

The IRON CLAW

by Arthur Stringer

Author of "THE OCCASIONAL OFFENDER," "THE WIRE TAPPERS," "GUN RUNNERS," ETC. Novelized from THE PATHE PHOTO PLAY OF THE SAME NAME.

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 leads 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 is crushed in 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 figures in a plot to kill Margery. Manley finds Margery not indifferent to his love. He saves her from Manley'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. An attempt by the Iron Claw to blow up the O'Mara cottage is frustrated in the nick of time. The Laughing Mask discloses his identity to Margery.

FOURTEENTH EPISODE

The Plunge for Life.

A strange mood of happiness, as unreasoning as it was inexplicable, seemed to have taken possession of Margery Golden. A less timorous light shone from the depths of her pool-brown eyes. At all times of the day, too, she could be heard singing about the house.

This wayward blitheness of spirit was something more than a puzzle to her heavy-browed father, who found little in the situation immediately confronting him to cause him any undue lightness of heart. For that situation had unexpectedly taken on the form of a defeat.

After all Jules Legar's campaign for the possession of that pregnant scrap of parchment which carried the key to the secret of the lost treasure of Windward Island, the long-fought-for document had suddenly disappeared from the Golden vault. And all evidence pointed to the fact that it was the Laughing Mask who had stolen the chart and cipher code from the safe.

Golden was in the midst of his second conference with the russet-faced Captain Brackett of the headquarters staff, when a telephone call came for that official. The talk over the wire was one-sided. Then with great deliberation the official hung up the receiver and swung about to Enoch Golden.

"Well, we've got your Laughing Mask for you."

"You've got him?" repeated Golden.

"Our man Walcott located him by trailing his chauffeur. And before nightfall we can have him rounded up."

"Where was he found?"

"Just where you'd least expect a man of that character to be found. He's hiding in a cave in the Hudson Palisades, not ten miles from where we're sitting at the moment, just above Coleman's village. And the fact he's ducked to a Malina like that bears out what we've always claimed, that



Crossed to the Cliff Edge.

he's as big a crook as this Iron Claw himself. For honest men don't crawl into river caves!"

Golden was about to reply in the affirmative to this self-obvious statement when he was interrupted by the entrance of his daughter.

"But suppose our fugitive," said the serene-eyed girl as she smiled down on the somewhat startled police captain, "had enemies who seemed at the moment stronger than he was and at the same time found himself in possession of something which it was essential that he should guard? Wouldn't it seem natural for him to go where he'd be least likely to be found?"

The russet-faced captain blinked stolidly up at her.

"When an honest man has something it seems dangerous to hold, he

goes to the police for protection. When a crook has made a haul, and is shaky about losing his swag, he beats it to his Malina, to his fence, the same as your friend the Laughing Mask has done! And the sooner we get the wheels moving and root that masked ground-hog out of his dugout the better!"

"I'm ready," announced Enoch Golden.

With a gasp of sudden resolution Margery rang the bell, called for her roadster, and struggled into her hat and coat, as she ran down the sandstone steps to the street.

She sped off through the city at a rate that was an open and obvious violation of all the speed laws. She laughed rebelliously as, once free of the congested ferry traffic, she swung lightly past the car in which she beheld her own astonished father decorously seated, giving him her dust as she mounted to the crest of the Jersey hills and struck the road leading northward along the wind-bosomed river.

Then as she swung past still another hurrying car the smile suddenly died from her face. For she felt sure that one of the faces in that car was the face of Jules Legar himself.

She went on, from that moment, crowding every inch of speed out of her car, exulting in the fact of its power, ignoring the shouts of onlookers as she swept up through Coleman's village, took the turn in a smother of dust, and brought the steaming roadster up sharp against a cedar-hedge crowning the topmost ridge of the river cliffs. She leaped boldly through the hedge and ran to the outermost lip of the Palisades. There, cupping her hands to her lips, she called out a single name again and again.

From a crevice in the broken rock-face below her a figure wearing a yellow mask looked cautiously out and waved up to her with an equally cautious signal. The next moment she was clambering nimbly yet carefully down the ledge of broken rock.

A pair of stalwart young arms were waiting to hold her up. But she quickly broke away from their clasp.

"Quick, they are coming to capture you!"

"Who are?"

"The police. They have found out you are hiding here. And Legar also has found out!"

The man in the mask darted back to a small table on which stood a shaded lamp. He bent quickly over and blew out the flame. This left the back of the cave in darkness. Then he ran back to where the girl still waited.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"I trust you in everything," was her reply.

"Then listen! The water at the foot of this cliff is deep. It is a drop of a hundred feet. But it may be our only chance. Are you willing to take that leap with me?"

"I trust you—in everything," she told him, as she drew herself up. He held her there for a moment and then slipped to the back of the cave. When he reappeared he carried a rough pine table in his arms. This he placed on end close to the entrance of the cave.

The next moment a shadow darkened the mouth of the cave. Silhouetted clear against the outer light they could see the stooping figure of the Iron Claw.

As he stood there, peering cautiously about the ledge of the rockshelf, he was stealthily joined by his followers.

"They're coming," the Laughing Mask whispered to Margery Golden, as he drew her closer in beside the rocky wall of the tunnel. Then, using the up-ended table as a screen, he advanced with her toward the cave mouth, slowly, silent, foot by foot.

They were within six feet of the opening when Legar turned about to give a word or two of command to his followers. Two figures, those of a masked man holding a slender girl firmly by the hand, came running out of the cave.

So suddenly did they come that they scattered Legar's men as they advanced. And before those astounded men could recover either their footing or their wits, the man in the mask, holding the girl close to his side, had crossed to the cliff-edge and had taken a flying leap out into space.

An involuntary gasp of consternation burst from that startled group of gangsters as they stood watching the clasped figures hurtle through the air, strike the surface of the water clean, and go down into its blue depths. Then, after what seemed an interminable wait, a second shout, as involuntary, apparently, as the first, burst from the watchers as they beheld the two figures reappear, swimming strongly side by side along the undulating surface of the water. But that shout was not a prolonged one. It merged suddenly into calls and cries of a somewhat different character, for with that repeated shout Legar and his men had betrayed their position to a russet-faced police captain and six stalwart men at his heels.

The next moment there was a

charge in force down the broken face of the cliff. And as the minions of the law descended on the cave-mouth the evil-eyed group gathered there erupted into sudden life. There was a wild scramble up the rock-ledge, quick encounters and combats, blows and counterblows, the impact of ash night-sticks on resounding skulls, the capitulating cry of half-stunned captives.

But Legar fought, backed close against the rock, with the ferocity of a wildcat holding off every attack and with his flailing iron claw sweeping back every assailant. Then, swinging about, he leaped up the cliff-face, springing from rock to rock with the agility of a mountain goat.

At the top of the cliff, when Enoch Golden himself, side by side with the police captain, attempted to bar that flight, the fugitive bowled over those two rotund figures and bolted northward along the topmost ridge of the cliff, heading for the timber not more than a hundred yards away.

But by this time two of the officers, recovering their wind and burning with the indignities to which they had been subjected, had caught sight of the fugitive and started in pursuit. They ran well, and they ran determinedly. Legar, realizing that they were gaining on him, and further realizing that he could not keep up his gait for long, veered suddenly toward the river, where a road-builders' tool shed stood at the extreme end of a rock-cut along the cliff-top. Through the doorway of this shed he darted, with his two pursuers, now joined by a third officer, not a hundred yards behind him.

Running to the far end of the shack, he sent his wooden arm crashing through the window, leaped to the sill, and stared out. Below him lay the Hudson. Crouching low, he leaped out into space and then dropped like a plummet to the river below.

The Octopus Bomb. Margery faced the supreme dilemma of her life.

The girl walked slowly to the still open window and gazed out, but the

crossed the room to the vault and swung to the heavy safe door.

With an odd birdlike movement of the head the girl stopped and stared intently at his figure, clearly outlined against the dark folds of the portieres behind him. Then, instead of locking the vault door, she took four swift steps to the heavily carved teakwood table to her right. In another moment she had caught up a Roman lamp of solidly cast bronze and, with all her strength, hurled it at the swaying portiere behind him. "Legar!" was her cry. And at the same moment she uttered a shrill cry of warning.

It was time. From behind one of the folds of the portiere she had glimpsed an iron claw at the end of a preternaturally long arm. And as this iron claw was lifted high in the air she cried out as she caught sight of the glint of a naked steel knife blade.

Her warning was sufficient. Lightly the Laughing Mask leaped to one side. By this time Legar was in the room itself, and as he advanced he drew a revolver from his pocket.

But the man in the mask was more agile than his enemy. He swung Margery about in a twinkling and whisked her back to the vault, where with one tug of his free hand he swung the vault door open. Legar fired, but the bullet ricocheted harmlessly against the open safe front of steel.

"Father keeps a navy revolver in the coin drawer of the vault here," whispered Margery as the man in the mask pushed her more deeply into the shadow of the protecting door.

At the moment that the Laughing Mask swung about and tugged open the coin drawer Wilson and a round-eyed footman, having heard the sound of the shot and having previously failed to get any answer to the telephone, came running to the library door. But before they could open that door Legar, realizing that his time was short, had taken matters into his own hands. Charging boldly against the still half-open vault door, he swung it shut upon the Laughing Mask and Margery before they had time to realize his intent. Then Legar threw



An Involuntary Gasps of Consternation Burst From Them.

mental problem that engrossed her preoccupied her attention to the exclusion of everything else. Then a voice behind her spoke:

"Can you see any of them?"

Margery turned to the man in the yellow mask, who stood close behind her.

"No," said Margery, in answer to his question. "We have a few minutes' grace. Do you think it surely the wisest thing to do; do you think it necessary beyond all doubt that I go away with you? I know you must realize what that must mean to me—I cannot but think of father!"

"I have thought of everything you have said—everything you have even thought," said the Laughing Mask gently. "But it is no longer safe for you to stay here. I had to tell you this. And I had to get from your father's vault the thing that will clear me of some, at least, of the crimes Legar has fastened upon me—Legar's confession."

"Then, come, let us hurry," said Margery.

The two of them then stole quietly down through the shadowy house to the library.

The Laughing Mask went swiftly to the vault and in a moment its heavy door swung open. But the next minute a tingle of alarm swept through Margery's body, for the call of the telephone on the rosewood desk suddenly rang through the room. By this time the Laughing Mask was within the vault, but the shrill of that bell brought him out into the room.

"Don't answer it!" warned the girl.

"But Wilson or another of the servants will surely come to answer it," explained the Laughing Mask as he moved toward the only door that he had not locked on entering the library.

"The confession—have you got it?" asked Margery, not heeding what he had said, so great was the tension of her mind.

"It is where it is safe," quietly replied the Laughing Mask.

"Then I'll shut the vault door," she said.

He stood watching her as she

were what seemed to be tiny tentacles upon it.

The clicking levers were beginning to work more rapidly. In another moment the great vault door would swing open—to what?

"Quick, Margery," he whispered, "what I have just given you is what I have called the octopus bomb. It will save us, if the need should be dire, if there should be no other manner of escape."

As the man in the mask finished the rapidly spoken words the door of the vault swung outward. Margery stepped forward.

The detectives, with whom the room swarmed, paid no heed to Margery. Their quarry emerged from the gloom of the vault a moment after her. He glanced about—from revolver muzzle to revolver muzzle, all leveled at him. Margery glanced back at the Laughing Mask as he stood thus, facing this desperate denouement. Then she cried out involuntarily, for one of the detectives had approached the Laughing Mask, raised his hand to the mask itself and was about to tear it off. But the Laughing Mask stepped backward and with a gesture commandingly stopped him.

"One moment, if you please, gentlemen. There is no need for this. My mask stays where it is. As for the crimes which you seem to think are matter for these revolvers—I believe this confession of the Iron Claw accounts for the chief of them and, therefore, for the rest."

The captain was about to glance at it, but turned to Golden for a word of instruction. The next moment there was a crash at the other side of the room. Legar had heard every word from his hiding place behind the antique screen and he knew that this was the most desperate case for his fortunes that had yet befallen. As the captain stretched forth his hand, extending the confession to Golden, Legar, with a rush, dashed past him, grasped the confession from his fingers and made for the window. Snatching his cap down over his eyes, he plunged head first through the glass, spluttering it to splinters.

Legar had flashed across the room like a missile from a catapult. Three of the detectives were knocked from their feet. The others gaped at the shattered window. The captain was the first to recover his wits. He shouted an angry command, one of his men threw up the battered sash and the rest leaped out.

Inside the Golden library, the detective who had tried to disclose the identity of the Laughing Mask was again intent upon solving this mystery. That is why he had remained behind.

"It's no use, your time's come. Off with the mask, I tell you!"

The Laughing Mask looked straight into the beady eyes before him and he saw that their gaze was not of the sort that is open to argument or persuasion. Then he looked steadily on beyond to where Margery stood, behind the detective.

Margery understood his glance and interpreted his gesture aright. She deftly slipped the octopus bomb from her handkerchief, in which she had held it, clutched tightly within her fingers, ever since she and the Laughing Mask had left the vault. As the detective strode forward to peer the more closely at what he expected to see revealed Margery hurled the bomb to the floor.

The next moment the room was filled with an impenetrable cloud of black smoke. Completely it enveloped everyone and everything in the library.

Gradually the black, sootlike pall rose to the high ceiling of the library, disclosing Margery, her father and the detective to one another. But the Laughing Mask had vanished. The detective dashed to the door leading to the adjoining reception hall and flung it open. Golden followed and both ran through this spacious chamber and on to the stairs. Margery, still apprehensive for the safety of the man in the yellow mask, ran after the searchers, who were fairly halted.

As soon as all three were clear of the reception hall the Laughing Mask's head emerged from a large ancient Roman vase; swiftly, he climbed from out its great sheltering bowl and stepped noiselessly back to the library.

Silently the Laughing Mask lifted the window and climbed over the sill. In another moment he had leaped to the ground below. But he had not reckoned upon the quick discouragement that overtakes that limp arm of the law known as a central office detective. The half dozen of the type, with their chief, who had pursued Legar when their revolvers failed to stop him, had quickly given up the chase. They were walking briskly when the captain quickly motioned to his men to hug the wall of the house. Something at the shattered window of the library had caught his attention. It was a man's back. The man was astride the window sill. The captain then recognized the hat of the Laughing Mask. The captain halted his men, who were still some fifty feet from the window. The Laughing Mask straightened up as he reached the ground beneath the window, and, for an instant, again he faced his enemy. But in a flash he turned and darted around the corner of the house.

When the captain and his men reached the first house corner they stopped to search the vista down the second house wall. Already the Laughing Mask was around the next corner and it did not dawn on the detectives that the man they were hunting would do anything but make for the hedge as Legar had done.

As a fact, Legar was still where he had eluded pursuit. He drew forth the confession that he had sought so

long. He held it to the light so that he could read it and then, with his claw, he tore the paper to shreds.

The Laughing Mask, too, had been the detectives. He ran with all the fleetness of foot that his athletic build and slim strength could muster, out beyond the Golden grounds and down the nearest street to the trolley line. As he reached the tracks a car, just from the barns, came to a stop and the Laughing Mask boarded it at a leap. The conductor of the car had gone to the signal box nearby. As the

man finished setting the signal the Laughing Mask saw the group of detectives at the head of the street at right angles to the tracks, dashing towards him. In another minute they would reach the car.

He slipped his revolver from his coat pocket and ran through the car. With a bound he was upon the front platform and slipped the catch of the door behind him. As the motorman faced about, the Laughing Mask's revolver was thrust into his face.

"Start the car—now!" cried the Laughing Mask.

Instead, the motorman lifted the controller handle from the box and would have struck the Laughing Mask's revolver hand, but the latter stepped back and thrust the motorman off the platform with a terrific shove of his foot. The motorman tumbled over in the dust of the roadway and before he could regain his feet the Laughing Mask had the spare controller handle out of the tool box and had started the car at full speed.

Leaving the controller box for an instant, he gazed backward. The detectives had stopped a passing automobile and were piling into it. The car gained momentum, and soon it careened along the rails, swinging around curves with two wheels in air and ever bettering its speed.

Nevertheless, the automobile, now driven by one of the detectives, could not be outdistanced. It was no scarcely more than a hundred yards behind. The car was approaching another slight upgrade, preparatory to dashing across the highest bridge on the road. As the car struck the level stretch of track at the entrance to the bridge abutment, again its momentum drove it at fresh speed. Now it was gaining on the automobile as the car full of detectives, in its turn, struck the upgrade. A new plan flashed through the Laughing Mask's mind. He looked back to measure the distance between the car and the automobile. The car gave a lurch as it struck the bridge switch-frog, in another moment it had left the rails and then it hurtled against the guard rail, smashed it and plunged downward.

As the car disappeared from the sight of the detectives in the pursuing automobile, Golden gave an involuntary cry.

"Drive on over the end of the bridge," commanded Golden, "and let us go down below."

The searchers went down the declivity to the water's edge and there lay the wrecked trolley car, smashed to splinters. The detectives scattered along the bank of the river, hunting for some sign of the Laughing Mask, but there was none.

"We have hunted all along the shore," reported one of the detectives to the captain, "but there is no sign of the Laughing Mask's body. It must have been carried on down the river and over the falls."

For the policemen and Golden, the quest was ended. They drove back to the Golden mansion and then the captain and his men took their leave. Golden, still somewhat unnerved at the fate that he believed had at last overtaken the Laughing Mask—for the eyes make the brain an appalling witness of what the ears would record only a meager impression—Golden mounted the stairs of his home.

Margery, wide-eyed, stood at the staidhead. What Golden had just seen was still pictured, in some sort, on his face.

"Father," she cried out, "what is it, what has happened?"

"The Laughing Mask," he said, "has met a terrible death."

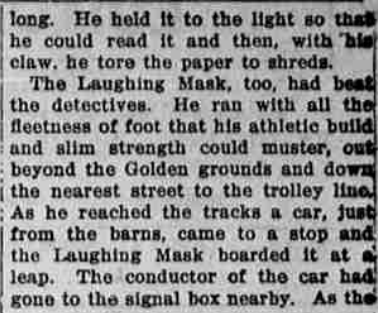
And then he told her what he had seen. She looked into his face, incredulous, amazed, horror-stricken.

"No! No! It can't be!" she gasped out, like one in a frenzy.

"I saw it with my own eyes," said her father.

She gazed at him vacantly, and then fell into his arms, her limp figure shaken by convulsive sobs.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



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