



CHAPTER I.

At the time of the startling occurrences which are to be herein recorded, the office of Jason Garrison, a broker of New York, was situated in a rather unpretentious structure on Wall street.

The broker rented the entire building, but he sublet the second and third stories, occupying on the first story for business purposes.

The building was very old and its internal arrangement was rather obsolete, for to enter the broker's office you first passed into a hall which extended through the building, and thence through a side door.

At the rear end of the passage a second flight, much more narrow than the first, also reached the second story, while at their foot a door opened upon an alley in the rear.

At this date it was ascertained that the third story over the broker's office was unoccupied, but the second story was tenanted as it had been for many years by John Oakburn, the old cashier, who had been employed by Jason Garrison since he first began business in Wall street years ago.

John Oakburn was a man sixty-odd years of age and a widower, but he was not childless. One daughter, Marion, by name, remained to cheer and brighten his home with the sunlight of her presence, and the aged cashier's little family consisted only of himself, his daughter and Judith Kredge, a female domestic of uncertain age, who was the sister of the office janitor.

The second-floor flat was much too spacious for the needs of the cashier's family, and furnished apartments were consequently let to such of Mr. Garrison's clerks as desired them, provided always they were approved by the old cashier.

On the night of the 23d of March, 18—, but one of John Oakburn's furnished apartments was occupied. The room was directly over the main office, and its tenant was Stuart Harland, one of the broker's clerks.

The street door was a massive one, as was also the door of the office properly. At night both were always securely locked and bolted. The keys of the office as well as the street door were always in the possession of John Oakburn, who was implicitly trusted by the broker in every way.

For twenty years John Oakburn had been celebrated for his rigid integrity and unvarying, scrupulous honesty, and "on the street," where one desired to vouch for the most positive terms for the character of another, he would say, "He is as honest as old John Oakburn."

Perhaps no man more perfectly deserved the title which he had won, which was far more honorable than any patent of nobility—the title "an honest man."

On day at noon a few days previous to the night of which we are about to write, while John Oakburn was alone in the office, having been detained by some important account, an incident occurred which would serve to illustrate the man's character perfectly.

Mr. Pratt, of the firm of Pratt & Weeks, entered and approached the old cashier in a cunning way in order to sound him with a view to inducing him to become a director of one of those "soap bubble" stock companies which are originated every year, inflate themselves with the money of the unwary and collapse when such a consummation will result by the temptation of sudden wealth held out to him as a glittering bait.

John Oakburn listened to the specious arguments of the smooth-tongued bandit of Wall street in passive silence, wholly unmoved by the temptation of sudden wealth held out to him as a glittering bait.

When Pratt concluded, John Oakburn turned his back upon him, saying in a scathing tone: "No more of this. I value my honor, sir!"

"And yet you are a poor man," retorted Pratt with a covert sneer in his voice. "In gold, yes; but not in principle."

"Your sentiments are quite romantic and poetical, but this is a practical age of money values."

"True; but were I to listen to you I should become as poor in character as I am in pocket."

"Our scheme would be a secret. No one would ever know it."

door, and Marion Oakburn emerged from her sleeping-room, gliding softly to her head she carried the lamp above her, but the paper and the metallic something from which the light had glinted when Harland saw her was no longer in her possession.

For a moment she stared speechless as a statue and listened, while we note how extremely beautiful she is.

Marion Oakburn possessed a form above the average height of women, which might have been the ideal of a Greek sculptor, and her rare brunette loveliness was unsurpassed.

There was an expression of sadness upon her perfect features—a look of melancholy that was pitiful, and it led one to think that sorrow had entered her young life; that in the heart of the beautiful girl there was some blighting grief.

Marion Oakburn was twenty-four years of age, and her face, with its full bloom and perfect development of a glorious womanhood.

As she stood at the door of her bedroom listening, she detected no breach of the silence, and so she glided across the passage to the back stairs noiselessly and gained the lower hall.

There she discovered that the bolts were drawn, and that only the night-latch secured it.

Marion seemed started at this, and she reeled back against the wall, where she stood for a moment trembling slightly, but with her brows contracted, as though in deep thought.

When she reached the landing Marion saw no one, but she did not return to her apartment. On the contrary she went to the door of the sleeping-room occupied by Judith Kredge.

Marion knocked, and a moment subsequently the woman who had just played the part of a spy, opened the door.

"What is it, Miss Marlowe? You are not ill, I hope?" she said, feigning surprise and solicitude.

"No, I am not ill, but I cannot sleep. Father has not come home. I have vainly listened for his footsteps on the stairs all night. What can keep him out so late. Oh, I fear some misfortune has befallen him."

"Perhaps he has returned and entered the office as he sometimes does, after business hours. Do you not remember he once fell asleep there and remained almost all night before he awoke? Shall we go down and see?"

"Yes, yes; why did I not think of that before, I wonder, Judith."

The woman's eyes glistened intelligently, but she made no answer.

She accompanied Marion down the front stairs.

They reached the office door and opened it.

Marion entered first, lamp in hand, and Judith Kredge came also behind her.

They had scarcely crossed the threshold when they recoiled, and Marion uttered a cry of horror.

Three Judith Kredge entered this terrible cry, and then she saw a police officer hurried down the street toward her.

Of course she received no answer, and she tried the door, which opened readily, and entered the apartment in which it chanced Stuart Harland had left the gas burning faintly.

Suddenly a look of intelligence and cunning supplemented the expression of perplexity which her features had momentarily assumed, and she ran down stairs and gained the office again.

"Mr. Harland has gone, and taken his valise with him!" she cried.

Marion seemed thunderstruck.

"It cannot be!" gasped Marion.

"No, no. That he is not in his room does not imply that he has fled."

"But he retired as usual. My room is next to his, and I heard him moving about but a few minutes before you called me."

Marion sprang to Judith's side and clutched her arm.

"Do not tell that! I beg, I implore you do not tell a living soul that you heard Stuart Harland in his room a few moments before we discovered my father."

Before Judith Kredge could answer, the door opened and the policeman who had heard the cry entered the office.

"What's this! A man killed!" exclaimed the policeman, and while Marion hurriedly explained how she had discovered her father, he proceeded to examine the dead.

"Ah, shot through the back of his head! Burglar's work, no doubt," continued the officer, glancing at the open safe.

"All turn in the alarm and we shall have help here in no time," he added; and running to the street door he began to rap with his club to call an officer from the next beat.

In a moment or so the policeman he was calling came, and his co-laborer sent him to telephonic the alarm to headquarters while he returned to the office.

In a few moments a sergeant of police and several officers of the precinct, with Mr. Paxton, of the detective service of the city, arrived.

Marion and Judith Kredge had remained in the office.

The detective and the police at once began to make the usual investigation.

First, the body of the victim of the crime was examined, and the nature of the wound which occasioned death was duly noted. The face of the dead was then covered, and the sergeant ordered that the body be not disturbed until the inquest.

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