

The IRON CLAW

by Arthur Stringer

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SYNOPSIS.

On Windward Island Pallidori intrigues Mrs. Golden into an appearance of evil which causes Golden to capture and torture the "Hillz" 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. Legar sends Golden a demand for the chart. The coveted 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. Margery rescues the Laughing Mask from the police. Manley finds Margery not indifferent to his love. He saves her from Mauld'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 De Mara cottage is frustrated in the nick of time. The Laughing Mask discloses his identity to Margery. Margery overhears the police's plan to take the Laughing Mask prisoner and hastens to warn him. They escape both the police and the Iron Claw. Later the Laughing Mask is almost taken while with Margery at her home. He eludes capture; Margery's father tells her that the Mask has met death. A mysterious woman frightens Legar's henchman into a promise of confession to clear the Laughing Mask. She meets Margery and discloses herself to that young lady as David Manley. Legar and his gang get possession of some loot and escape, taking Margery with them. The Laughing Mask adds to his mysteriousness by once more saving her from death.

SIXTEENTH EPISODE

The Unmasking of Davy.

In that gloomy sanctuary of evils known as the Owl's Nest, Jules Legar bent over the half sheet of paper on which the pen in his lean fingers was inscribing certain cryptic characters. Then he quickly folded the strip of parchment, placed it in an envelope, and securely gummed down the flap with the aid of the iron hook which took the place of his missing left hand. Crossing the dank flagging of the subterranean chamber, he stood before a rat-faced individual, who squinted slavishly up at him with one good eye. Although fortified by liberal portions of the Owl's illicit brew, it was evident that One-Lamp Louie nourished an unwholesome dread of that scar-marked tyrant, who brooked no infraction of his malign authority. "Cut out that booze and listen to me," commanded Legar in curt tones; "you know the place where those bulls from headquarters gave us such a lively run that I had to cache that Van Horn swag. Get out there as quick as you can and turn this envelope over to Dutch Frank, who will be waiting with Tony Raffello along the road near the lake. They will know what to do, and remember—no bungling on this job."



Slipped the Handcuffs Over the Secretary's Wrists.

pressed so closely to the cracked door panel that every word spoken in the outer room was plainly audible. This daring eavesdropper wore a yellow mask, with the mouth slit curving upward in a fixed, mocking smile. He now seemed animated by a strong desire to accompany One-Lamp Louie as that worthy departed on his strange errand. Swiftly mounting a shabby ladder on one side of the room, the masked interloper groped his way upward through a narrow bulkhead door, opening onto a gloomy alleyway. Racing down this alley, he reached the street where a black, low-slung limousine stood drawn up at the curb. On the next block a thick-bodied man was hailing a passing taxi. "Follow that taxicab," he cried out to the chauffeur; "don't let it get out of sight for a minute."

The pursuit of that yellow-trimmed taxicab led through the canyonlike streets of the lower city onto a squat ferryboat and across the turbid river, threaded the narrow mazes of Jersey City, and finally swept out on to the broad highways of the open country. Like a greyhound coursing a clumsy rabbit, the high-powered limousine clung to the lurching taxi, and then as the two dust-enveloped vehicles struck into the uplands their speed perceptibly slackened. Among these rolling uplands were the stately summer mansions of a millionaire colony which migrated here annually from the sweltering metropolis. It was in this abiding place of wealth that Enoch Golden had erected a great rambling manor house. The aged banker now stepped out of one of the French windows opening on the broad veranda and stood thoughtfully surveying the peaceful landscape glimmering in the June sunlight.

"What is troubling you, Enoch?" his gentle-faced wife inquired tenderly; "do you think we may still be in danger from that man who already has caused us so much suffering?" "It isn't that I fear for myself," Golden replied, fondling the hand that lay in his, "but that human monster seems bent on striking at me through Margery. He is capable of anything, but I hardly believe he will dare remain in this vicinity with both Captain Brackett and Lieutenant Kirby on his track."

Even as he spoke those two redoubtable, if somewhat heavy-featured, police officers turned in at the gravelled driveway.

"It's all right, Mr. Golden," called out the red-jowled police captain as soon as he got within hailing distance, "not a trace of that bunch of yeggs. They must have been tipped off I was workin' on the case."

"That's fine," called out a sweet girlish voice from the house, "now father can't refuse to let me have that gallop Major and I are both longing for."

"It would be hard for me to refuse you anything, Margery," responded the affectionate father, "and if Captain Brackett thinks it will be safe, I certainly don't want to spoil your pleasure."

"Your daughter will be in no danger while I'm around," pompously announced that officer, "and now the Iron Claw bandit has cleaned out. I'm goin' on a still hunt for that masked gum-shoe artist. That paper your secretary got off Red Egan leaves a lot of bad jobs that need explainin'." A few minutes later a groom approached the veranda leading a spirited black horse. Margery leaped into the saddle and the thoroughbred swung into the lake road. She became so absorbed in the liquid-noted duet of two mating song birds that when Major suddenly pricked up his ears and shied to one side of the road her equilibrium was seriously threatened for the moment. As she regained her precarious balance and quieted her high-strung mount Margery discovered the object of his fright was a black, dust-coated limousine standing half concealed in the thick shrubbery. A motionless figure sat in the driver's seat, his visored cap pulled low over his face.

She urged the skittish animal past the troublesome black specker and continued down the road, every sense keenly on the alert for possible danger. Presently her horse reared again, and this time more violently, as a hawk-faced chauffeur wearing a greasy duster jumped up from the grassy bank where he had been smoking his pipe. Near this disreputable figure stood an equally disreputable-looking taxicab with yellow trimmings. With a light touch of her whip, Margery swept past this loering harbinger of evil.

A few hundred yards farther on Margery sharply reined in her mount and sat, intently staring into a clump of alder bushes growing close to the lake. In that clump of bushes she saw the back of a thick-shouldered man, who, by his impatient movements, appeared to be waiting for someone. As the puzzled girl watched that vaguely familiar figure, a startling development took place. A second person, whose features were concealed by a derisively smiling mask of yellow fabric, stepped out of the dense foliage and abruptly confronted the waiting figure, whom Margery now placed the one of Legar's scoundrels known as One-Lamp Louie.

Apparently the newcomer was making some urgent demand upon that one-eyed miscreant, a demand which he emphasized by sundry prods with the muzzle of a heavy blue-metalled revolver. After casting a furtive glance about him, the wily gangster appeared to weakly surrender, for he drew from his inner coat pocket a sealed envelope, which his masked opponent hastily seized and ripped open.

Even as he rapidly scanned the strip of paper he found in the envelope, the silent girl on horseback saw creeping through the bushes two stealthily figures, which were stalking

the Laughing Mask like slinking jungle cats hunting in pairs. The next moment those creeping figures had avalanched themselves upon him, knocking his weapon from his hand and bearing him heavily to the ground under their combined weight. Fighting with a courage born of desperation, the Laughing Mask with one supreme effort shook off the clutches of his unwieldy opponents and sprang to his feet, the strip of white paper still gripped in his left hand.

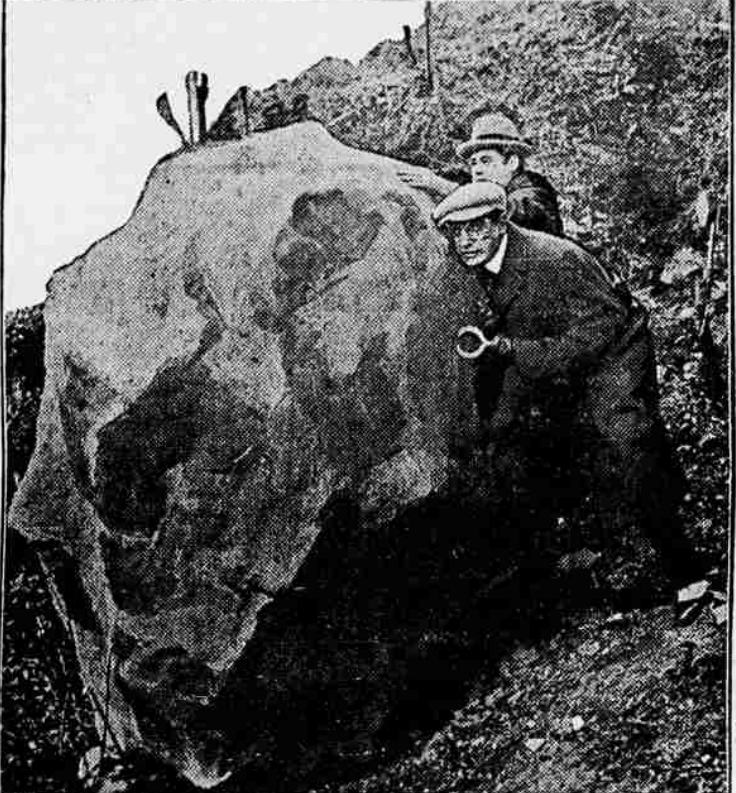
One-Lamp Louie, seeing his opportunity, leveled the revolver and fired at close range. A stinging pain in his left hand forced him to involuntarily relinquish his hold on the crumpled bit of paper, and a puff of wind sent it kitting high above his head.

The astonished girl, sitting as motionless as an equestrian statue, had barely time to gather her scattered wits, when that disputed scrap of parchment came gently floating down the breeze. She knew that paper must have some great intrinsic value or the Laughing Mask would not have jeopardized his life for its possession.

Wheeling her tender-mouthed horse in his tracks, she struck him a sharp blow with her riding crop. Smarting under this unusual indignity, he launched out like a black thunderbolt toward the startled gangsters blocking his path. Margery swung low like an Indian and scooped up the paper.

As Margery swept past the last of her enemies she saw the black limousine backing out from the shrubbery just ahead of her, and by a herculean effort succeeded in pulling up barely in time to avoid a collision with that mysterious vehicle. Just then the Laughing Mask, with his left hand hastily bandaged, burst out of the bushes and ran swiftly toward the waiting motor car. He stopped in sudden wonderment as he saw the serene-eyed girl who smilingly extended a frayed and soiled strip of white paper.

"I don't know whether this is your property," she said lightly as he came



Placed Their Shoulders Against the Granite Bowlder.

toward her, "but I didn't want you to lose it after that terrible fight."

He was suddenly interrupted by the sound of loud and raucous shouts and the jerky whirring of the taxicab engine.

"These men are in an ugly mood and will stop at nothing. My man and I can hold them off until you get a start. When you get home give that paper to your father's secretary. It concerns him deeply. Go at once and ride as hard as you know how."

From the depths of a comfortable wicker chair in the spacious living room, Margery narrated the exciting events of the last hour to a little circle of breathless auditors, including the somewhat abashed Captain Brackett of headquarters.

And when she exhibited that tattered slip of paper which she had been instructed to deliver to the young secretary, David Manley, the red-faced captain could restrain himself no longer.

"I ain't sayin' this Laughing Mask ain't brave enough when it comes to a show-down," he said in unctuous tones, "but that don't let him off those crimes he's charged with. I've been followin' up a clue that leads right into this house, Mr. Golden, and if you ain't got any objections I'd like to have a talk with that secretary of yours."

At that moment the unsuspecting object of this thinly veiled insinuation airily entered the room. Margery uttered a gasp of surprise as she saw his left hand bound in a blood-stained handkerchief.

"That left hand of yours looks kind of mussed up," said the police captain, "perhaps you wouldn't mind tellin' us how it got hurt."

For the first time since Margery had known the frank and boyishly engaging David Manley he appeared constrained and somewhat evasive.

"Wh—!— was fooling around in the gunroom and—my automatic accidentally went off," he replied haltingly, and then added quickly as though struck by an inspiration, "I was cleaning it, you know."

Into the dull face of the captain flashed a look of satisfied triumph. He took from his pocket a pair of heavy, jangling handcuffs.

"That bluff don't work," he replied, "not when we know the Laughing Mask was wounded in the left hand not half an hour ago." Then he solemnly enunciated, "David Manley, you are under arrest!"

With these words he dexterously slipped the handcuffs over the secretary's wrists.

"But this is preposterous, Captain Brackett," declared Enoch Golden somewhat heatedly. "I would as soon think of accusing my own daughter of being the Laughing Mask as this boy, who has stood by me through all my troubles."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Golden, but the law must take its course," answered the smug-faced police officer. "I didn't make any move until I was sure of what I was doin', though I've had my suspicions ever since I found this here piece of jooly on your library floor the time the Laughing Mask gave us the slip."

Fishing in a deep sidepocket, he drew out a gold cuff link with the letters D. M. monogrammed on its oval face.

"You'll have to do a lot of explainin' before you get through," he thundered at Davy in a third-degree voice, "and since you say you ain't the Laughing Mask, you might as well commence by tellin' us how he happened to drop this sleeve button with your initials on it."

"I guess you'll have to do your duty, captain," came his low-toned reply. "I have no explanation to offer you."

Suddenly from behind a lace hanging stepped a familiar figure holding a black automatic in his hand. His features were hidden by a yellow mask, the mouth slit curving into an enigmatic smile.

"The Laughing Mask!" involuntarily burst from the astounded group. "Entirely at your service," came the mocking rejoinder. Then he cried tersely, "Throw up your hands, all of you. The cuff link which this highly intelligent officer considers so very important was borrowed by me because

ly, "for it is the key to the hiding place of the Van Horn loot, which Legar must have cached when we had him on the run. It gives Wrenney's Oak as a starting place, and here are the directions for pacing off the distance to where the plate is concealed."

Captain Brackett, now rehabilitated in his customary dignity, reached out an authoritative hand for the paper and studied it intently for a moment.

"Anyone could see that," he answered slightly, "and we've got to get out to Wrenney's Oak in a hurry if we're goin' to beat the Iron Claw and his pirates to that sack of loot."

With his usual buoyant spirits decidedly crushed, David Manley stood on the broad veranda and watched the little party embark in a racing motorboat, which carried them swiftly over the limpid waters, leaving a long trail of foam in its wake. For a brief space Davy stared irresolutely over the lake, then a look of sudden determination flashed into his face, and a few minutes later he was at the helm of the speedy "Arrow," skimming over the surface of that lake as lightly as a swallow on the wing.

He landed a short distance below the deserted craft of his employer and made his way through the moss-carpeted woods toward Wrenney's Oak as silently as in aboriginal. As he approached that hoary veteran of the forest, he saw under its wide-dung branches the golden-haired object of his quest.

The giant oak had implanted its sturdy roots deep in the soil on the edge of a precipitous ravine, and as Davy's eyes traveled up the steep hillside which abruptly flanked the narrow path skirting this ravine his face suddenly went white with fearsome apprehension.

Peering out of a tangled thicket was the deep-seared face of Jules Legar. That face was as repellent in its beastlike ferocity as must have been the hideously painted savages who once roamed these forest glades, bent on murder and destruction. Unconscious of the presence of this lurking foe, the stalwart police captain was solemnly pacing off certain distances, guided by a slip of white paper which he held in his hand.

Standing near by and completely absorbed in these awkward maneuvers was the graceful figure of Margery Golden, her stoop-shouldered father close beside her.

A rasping oath from Legar warned Davy that something had gone amiss with that worthy's plans.

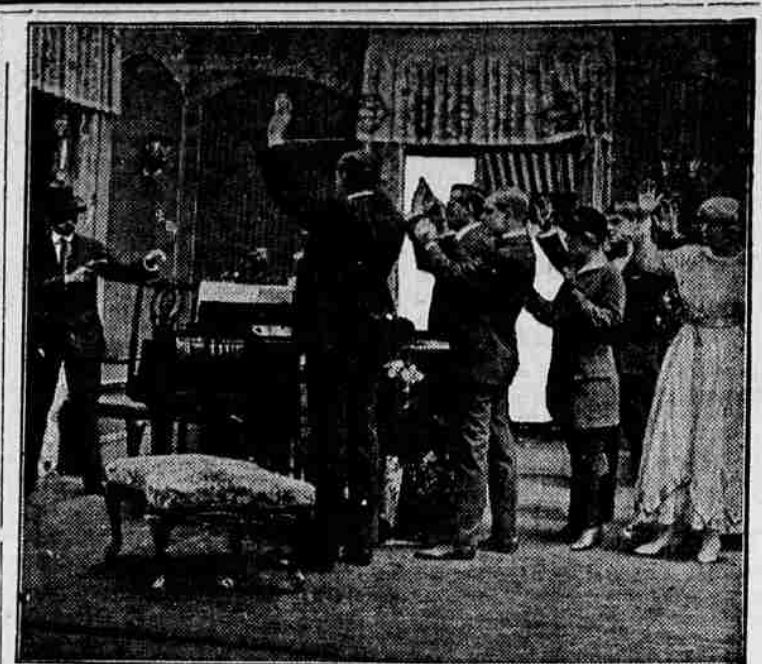
"The cop's stumbled on the right place by accident," growled the angry voice from behind the bushes; "the fool thinks the stuff is in the ground—now he's starting to dig right in front of the cave—that sews up Louis good and tight—we'll have to do something and do it quick."

"If you want to put the kibosh on that bunch buttin' into our business, I know how to do it," said Frank. "That big rock we seen up the hill don't need much of a shove to send it goin' down like thunder lid loose, an' it's headed just about right to smash that whole outfit off the ledge into the gully."

Davy saw the two rapidly moving figures climbing up toward a massive bowlder which by one of those odd whims of nature hung so lightly poised on the hillside that the hand of a child might have set it vibrating on its precarious balance. He saw Legar and Dutch Frank place their shoulders against that granite bowlder.

Davy knew that in a few seconds that revolving bulk of solid granite would acquire a velocity which would send it tearing past him like a shot out of a gun. He raced down the hillside and put his last ounce of strength into a flying leap which landed him close to Margery Golden and her startled companions.

He dived against the wondering-eyed girl as a groggy football player might weakly hurl himself against the opposing line, and the sheer impact of his weight sent them both sprawling several yards up the trail which bordered the ravine. Even as Enoch Golden and Captain Brackett rushed to lay hands on Margery's supposed assailant the flying mass of rock thundered across the space where they all had been standing but the second before, and sweeping every obstacle out of its path, went crashing and reverberating into the depths of the yawning chasm far below.



"Throw Up Your Hands, All of You!"

ured to the shock and tumult of conflict by the experience of many years, who first recovered his self-possession and noted a one-eyed man stealthily making his way out of a deep and cavernous fissure in some nearby rocks. Over one shoulder this villainous-faced prowler bore a burlap sack which gave out a clanking sound as he felt his way step by step along the rough trail.

The captain made up in valor what he lacked in discretion, and, tugging out his heavy service revolver, he rushed after that skulking gangster, loudly calling on him to surrender in the name of the law. But One-Lamp Louie had no apparent intention of surrendering either himself or the coveted bag of loot to that wrathful guardian of public morals. Instead, he coolly dropped to one knee and lived up to his reputation of being the handiest gunman in Legar's hard-shooting gang by sending a bullet neatly drilled through the police captain's shoulder.

But he did not know as he dodged his way among the shadowy tree trunks that a youthful figure armed with a heavy police revolver, a resolute-faced girl and an elderly white-haired man were rapidly closing in on him. As he broke from cover and started up the railroad embankment he ripped out a hasty oath as he saw his pursuers emerging from the woods a short distance below him. At the same moment they saw that sinister figure with the burlap sack and came toward him on the run.

One-Lamp Louie instantly reached the conclusion that it was safer to run than to fight, and he pounded up the ties with rapid strides.

Fifty yards up the track the gangster saw a battered old switching engine standing by a dripping water tank. He leaped aboard and opened the throttle.

As the self-constituted posse came to a baffled stop close by the water tank they saw an evilly grinning figure leaning out from the cab of the fast receding engine, a figure whose hand waved a mocking signal of farewell in true railroad style.

A few feet distant from the water tank was a small, boxlike shanty containing the levers manipulating various switches. In front of this shanty stood a distraught engineer, volubly cursing the bold depredator who had robbed him of his iron charge. Suddenly a new look of consternation flashed into his eyes and he turned in a frenzy of excitement to his grimy-faced assistant.

"We've got to throw that devil off the main line, Gus," he shouted as he dived into the boxlike structure. "The Overland is due any second. They'll crash together head on."

Almost as he spoke the last words he jammed over one of the shining levers with all his strength. At that moment came a long-drawn screeching whistle, accompanied by the grinding sound of hastily applied airbrakes. Down the level stretch of track the onlookers, gripped in an agony of suspense, saw the heavy Overland express rushing at top speed straight for the lumbering freight engine. The intervening space between those speeding iron-clad monsters lessened with every second.

With set faces the little group by the water tank steeled themselves for that seemingly inevitable crash of collision. But at that crucial instant the outlaw engine swerved with incredible swiftness and shot off into the long siding, just as the express thundered past with its dozen coaches of human freight.

Like a crazy Malay running amuck the engine, with the desperado at its throttle, tore down the siding toward a startled group of laborers who had been ripping out a defective rail. Amid a babble of warning shouts the engine struck that deadly gap, and bereft of its steel guides, plowed wildly for a short distance along the ties, and then, enveloped in a swirling cloud of steam, plunged headlong over the steep embankment. Under that shapeless mass of twisted metal which had once been a staid old switching engine the white-faced pursuers of One-Lamp Louie found the crushed and lifeless form of the unregenerate gunman huddled across a burlap sack of stolen plate. With a gesture of distress Margery Golden turned away from that repulsive, death-stilled figure.

"Please take me home," she said wearily to her father, who was standing near by.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)