatly as a French chef trusses a capon. As he was rudely backed away to where Margery Golden, equally corded and tied, already stood, he heard one of the men behind him speak.

"Did he croak the chief?"

"Naw, he's still breathin'!"

"Then we gotta get him outa here. . . . Pip, you call a taxi. We gotta get him back to his own 'Malina,' or there'll be hell to pay!"

"How about this gun boob and the rib?"

"Gag 'em and throw 'em into that bathroom there! And if youse turn on the gas by accident, I guess it's goin' to save us all a lot o' trouble!"

The Creeping Message.

David Manley, for all the predicament confronting him, tried to school himself to calmness.

Close beside him, bound and gagged like himself, he could feel the inert body of Margery Golden.

But what most disturbed him was the gas jet that stood out from the green-papered wall high above his head. That had been the finishing touch at the hands of his enemies.

He looked carefully about the room, point by point. It was nothing but a commonplace bathroom, with a door on one side and a small window high up in the wall on the opposite side.

He found nothing, in that methodic inventory of his surroundings, to revive the slowly dying embers of hope. He could neither move nor call out. But there was still a way of sending a message out to the world.

He worked and floundered about until he was in a sitting position. Then he worked his way closer to the enamel bathtub, leaning, panting and helpless over its edge, for a moment or two, as a drunken man leans over a cell cot. Then energy again revived in him. He slowly and painfully edged further and further over into the bathtub, like a cut worm rounding a leaf edge, until with his forehead he was able to push and bunt the loose drain plug into its socket. Then, once more withdrawing from the bathtub, he directed his attention to the nearer of the two taps that stood at its head. He had the use of neither hand nor foot, to turn that tap. But by the pressure of his own skull against the tarnished brass tap handle he was finally able to throw the faucet open. Then he sank wearily back to the floor, for his head was swimming dizzily and bands of steel seemed constricting his chest.

He lay there watching as the water from the overflowing tub trickled to the floor, pooled in the worn undulations of the boards, and crawled on again, in search of some avenue of escape. And he watched it as it moved, for on its sinuous back, he remembered, it carried his message of deliverance, his hope of life. Finding an unused ventilator flue, the water fountained joyously down on the head of a long-haired artist hard at work on a canvas.

That artist, after speechlessly contemplating the deluge, ran shouting to the hallway, where he was joined by his model and by fellow artists from neighboring studios.

When they found their investigations barred by a locked door, they broke it in. While they were sniffing suspiciously about the outer room, however, their efforts to reach the source of that deluge were being anticipated by a more stealthy figure, which, clambering monkeylike up the narrow iron fire escape, climbed still higher to the small window and promptly broke it in.

Manley, rousing himself at the sharp sound of the breaking glass, turned about to behold the face of a narrow-eyed and dark-skinned stranger in the square of light about him. Even as he stared up at this exotic face with its uncanny fringe of jet black hair he saw the unknown intruder draw a slender tube from under his coat. To this tube the stranger fitted a small arrow scarcely longer than a darning needle. Then, placing the tube to his mouth, he sent the slender dart whistling down through the air, where it fixed itself in the wooden flooring not three inches from Margery Golden's head.

Instinctively, as Manley witnessed that incomprehensible attack, as he vaguely awoke to the meaning of the strange performance, he crawled to the girl's side. There he tried to shield her helpless body with his own.

But after that he remembered little. He awakened later to the sound of a woman's soft sobs close beside his aching head. And he knew, even before she spoke, that it was Margery Golden.

"It's no use, doctor," she was forlornly crying out to the figure nearer the foot of the bed. "I saw that man, and I know it was Mauki. And as soon as I saw him I knew Legar had sent him, had sent him with the same poisoned arrows that once killed an informer in the Owl's Nest!"

"But this man isn't dead," protested the doctor.

"No, but he will die."

"Now, young lady, this won't do, you know," the man of medicine tried to reassure the quietly weeping girl. "And if you leave me with him for a few minutes I'll make another examination. And then we'll know the worst!"

"I'd rather stay with him—to the last," said the white-faced girl.

"But if you'll come back, in ten minutes!" quietly announced the man who was not used to having his suggestions crossed. And he held the door for the unhappy girl as she passed unsteadily out.

Manley, the next minute, lifted his head from the pillow.

"Say, doctor, what's this about me dying?" he demanded.

"That all depends on one point," was the doctor's reply as he gingerly took up one of the slender arrows, no longer than a darning needle. "And the point is whether or not we can find an antidote for the poison that was smeared on those outlandish blow-gun darts. But the next point is, how do you feel?"

"I might feel worse!"

The man of medicine looked puzzled.

"Well, that seems to be the strange part of this case. The infection must be a very insidious one. Even the wounds themselves show no signs of toxification. So you wait here a minute until I get my instrument bag!"

When that somewhat bewildered man of medicine returned with his bag he found David Manley sitting up in bed, poring frowningly over a sheet of paper which he held in his hand.

"Who threw this note on my bed?" demanded his patient, with a vigor that was unlooked for in the dying. It was the doctor's turn to frown as he took the sheet of paper from the other's hand.

"I draw the fangs from Mauki's blow gun," read the message there inscribed. "His arrows held no poison, and you are safe. . . . The Laughing Mask."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)