

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 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. Legar sends Golden a demand for the chart. This coveted chart, lost in a fight between Manley and one of Legar's henchmen, but is recovered by the Laughing Mask. Margery rescues the Laughing Mask from the police. He saves her from Manley's poisoned arrows. 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. Margery overhears the police's plan to take the Laughing Mask prisoner and hastens to warn him. 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 recover possession of some loot and escape, taking Margery with them. The Laughing Mask aids in his mysteriousness by once more saving her from death. Margery rescues the chart of the Van Horn loot. The police attempt to arrest David as the Laughing Mask. The Mask appears on the scene. David saves Margery and her friends from Legar's henchmen, one of whom loses his life trying to escape. The police captain teaches Margery the helicopter. In an effort to save David she is almost trapped by Legar. The Laughing Mask comes to her aid. The code saves them. David discovers a diagram which is the means of averting the deaths of the Golden and their guests at a lawn banquet. Brackett's man reports that while searching for the Laughing Mask, that individual tips him to a robbery by Legar's men and they are captured. Brackett lays a trap for the Laughing Mask, but Legar catches the captain and his party. They are saved from destruction only by the work of the Mask. The Mask asks Margery's further trust.

NINETEENTH EPISODE

The Cave of Despair.

Margery Golden was naturally of a happy disposition. Yet as she sat in the June fragrance of the color-splashed rose garden and let her thoughts dwell on the recent events which had so rudely shattered her many cherished ideals, the pensiveness which could not repress a long-drawn sigh which betrayed only too clearly her distress of mind. From a branch overhead a liquid-tongued robin poured his melody of spring and gladness into the unheeding ears of the silent and preoccupied figure on the rustic bench.

Suddenly the feathered songster ceased his joyous carol as Margery heard the sound of approaching steps on the gravelled walk. The newcomer stood looking wistfully down at the sweet-faced girl whose golden hair glistened in the shaft of sunlight filtering through the soft spring foliage. She met his look with one of surprised inquiry.

"I hardly expected to see you here, Davy, after all that has happened," she said in tones of gentle reproach.

"I had to come, Margery," he answered quietly. "I couldn't stay away from you any longer. Won't you believe that I am truly sorry for what I have done and try to forgive me?"

The silent robin, which had been regarding this masculine intruder into its peaceful domain with some uncertainty, now took wing in a sudden flutter of apprehension. For at

As though in compliance with this stern warning, the key grated in the lock and the door swung slowly inward. With a quick rush the besieging forces catapulted into the gueroom, only to find it apparently empty. Then, with a gasp of amazed consternation they beheld a figure which silently emerged from the space between the swung-back door and the wall. For that figure wore an enshrouding mask of yellow cumbric and gripped in one hand a heavy caliber revolver, which waved in disconcerting fashion over that startled group.

"I think Davy must be well beyond recall by this time," he said as he slowly backed toward the door, "and I will now leave you to your own devices."

As he spoke the last word he stepped into the hallway, and with almost simultaneous movements pulled the door shut after him and locked it from the outside. Then came a clamor of wrathful voices as the caged detectives, smarting under the indignities to which they had been subjected, hurled themselves in unavailing fury against that stout obstruction which barred their pursuit of the boldly impudent masker.

But with the exception of a fair-haired girl waiting anxiously in the rose garden there was no one in sight about the well-kept grounds. As in response to her eager inquiries, her father told her of their humiliating encounter with the masked interloper, who had miraculously taken the place of the harried Manley, Margery became conscious of the openly suspicious gaze of the russet-faced police captain.

"I don't know what your motive is, Miss Golden," he said resentfully, "but for some reason you have tried all along to discredit my theory

me hope that some day you will let me come back to you."

Then he slowly took from his pocket a folded square of note paper.

"I had almost forgotten to give this to you," he said, extending the paper to the wondering girl. "I found it fastened on the thorn bush near the great bowlder on Seven Oaks hill. It is addressed to you and I think it must be from the Laughing Mask, for he has been seen around there a number of times."

As Margery hastily glanced at the penciled note she saw that Davy was right in his conjecture, and he rejoiced much that he had lost in her affections as she realized what a struggle it must have cost him to act as message bearer for his masked rival.

"I'll trouble you to hand over that letter, Miss Golden," demanded Captain Brackett in authoritative tones as she stepped from his place of concealment. "I've had my doubts about your wantin' to land that masked criminal in the cell where he belongs ever since you steered us wrong the time he made his last getaway, an' perhaps this little dockment will help throw some light on the subject."

His beefy paw suddenly shot out and firmly clutched her slender wrist. But the resisting girl found a timely ally in the person of David Manley, who perceived that for reasons of her own Margery did not wish to surrender the note, and with a quick movement snatched that object of contention from her fingers and stuffed it in his pocket.

The belligerent captain now advanced threateningly upon the new factor of this unexpected resistance to the majesty of the law.

"Come across with that paper, young man," he bellowed furiously, "or I'll show you what it means to interfere with an officer performin' his duty."

Then as the calm-faced Davy exhibited no indications of complying with this demand, the late policeman attempted to decide the issue by physical force. Roughly throwing a pin-pointing arm about the defiant Manley, he made a vigorous effort to extract the much-coveted paper from his prisoner's pocket.

As the struggling figures thrashed and tramped over the orderly flower beds, Enoch Golden and two of Captain Brackett's men, who had heard the sounds of the unequal combat, came hurrying upon the scene. The sight of these enemy reinforcements acted upon the nearly exhausted Davy like a rowelled spur upon the flanks of a jaded horse. With a supreme effort, he wrenched loose from the grasp of his heavy-handed captor and darted across the stretch of velvet lawn toward the spacious countryhouse, with the determined officers close at his heels. Up the steps and through the open door he scurried, and, gaining the gueroom at the end of the hall, slammed and bolted the heavy door of that sanctuary in the very face of his pursuers.

"Don't be foolish, Davy," called out Golden sharply. "You are making a grave mistake in resisting the law and you will have to suffer the consequences unless you open this door immediately."

As though in compliance with this stern warning, the key grated in the lock and the door swung slowly inward. With a quick rush the besieging forces catapulted into the gueroom, only to find it apparently empty. Then, with a gasp of amazed consternation they beheld a figure which silently emerged from the space between the swung-back door and the wall. For that figure wore an enshrouding mask of yellow cumbric and gripped in one hand a heavy caliber revolver, which waved in disconcerting fashion over that startled group.

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"I don't know what your motive is, Miss Golden," he said resentfully, "but for some reason you have tried all along to discredit my theory

about Manley and the Laughing Mask being the same person. What has just happened proves I am right, for no two people could have changed places between the time we chased Manley into the gueroom and that masked criminal opened the door. No one came out of that window and you know it as well as I do."

For a moment the puzzled girl took rapid counsel with herself.

"I am afraid I shall have to discredit your theory again, Captain Brackett," she said in unequivocal tones, "for David Manley did come through that window and I saw him with my own eyes."

For a moment the heavy-featured police officer stared at her in apparent disbelief, but Margery felt she had twisted the truth in a good cause, and presently he turned from her clear, level gaze with the attitude of a man who has completely lost his bearings.

After lunch she slipped away from the group sitting on the broad veranda, discussing ways and means for the immediate capture of the Laughing Mask, and taking a shortcut across the fields, soon came in sight of the old gray farmhouse.

Off to one side of the weather-beaten dwelling she saw Davy comfortably sprawled in a fringed hammock slung between two gnarled apple trees. Suddenly he sprang out of the hammock and, after an irresolute glance toward the house, set off at an easy pace down the road in the direction of Seven Oaks hill. Under the deserted hammock Margery saw a folded square of paper, which she concluded was the note Davy had so narrowly saved from the ruthless clutches of Captain Brackett earlier in the day.

But instead of the penciled lines of the Laughing Mask she saw a rough diagram of a great bowlder with a star bisecting its base-line. Under this star were the words: "Press at this point until opening appears." The significance of the puzzling sketch suddenly flashed into the mind of the quick-witted girl. She knew that at one time extensive coal mining operations had been carried on at Seven Oaks hill.

In these forgotten catacombs, an entrance had apparently been effected by the construction of a secret door at the foot of the lone bowlder on the hilltop. This would account for the sudden disappearance of David

ures worming their way down the slope toward her.

She would have been taken entirely off her guard had not the heavy-footed gangster known as Dutch Frank clumsily loosed a heavy stone, which went bounding and crashing down the steep incline past the startled girl.

"Spread out, and be quick about it!" Legar commanded sharply. "Tony, cut her off from the house; stay where you are, Dutch, in case she doubles back; Mack, you watch the road; I'll get the girl myself."

Then out of her desperation was born a plan, uncertain and hazardous in its nature, but worth attempting as a last resort. Gathering all her strength for a final effort, she headed directly for the lone bowlder standing on the ridge-top some twenty yards above her. She covered the intervening distance with a frenzied burst of speed and threw herself, panting convulsively, at the base of the massive rock.

Then her blighted fingers came in contact with a slight projection, on which she saw painted the faint outline of a red star. She instantly pressed with all her strength against this projection and, with a sharp click of releasing bolts, a slab of wood so closely resembling the rock as to defy detection suddenly dropped in its grooved guides, leaving a narrow aperture in the face of the bowlder.

Even as Legar, his cruel face aflame with evil passion, rushed upon the defenseless girl, she slipped through the strange opening, and as she stumbled onto a rude wooden platform some ingenious mechanism sent the heavy panel shooting into place behind her.

Beneath the platform on which she was standing the gloom was broken by flickering tallow dips fixed against the wall, and Margery saw, as she expected, the labyrinthian galleries of the long-deserted coal mine. Then as she discovered a ladder which led down into the wavering shadows the heavy barrier suddenly dropped and silhouetted against the outer light she saw the leering face of Legar.

As he came twisting through the narrow passage the harried girl sprang for the ladder and groping her way downward found herself in a sloping tunnel from which opened a series of exhausted coal pockets.

Margery could now hear rough voices and the shuffling of feet on the platform above her head. After a

moment's hesitation, she darted into one of the shadowy chambers, hoping to find some place of concealment in its dark recesses. But she was suddenly threatened by now and unexpected dangers, for in the center of that vaultlike room her hurrying feet suddenly slipped from under her, and with a startled outcry she plunged through a hidden trapdoor, which sprang back into place when relieved of her weight.

When the badly shaken girl sat up on the uneven stone flooring where she had landed with considerable force, she realized she had fallen into another of those spectrally lighted chambers on a lower level of the abandoned mine. But there was this difference—the murky cave in which she now found herself had no outlet.

Against one side of that tomblike chamber the miners had left an ascending series of rocky ledges upon which they must have stood to reach the higher coal deposits, but this rough stairway offered no hope of escape to the apprehensive girl.

Then, with a faint flash of light, the trapdoor swung open, and she heard a startled oath, followed by the thud of a heavy body as it struck the rocky flooring. A long silence followed and the alarmed girl realized that her unseen enemy must be lying unconscious where he had fallen.

She did not know that the sudden and mysterious disappearance of Black Tony had proved too much for even the iron nerve of those crime-hardened gunmen.

"Tony must have fallen down an old shaft, but that's no reason for your throwing a fit," Legar said in a voice that was a trifle unsteady, "maybe the girl's down there, too. Get one of those lights off the wall and we'll take a look at that nantap."

Spurred on by a curse from his grim-faced leader, the heavy-set

ganster called Mack advanced slowly and with some trepidation toward a tallow dip sputtering in a bracket fixed against the tawny black wall. As he fumbled at that bracket with thick and clumsy fingers, a fearful and gruesome thing happened. Suspended high over his head and concealed with the wall bracket by a slender wire, invisible in the semidarkness, was a massive iron crowbar, its beveled edge sharpened to a razorlike fineness. The coarse fingers brushing against an ingenious trigger had instantly released that deadly weapon hanging in midair. It dropped straight down like a plummet and catching the unsuspecting gunman squarely on the head, spit his skull like an eggshell.

But the supernatural horrors of those subterranean vaults were still to be exhausted. For a moment Dutch Frank, the blond gangster, stared in white-faced consternation at that ghastly figure stretched before him. Then, with a sudden blast of terror, he turned from the appalling sight and fled blindly along the dusky tunnel toward the ladder leading to the upper world. In his mad rush to escape from those ill-omened vaults of death he blundered heavily against an old and decaying mine prop.

The age-rotted timber crumbled like paper under the forceful blow from the shoulder of the racing blond giant, and with the suddenness of a cloud-burst, a great section of deep-fissured rock, which roofed the tunnel, fell with a sullen roar onto the struggling gangster, crushing out his life and blocking up the passage. As the muttering echoes aroused by that landslide slowly subsided, Legar realized that the hand of death had robbed him of the last of his evil followers, and his savage courage entirely forsook him. Obsessed with a mad desire to escape from the encompassing shadows, he frantically tore at the rocks which now checked his egress.

It was with new misgivings that the girl crouching in the stygian gloom of the walled-in crypt on the lower level of the abandoned mine, heard the muffled roar accompanying the cascade of rocks into the tunnel. Her enemy lying under the trap-door where he had fallen now gave unmistakable signs of returning consciousness.

But these appalling conjectures were suddenly banished by a danger which threatened dire and immediate results. Her enemy lying under the trapdoor where he had fallen now gave unmistakable signs of returning consciousness.

Presently he would commence to explore his surroundings, and the girl, separated by only a few feet of enshrouding darkness from the merciless criminal, felt her blood turn cold at the thought of those groping fingers which would eventually find her. But as she waited, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of betraying her presence, she heard a low exclamation of satisfaction come from the Italian gunman, and even while she wondered what it could mean, a small shaft of light suddenly pierced the ebony blackness.

That exclamation from her enemy meant he had found his pocket flashlight unbroken, and now a little circle of light traveled over the jutting walls, slowly approaching the spot where Margery Golden crouched, waiting her inevitable discovery with all the courage she could muster. Nearer, and yet nearer, came that betraying beam of light. Suddenly it rested full on the white face of the girl, while from the lips of Black Tony came a startled oath of wonder.

Then the light was quickly extinguished, and Margery heard the soft pad of stealthily approaching footsteps. Into her distraught mind came the memory of those shelllike ridges she had seen at the farther end of the chamber, and, feeling her way along the damp wall, she stole rapidly toward them. Even as she stumbled against the lowest of those stone projections, she heard the sudden spring of the gangster, followed by his cry of baffled fury as he clawed at the empty air where he had last seen her.

Then came a little click to her ears, and again that circle of light commenced its exploration. It suddenly glared into her eyes, and the shadowy form behind it came rapidly under the ledge.

With drawn breath and tumultuously beating heart, she waited, waited until she saw the bullet-shaped head of the gangster just beneath her. Then with a mighty effort she lifted a heavy lump of coal, and with all her strength sent it crashing onto the helmeted skull of the Italian.

She now had nothing but her bare hands with which to repel that gangster, more dangerous and vicious than a mad dog. As she lay flat on the narrow ledge momentarily expecting a fresh onslaught, she knew there was but one possible chance for her salvation. If her masked protector should by any chance return to this underground labyrinth, which he had apparently utilized as a terribly guarded hiding place, she might yet escape that knife blade.

But the chance was even more remote than the despairing girl could realize, for at that moment, while she was intently listening for the soft step of Black Tony, the Laughing Mask was seated in a fragrant garden talking in an earnest manner to the pretty Dorothy Wilkens, close beside him. Then as he impulsively leaned over and kissed her he heard the rapidly approaching sounds of a hard-driven motor.

Then that car, in which were seated Captain Brackett and two of his detectives, came into view and, with the whine of hastily applied brakes,

stopped a short distance down the road. At sight of those implacable enemies the Laughing Mask, with a word of assurance to his companion, slipped quietly through the hedge and ran lightly toward the highway, down which the detectives were already coming. But the meaning of this surprising maneuver was apparent in another moment, for mingled with the startled shouts of the officers came the rapid explosions from a motorcycle, which now darted away with its masked rider bending low over the handle bars.

With a quick crash of gears the automobile started in hot pursuit.

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The Capture of Legar.

Maney behind that solitary rock on a previous occasion, and the equally sudden emergence of the Laughing Mask a moment later. With a feeling that at last she had stumbled upon a tangible clue, Margery sped rapidly across the meadows in the hope of reaching the undermined hill before Davy should arrive by the more circuitous route of the highway.

To her relief, the coast was still clear when she reached her destination, but when she had toiled half way up the steep slope the unsuspecting object of her espionage came sauntering leisurely along the shaded road. Margery darted into a nearby laurel thicket and from this opportune covert kept an intent watch on the movements of the young man, who was now picking his way along the crest of the ridge. As he neared the isolated bowlder he stopped, and then, apparently satisfied he was free from observation, disappeared behind that great sphere of stone. A moment later, as the breathlessly waiting girl half expected, there issued from behind that rocky screen a figure clad in the familiar habiliments of the Laughing Mask.

But at that instant another person emerged from behind the bowlder and descended the hillside within a few yards of the thicket where the wide-eyed girl crouched in utter bewilderment. For the newcomer was none other than David Manley himself and the solution of that baffling mystery seemed further off than ever.

At Bay.

The sadly perplexed girl stepped out from her place of concealment and stood watching the fast disappearing figure of David Manley. To her further amazement, he seemed to be headed directly for the Wilkens' estate. What did it all mean? Deeply occupied with these distressing thoughts, Margery was oblivious to the stealthy approach of four sinister fig-

ures worming their way down the slope toward her.

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With a quick crash of gears the automobile started in hot pursuit.

When the Laughing Mask had established a fairly wide margin of safety he slowed down and, leaping from the saddle, ran with quick strides over

the fields toward Seven Oaks hill, looming across the valley. A few moments later the stalwart police captain and his two men came pounding over the same course, but at a somewhat slower and heavier gait.

Far down in those buried chambers under the hill, for which those striving figures were headed, a wolfish-faced man desperately clawed at the pile of rock and debris choking the tunnel.

Suddenly with an exclamation he wriggled through the narrow passage he had effected, and staggered like a drunken man toward the ladder, his scar-ravaged face livid with dread apprehension.

He made his way through the opening and stood confusedly blinking in the bright flood of sunlight. The next moment a running figure bore down upon the outflow from the other side of the rock. There was a sudden impact of colliding bodies and Jules Legar and the Laughing Mask stood in dazed uncertainty, staring into each other's eyes.

By warily evading the menace of that terrible claw of iron, the masked mystery, with a sudden trick of Japanese origin, sent his heavier opponent toppling over backward. Then, before Legar could regain his balance, the Laughing Mask slipped through that still open passage into the bowlder, the panel closing sharply as he stepped on the platform. The next instant Legar found himself face to face with Captain Brackett and the two detectives, who had been hot on the trail of the Laughing Mask.

Before Legar could draw his gun those three heavy and resolute officers avalanched themselves upon him, burying him under their combined weight as he crashed to the ground.

To Margery Golden, still lying on that narrow rocky ledge, expecting every moment an attack from out of the dark, the passing time had seemed like a fearful eternity. She had heard Black Tony creeping about below her in an apparently futile search for his flashlight.

Then came a low cry of triumph and a thin streak of light veiled upon her. She saw the sinister, leering face of the swarthy Italian as he came steadily nearer. She shrank back against the rough wall as a long, tapering knife, clutched in snowy fingers, came reaching toward her. It seemed certain that nothing short of a miracle could save her. But even as the knife was raised to strike, the miracle happened.

The apparently solid wall behind her suddenly gave way and Margery felt herself quickly pulled through an opening by strong, tender arms. She was vaguely conscious of being borne up a ladder and presently a gentle breeze fanned her cheek. When the fresh air had revived her and she became accustomed to daylight she saw the Laughing Mask bending over her.

"I had a feeling up to the very last that you would save me," she murmured gratefully.

"It was lucky I knew about the old ventilating shaft connecting all the galleries in the mine," he modestly replied; "it will be quite safe for you to go home now, for I happen to know that Legar himself is captured and his men have all met the final punishment they so richly deserved."

But Margery fixed a pleading look upon her masked savior.

"Can't you see how I am tortured by this terrible uncertainty," she said in supplicating tones, "if you really love me, you will tell me who you are."

For a moment the Laughing Mask hesitated, then he slowly raised the yellow visor which so long had preserved the secret of his identity. Transfixed with wonder, Margery stood gazing upon the face of her companion. A little cry broke from her lips, a cry that might have signified either joy or sorrow.

(TO BE CONCLUDED.)



He Slowly Raised the Yellow Visor.