

THE IRON CLAW

by ARTHUR STRINGER

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

SYNOPSIS.

On Windward Island Palidori 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. Palidori 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, whence she is recaptured. Margery's mother fruitlessly implores Golden to find their daughter. The Laughing Mask again takes Margery away from Legar. Legar sends to Golden a warning and a demand for a portion of the chart of Windward Island. Margery meets her mother. The chart is lost in a fight between Manley and one of Legar's henchmen, but is recovered by the Laughing Mask. Count Da 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 Da 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 Manley'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 O'Mara cottage is frustrated in the nick of time.

THIRTEENTH EPISODE

The Hidden Face.

Enoch Golden looked at the heavy shadows about his daughter's eyes. Then he seated himself heavily in the arm-chair which he had so abstractedly turned about for him.

"Margery," he said with an effort at sternness, "are you still worrying about that young Manley?"

For a moment or two the girl remained silent.

"I can't help it, father," she finally acknowledged. And she further discomfited her frowning parent by a suspicion of tears in her downcast eyes.

"But I don't believe David Manley is any more dead than I am!" the old millionaire finally and stoutly asseverated.

"Then why has there been no word of him, no trace of him, since the night of that awful explosion?"

This question, apparently, was not an easy one to answer. But Enoch Golden was not to be lightly dissuaded from his task of consolation. "I'll tell you what I believe, my girl. I believe everything's all right, no matter what you think. Everything's going to come out all right. Before the week is out, if what the police tell me is true, we're going to have this man Legar safe behind the prison bars where he belongs. What's troubling me more than David Manley, just now, is the problem of this Laughing Mask person. I had nothing less than a deputy commissioner call me up this morning, for the authorities down in Center street are convinced of the fact this Laughing Mask would be a better haul than even Legar himself. They claim to have a clear record against him, and in ten minutes I've got to face a delegation from the detective bureau and tell them for the twentieth time just how



Beside the Door Was the Figure of a Young Woman.

much, or rather, how little, I know about that mysterious stranger!"

Later in her room Margery Golden, looking up, saw a figure in a yellow mask silently and pensively regarding her.

She could even see the smile which fitted for a moment about the fringe of the mask. Then the intruder's face grew serious again.

"You are unhappy?" he quietly inquired.

"You seem to appear only on those occasions when I am," she slowly and thoughtfully replied.

"You are wondering at this very moment if young Manley will ever come back to you?"

She colored a little as she stared up into the masked face.

"Yes," she finally acknowledged, "that is something I must know."

"Why?"

She remained silent.

"Is it because you care for him?"

The girl took a deep breath. Then she stared bravely up at her interrogator.

"Yes, it is because I care for him—a great deal," she found the courage to reply.

He turned about and tipped to the door. Then, carefully nursing the knob in the palm of his hand, he released the catch and swung the door suddenly inward. And crouched low in the hallway, close beside the door frame, was the figure of a young woman wearing a housemaid's apron.

The startled young woman, on discovering that she had been detected in the act of listening at a keyhole, sprang to her feet and fled like a shadow down the long hallway.

"Why, that was one of our maid!" cried the astonished girl.

"And also a secret agent of the

Iron Claw's," announced the man in the mask.

"But what are you going to do?" demanded the puzzled girl.

"I'm going to show that I'm still your friend, and at the same time prove that this particular maid is your enemy," called back the man in the mask.

But that particular maid, realizing apparently that events were shaping themselves into some final issue, lost no time in loitering along the hallway of that shadowy house.

She ran straight to the heavy folding doors, which shut off the library wherein, she knew, Enoch Golden was already conferring with his circle of officers from the detective bureau. Opening these doors, she confronted those startled officials.

"If you're after that man you call the Laughing Mask," she announced in her shrill soprano, "you'll find him here in this house, at this very moment."

"In this house?" echoed the astounded old millionaire.

"You'll find him," shrieked the white-faced maid, "in Margery Golden's room. And the sooner you get there the better!"

"That's a lie!" thundered the master of the house.

"Then send those men and show them it's a lie," was his servant's brazen challenge.

They rose as one man and moved towards the door.

But they did not pass through that door. They came to a pause, for the very material reason that a man in a yellow mask, holding a revolver in his hand, confronted them from the hallway.

"Just a moment, gentlemen," this masked stranger suavely announced, although the suavity of his voice was somewhat discounted by the obviously menacing position of his firearm.

"Since denunciations seem to be in order, will you permit me to point out to you that the young lady who has just addressed you is Betsy LeMarsh, alias Williamsburg Sadie, not only one of the most adroit woman crooks in the city, but also an emissary and agent of Jules Legar himself!"

Having made that speech, the Laughing Mask promptly swung the heavy folding doors shut. He did so before one of the astonished onlookers could interfere. Then he turned the key in the snaplock, and ran headlong along the quiet hall. He all but collided with Margery Golden herself.

"Here's where I take time by the forelock," he grimly announced, as he darted across the room to a huge, old-fashioned grandfather's clock which stood against the farther wall. The astonished girl saw him swing open the door and step inside the clock.

Then she turned quickly about, for the men from the central office were already in the room. And she had no desire to make their task easier for them.

"That man came into this room!" declared one of the older men, challenging the half-smiling girl with an indignant frown. "Where is he?"

"How should I know?" asked the calm-eyed young woman.

"Well, he's here, and we'll get him," declared the man who seemed to be the leader of the others. Then Margery Golden's heart suddenly came up into her mouth, for she could see that he was hurrying across the room in the direction of the clock. She could see his right hand go into his pocket and whip out a revolver as his left hand threw open the little black-walnut door along the face of the clock. Then she breathed again, for the clock was empty.

But the man with the revolver had dropped to his knees and was patting interrogatively about the clock base.

"I thought so!" he suddenly called out. "There's a spring trap here that opens through the floor. Quick, some of you men, get down to the basement!"

Margery Golden was even able to smile again.

"Wilson," she said, "be so good as to show these gentlemen the way to the basement. And then be so good as to have Miss Betsy LeMarsh come here."

But Miss Betsy LeMarsh had commandeered a hat and coat belonging to her mistress, possessed herself of a jeweled ring or two and a small morocco case, which she discreetly stowed away as she stole quietly down the servants' stairs, and slipped out through the shrubbery.

So preoccupied was she, however, in putting distance between her and the house which she had just left that she failed to observe a figure simultaneously and quite as eagerly emerging from a basement window. Yet as she hurriedly rounded the block, in eager quest of a taxicab, this figure showed an unmistakable interest in her movements. And when she had finally halted a taxicab and climbed into it, the stranger in a yellow mask so cautiously shadowing her made a signal to the driver of a mysterious limousine, which seemed to be casually engaged in following his own movements.

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"Follow that taxicab," he commanded his driver as he leaped into the still-moving car.

The man in the limousine sat tense and silent, watching the flight for mile after mile. Then, realizing that it was taking them beyond the bounds of the city itself, he drew shut the side-blinds of his car, reached under the seat and took from its hiding place a japanned tin box, remarkably similar to an actor's make-up box.

Balancing this on his knees, he first removed his mask of yellow cloth, adjusted a small folding mirror to the box lid, and busied himself with

the assortment of pigments and cosmetics of the make-up putty therein contained. The clear-lined face which first gazed into the folding mirror slowly but unmistakably became converted into something repellent to the eye.

The next moment the limousine came to a stop at the roadside.

"That taxicab has just turned in at the Bellaire inn," the well-trained driver called back to his master.

"So I notice. And that's the place, I'll wager, where Legar himself is trying to keep under cover."

"There's the woman herself, running up the steps," announced the driver.

"So I also observe. And under the circumstances, I think it would be best for you to slip after her, as quietly and quickly as you can."

"Yes, sir!"

"Then come back to the car and report to me the number of the room she asks for. Find out the number, whatever happens. For in that room, I imagine, we're going to encounter our old friend of the Iron Claw."

The Flash for Help.

Jules Legar was in anything but an amiable frame of mind, and when Williamsburg Sadie was quietly ushered into room 307 of the Bellaire inn, he greeted her with a malignant scowl which she promptly and openly resented.

"You don't seem exactly crazy to see me," she announced as she watched Legar lock the door through which she had just entered. His right arm, she noticed, was carried in a voluminous white cotton sling.

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from this dump?" he wrathfully reminded her.

"Well, I didn't come because I wanted to!" was the other's retort.

"What's wrong?"

"Everything's wrong! Old Golden had a bunch of flaties in his house, and that Laughing Mask boob squealed on me to the bunch. So I had to beat it."

Legar swung about on her.

"And you beat it straight here, in open daylight, leaving a paper-chase trail at your heels!" There was rage in his voice.

"I tell you I left no trail. I've got



"Just a Moment, Gentlemen," This Masked Stranger Suavely Announced.

my own scalp to take care of. And if I've taken a chance to beat it up here and put you wise, it seems to me there's more than this grouch-talk comin' to me!"

"Then, for the love of heaven, woman, don't holler so the whole house will hear you! Speak quietly."

A one-sided smile played about the hardened face of that worldly wise young woman.

"I guess you're kind of losin' your nerve," she contemptuously announced.

"Listen to me, my girl. I've been at this game longer than you have, and I've learned there are times when even walls have ears."

The woman laughed.

"Then you'd better get earmuffs on that window sill, for I've got a hunch it's—"

Her voice died away at the same moment that the smile vanished from her face.

"Don't turn around," she said in a sudden startled whisper as she looked down at her feet. "For there's a man's face starin' in at that window now."

Legar remained motionless.

"What face?" he quietly asked.

"It's the man in the Laughing Mask!" was the whispered response.

Legar continued to stare at her, still motionless.

"That means he came up by the fire-escape," meditated the fugitive. "And that means Red Egan must surely have seen him."

The next moment the man with his arm in a sling had thrown the bandage aside and was running towards the window that opened on the fire-escape landing.

On that narrow ledge of sheet-metal, wedged in between the window sash and the escape railing, a terrific combat was already taking place. Before Legar could get the window open the Laughing Mask, by an adroit jiu-jitsu movement of the body, succeeded in pinning the winded Red Egan down on the fire-escape platform. But already a second sentry of Legar's was swarming up the narrow metal stairway, and all the attention of the man in the mask had to be directed towards his new adversary.

It was while countering the onslaught of this second enemy that the Laughing Mask became conscious of still another point of attack. For as he fought there, on his knees, astride the panting form of Red Egan, an iron claw reached viciously out over the window sill behind him, and fixed itself in his shoulder. The next moment he was being hauled bodily in through the open window.

Ready hands were there to take possession of that battered and breathless captive.

"Put him in that closet!" exultantly commanded Legar, and Red Egan and his accomplice, the Laughing Mask, were hauled into the green-taped trapezoidal room which stood in the center of the room.

"Now what'll we do with him?" demanded the panting Egan.

"Leave him to me," announced Legar, studying the man out of narrowed and slanting eyes. Then the man with the arm in a sling stepped slowly and studiously to the chair in which the helpless Laughing Mask sat, for the light in the room was none too clear.

"So you're the man of mystery, are you? You're the fellow who keeps a dead wall between you and the world, eh? Well, my valiant hero, we'll soon put your valor to the test!"

Williamsburg Sadie, with her mouth slightly agape, stood halfway between the chair and the door, watching the man with the iron claw as he exulted over his enemy.

He watched Legar's hand as it reached out to the mask of yellow cloth and, with a vicious flourish of the face which he had concealed.

Then a scream, short but high pitched, burst from the startled lips. For what she saw at that moment seemed like a charnel-house endeavor to a human face. A ghastly, discolored surface ran lividly. The bulbous and distorted nose, now moist with sweat, seemed more like a fibroid tumor than an organ of flesh and bone. The coarse seam of the mouth leered crookedly from a face that seemed leprous in its corruption. Even the eyes, bloodshot and small, seemed to stare out from under a gangrenous brow.

And Legar drew back at the sight of those loathsome features. He backed slowly away, staring at that face, until he came to the electric button set in the wall. He reached out to switch on the electrolite, for the struggle on the fire-escape landing had left a curtain hanging half over the window, and this made the light uncertain. But even as Legar lifted his finger to the switch a sudden knock sounded on the door of the room.

Both Red Egan and the woman turned mutely to Legar. And as they looked, the knock was repeated, louder than before.

"Lock him in that closet," was the

clerk.

Instead of replying, the house detective took out paper and pencil, and, carefully watching the winking and blinking bulb, wrote a number of letters down on his slip of paper.

"That's the first time," he solemnly announced, "I ever saw an electric bulb talk Morse!"

"Talk Morse?" echoed the other.

"Yes, talk Morse, or I never rounded off the brass for two years. And here's what it has said, twice over. Help—room three—seven—help—help!"

The house detective suddenly stood upright. "Say, who is in 307 in this house, anyway?"

"That Virginian with his arm in a sling!"

"Then it's up to us to find out what's going on in that room!"

The Laughing Mask, in the meantime, was no longer giving his attention to the wires along the closet wall. But with his pocket knife he had already removed the set screw from the door knob of the closet door. Then, swinging lightly up to the shelf that stood some five feet from the floor, he seated himself there opposite the door.

By grasping the two heavy clothes hooks screwed into this door, and by planting his feet firmly against the sash on either side of it, he felt that he was not altogether at the mercy of his enemies, since by so bracing himself he could hold that door shut against all intruders. Legar might break it down, it was true, but that would both take time and involve certain risks. And help might come at any moment.

Even as he sat there he could hear the key turned in the lock and then the sound of Legar's quick oath of exasperation as the door knob fell loose to the floor, in response to his tug at it. At the same time hope rose in the captive's heart, for he could hear the muffled sound of a knock on the outer door. And still again the prisoner in the closet could hear Legar's oath of exasperation. This was followed by the sudden impact of the heavy wing chair against the panels of the closet door. That blow, repeated again and yet again, was heavy enough to break through the wood. But that dignitary known as High-Collar Davis, being a gentleman not given to inactivity in moments of emergency, and being sufficiently persuaded of untoward proceedings behind the door which refused to open to his knock, promptly seized a fire ax from its vermilion-painted rack in the hall, and sent it crashing through the panels of the door which bore the numerals 307.

Legar, seeing the door giving way before this determined onslaught, drew his revolver and emptied it into the half demolished closet door even as he backed away across the room to the open window. There he followed his already vanishing accomplices out on the fire escape, swarming down the narrow ladder after them as the outer door of the room gave way and a group of excited hotel attendants, headed by High-Collar Davis, came tumbling into the room.

The man who emerged from the closet lingered only long enough to point out to them the fleeing figures already at the foot of the fire escape. Then he himself darted down through the hotel hallway, took the stairs on the run, circled out through the rotunda, and springing through shrubbery and flower beds, leaped into a limousine drawn up at the side of the road.

"Fellow that touring car those men have just piled into," he called out to his driver. "Follow it until we get into the city. Then swing past it and get to Golden's house before it does, whatever happens!"

But that touring car showed itself to be a much speedier vehicle than its unkempt appearance might indicate. And its driver seemed possessed of a surprisingly intimate knowledge of suburban side roads, for as the black limousine drew up on it the dust-covered open car suddenly swerved to the left, dipped into a narrow valley, and took the rise to the railway track like a swallow rounding a cliff head.

Then the man in the yellow mask stood up in his car, with an involuntary gasp of horror on his lips. For thundering along the curving track as the dusty touring car rose to the crossing came an even swifter-moving train, freight, whistling its frantic warning as it came.

But that warning was too late. The pilot of the locomotive seemed to root like a boar's snout under the flimsy body of the automobile and then tossed it and its human freight high over its shoulder. There was a momentary cascade of bodies and metal through the air, a sudden discontinuance of the whistle blast, and the grind of steel

against steel as the startled engine driver threw on his brakes.

"Did they strike?" asked the Laughing Mask's chauffeur over his shoulder.

"Yes, they struck! But don't turn back. Keep going! For there's another car from that hotel following us, and we've still got to get to Golden's house first."

It was some twelve minutes later that Margery Golden, as she sat disconsolately in the quietness of her room, found herself confronted by an unannounced visitor.

"It's you!" she gasped, as she rose to her feet and found the Laughing

Mask standing, a little breathless, just inside her door.

"I'm sorry to startle you," he explained, "but as usual, they didn't give me any too much time!"

"But what has happened?"

"The same thing over again. There are five men downstairs persuading your father the Laughing Mask is a criminal, and those five men are determined to make me a prisoner."

"But why should they keep saying this?" asked the bewildered girl.

"Because they don't understand."

"No, they don't understand," she repeated. Then she turned and stared at the masked face. "Nor do I altogether understand!"

"But surely you'd trust me enough to hide me away here until I can escape from them?"

"How can you ask me to trust you when you refuse to trust me?"

"But I do trust you, I always have!"

"Yet not enough to remove that mask?"

The man standing with his back to the door remained silent for a moment or two. Then he quietly reached back and turned the key in the lock.

"And you insist that I unmask?"

"No, I do not insist. But if you believe in my honesty I also want to believe in yours."

Again there was a moment of silence.

"You are right," said the man in the mask. Then he crossed the room to the door of the white-tiled bathroom, laughing as he went. "But since my hands are clean, I also insist that my face shall be!"

The girl stood puzzled as she heard the sound of a tap being turned and the splash of water.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

A quiet laugh echoed out of the little white-tiled room.

"Washing my face," answered a somewhat altered voice, "and I'm afraid I'm rather spoiling your towel with my make-up."

The next minute the Laughing Mask, denuded of his domino, stepped back into the room.

"Will you trust me enough now to help me get away?" he asked.

The girl stared round-eyed into the smiling face above her. She started to lift her hand, as though in wonder, to her brow. But the man in the doorway imprisoned that hand in his own, and drew her a little closer to him.

"Will you trust me now?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, in a voice hushed with wonder, as she felt his arms close about her. "I will always trust you!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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A Terrific Combat Was Taking Place.

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