

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 Grand 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 rescued. 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. An alarm to have killed him. Golden's house is dynamited during a masked ball. Legar escapes but De 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 Mauki's poisoned arrows. Manley plans a mock funeral which fails to accomplish the desired purpose, the capture of the Iron Claw and his gang. Margery is saved from death at the hands of the Iron Claw by the Laughing Mask.

TWELFTH EPISODE

The Haunted Canvas.

The daughter of Dan O'Mara was a very happy girl. So happy, in fact, was the freckled-nosed Peggy that there were times when the sheer novelty of her good fortune somewhat frightened her. For the tide had turned. The O'Mara family, as Peggy put it, was at last in clover. That mysterious fighter of wrongs known as the Laughing Mask had interested himself in getting honest work for Dan O'Mara. And that gracious-eyed lady known as Margery Golden, once she had realized the true position of the family, had become equally interested in doing what she could for the spindle-legged Peggy.

It is true, none the less, that this last-mentioned young lady's benefactress had been momentarily nonplussed by Peggy's choice of a vocation, when this choice was placed before her. "What would you like to do most?" Margery had asked at the end of her second trip to the O'Mara cottage with a bundle of clothes for the all but breathless Peggy.

"Be an artist's model!" promptly announced the rapt-eyed factory girl. "But why a model?" asked the amazed Miss Golden.

"To doll up in glad rags and get myself painted!" explained the dreamer of the dye vats. And odd as that choice seemed to her, Margery Golden did not depart from her promise. She sought out her artist friend, Frank Aimick, and inveigled him to experiment with a new and somewhat untried model.

Frank Aimick, however, soon found the ardent-eyed young Peggy more of a help to him than he had anticipated. Some of her unctuous yet uncouth attentiveness, in fact, brought a smile to the face of the busy artist.

But that smile was never broader than when he noticed her standing wide-eyed before the large canvas above the fireplace at the end of his studio. For this painting, which bore the title of "The Vigilante," was a remarkable piece of work, in more ways than one. It showed the life-size figure of a frontiersman staring out into the room, with a leveled carbine at his buckskin-shoulder. But the arresting feature of the painting lay in the fact that both the eyes of the figure and the barrel of the leveled rifle seemed always to be directed at the spectator, no matter what position the spectator might take.

"That guy gives me the willies!" Peggy protested as she made her way back to the model throne.

"Why?" asked the smiling man at the easel.

"He keeps such a bead on you, no matter where you get in this room!" was the girl's reply.

But destiny, in the form of one Jules Legar, had secretly ordained that Peggy's happiness should not be a lasting one. For Peggy O'Mara was no longer a trivial factor in the activities of the Iron Claw. This slip of a girl had brought defeat to his plans when success seemed well within his hand. And for these humiliations Legar decided that the girl should pay, and pay to the full.

The modest home of the O'Maras, however, had no inkling of this decision until Dan O'Mara himself, wandering about his combined kitchen and living room in search of his pipe, was somewhat startled to see a square of paper pinned to the faded door panel. Peggy herself, joining her father, was equally mystified by this slip of paper, for its surface showed nothing but a round blot or two of black ink on a square of white. Neither Dan O'Mara nor his daughter had any reason to know the meaning of the spotted warning, any more than they knew that one Mauki, the stealthy emissary of the Iron Claw, stood hidden behind the walls of one of the three cottages commanding a clear view of the O'Mara home.

They had no way of knowing that this same Mauki lurked there behind a shuttered window, patiently watching, hour after hour, the house across the way. Close beside him as he watched

stood a magazine rifle to which a Maxim silencer had been adjusted. And on the floor beside the rifle lay yet another weapon. This, however, was a weapon of defense, for it consisted of a craftily constructed cape which, for purposes of disguise, could be promptly converted into a woman's skirt.

So sure was Mauki of his defensive arrangements that when he caught sight of Peggy O'Mara and her father at the window he promptly reached for his rifle, adjusted the barrel between the shutter slats, and took aim. Then he pulled the trigger.

The next moment a bullet went crashing through the window of the O'Mara home.

Instinctively the two startled figures leaped away from the window. As they did so they realized that a third person had entered the room. And a second glance showed them that it was the Laughing Mask himself.

He stood for a moment or two, staring down at the spotted warning that lay face upward on the floor. Then he stared at the shattered window. The next moment he was pushing Peggy and Dan O'Mara bodily back from that square of light.

"But what's the meanin' of all this, anyway?" demanded the astonished householder.

"It means that a bullet came through that window," the Laughing Mask explained. "And I know that bullet was intended for your daughter here."

The next moment the Laughing Mask had caught a broom from the corner and about it was draping one of Peggy O'Mara's well-worn waists. Above this he placed the girl's hat, tying it in place with a scarf. Then dropping to his knees well out of sight on one side of the window, he slowly advanced his improvised dummy into the square of light.

That rough outline of a human figure was scarcely in position at the window before a second pane crashed in and the broom was knocked from the hand of the masked man holding it.

"That shot could have come only from one of those three houses across the way. And it's ten to one it's from that empty house on the right!"

He drew away from the window and stood for a moment deep in thought. "O'Mara, I want you to slip out by your back door and get help. Call on any neighbors you can trust in a case like this. Then hurry back here, for I don't want that scoundrel to suspect his plans haven't worked out exactly as he imagines!"

"We'll get the devil!" announced O'Mara as he slipped away. And while waiting for his return the Laughing Mask sent Peggy for a cupful of flour. With this he powdered her hands and blanched her thin young face. Dan O'Mara had stepped back into the house before the masked visitor had completed his task.

"Now, I want that sniper to think he's done his work. I don't want him to break from cover until your friends have surrounded that house. So take your daughter and carry her out, just as though she were a dead girl."

Dan O'Mara, doing as he was directed, stepped from the doorway with his own white-faced daughter hanging limp in his arms. He acted his part with a sincerity that was not without conviction. For, two minutes after he had staggered into the open with that apparently sad burden, the sniper from the shuttered house was detected slipping out of a cellar window and scurrying along a broken fence.

That escape, however, came before Dan O'Mara's friends could completely take up their position about the suspected house. But one of those friends caught sight of the fugitive in the strange-looking cape, the alarm was given, and the pursuit began.

It was not a long chase, but it was a stern one. Determined as those indignant factory-tollers were to run down the mysterious gunman so wantonly threatening their homes, the feeling Mauki proved himself startingly fleet of foot. He gained sufficiently on his pursuers to round a corner, dodge into an empty coalshed, and emerge a moment later as a stooped old woman in amber-colored spectacles and a rusty gray wig. Being obviously hard of hearing, this same old woman could not give much information to the group of excited men suddenly accosting her as she hobbled across the street.

Five minutes later a swarthy-skinned man with wiry black hair was hurrying across country to one of the well-concealed dens of Jules Legar, where he duly reported to the Iron Claw the news of his enemy's ruse and his own narrow escape.

Before the second day had passed Legar had evolved yet another plan for the subjugation of his enemies. This took the form of a decoy message delivered to the unsuspecting Peggy O'Mara, purporting to be a haste request from Frank Aimick to come to his studio at nine o'clock that night, to the end that he might hurry to completion one of his unfinished canvases for which the girl was act-

ing as a costume model. Legar and two of his followers, in the meantime, entered Aimick's studio on the pretense of being a fire marshal's inspector, caught the artist off his guard, and carried him bound and gagged and helpless to one of the small back rooms of the studio building.

Peggy herself, before starting out in answer to that summons, was still somewhat uneasy in mind over recent events. So she left word with her father to call for her not later than eleven o'clock.

But more than Dan O'Mara called for his daughter that night, for ten minutes after her departure from the cottage Margery Golden's limousine drew up at the door. Margery's eyes widened when O'Mara explained the reason of his daughter's absence from home.

"But an artist like Frank Aimick would never be able to work at night," she argued, with growing alarm. "He must have daylight for working in color."

Dan O'Mara turned to the table at his side.

"Here's his message, plain as day, written in his own handwriting," was the puzzled workman's only explanation.

Margery took the message in her hand and studied it. Then her color faded a little.

"That is not Frank Aimick's writing!" she suddenly announced.

"We must get to that studio as fast as my car can carry us."

Peggy O'Mara, in the meantime, was being confronted by more than one surprise. The first came with her arrival at the Aimick studio, when the stranger who opened the door in response to her knock informed her that the artist was out, but would return in a minute or two. The second came with the quiet movement of yet another man who sidled up to the studio door and promptly locked and barred it. But the greatest surprise of all awaited her as she turned



"It Means That a Bullet Came Through That Window!"

from the door and saw Legar himself standing before her.

She stood there, white lipped, staring from one evil face to the other as Legar's companions closed in about her.

"You're a fine bunch o' cradle-snatchers!" she finally and wrathfully burst out at them, with the ultimate and reckless anger of desperation in her eyes. "You're a grand army o' heroes, you are, to come five strong agin' a girl like me!"

"Stop that brag!" commanded the frate Legar. And there was a general movement in the direction of the blazing-eyed girl.

There was one man in that group, however, who did not join in that movement. The reason for this lay in the fact that at that moment he happened to be looking up at the painting of "The Vigilante."

He was about to reach for a heavy easel-peg, to fling it at the canvas, when he suddenly straightened up, clasped a hand to his shoulder, and turned about. There was a look of mingled wonder and incredulity on his face. Then he slowly drew from the fleshy part of his upper arm a small steel dart, little bigger than a knitting-needle.

The next moment a second man, moving across the room to catch up a curtain cord with which to tie the captured girl, felt a sudden sting in his hip, stopped abruptly and pointed with a shout of anger toward the canvas above the mantel.

Still another of Legar's followers, not realizing the meaning of that cry, stepped forward and stared at the painting. Out of the barrel-end of the painted rifle, as he did so, shot still another dart which buried itself in his neck.

"Th' darts!" he mumbled, as thickly as a drunken man might. "Th' darts 're drugged!"

But even before those mumbled words were spoken the swarthy-skinned Mauki, trying to hold the still struggling Peggy O'Mara down on a divan, felt a sharp pain above his shoulderblade, turned about, and saw Legar run across the room and catch up the heavy brass fire tongs from beside the mantel end.

"The painting!" squeaked Mauki, staggering out against the model-

throne. "The painting—it is spitting steel at us!"

Legar, however, was no longer in need of that warning. Standing to one side of the mantel, close beside the wall, he attacked the huge canvas with his fire-tongs, beating in the center of the picture at the same time that Peggy O'Mara, realizing that she was no longer being held a prisoner, caught up a teakwood tabouret and with it precipitated herself on the preoccupied Legar.

He ignored that flank attack, however, for the Iron Claw suddenly found himself confronted by a figure of more importance than either the spindle-legged girl or a painted gunman.

Out from behind that tattered canvas had emerged a man wearing a yellow mask, tossing to one side a slender blowpipe as he came. Before he could regain his feet after that hurried leap from the mantel shelf, Legar himself had dropped the fire tongs and whipped a revolver from his pocket. This he leveled directly at the body of the Laughing Mask. But before he could pull the trigger, Peggy's tabouret struck against his outstretched arm, knocking the weapon up in the air.

By this time the Laughing Mask was up on his feet, and face to face with his enemy. Before the revolver could again be brought into play the two had clenched. Then the Iron Claw went down before a clean-cut blow from his opponent. He recovered himself sufficiently, however, to roll to where his fallen revolver lay. But before he could level that firearm at his adversary the Laughing Mask, remembering that even the officers of the law were no longer his friends, dived out through the small door at the rear of the studio and disappeared from sight, for already the sound of O'Mara and his rescuing party could be heard as they swarmed up the stairs.

The Iron Claw himself heard those sounds, drew himself together, and

minutes, I want you to get any help you can, and come after me." Margery stole along the shadowy roadside to the spot where she had seen Legar creep in through the bushes. She followed as best she could, found herself face to face with a tunnel-opening that showed itself dimly in the moonlight, and after a moment's hesitation stooped low and crept into this tunnel, feeling her way cautiously along the smooth brickwork of its walls. She came to a turn, butressed with heavier masonry, and padded along this wall until her groping fingers came in contact with a light switch. This, after a moment's thought, she turned on. The next moment a number of bulbs along the corridor roof above her flowered into light.

Staring ahead of her, she saw that the corridor ended in nothing but a blank wall. But as she stared intently at the wall she detected in one side of it a partially concealed electric button. She moved toward this cautiously, for she had learned of old to be wary of approach to any of Legar's fastnesses. Then, as she advanced, she came to a sudden stop. For she saw on the flagstone upon which she was about to step a small cross. There was also a minute crevice, unnoticeable in its companions, about this quadrangle so suspiciously marked by its cross. So she stopped carefully over the suspected area, crept forward to the button, and touched it with a tentative fingertip.

The next moment a remarkable thing happened. A section of the heavy masonry shutting off the end of the corridor, at that touch, swung silently about on its axis, leaving an aperture wide enough for a human body to pass through. The girl, holding her breath, stepped through the ponderous masonry.

This chamber, she saw, was empty, except for two mysterious strands of iron chain that ran from ceiling to floor, close against the wall, while against the other stood a deal table and a camp couch across which lay a couple of very dirty blankets. But along the floor at the far end of the room her quick eye detected a thin pencil of light. So she tiptoed quietly forward until she stood close to the door above this illuminated crevice. Then she stooped lower, listening intently, for the sound of muffled voices came to her from the room within.

"I tell you we can't afford to fall in this move," she heard the voice of Legar himself announce. "The thing's got to be settled, and settled before morning!"

"But how?" asked one of his followers.

"With two pounds of guncotton and a time fuse," was Legar's reply.

"In the O'Mara cottage?" asked another voice.

"Yes, I want that cottage wiped off the face of the earth, and the family with it! And I want it done before morning!"

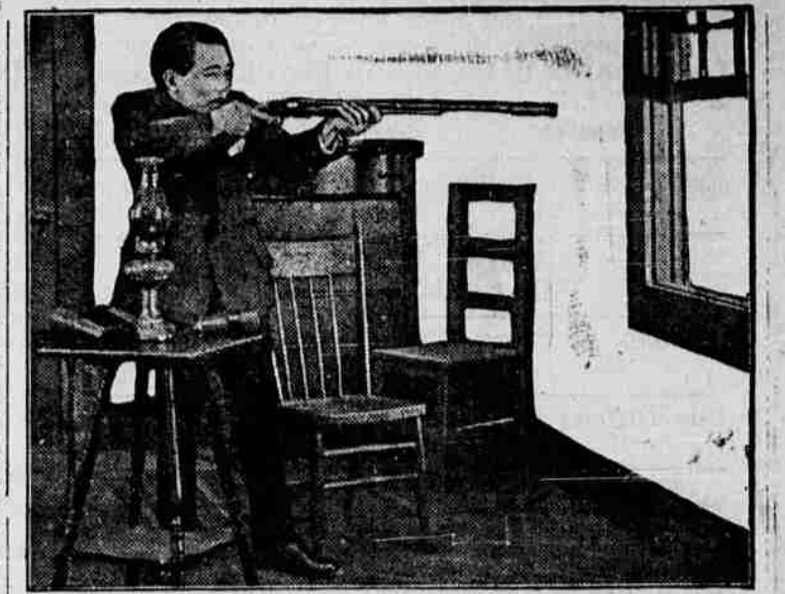
Margery listened, oblivious of the passing of time, as the conspirators behind the closed door continued to debate on their plan of action. Then she started, even as much as they did, when the sudden buzzing of an electric annunciator warned that intent group of an intruder's approach.

It was then and only then that the girl remembered her parting message to the taxicab driver. All that was left her to do was to dart over to the camp cot, and drop down on the stone floor beside it.

The next moment Legar and his men were in the outer chamber. While one of the men crept to a secret outlook crevice in the farther wall Legar himself stepped to one of the control chains which ran from floor to ceiling on the other side of the room, and by pulling one of these started into action some mysterious mechanism which the watching girl could not quite comprehend. She saw them run back to the inner room and stand waiting while Legar manipulated still another secret spring which threw open a hidden door in the back wall of that room.

And that door, she surmised, led by some unknown passage to the outer world.

But Margery did not give much thought to this, for there came to her as she regained her feet the repeated cry of a human being, a cry husky with terror. She ran to the privy door in the masonry, swung it back, and there beheld a sight which made her blood run cold. It took her, in fact, a ponderable space of time to understand the scene confronting her. But as she stared out she saw where her unsuspecting chauffeur had stepped on the cross-marked flagstones, for it



Then He Pulled the Trigger.

was now several inches lower than the rest of the floor. And this, obviously, had released a steel arm which had swung suddenly forward and swept the startled intruder flat against the stone wall, holding him there as in a vise. And as he stood pinioned there a great block of granite, released by some hidden machinery, was slowly descending from the roof of the corridor. Margery quickly manipulated the chains and released the chauffeur.

"Let me at 'em!" he shouted, brandishing the automobile wrench which he still carried in his hand. "Just let me at 'em!"

"It's no use," cried Margery, holding him back. "They have gone, the lot of them. And we've got to follow quickly, or there'll be a whole family meet a worse fate than yours might have been tonight!"

She had taken the wrench from his hand and was leading him out of the tunnel mouth by this time, explaining that he would have to bring his taxicab from his hiding place and at once start in pursuit of the Iron Claw. But these explanations came to a sudden and an unexpected ending, for Legar and his followers, skulking in the bushes, caught that betraying sound of voices and saw a chance that was too good to be missed. They closed in on the girl and the taxi-driver. Yet that sullen-spirited driver, when cornered, fought with an energy so explosive that the entire circle became involved in the struggle. It was Legar himself, and only Legar, who had the presence of mind to direct the attention towards the girl. He swung suddenly about and started for her. She saw him coming, raised the heavy wrench she still carried and sent it flat against his bony temple and took to her heels. She jumped into the empty taxicab and headed for the O'Mara cottage.

So colorless was her face as the bewildered Dan O'Mara opened the door that he started back in alarm. And her words were even more disturbing.

"Come away!" she called out. "Come quick, or it will be too late!"

"And what's wrong now?" asked the astounded householder.

"Get Peggy!" gasped the girl as she stared frantically about the little room. "Get her away from here, quick! The house has been mined! There's been a bomb left here, and any moment—"

She stopped speaking, for the pungent smell of powder smoke had assailed her nostrils. Then from the open window, in which a somewhat neglected flower-box stood, came a faint sputter of sound.

She ran to the window. Lying in the flower-box she saw a heavy cylinder of metal. Even before she caught sight of the time-fuse which quietly hissed and burned at one end of the cylinder, she knew what it was. It was the infernal machine which Legar's agent had placed there to destroy the house. And at any moment the explosion might take place.

Margery caught the heavy cylinder up in her hands. She even tried to blow out the fuse. But this was useless. Then she tried to tear it away. But this second effort was equally fruitless. And sheer panic took possession of her at the thought of her helplessness. The bomb dropped from her fingers to the floor. She made one instinctive effort to warn poor young Peggy O'Mara away, as the girl ran to her side. But instead of repeating that warning she let her arms close about the slender body as though in mute acknowledgment that she knew it was already too late. For the fuse, she could see, was burning down into the end of the cylinder itself. She even closed her eyes, awaiting the inevitable.

She opened them again, at the sound of a sudden stop. She opened them to see a masked figure dart into the room, catch up the smoking metal cylinder, and with one and the same movement hurl it out through the open window.

The next moment a great detonation shook the walls of that house. The bomb had exploded. But the house of O'Mara still stood. And Peggy and her father stared open-mouthed at the newcomer, who, instead of staring back at them, stood intently regarding Margery Golden.

"The Laughing Mask!" said that somewhat shaken young lady, in little more than a whisper.

"At your service!" replied the man in the yellow mask, with a half-humble and half-mocking bow as he stood, for one fleeting moment, in the narrow doorway.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)