

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 intriguers 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 Da 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 Da Espares is crushed in the ruins. Margery rescues the Laughing Mask from the police. Manley finds Margery not indifferent to his love. He saves her from Manke's poisoned arrows.

TENTH EPISODE

THE LIVING DEAD

"I'm opposed to your plan, sir," Enoch Golden declared with heat, "and I always will be opposed to it!"

David Manley, as he stared across the table at the ruffled old millionaire, tried to control himself to patience.

"But you acknowledge that you are equally opposed to Legar's intrusions. Into this house, to having his secret agents planted about at your elbows. But when I work out a plan that offers a reasonable promise of trapping Legar and his men, you stop the whole business by declaring it's lacking in dignity!"

"Dignity is something which departed from this house the day Legar first forced his way into it!" was Golden's bitter retort.

"Precisely!" cried young Manley. "His whole campaign has been one of intimidation, of threats and assaults and reprisals. They have been trying to frighten us with terror. So my contention is, why not give them a dose of their medicine? Why not fight them with their own weapons, and in doing so, perhaps go them one better?"

"But I can only repeat my convictions that your plan can't succeed!" protested the tremulous-voiced old financier.

"Why not leave that to me?" cut in young Manley, with his first touch of impatience.

"I've left a good many things to you, Davy; but I don't encourage men to plan their own funerals!"

"Yet I've thought this out, sir, and I maintain that it's worth a try. You know as well as I do that these men who work with Legar are an ignorant and illiterate lot. They're not afraid of force. But when you confront them with the supernatural, you get them face to face with something they can't understand. And what they can't understand they are going to be afraid of!"

"And you think you're going to frighten 'em away with a casket?"

"I'm going to make them believe that David Manley, having departed this life because of an attack on his person by one Maubi, with poisoned arrows, is about to be duly interred in the Golden mausoleum, and—"

"But you couldn't even get a wax figure that would fool a five-year-old child! You couldn't—"

"I've already got the figure, interrupted Manley. "And it strikes me as being an exceptionally perfect one."

"But what's all this funeral business to lead to?" demanded the old financier.

"It leads to the fact that Legar and his men will be duly informed of my death, for I want all the servants in this house to pass before the casket and see me in it. And Legar's spy will be one of them. So Legar, you may be sure, will get the facts as soon as they are known. He will be tipped off as to the day and hour of the funeral. He will also be told that the cortege, say of three carriages, is to proceed to the Golden mausoleum, and that Margery Golden is to go in one of the carriages. And that lonely spot will strike him as precisely the right spot for making a coup."

"And what do we gain by that?"

"We'll fill our big thirty-thousand dollar mausoleum with thirty big policemen, and round up the gang before Legar can even smell a rat."

But Enoch Golden remained unconvinced.

"Well, it may be a brilliant plan, but you can please leave me out of it," he finally announced.

"That's just what I've been asking for," explained Manley. "All I want is to be allowed to conduct it in my own way."

David Manley, however, did not conduct that strange funeral altogether in his own way. Carefully as every detail had been planned, there were one or two minor features which at the time escaped his attention.

The most inconspicuous and yet the most vital of these was, perhaps, the personality of the driver of the third carriage in that small cortege which wended its way so decorously from the Golden home. For under the funeral outfit of this phlegm-eyed driver re-

posed the stalwart body of a certain One-Lamp Louie, long known among his associates as an habitue of the Owl's Nest and an underground agent for Jules Legar himself.

Now One-Lamp Louie gave no promise of either active or passive interference with these duly appointed mortuary exercises until the city itself had been left well behind. Then, awakening to the fact that they were traversing a desirably sequestered stretch of road, he watched intently for certain prearranged signals from his one-armed accomplice. Immediately after the discovery of those looked-for signs the spirited team driven by One-Lamp Louie showed unexpected yet unmistakable evidences of restiveness.

But there was a limit to what that team of spirited blacks would endure. And they suddenly, to all intents and purposes, determined to follow their own line of travel at their own rate of speed, for, as the driver sat on the box apparently sawing on the reins, that exasperated team plunged suddenly forward, swerved across the road, and went galloping down a tree-screened bypath which was little more than a cart trail winding in and out through slopes of greensward and shrubbery.

Half a mile deeper in that shrubbery this runaway team would surely have reached the spot where a black limousine stood hidden away in the shadow of laurel-copses, had not still another and an equally unheralded factor entered into the situation. This factor took the form of a high-power roadster in which was seated a man wearing a yellow mask. His irruption into that orderly little procession, indeed, proved as abrupt as One-Lamp Louie's eruption from it. And he seemed plainly suspicious of both Louie's motives and movements, for he lost no time in swinging from the highway and plunging recklessly after the runaway carriage.

As his car approached the runaway cab that mysterious stranger, known as the Laughing Mask, stepped to the running-board of his roadster, leaning far out as the two swerving vehicles drew together. One-Lamp Louie, whatever he may have thought of that approach, had little means of evading it. To swing off what narrow road remained before him seemed frankly suicidal. To lash his team to greater effort was already out of the question. To take his hands from the reins, even, along that uncertain road, was equally foolhardy. So the strange race went on, the swaying and bounding cab with a white-faced girl tossed about under its hood, the leaping and lurching roadster, every second drawing closer down on its quarry yet every second threatening to turn turtle over one of the grassy embankments above which it shuddered and slewed.

It was the Laughing Mask, leaning far out from his running-board, who threw open the cab-door and called sharply to the startled girl.

"Quick," he commanded.

For one moment she hesitated. Then she reached out for the unsteady hand groping for her.

The next moment she found herself sitting back, a little breathless, in the leather-upholstered seat of the roadster and the man in the Laughing Mask smiling down at her.

The Black Watch.

A number of things had happened and were happening to disconcert, if not to discourage, the redoubtable Legar. That astute young-adventurer, Betsy Le Marsh, alias Williamsburg Elsie, who, with the aid of divers forged recommendations, had installed herself in the Golden household, repeatedly and stubbornly reported that David Manley was dead.

Williamsburg Elsie also expressed a strong desire to migrate from the house in which she found herself so inquisitive a maid, since that house, she declared, was too full of "queer things" for her comfort.

When, at Legar's suggestion, she had tried to "pump a needfulful o' dope" into her altogether unsuspecting mistress, a dead man's face had suddenly appeared between her and the bedroom door. And on two different occasions, after midnight, when she had ventured down to the housekeeper's telephone to send in a secret message to Legar himself, she had found herself confronted by a ghost in white.

Nor was Betsy Le Marsh the only malcontent. Even Red Egan himself, one of the best "cold-steel" men in all the group that clustered about the Owl's Nest, had of late shown unmistakable signs of mental disturbance. A dead man's ghost, he declared, had looked in through one of the headquarters' windows. Red Egan, it is true, had promptly emptied his six-shooter at that phantasmal intruder, but with nothing more to show for it than a shattered window-sash and six panes of broken glass.

When the master-criminal, to put an end to all such absurdities, had by the force of many dire threats and oaths compelled both One-Lamp Louie and Red Egan himself to repair to the

Golden mausoleum and verify the contents of the mysterious casket there deposited, Red Egan had returned with the preposterous story of a white sheet suddenly descending out of the blackness of the vault and whisking One-Lamp Louie out of reach and also out of sight. And since the once valiant Red Egan showed so craven a spirit that nothing short of a quart of three-star brandy could tranquillize his shak- ing nerves, and since One-Lamp Louie showed no signs of returning from the mysterious realms into which the afore-mentioned white sheet had whisked him, Legar promptly and wrathfully decided to take the matter into his own hands. He would lay this ghost, he announced, or something would go smash in the process.

But he had no intention of approaching that intimidating mausoleum without due and definite preparation. With him he took a powerful pocket flashlight, a Colt automatic pistol and a couple of extra clips of cartridges. Out the instrument on which he reposed the most confidence was a gun-metal disk little bigger than a pocket aneroid, some three inches in diameter and no thicker than a man's hand. This innocent-looking disk, which could be slipped into a vest pocket as easily as a timepiece, was known to the habitues of the Owl's Nest as the Black Watch.

While actually nothing more than a small-sized hand grenade, its claim to distinction lay in the tremendous explosive power which stood compressed between its slender metal walls.

Legar was not a coward. Yet as he stood in the clammy midnight air of the Golden mausoleum and quietly removed the screws that held the top on the black casket beside him, he found that combination of silence and gloom and unsavory surroundings a little more of a strain on his nerves than he had anticipated. Yet as he lifted back the sable cover of the casket he did so with a hand that was still steady.



When She Tried to "Pump a Needfulful o' Dope" into Her Mistress, a Dead Man's Face Appeared.

Thence he took up his flashlight, and pressing close to the coffin's side, stood studying the pallid face that lay surrounded by its even more pallid drapery of white satin.

He stared at that pallid face long and intently. He stared at it with studious and narrowing eyes. Then he did a strange and an inexplicable thing.

Lifting his maimed right arm that ended in its shank of steel, he brought it down with a crash on the glass cover of the casket. Then, as though infuriated by some unreasoning hatred for the pallid face still staring so impassively up at him, he struck again. This time the blow fell directly on the head between the white satin swathings. But that falling arm, instead of striking a human head of flesh and bone, crashed down through a thin shell of fiber and tinted wax.

Legar, focusing his light on that shattered mask, emitted a short bark of triumph as the meaning of it all came home to him. He leaned for several minutes over the violated casket, staring at it with insolent yet abstracted eyes, pondering just what move could lie beyond so intricately engineered a subterfuge. And the answer to that question came more promptly and more directly than he had anticipated. For as he stood there, turning a piece of the wax-covered tissue meditatively over in his fingers, the electric bulbs that strung the mausoleum roof broke into sudden light. From different quarters of that shadowy building, at the same time, stepped a group of hidden officers, headed by David Manley himself.

So quickly and so quietly did that transformation take place, indeed, that the man leaning over the casket had neither time nor chance to change his position. He merely blinked a little stupidly at the revolver which glimmered in Manley's hand. Then, with a gesture that seemed equally stupid, he reached for his watch and held the heavy gun-metal case meditatively between his fingers.

"Stick 'em up!" Manley was at the same time commanding with a curt head movement towards Legar's hands. "It may have taken some work, but this is the time we gather you in!"

Legar laughed as he confronted his enemies.

"Do you want to take me alive?" "Alive or dead, I'm going to take you!"

"Then take this first," cried Legar. At the same moment that he spoke the left hand in which he still held what seemed to be a black metal watch case swung forward. And as that object which so closely resembled a black watch hurtled through the air, Legar flung himself flat on his face along the vault flooring. Then the black watch struck.

The next moment the walls of that ponderous structure of marble and sandstone seemingly built to defy time itself, lifted bodily in the air, like the hull of a torpedoed dreadnaught. Then, following the roar and rumble of that vast detonation, came the momentary catastrophic silence which so strangely and yet so inevitably succeeds a calamity too gigantic and too abrupt to be understood.

That ominous silence, however, lasted only for a few seconds. Out of it arose muffled calls and thin cries for help, followed by answering shouts from many different points in the darkness as rescuing hands set to work on the ruins.

And out of those ruins, while this work was going on, emerged two bruised and tattered figures strangely divergent in appearances. The first figure, worming its way out through the interstices of crumbled rock and cement, as cautiously and as silently as a wounded blacksnake might crawl from a cave, bore an iron claw at the end of its right arm and betrayed an unmistakable desire to creep away into the darkness before being observed.

The second man, who, on recovering consciousness found himself engaged between two fallen pillars of marble topped by one of the roof slabs, experienced no little difficulty in emerging to the open, so closely were these protecting pillars wedged about him.

But as he worked his bruised body

All this Legar might have done, and might have done without great difficulty, had not a trace of his older obsession of hate impinged on his clearly outlined course of action.

He was once more himself, by this time, walking with a limp that was scarcely discernible. But as he stole down from the higher ground and made his way back towards the West- ington chimney flares he became once more conscious of the whiter glare along the roadside he was so cautiously skirting. This, he remembered, as he stole nearer, came from the headlights of a stalled limousine. Then he made a second and a more startling discovery. He knew, even before he caught sight of Train working over his helpless car, that it belonged to Enoch Golden. But what actually drew him closer to the spot was a glimpse of Margery Golden herself, in a gray fur motor coat, as she stepped from the body of the car and came full into the glare of the headlights, closer beside her stooping chauffeur.

"Are we stalled?" he could hear the girl ask.

"We'll be off again in a minute or two, Miss Margery," was Train's pre- occupied reply.

"But I can't stand here helpless," protested the girl. "I can't wait. I must know what has happened to David Manley!"

"Whatever it was, it's over and done by this time."

"But he may be dead. He may be lying crushed under those fallen pil- lars. I must go on. Tell father I couldn't wait, that I've gone ahead on foot!"

Legar, crouching back in the shadows, heard these hurried words and as hurriedly acted on them. Slinking back through the bushes, he swung about and followed the girl through the darkness.

Yet it was not until the girl had passed well out of hailing distance of the headlighted car that Legar circled even more hurriedly forward and swung in again to intercept her.

She was struggling, a little breath- lessly, up a sandy slope, with her straining eyes still fixed on the mov- ing lanterns about the ruined mauso- leum.

Then, swinging apparently out of the empty air about her, a circle of steel, suddenly encompassing her arm, brought her to an abrupt stop.

With one quick movement Legar tore the motor veil from her head, twisted it into a coil, and flung it about her neck. And all the while the Iron Claw, grappling at her arm, held her as a steel trap might.

She was already dizzy with pain when she heard the sharp crack of a revolver shot close over her shoulder. This was followed by a quick shout and a muttered oath. She felt herself forcibly flung from Legar's arms into the arms of another man panting breathlessly up the sandy slope. She could see this man, even as he held her from falling, stop to level his gun at the feeble figure of Legar. She could see him shoot again, and still again, at the same moment that Train and the plunging automobile came throbbling and panting up to the scene, the electric lamps throwing out their wavering, long columns of white light as they came. Then the stranger, ar- rested by certain gasping and sur- gling sounds from the throat of the half-garroted girl in his arms, stooped down and tore the constricting veil away from the slender, white column of her neck. And Margery, opening her eyes, saw that it was the Laughing Mask bending above her.

"It was Legar!" she gasped as Train, followed by her father, came panting up to where they stood.

"And there he goes now!" cried the Laughing Mask, pointing down the long lane of light columning out from the car's lamps. Across that narrow river of light they could catch a glimpse of a tall figure skulking off into the darkness.

"Follow that man with your car," the Laughing Mask suddenly cried out to the chauffeur.

"No car could travel through coun- try like that!" protested Train.

"Then keep your lights on the main road to the west here, so as to pick him up if he tried to break through on that side. I'll swing around by the foundry yards and head him off in the east!"

And the next moment the man in the yellow mask had disappeared in the darkness. Golden and his daughter stood staring after him.

Two minutes later the blackness that had swallowed him up was stabbed by a series of flame flashes, followed by the repeated bark of a revolver. From the gloom still nearer the shadowy piles of the Westington foundry came an answering series of shots.

"That means he's making for the foundry, sir!" cried the excited Train as he swung his car about.

"Then, for God's sake, get us there, as quick as you can," commanded Enoch Golden as the car lurched and pulsed and crawled on between the broken shrubbery, in perilous search for some open pathway.

For both Legar and his pursuer were by this time well beyond their line of vision. That desperate-minded master criminal, in fact, realizing that his enemy was pressing close at his heels, mounted a slag pile, dropped flat, and emptied his revolver into the darkness, where the Laughing Mask should have been.

But the wary pursuer, dropping low beside an empty pitch barrel, held his fire and waited. The moment he heard the crisp sound of footsteps along the slag slope he once more took up the pursuit.

That pursuit led through a narrow lane between great piles of structural

iron. It led through an abandoned boiler room, then on through a dimly lighted and low-roofed structure of pulleys and lathes, and from there to the brighter lighted and higher roofed metal room of the foundry itself. There, beside glowing furnaces half-naked men toiled over incandescent annealing boxes and cauldrons of molten metal. There gigantic track cranes swung bowls of liquid fire from crucibles to mold beds.

And there the harried Legar, bewildered by the sudden bright light, ran like a pelted hound down the sandy paths between forge and coke oven and cauldron crane. There, seeing his way blocked by a group of round-eyed Lithuanians, he swung, catlike, up into the iron network of the cable bridges, with his pursuer still close at his heels. And there, midway across that smoke-stained roof, that echoed with the tumult of thunderous hammers and directly over a king cauldron of molten steel, the two men came together.

There Legar, with his metal claw hooked securely into the iron network above his head, swung about and faced his enemy. And there, on that grimy bridge high above the equally grimy workmen who left their forges and lathes and cauldrons to witness the struggle, the two enemies, who had so long and bitterly opposed each other, found themselves face to face for their final struggle.

Yet the man in the yellow mask seemed the cooler headed of the two, for as Legar struck snarling at his face he ducked low on his narrow perch and at the same moment whipped his revolver from the side pocket of his coat. Yet Legar, with a movement equally prompt, kicked viciously at the fingers clustered about the gun-but before the weapon itself could be brought into use. The next moment that weapon fell with a hiss and splash into the lake of molten metal beneath them.

Then the struggle became one of tendon against tendon, of straining muscle against muscle, of empty-handed mortal strength pitted against mortal strength. There, like animals of the wild, high in some Amazonian eyrie, the two strangely entangled figures fought and struggled and clawed and struck.

In the matter of mere physical strength Legar seemed to have the advantage. And what under ordinary circumstances might have proved a disability could now be turned to his advantage. For the iron claw at the end of his right arm, hooked securely into the network of steel behind him, held him there without effort and without strain. His opponent, on the other hand, found it no easy task to make sure of his perch above that ever-intimidating cauldron of molten metal. His arm shook with the tension imposed on his overtaxed muscles. His fingers became numb with pain, threatening to lose their prehensile power, and even as he fought he weakened to a realization that he must change his hold.

It was as he maneuvered to bring about this shift of position that the ever-watchful Legar, alert for the most trivial advantage, saw his chance. Swinging his body suddenly free from its footing on the narrow ledge of metal where he stood, he pendulumed towards his momentarily unstable op- ponent, throwing his feet forward and upward, as he did so, with all the force of a football player kicking a double punt.

The force of this unlooked-for im- pact was too much for the man in the mask. He tottered back, caught fran- tically at a soot-covered steel bar be- side him, dropped the full length of its diagonal course before he could make sure of his clutch, and came into vi- olent collision with the heavy iron block of a crane ladle. There, half- stunned by the blow, he fell sprawling across a polished steel cable which drooped floorward between the block and its empty metal pot. He tried to clutch that cable as he fell, but his speed proved too great and his over- taxed fingers were too weak. As he fell along its polished surface, how- ever, it offered sufficient resistance to carry his limp body beyond the peril of that open lake of molten metal, which, his frantic brain kept telling him, meant death. And as he dropped weakly from the cable loop to a pile of molding sand lying between a cast- ing box and an empty spill trough, a score of watching men gave utterance to a shout of relief and a score of waiting hands were there to help him to his feet.

So intent were those astounded iron- workers on watching that perilous fall, however, that they paid scant atten- tion to the second figure climbing spi- derlike higher along the blackened ironwork of the blackened roof. They caught no glimpse of him as he scrambled, sooty and panting, through the ventilating flue that opened on the roof itself. Nor did any eye follow him as he crept, gorilla-like, along the perilous slope of that roof until he came to the end of the building. Along this end he found a lightning rod, run- ning from the peak of its roof to the ground. He promptly tested the strength of this wire, satisfying him- self carefully, foot by foot, by means of one hand and an iron hook which struck and clung to the metal with the vicious tenacity of an eagle's claw.

When he reached the ground, still breathing heavily, he looked cautious- ly about. Then, making sure he was not observed, he slipped into the shadow of a pile of iron ingots, once more waited and listened, and then, crouch- ing low, crossed the foundry yard and climbed the high board fence sur- rounding it. And a moment later the darkness of the night had swallowed him up.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)