

# THE "IRON HOUSE"

By Willis Emery, Copyright, 1905, by Charles B. Etherington.

I HAD spent the evening at a theater with my clients, Mrs. Desborough and her daughter, and we had tried, with fair success, to exclude from our conversation all reference to the very thrilling drama of real life in which we three were cast for leading roles. Miss Desborough, indeed, seemed to shake her mind free of it with ease and heartily to enjoy the play upon the stage, but there were long intervals when I beheld the actors with no comprehension of what they were



IT WAS MY PARTNER, JOHN HAMMOND.

about, and it was the same with the elder of my companions. Often I was aware that she shuddered and started as if waking from no pleasant dream. Then I knew that she had been thinking of our adversary, Richard Stendhall, whom she feared with the simplicity of superstition as though he were the devil. Sometimes in such moments she would cast a quick glance at me as if I were her sole reliance in this just contention.

Upon the whole, it was a highly emotional evening for me and for this reason keenly delightful.

When I had parted from Mrs. Desborough and pretty Miss Alice after a bit of supper it was past midnight, mild, clear and with a growing moon now falling toward the west. I was in no mood for sleep. My mind refreshed itself upon its own delight, and so it happened that I took a long detour to pass by Stendhall's home—the "Iron House," as it is called, because of the abundance of that strong metal in and around it.

There is a tall iron fence upon the avenue side, and the black arch over the great gate rises twenty feet at least. The cumbersome bolts were almost on a level with my eyes. The upright bars which I took hold upon were bigger than my hands could clasp. This formidable structure, seemingly designed for giants, dwarfed me in body, yet enlarged my spirit, for in the dark mass of that great house there was a single lighted window in the second story, and I believed that Stendhall burned his lamp so late to seek for refuge against my attack.

This was by no means the first time I had stood before his gate. His house, so ponderously defended, the courtyard always deserted by day and crowded with black shadows by night, had exercised a strong fascination upon my mind long before I dreamed that the man himself would ever be more than a name to me. His home fitted him so well! His iron hardness of heart, his long defiance of the law, his incredible wealth locked up in steel behind the doors of banks, the mystery of his ways—these and many other images I had enjoyed years ago, when the scene was new to me and Stendhall charmed my fancy as a type of the most monstrous product of our era, the throned brigand of industry.

The broad window whence came the light in a wavering tracery around the edges of the curtain had once been pointed out to me as belonging to the room where Stendhall received the most intimate of his visitors and concocted his most intricate conspiracies. He, indeed, formed many alliances and seemed to have no need of caution, distrustful of all men, but fearing none, scorning treachery, often betrayed, yet never to his hurt.

As I watched, the light was slowly lowered. Frugal Stendhall, being about to leave the room for a little while, had turned down the gas. Presently I saw a gleam through a panel of stained glass upon a stairway. Then the door of the house was opened and two men appeared. They were no more than shadows under the overhanging, heavy roof of the stone pillared portico, yet one of them was so tall that it must be Stendhall. The other disclosed no recognizable characteristic. They walked slowly along the portico, which ended at the wall of an adjoining building. For perhaps two minutes they were invisible to me. Then Stendhall returned alone and entered the house.

What had become of the other man?

It was an interesting puzzle, but one that I despaired of solving. I continued to stare idly at the house until Stendhall had turned up the light in his room. Then I abandoned my position and faced toward home. At the corner of the next cross street I looked westward, attracted by the brightness of the moon, and so I chanced to see a man coming out of a house upon that street—the third from the corner. It was my partner, John Hammond.

If his manner had been ordinary I should have followed and hailed him, but he was so obviously daunted by the brilliancy of the night and made such haste to pull his hat down so that the shadow of its brim might shield his face that I was thrilled with a sudden monstrous suspicion, and I let him go upon his way.

It seems certain that some revelation must have come to me before in order that I should have been prepared to condemn Hammond upon such evidence. There was merely the physical possibility that a secret passage might lead from Stendhall's portico to this house upon the street below, and yet my mind would never have accepted so readily the suggestion of my partner's treachery unless unnoticed hints of its inception had been accumulating in the remoter regions of my brain during the past month of our joint labors with the Desborough case.

In the succeeding portion of the night I slept little and thought much, and as a result of it all I went next morning at the earliest possible moment to the Central Safe Deposit vaults, where we kept certain documents of capital importance to our affairs. Among them was the original contract drawn nearly twenty years ago between Clarence Desborough and Richard Stendhall, whereby the former ceded a part of the control of his business to the latter. A dozen other men in the same field of industry had committed a similar indiscretion, and then Stendhall had executed the first grand coup of the career which raised him to such heights of wealth and power. How it was done has never been disclosed—probably by a trick as simple as the commonest sleight of hand. The salient fact is that Stendhall began at once to arrogate to himself powers not delegated in these agreements, and when the victims perceived his intent and turned to study their contracts not one of those documents could be found. Then began interminable lawsuits, marked by incredible scandals, disgracing many courts, but Stendhall's grip upon that industry which he had planned to seize grew always tighter. Some of his opponents became his tools and waxed rich; others were ruined. Two succumbed to the stress of the unequal battle and died insane. One of these was Clarence Desborough.

By what means the Desborough contract escaped destruction I do not know, but it was offered to the widow by a wretched creature who had long served Stendhall and had been discarded. My partner, Hammond, had just formed the acquaintance of the Desboroughs and had lost his heart to Alice, who was never in the least attracted toward him. The affair was put into his hands. I naturally took part in the investigation which followed. We satisfied ourselves of the genuineness and importance of the document and advanced to Mrs. Desborough the moderate price demanded. Its value was in the millions, but the man who sold it cared little for money, knowing himself to be on the brink of the grave.

If Hammond was to play us false this document would be the nucleus of his treachery, and jealousy rather than money the true motive. He fancied that I had displaced him with Alice, but this was impossible for the reason which I have stated. Indeed, no one knew this better than he did in his calmer moments, but jealousy is a kind of madness.

Supposing him to have had a treasonable interview with Stendhall, there was a fair probability that the contract had been exhibited, and with this thought in mind I went to the safe deposit box that morning. The result seemed to justify my suspicions, for the precious document was not there.

I took post in a convenient doorway and within ten minutes saw Hammond enter the Central company's vaults. When he had gone away again I re-examined our drawer. The contract was in its proper place.

My plan was already formed. It would have involved a hazardous repossession of confidence except for one fortunate circumstance—the man whom I must trust was my own father. He was a manufacturer of the costlier kinds of paper and imperishable parchments and an expert in inks and signatures and all details that mark the authenticity or expose the fraudulency of documents. It was upon his opinion that we had chiefly relied in the matter of the genuineness of the Desborough contract. It was to him I now carried it with the singular request that he should prepare for me the best possible forgery.

During the time necessary for this work Hammond once visited the safety deposit box and missed the document, but I satisfied him with the falsehood that it had been in my possession. On the evening of the same day my father laid two copies of the Desborough contract before me and asked me to judge between them; but, though I had learned many secrets from him, I could not

distinguish the new from the old.

After I had substituted the false for the genuine contract it was necessary only for me to visit the Central's vaults at the close of every day. When Hammond should be ready to consummate his corrupt bargain I could not fail to know.

It fell upon a Saturday, and at midnight I followed Hammond to the house upon the cross street whence I had seen him emerge, as I have described. I was dressed in shabby clothes and disguised as an old man with a white wig and beard. When Hammond entered the suspected house I was quite close to him, and I observed that he gave no summons. There was no visible attendant. The door seemed to open of itself, and I observed a similar phenomenon a few minutes later when a shadowy form which I could not doubt to be Hammond's passed along the dim arcade to the unlighted portal of Stendhall's residence.

Immediately an almost insane curiosity took hold upon me. My desire to see the meeting between Stendhall and Hammond was so strong that it relieved me of the necessity of planning. I proceeded upon pure animal instinct.

It was no great feat to climb the iron fence, but I will not describe, and, indeed, shall never clearly know, how I scaled the side of Stendhall's house. Once at the window, my difficulties were over. There were a fair footing and a hold for my hands, but I could see nothing. The window was a little way open, and the draft was outward, so that the curtain's edges seemed glued to the casing. My excitement was maddening, and the minutes were endless. Then suddenly the current of air changed. The curtains swung some inches inward, and I could see into the room.

Stendhall stood with his back toward me, looking across a broad table to the door, which an ill favored fellow who seemed to be a servant had just opened. There was a folded paper in his hand. He advanced and gave it to Stendhall, who glanced at it and nodded several times. The servant withdrew, and not a word had been spoken upon either side.

I slid down from my perch without a thought for my neck, ran round inside the yard to the front door and pressed the electric button. Upon the front of the house had a conventional and inhabited look. I expected a prompt response to my ring. Instead there was a long wait, during which I had a strange sense of being scrutinized by hidden eyes.

Upon the farther side of Stendhall's house there was a carriage way closed by heavy gates, which suddenly were rolled aside. A closed carriage rolled out into the road, and I thought I heard a muffled cry from within it. Clearly they were taking Hammond away, having robbed and gagged him. What further violence was meditated I knew not, but a strange survival of loyalty to this traitor swept over me, and I ran to his relief.

Through many dark streets I pursued the vehicle, and at last it stopped beside the curb. I ran up to it and wrenched open the door. The coachman upon the box remained absolutely motionless, paying no attention to me. The carriage was empty. I had been neatly tricked.

It was useless to return to Stendhall's, and upon a chance I went to the house in which my partner had his rooms. I had removed the wig and beard. The attendant at the outer door knew me and stared at my shabby attire. Mr. Hammond, he said, had just returned. I went to his apartment and knocked, and he answered in a hoarse voice, "Who's there?"

"Let me in," I called. "I must see you at once."

There was a brief silence and then a loud, sharp sound. I set my hand to



HE LAY DEAD AT MY FEET.

the door and found it unlocked, but obstructed by the body of the man who for so many years I had called my friend. He lay dead at my feet, a revolver upon the floor beside him.

I learned subsequently that he had received a blow upon the head, doubtless in Stendhall's house, and that he had been found wandering in the streets not far away. While being led home he had recovered and had insisted upon going on alone.

By no exercise of ingenuity or patience or use of such influence as I could command have I ever been able to involve Stendhall in any criminal transaction for this affair. The secrets

of his house were undiscoverable beyond my own evidence as to Hammond's entry by the private way could offer nothing. That did not prove the manner of the assault upon him. When Stendhall found that he had taken a worthless document from Hammond he offered a satisfactory settlement of the Desborough suit, and with that I was forced to be content. The facts about Hammond found their way into print, but that they frightened or even annoyed Stendhall in the slightest degree I cannot give myself the pleasure of supposing, but I know upon excellent authority that the trick of the forged contract cut him to the marrow.

### CAPTAIN EXAMINED

Tells How Accident to the Steamer Roanoke Occurred.

San Francisco, Dec. 12.—Captain Dunham and other officers of the steamer Roanoke who were imperilled by an accident on the Eureka bar November 27, came before Captain's Bolles and Bulger today to explain the accident. Dunham said when he neared the entrance

to the roadstead at Eureka he could see the bar breaking heavily, but that is the usual state of affairs in rough weather. He did not feel that he was imperiling his ship by trying a passage. Just as the vessel made the crossing, he said, a wave struck them that wrecked the rudder. He considered he had more of a chance at sea than in the rough water near shore and backed the ship outside.

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