

Complete Story.

# THE ALIBI.

By HERBERT SHAW.

As Mr. James Cartwright, of "The Cedars," Sutton, sat alone over his coffee, there came a shadow outside. He looked up. The big windows from the lawn were open, for it was hot summer, and a man was coolly stepping through them into the room.

"What the deuce—?" cried Cartwright, his finger on the knob of the bell.

"Not at all," said the other. "Do you know it will make rather a difference to you if you touch that bell? Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Cartwright." A strong man himself, he was amazed at this impudence. "And yours?"

"Bourne!" screamed Cartwright.

"Exactly, Cartwright. And you are—I know you were in Australia—Michael, without any surname, but with the pretty addition. Hell Michael. But there's no occasion to shout it out so. Old chums deserted come together at the last."

Cartwright's mouth twitched visibly in the shaven face. "What have you come here for?" he said at length.

"My dear Cartwright Michael (pretty name that), what a question! Friendship, of course, and other things. You

left us rather in the lurch, old man, that time years ago. And we were a pretty three—Hadley, Bourne, and Hell Michael. We did some good work. And then the last affair, the robbery of the Bank at Pilot's Mound. That's the one I've come to talk to you about. You had all the money, and old Hadley and I couldn't move a step without it, and when trouble came, you were missing, you cur!"

"It was not my fault," said Cartwright feebly. Bourne got up and shut the windows tight, and came back, glancing round the room.

"Whose, then?" he said sharply. "Whose? If it was not your fault, give us a name. This house, the garden, the pictures—how did they come? You don't answer. I'll tell you why I've come. Day after day old Hadley and I have slaved—once we broke out together, and they flogged us together, by heaven!—but at the finish it was to be you who should pay. Day after day we waited till we were free, and, now we've paid the penalty, we're as clean as though we were children. You're not! You've not had your punishment. We're going to run the company again—not for work, but pleasure—and you're the man to pay. If not—well, they haven't got you in the

directory here as Hell Michael, have they?"

Cartwright's lips now were tight as a drum. "Where's Hadley?" he snapped out.

Bourne looked him in the eyes. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "Melbourne, waiting till I give him the word."

"You don't get a single halfpenny from me!" shouted Cartwright, suddenly ferocious. "I've worked here square. I've got a name and position, by heaven, and I'm not going to have a couple of blacks like you hanging round."

"Keep easy, please," said Bourne, for Cartwright was out of breath. "You might have put it simpler. It's fighting, then?"

"May I open the door for you?" said Cartwright. "Or preferably the window, as you came that way?"

"Good night, old son," said Bourne amiably, as he stepped out. "But I don't intend to lose sight of you, you know."

Mr. James Cartwright sat alone over his cold coffee, and thinking hard, faced the black past that had reared up as if by magic. But he did not intend to be daunted by it. He did not intend, above all, that the past should hurt him now, after his years of easiness and peace. Most emphatically, no. He would shut up the house and send away the servants for a time. That would throw Bourne off the scent. Bourne would not act till Hadley came over. He himself would go to London and hide there. And, if necessary, there was only Bourne to deal with. It was a good thing Hadley had not come over yet.

But Bourne had lied (though he did not quite know why, except for the angry meaning in Cartwright's question)

when he had said that Hadley was still in Australia. Hadley was staying at a small hotel in Above Bar, Southampton.

## II.

Cartwright shut up the house and went to London, taking rooms in a street which led from the Embankment to the Strand. The top half of the street was all newspaper offices, the lower half law offices and rooms.

He was very pleased because he had shaken off Bourne.

On the third day of his occupancy of the rooms he was disturbed to see Bourne's face at the window of a room in the house opposite a room on a higher level, so that Bourne could see right into his room. And Bourne, fulfilling his threat of keeping an eye on him, was grinning amiably at him, as on the last occasion of their meeting. Though amiable, it was not a pretty grin.

Cartwright had heavy curtains brought in and put to that window.

That night, on his own side of the dark curtains, he sat alone over very strong black coffee. When he had drunk it he stayed for a long time with his elbows upon the table and his chin in his hands. I don't think he would have troubled about anything from first to last if he had not been engaged to a girl.

But now he had set out for fighting, and it was not "Hell Michael's" way to draw back. This was plain and certain to him—he must get rid of Bourne before Hadley, the other enemy, came over. Then he could marry her and take her away quickly somewhere, and they would be safe as houses.

A day or so saw a queer advertisement in half a dozen London papers: "Secretary wanted for special work. Write,

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