

The Iron Claw

[Read this story in the Palladium and see it at the Palace.]

Side by side with a Flemish nun walked a Paris Apache, then came a Montenegrin peasant and a flowing-robed Oriental Swami, then a red-sashed pirate and a velvet clad Venetian Doge. Then, following a man on "lifters," who laughingly proclaimed himself to be Hully Gee, the Chinese Giant, came an equally tall figure in a gold-braided Arabian burnoose. This figure, for all its height, was strangely stoop-shouldered, moving with a dignity of step which went well with the voluminous drapery in which it was clad. And Manley watched closely as this stately Arabian chieftain, bowing gravely to Golden, reached out two ungloved hands to greet the two hands which his host extended to him. About these hands he saw at a glance, there could be nothing doubtful.

But Manley had little time to give further thought to the scene, for at that moment he became aware of the fact that Da Espares had slipped away to another part of the house—and during that night, Manley had determined he would keep an eye on his enigmatic foreign friend. But instead of following Da Espares, on discovering him stepping quietly into the deserted library, the alert-eyed young secretary promptly retreated to the quarter where the receiver of his dictaphone was concealed. There, on placing this watch-case receiver to his ear, Manley had the satisfaction of catching the faint hum of voices. Much of that guarded talk taking place in the library Manley could not overhear. But he caught enough to arouse his curiosity.

"Then the plan was worked?" asked the anxious voice of Da Espares.

"Without a hitch," answered the other voice. "The girders have been cut through and the bomb placed."

"And the clock fuse adjusted?"

"Yes."

"But what was it set for?"

"For the stroke of twelve!" answered the unknown voice. "By that time the crowd will be at the table, eating."

"But how," asked the anxious voice of Da Espares, "could we get Legar inside?"

The sound of a triumphantly quiet laugh came over the little instrument.

"Legar is already here!" announced the other.

"Hush! Not so loud!" warned Da Espares. And from that point on it was only broken phrases that trickled into the hidden listener's ear.

"Come as an Arab chief. . . . Nicchia the Dago acrobat on his back. . . . yes, under cloak. . . . could hold out both hands. . . . and never even suspected. . . . being watched. . . . can't afford to lose this time!"

Again came the sound of the quietly triumphant laugh. And it was Da Espares' voice that sounded clearly the next moment.

"But how did he work that bridge fall?"

"Long dive. . . . came up under a lumber schooner's stern and hung to rudder chain. . . . down with tide. . . . an hour later. . . . swam ashore. . . . launch to Oyster Joe's!"

Manley did not wait for more. Midnight, he knew, was already too perilously close for half measures. By the time he reached the upper floor, in fact, he found Enoch Golden already heading the grand march to the great table running almost the full length of the huge room opening off the conservatory. The next moment he saw Da Espares himself step hurriedly, yet smilingly to the side of Margery Golden and take their places in that gayly-colored line that rippled with laughter and movement as the orchestra once more struck up. Then, remembering what he had overheard about mysteriously weakened girders and planted bombs, Manley likewise remembered the newly installed vault and the fact that Legar's final object was the possession of a certain paper which that vault held. And he slipped out through the door, and on through the empty conservatory, frantically wondering just what his first move to avert that impending catastrophe should be.

The figure which intervened in that crisis, however, was a much more picturesque one than the slight figure of a young private secretary in somewhat disheveled evening clothes. For what the merriment about the great crowded table was at its height an unexpected and uninvited guest strode in

through the wide door and confronted the company there assembled. This figure wore a dust-stained motor coat and cap. But the most conspicuous feature of his attire was the yellow mask which covered his face. Equally conspicuous was the huge blue-barreled revolver which he firmly held in his right hand. This weapon, in fact, glinted menacingly in the strong light as the stranger's left hand was suddenly lifted for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he proclaimed in a clear voice, "this intrusion, I fear, may shock you. But you are about to be shocked in a much more serious way. On the stroke of twelve there is to be an accident here, perhaps something much graver than an accident, in which it is my great desire that you should not participate! So I must ask each and every one of you to leave this room, and this house, as quietly yet as quickly as possible! Every one," repeated that authoritative-voiced intruder as Da Espares and the tall man in the Arabian burnoose rose to their feet, "except these two gentlemen here."

Out of the silence that ensued on that declaration arose a small murmur of wonder, a stir of nervousness, and one shrill laugh from a woman holding a wine glass. Then Enoch Golden himself called out an angry exhortation, followed by a sharp word or two of command. But the company had already risen. For the masked stranger, stepping still closer to Da Espares and the figure in the flowing burnoose, had coolly intercepted them as they moved in unison towards a side door.

"Get back, both of you," the clear voice behind the yellow mask had called out, "or before God I'll shoot you down where you stand!"

That sudden threat of violence was the spring which released the tension. There were mingled shouts of resentment and fear, followed by a quick and unreasoning rush for the door, couriers and nuns and peasants and Apaches and Geisha girls in contending flurry of flurry and frightened faces.

For a minute or two the master of the house struggled in vain to stop them. Then his attention was directed towards the Laughing Mask, for the latter, advancing with a quick stride to the man in the burnoose, jerked aside that flowing garment and revealed Legar himself, Legar with a sinisterly seared face and an iron claw at the end of his right arm. And the same moment that this movement was taking place, Da Espares himself, with his eyes always on the Laughing Mask, stole quick step by step towards the door on his left. He had reached that door before his enemy detected him.

The man with the revolver wheeled about and fired as the Spanish knight in silk and lace dived through the opening. Legar, seeing his chance in that division of interest, charged boldly through the damask-laden table, scattering silver and glass and flowers as he went. In another breath he had reached the conservatory, where, a second or two later, his iron-shod arm could be heard flailing through the fragile barrier of glass between him and the outer world. And by the time Enoch Golden reached the spot his enemy had vanished.

Yet in almost the same breath the Laughing Mask had leaped in the opposite direction, in pursuit of the fleeing Da Espares. But that flight, wherever it led or might have led, was interrupted by a sudden detonation that shook the great house to its foundation. There was a roar of falling girders, the splintering of wood, the rumble of a great avalanche, as a seven-ton steel vault, deprived of its supports, crashed down through the flimsy flooring, carrying dust and debris and tumbling pieces of household furniture as it went. Nor did that massive thing of metal stop until it bedded itself in the broken cement flooring of the cellar below. Then above the rattle of falling plaster and echoing showers of scattering bric-a-brac rose the quick cry of human voices calling for help.

[To Be Continued.]

DRINKS BARREL A WEEK.

MUNCIE, Ind., Sept. 1.—Romeo Smith testified that although a barrel of beer was being shipped to his house once a week he was not running a blind tiger. He said the beer was for his own consumption.

The Sandman Story For Tonight

It was cold, rainy and the water dripped down through the roof on the bare floor, where the mother lay ill with two sick children in the bed at her side. Olga, the eldest girl, was busy trying to cook a bit of porridge on a few chips. After ten minutes' work she gave the mother a bowl of steaming gruel, swept the floor and, covering up the sick carefully, put her shawl around her head.

"I am going out to get some rushes and weave a couple of baskets," she said. "For I am sure that I can sell them for a good price at the Easter market. Do not worry; sleep till I come back, and all will be well."

Olga hurried down to the bank of the stream, and was about to get an armful of rushes when she spied, far out in the marsh, some beautiful rushes of an unusual color. They were tall and straight, and of a bright, glossy green.

"I will get those," said Olga, aloud. "They are so exquisite that a basket made of them would sell for a big price. It is muddy and wet, but then—how nice to earn the money for mother."

Out into the cold, wet mire she plunged, and floundered about for a long time before she reached the dry spot on which grew a large field of the lovely rushes. Just as she was about to cut down a bunch there sprang out of a hole in the ground a tiny brown dwarf, whose white beard touched his knees.

"What right have you to steal my rushes?" he demanded in an angry voice.

"Oh! pardon, sir," exclaimed Olga. "I did not know anyone owned them. I was trying to get some pretty ones, in order to make a few Easter baskets to sell to get money for my mother, who is sick. But I would not have come for these had I known they were yours."

When the dwarf heard Olga's sad story he smiled, for he really was a kind soul.

"That's all right, little girl," he said, gently. "I have far more than I need. Some of these rushes are very peculiar, and have a habit of playing tricks on people, but on kind ones it is always a pleasant one. Take all you wish; you are welcome."

And the good little dwarf helped Olga bind together a large bundle of the pretty rushes.

It was growing cold by this time, and the girl started home. The wind blew, and the rain turned into snow. Then the bundle on her back seemed to grow heavier every moment. Stumbling at every step, she crept slowly home, and was glad to fall, almost exhausted, at the door. Warming up the tea and feeding the two sick children with bread and milk, Olga then lighted the lamp and set about weaving the baskets.

She took up the rushes and laid them over on the table, but she found they

were so heavy she could hardly stand up under the burden.

"I must be getting ill," she said to herself. "And who will wait on mother then? I must work, and not give up."

So she tried to bend the rush, but it would not bend. It was hard and cold and stiff.

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Olga, bursting into tears. "The rushes are no good, and all my work was for nothing—I can make no baskets."

Just then one of the logs on the hearth broke into a bright flame that lighted up the room in a brilliant glow.

"Why, Olga, child; these rushes are of the purest gold," cried the mother, in surprise. "The good dwarf has rewarded your own goodness."

And they were—every one of the big bundle of rushes was a long, shining rod of gold. There was enough to sell for a big sum, and with it Olga made her mother and family comfortable for life. But never did they forget the brown dwarf, who had brought them such good luck.

Tomorrow's story—"How Beasts Saved Bobby."

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FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC:

The Railroads' statement of their position on the threatened strike, as presented to the President of the United States

A strike on all the railroads of the country has been called by the Train Brotherhoods for 7 o'clock Monday morning, September 4.

This strike was ordered from Washington while the President of the United States was making every effort to avert the disaster.

The Final Railroad Proposal

The final proposal made by the railroads for a peaceful settlement of the controversy, but which was rejected by the brotherhoods, was as follows:

(a) The railroads will, effective September 1, 1916, keep the time of all men represented in this movement, upon an 8 hour basis and by separate account, monthly, with each man, maintain a record of the difference between the money actually earned by him on the present basis and the amount that would have been earned upon an 8 hour basis—overtime on each basis to be computed pro rata.

The amounts so shown will be subject to the decision of the Commission, provided for in Paragraph (c) of this memorandum and payable in money, as may be directed by said Commission in its findings and decision.

(b) The Interstate Commerce Commission to supervise the keeping of these accounts and report the increased cost of the 8 hour basis, after such period of