

THE IRON CLAW

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"THE WIRE TAPPERS," "GUN RUNNERS," ETC.
NOVELIZED FROM THE PATHE PHOTO PLAY OF THE SAME NAME

TWENTIETH EPISODE

The Laughing Mask's Triumph.

Margery Golden suddenly threw aside the magazine which she had been listlessly thumbing, and springing to her feet, crossed rapidly to the window of her cool, white bedroom. As she stood gazing out with unseeing eyes, a little frown of vexation puckered her forehead. From the open windows of the spacious living-room on the first floor came the subdued murmur of voices. But to Margery's straining ears not a word of that low-toned conference was audible. Occasionally she heard the rumble of Captain Brackett's voice, more strident and authoritative than the others.

The resentful officer of the law had conceived the idea that on more than one occasion Margery had aided and abetted the Laughing Mask in slipping through his fingers, and it was for that reason she was now excluded from the deliberations where the capture of the elusive masquerader was under discussion. In anticipation of this state of affairs Margery had devised the ingenious method for learning the plans of the detectives.

Having ascertained that the conference was in full swing, she quickly went to a small wicker table and, taking off the telephone receiver, held it pressed tightly to her ear. Her wire was a house extension connected with the trunk line which ran into the living-room, where her father and the officers were now gathered. In that room the telephone standard, resting on a heavy mahogany table, had been skillfully tampered with. Presently the booming voice of the police captain came to the ears of the listening girl.

"When I go after a man I don't quit till I get him," she heard him announce in self-laudatory tones. "I landed that one-armed crook, Jules Legar, in a cell all right, an' I tell you, Mr. Golden, if it hadn't been for your daughter interferin' I'd had the bracelets on the Laughing Mask long ago."

At that moment Margery heard the door behind a new arrival, and again it was Captain Brackett's voice which reached her as he impatiently questioned the detective who had just entered.

"What are you doin' here, Walters? Didn't you get the orders I sent you by Jenkins to take Legar out of that chicken-coop they call a jail out here, an' keep yourself handcuffed to him every minute until he was safe in the Tombs?"

"I got your orders, chief," came a hesitating voice, presumably that of the sleuth called Walters, "but I've got some bad news for you, Legar's broke jail. He croaked Jenkins and made a clean getaway."

Then Margery heard the hurried tones of the detective as he launched into an account of the strange escape of Jules Legar.

"I don't see where I'm to blame, chief," he began in a somewhat aggrieved voice. "I seen Jenkins aroun' noon. He was 'savin' into the jail with a tray from the restaurant. He stops



He Knew His Doom Was Sealed.

and gives me your orders and says I ought as well wait outside until Legar had his feed. That seemed reasonable, an' I hung aroun' for 'bout half an hour. Then when Jenkins didn't come out, I commenced to get kind o' uneasy like an' I steps inside to see what was goin' on.

"Lyn' face down in the corridor I found Jenkins, just outside of Legar's cell. The cell was empty, with the door standin' open and Jenkins' key in the lock. We combed every inch o' that cell, but Legar had disappeared. There was a trace behind him

that he was dead, but when I turned him over I got an awful shock. His face was all twisted up with sufferin' and full of deep lines and wrinkles. Then I seen his hair was all streaked with gray. When he spoke to me he was a healthy young feller, but when I found him he was like some old man about 70; what had died of some awful disease. That's about all an' I don't see how."

But Margery did not wait to hear the concluding remarks of the detective, for at this point she abruptly hung up the receiver. Here was news of a startling character which must be imparted to the masked guardian of her safety without loss of time. Without stopping to even catch up a hat, she slipped out of her room and down the stairway. As she tiptoed softly past the living-room, the door suddenly opened and Captain Brackett and Walters stood on the threshold. The stern-faced officer watched the slender girl as she went out of the front door and closed it behind her. Then he turned to his crestfallen subordinate.

"Never mind doin' what I was tellin' you, Walters," he tersely commanded. "I want you to shadow that young woman. Don't lose sight of her for a minute."

So it happened that when Margery Golden paused by the mysterious lone boulder on Seven Oaks Hill a hawk-faced detective was hidden not ten paces distant behind one of the great trees from which the ridge took its name. He saw the girl glance furtively about her, and then from her pursed lips came a low, thrilling call like that of a bird. After a brief interval she repeated this signal, and presently a yellow-masked man came stealthily around the side of the great boulder. The hidden listener caught enough of what Margery Golden was saying to become aware that she was recounting, almost word for word, his own story of the escape of Jules Legar.

"I have a theory of my own as to what was used to kill Jenkins in that fearful manner," the Laughing Mask was saying, "and I am going to find out tonight whether I am right or wrong. Legar's followers have all been wiped out with the exception of a man calling himself Skidmon. He was known as a brilliant scientist until he contracted the drug habit, and then, when he was down and out, he fell in with Legar. He lives in a tumble-down old house at the foot of the blind alley south of Washington square."

At that moment the detective, burning with zeal to make up for the escape of Jules Legar by the sudden capture of the Laughing Mask, suddenly emerged from behind the oak tree and rapidly advanced upon the startled pair. As the Laughing Mask darted around the boulder toward the secret door leading into the subterranean retreat, Margery planted herself directly in the path of the oncoming Walters.

"You've about gone the limit this time, young woman," he snarled as he seized her slender wrist in his powerful grasp, "an' we'll see what the chief thinks of your helpin' that criminal make a getaway."

A little later the burly Walters haled his frail prisoner into the living-room, where her father and the detectives were still gathered. Captain Brackett, fuming with anger, tried his utmost to wring from her the secret of the boulder, but his rapidly volleyed questions failed to break her sphinxlike silence. Finally her loving but sorely tried father looked her in her bedroom to prevent her further interference. Hastily going to her impromptu dictaphone, Margery heard the voice of Walters repeating what the Laughing Mask had said about Skidmon, the last of Legar's henchmen. When he had finished, the blaring tones of Captain Brackett came over the thread of copper.

"Our best move will be to watch the house of this Skidmon," he announced decisively, "an' when our man comes along we'll nab him. If we're playin' in luck we might get Legar in the same dragnet."

As Margery replaced the receiver she realized the Laughing Mask was threatened with grave danger. In some way she must warn him. But there seemed no possibility of escaping from the bedroom. Then a sudden scheme flashed into her mind, which she hastened to put into execution.

To mislead her father she tied the bed sheet to the window sill, and when that gentleman discovered the supposed escape, he ran to the shrubbery beneath the window. Then Margery stole out of the closet and silently went her way in her car.

As Margery paused in front of a dismal old rookery she suddenly perceived in the moonlight a shadowy form mounting steadily upward on the narrow fire-escape ladder. When that stealthy prowler stepped onto the iron platform just outside the lighted window she saw it was the daring masker and realized she was too late to warn him. Before she

could attract his attention he cautiously raised the window and vanished into that house of mystery. But she quietly determined he should not be taken unawares by his enemies and quickly followed.

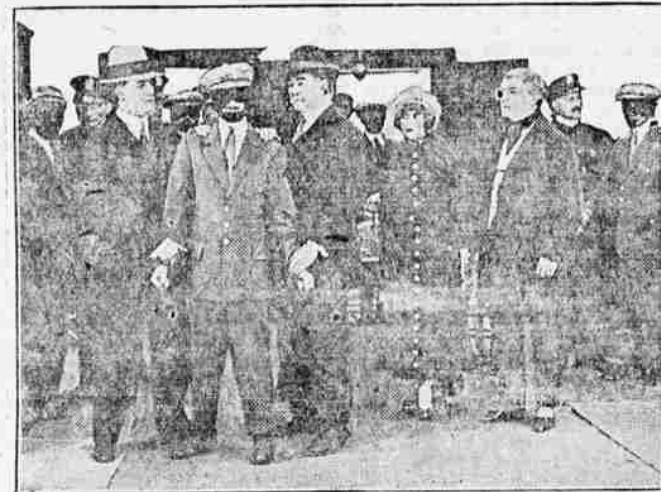
She slipped into the empty bedroom and, warily crossing the floor, stood in spellbound wonder gazing through the open doorway. Backed up against a bench stood the tense figure of a middle-aged man with drooping eyelids and the pasty gray complexion that betrayed the habitual use of some noxious drug.

He had apparently been interrupted in the midst of his investigations, for on the bench, just behind him, was some object protected from the light by a strip of thin toweling, a long platinum needle used in extracting germ colonies from their cultures, a compound microscope and an open notebook for recording the result of his labors. Facing the intimidated drug fiend stood the Laughing Mask.

"My patience is about exhausted, Skidmon," he said to the man shrinking back against the bench, "and unless you write that confession clearing me of those crimes committed by Legar with your devilish assistance, I am going to shoot you through the head with as little compunction as though you were a mad dog. Your terrible poisons have been responsible for more than one unsolved murder and society will be well rid of you."

This convincing threat had the desired effect, for the stoop-shouldered chemist moved sullenly toward a small writing desk standing near the window. As his reluctant pen traveled slowly over a sheet of foolscap, the Laughing Mask stood looking over his shoulder, prompting the other's delinquent memory with an occasional quiet word and the insistent menace of that ever-ready revolver. The details of those abhorrent crimes, committed in cold blood by Legar for the sole purpose of setting the police upon his enemy, had practically been completed when a shrill penetrating whistle sounded from the alley.

The Laughing Mask turned quickly to the nearby window and, throwing back the shutters, leaned out and



In the Grasp of the Detectives Were No Less Than Four Laughing Masks.

strove to ascertain the meaning of that foreboding signal. For a moment only he relaxed his guard over the crafty poisoner, but that moment gave to Skidmon the chance he had been seeking. Before the startled girl, watching through the doorway, could cry out a word of warning, he launched himself upon the half-blind figure leaning out of the open window.

Caught at a decided disadvantage and unable to use his weapon, the Laughing Mask suddenly lost his balance, and, grasping wildly at the empty air, plunged headlong from the window down into the abyssal darkness.

He seemed doomed to sure destruction, but fate decreed the springy branch of an elm tree should catch that hurtling body, and the force of his fall was broken when, limp and unconscious, he dropped a second later onto the stone flagging by the cellar doorway.

As the moon seined across the star-strewn heavens its pale light disclosed the still form of the unconscious Laughing Mask lying under the laboratory window from which the infuriated scientist had flung him. A one-armed man, who came slinking out of the shadows, saw the inert figure and bent over it with a savage exclamation of triumph. He glanced furtively about him, and, throwing back the bulkhead doors leading into the cellar, backed down the short flight of steps, dragging the Laughing Mask after him, like a spider dragging a fly into some dark recess.

Legar seemed strangely at home in his dark and gloomy surroundings, for after letting the Laughing Mask drop heavily to the cement flooring, his groping fingers quickly found a battered lantern hanging from a rusty hook. This feeble illumination showed the cellar to be piled with all sorts of discarded household furniture, including a pile of worn-out carpeting near where the masked man was lying. As Legar bent over the helpless figure a faint noise came from the stairway leading to the floor above. He instantly straightened up and made a search for the noises.

From under the pile of carpeting two pairs of long arms suddenly stretched out toward the silent form of the Laughing Mask, and, quickly seizing him by the feet and shoulders, dragged him under the frayed folds of that ancient floor covering. When the scared outlaw gave up his fruitless search and returned to the place where he had left the Laugh-

ing Mask, with the full intention of dispatching that sworn enemy with his own hands, he gave a gasp of incredulous amazement as it dawned upon him that his intended victim had completely disappeared.

It flashed into his mind that the Laughing Mask might have recovered sufficiently to have crawled up the short flight of cellar steps, and, hurrying outside, he commenced a systematic search of the dark corners where a man in desperate straits might endeavor to hide. He had hardly left the cellar when the pile of threadbare carpet showed signs of sudden agitation, and, in obedience to certain commands issued in painfully broken whispers, two spectral figures emerged from under that singular refuge and glided toward the stairway leading to the upper story, where the laboratory was located.

In that laboratory the wide-eyed Margery Golden was searching the littered work bench, hoping to find something to incriminate the venomous Skidmon. She did not venture to touch the glittering instruments, but turned her attention to the object which was hidden under the thin strip of toweling. When, after a little hesitation, she gingerly raised that flimsy covering, she saw a thin glass vessel bearing a printed label and half filled with a gelatinous substance. She stooped and read from the label the words "Colon Bacilli," but that did not convey to her that in the nutrient medium contained in that Petri dish was a culture growth alive with millions of malignant germs. Hoping to find some more tangible clue, she replaced the towel and picked up the open notebook lying near the microscope. Her face went white with the horror of the thing as she deciphered the cramped entries:

May 13—Emberich has advanced the theory that old age is brought about in large part by the weakened resistance of the subject to the ravages of the bacillus coli, colonies of which invariably infest the digestive tract of every person even though in normal health. The activity and number of these bacilli vastly increase with advancing age, causing a form of auto-



intoxication and a subsequent hardening of the arteries due to increased blood pressure, and other symptoms of general structural decay. It would seem probable that from a sufficiently large colony of colon bacilli a virulent toxic poison might be extracted, which, administered even in minute quantities, should almost immediately attack the tissues and destroy the subject with all the indications of death from extreme old age. Such a poison, apparently unknown to science, and already present in less malignant form in every human system, would be extremely baffling in the event of an autopsy. I shall immediately start experimenting along these lines.

May 15—The colony of colon bacilli which I started in a gelatin culture medium is multiplying rapidly. Flourishes best at blood heat—destroyed at temperature of 60 degrees Centigrade. The change in color from grayish white to brown should indicate an increase in virulence and pathogenic qualities.

May 17—Inoculated guinea pig with bacilli poison—died instantly; body shrunk and withered; much encouraged.

May 20—Discovery has just been put to a gratifying practical test—managed to get a needle infected with the bacilli extract to Legar who had been captured and confined in prison. Legar has just communicated with me. He succeeded in scratching his jailer with the contaminated needle, and the man was seized immediately with convulsions and died in two or three minutes with all the symptoms to be expected. Legar regained his liberty, and now wishes to destroy an entire family named Golden. I will prepare minute capsules which will keep the bacilli alive and—

And as with a shudder Margery came to the last unfinished and cold-blooded entry she heard Skidmon rapidly approaching the door. Thrusting the incriminating journal into her dress, she quickly stole into the back room, where she could watch the laboratory without being observed herself. She saw the unnerved bacteriologist hurriedly drag a battered trunk from a dark and cavernous closet. As he threw an uneasy glance toward the door leading into the hall his face suddenly froze into an expression of abject terror.

Advancing from the doorway came a figure with features cloaked by a mocking yellow mask. This startling apparition deliberately aimed a black

automatic at the terrified scientist and with his left hand silently pointed to the desk where lay the unfinished confession. Skidmon faltered toward the desk in obedience.

But his intelligent mind worked quickly, and by the time he had affixed his name to that document vindictive against the fugitive from Legar's atrocious crimes he had banished the fears which this supernatural resurrection had caused him and determined on a course of action. Rising from the desk he approached the Laughing Mask, who was standing near the open closet with his ready weapon in his hand. Skidmon held out the signed confession, but before the other could take it the paper, with seeming inadvertence, slipped from the fingers of the scientist and fluttered to the floor. As he stooped to regain it he suddenly hurled his weight against the legs of his unsuspecting enemy with a force that sent him toppling over backward into the depths of the closet, and before the Laughing Mask could regain his footing the door had been swung shut and bolted.

Margery, from her place of concealment, saw the loose-tipped malefactor make a motion as though to destroy the confession, but he suddenly grew rigid as though gripped again by the hand of fear. Following the direction in which his eyes were staring, she saw the reason for his trepidation. A figure masked in the identical manner as the man just imprisoned in the closet came slowly through the hall doorway.

"It would be foolish to tear up that little document," he said in tones of grim determination, "for you would have to write it over. As it is rather essential to my welfare, I'll trouble you to hand it to me."

But instead of complying with this demand the dazed and panic-stricken analyst backed slowly away from that terrifying specter. His retreat was suddenly checked by the laboratory work bench, on which he heavily dropped a trembling hand to steady himself. As he did so there came a sharp sound of breaking glass and, with an abrupt cry of pain, he flung up his deeply gashed hand, splashed with blood and a thick ooze of gelatinous matter. He turned and saw the splintered pieces of the fragile vessel which had contained the colon bacilli culture. A dull moan of horror came from his blue lips as he realized he was hopelessly inoculated with the deadly virus.

In wild desperation he caught up the towel from the work bench and scrubbed the smear of blood and sticky substance from his open wound. But the strip of linen dropped from his nerveless fingers as a series of convulsive tremors shook his tortured body. Then his knees gave way under him and he slowly sank upon the floor, and after several jerky spasms his pain-racked form was stilled in death.

Overcome by the sight of that gruesome tragedy, Margery stood rooted to the floor, inarticulate and trembling. She saw the Laughing Mask pick up the confession and go out of the laboratory toward the stairway. Still holding the revolver, he descended to the cellar with the air of a man whose mission is but half finished. Even as he hastily coaxed himself back of the piles of carpet he heard Legar returning from his futile search of the premises. That puzzled worker of iniquity suddenly found himself looking into a revolver held by the Laughing Mask, who had stepped out of the shadows.

Realizing he had been outwitted and that resistance was useless, Legar raised his arms above his head in obedience to the curt command of the other. But the evil genius was not slumbering, and as his lifted right hand came in contact with a large earthen flower pot standing on a shelf above him he grasped that heavy object and hurled it with all his strength full in the face of his masked opponent.

That crashing and unexpected blow accomplished its purpose, for the Laughing Mask dropped in a motionless heap as though he had been struck by a bullet. The one-armed man, bending over his apparently lifeless enemy, saw a paper protruding from the inner pocket of his coat. As he glanced at it by the sickly light of the lantern he realized its purpose, and hurried up the stairs to call Skidmon to account for disclosing his guilty secrets.

The first door he opened proved to be that of a small butler's pantry, and by the flickering light of the match he saw in the gloomy compartment a statue-like form standing with folded arms. The silently accusing figure wore a yellow mask. With a half-strangled oath he dropped the glowing match and slammed the door on that masked apparition.

He raced up the stairs to the third story landing, where he paused to regain his breath before entering the laboratory of his traitorous henchman. He suddenly recoiled as though struck a blow. Down the narrow passage came the Laughing Mask.

For a moment the terrorized malefactor cowered against the rickety banisters. Then, as that dread figure came nearer, he wheeled about and steadily mounting up to meet him came another figure with its face also covered by a cynically smiling yellow mask. The despairing criminal turned and fled toward the attic, but standing motionless at the top of that flight of stairs was still another yellow-hooded figure. Like some fear-crazed animal, Legar rushed blindly through the laboratory doorway. Skidmon's body lay where it had fallen, and as Legar's eye fell on that ghastly and

distorted face he gave a sobbing moan of fear.

As he glanced toward the hall doorway he saw his escape was cut off in that direction, for standing on the threshold was a quietly waiting Laughing Mask. He threw open the door leading into the chamber where Skidmon had been engaged in packing his effects, but stationed in the center of that room was a forbidding form wearing a yellow visor. As Legar backed away from that hateful vision he tripped over the body of the dead scientist and fell heavily, striking his forehead a sharp blow against the edge of the laboratory bench. He slowly got to his feet, pressing his hand in a dazed manner against his injured temple, from which a little crimson stream was trickling down into his eyes.

Catching up the towel which had covered the glass vessel broken by Skidmon, he mopped the blood from his eyes, and the jagged wound on his forehead. Then as he felt a clammy moisture on his fevered skin he hastily examined the towel and saw it was smeared with a substance resembling a crushed jelly fish. He saw none of that gelatinous matter on the bench and quickly picked out of it a piece of broken glass bearing a printed label. As he read the words, Colon Bacilli, he knew his doom was sealed.

With distended eyes and foam-flecked lips he suddenly pitched headlong to the floor, where he lay writhing and twisting like a soul in torment. As the relentless poison ate into his vitals his convulsive struggles weakened, and death stilled forever his thrashing iron claw.

Then the shuddering girl became conscious that the Laughing Mask was standing near, and as he stooped and took the confession from the stiffening fingers of the dead criminal she saw his yellow visor was torn and splashed with blood.

Suddenly there resounded through the quiet house the sound of crashing blows delivered upon the front door, followed a moment later by heavily pounding feet as the raiding detectives, headed by Captain Brackett, came storming up the stairs. Presently with Enoch Golden and the heavy-jawed captain in the lead they came crowding into the room where he and Margery were waiting. In the grasp of those agitated detectives were no less than four Laughing Masks, each one an exact counterpart of the other.

The detectives tore the yellow coverings of their prisoners and disclosed the straightforward and unfamiliar features of four young men of about the same age as David Manley. With a puzzled exclamation the police captain approached the remaining Laughing Mask standing by the side of Margery Golden. That man of mystery silently extended Skidmon's confession to the police captain, who glanced hastily through it.

"Well, I guess that lets you off," he muttered with evident disappointment, "but now you're clear of the law, what's the use of hidin' under that mask?"

With a quick and decisive movement the Laughing Mask stripped off that grotesquely smiling piece of yellow cambric, revealing the handsome and boyish face of the young secretary, David Manley.

"Now that Legar is dead, my disguise has served its purpose," he explained in quiet tones, as he glanced around that circle of intent listeners. "He knew I would try to protect my employer and his daughter from his evil purpose of revenge, and by acting in a double role I was able to fight him to better advantage. I finally organized four of my friends into a sort of secret order of Laughing Masks, but they always kept in



The Laughing Mask Stood Looking Over His Shoulder.

the background except on one or two pressing occasions. Miss Wilkins, my stepsister, made our masks, and we used her garden as a meeting place. Miss Golden has known all this since we worked Legar in the coal mine, and I think she will join me in inviting you all to come to a little affair which is going to be held in a church in the very near future."

As Margery turned away to hide her fears and her blushes, her father warmly grasped his former secretary's hand, and after a moment the solemn red face of Captain Brackett slowly cracked into a sheepish grin as he extended his beefy paw to David Manley, alias the Laughing Mask.

(THE END.)