



found in your possession you would be accused of John Oakburn's murder, said Pratt.

"That's so—the money will be safest with you," assented Kredge.

"Is not this crippled scoundrel himself the assassin?" asked the detective.

"Before the night is over the marked money will all be hidden where no detective will ever find it. I only wish we had the one thousand of the marked money we gave Garnar back again."

"That's not the money we may be traced to him, and to save himself there is no telling what he might do," continued Pratt.

"Well, open the safe and get the marked money out. Before hiding it we will test the preparation which I prepared for you and German chemist today, as I promised I would. The compound is recommended to remove ink marks. If we can remove the marks on the money, all well and good," said Weeks, and he placed a large stone jar or bottle on the table.

Pratt wheeled like a flash and saw him. The next instant he was struggling desperately with the three villains, whose evil faces were darkened by the shadow of deadly thoughts.

Paxton comprehended that he had a wonderful chance to secure the marked money if he dared take a terrible risk. Like a shadow he glided into the room, intending to snatch the package of marked money and escape with it.

Pratt fully realized that his situation was a desperate one. "This man is a spy! He must not escape us!" cried Pratt, as his confederates hurled themselves upon the detective.

The latter exerted all his surprising strength in making a determined struggle to liberate himself from the clutches of his foes.

In the encounter the table was overturned, and the bottle which Weeks had said contained a compound for removing ink stains was dashed down upon the floor at the feet of the struggling men.

An explosion followed. The great stone bottle burst into a thousand fragments, and a sheet of flame flashed upward into the faces of the combatants, who involuntarily leaped away in every direction.

Weeks learned afterwards that through a mistake on the part of an assistant of the old chemist of whom he had purchased the compound, he had been given an explosive mixture instead of the compound for removing ink marks.

Paxton was released by the frightened villains at the instant of the explosion, as they leaped away to escape the flying missile and the sheet of flame from the wreck of the bottle.

stately for his escape from the office of Pratt & Weeks.

Meanwhile, Stanmore, after parting from the detective, confessed to himself that he was deeply troubled by the developments of the night.

Gaining his own apartment at the hotel, he seated himself and remained buried in profound meditation for a long time, while the expression of his features revealed that his thoughts were far from pleasant.

Stanmore was aroused from the reverie into which he had fallen by a knock at the door, and he admitted Mr. Marks, of the firm of Marks & Book, accommodation loan brokers, of whom mention has been made.

The two men exchanged cordial greetings, and became seated.

A confidential conversation relating to business subjects ensued, in the course of which Mr. Marks said: "Yes, Pratt & Weeks have fallen upon evil times. Dupes have been wary. The pigeons flee at sight of the hawks, and luck in the stock market has taken a strong turn against the cunning swindlers. They have met with many losses, and they now owe a considerable sum."

"Good! Excellent! We shall accomplish our purpose, Marks."

"It is but a question of time, sir," answered the other.

Mr. Marks remained with Stanmore for some time, and he had just departed when Mr. Judson, of the firm of Judson, Kirk & Co., brokers, called.

In the most friendly way Stanmore received the representative of this well-known Wall street firm, and after a few remarks he placed a slip of paper before him.

"Indelibly of Pratt & Weeks to Judson, Kirk & Co., on account of transactions in railroad and mining stock to date, \$43,000."

Stanmore read the memorandum with a pale face.

"The end is surely coming. Retribution hovers over the heads of the scoundrels, and its shadow is growing darker day by day," he said.

"Yes, the tables are turning. A secret foe has foiled all their schemes of late. Assuredly the day of their triumph and the downfall of the swindlers cannot be far distant," answered Mr. Judson.

Some further remarks were exchanged, and while Stanmore and his guest were still conversing, Mr. Benjamin, of the firm of Abraham Benjamin & Co., money lenders, entered.

heap of maledictions upon the head of the detective, Pratt said.

"It seems that fortune is dead against us in every move of late. Every speculation fails, and we are becoming deeply involved in debt. We owe Marks & Book, Judson, Kirk & Co., and Benjamin, the old Jew money lender."

"Yes," assented Weeks. "But if our investment in 'C' and 'N. W.' railroad stock turns out as we hope, we are saved."

"But if the market goes the wrong way, you know as well as I do we are ruined unless the marked money can be made to save us," answered Pratt.

"Perhaps we may arrange that. Old Benjamin is an unscrupulous fellow. I've sounded him. If the worst comes, we may be able to get him to take the marked money at a discount, and let us have the gold for it," suggested Weeks.

Little did they suspect the fact, but the conspirators seemed destined to play into Stanmore's hands.

The plotters feared the consequences of his discovery made by the spy who had escaped them.

"I wonder how much of our conversation the fellow heard," said Weeks presently.

"Enough to condemn us, no doubt, if he could prove what he heard. Fortunately we have not secured the money, which was undoubtedly his purpose. Now we will conceal it and defy him if he seeks to expose us. Our oaths would go as far as his in a court of law, if it should come to that," replied Pratt.

He was the leading spirit of the firm. "That infernal money has done us no good yet, but on the other hand it has brought us trouble," said Weeks querulously.

Thus they continued to converse until Levi Kredge left them.

When he had gone they secreted the marked money and then took their departure from the office for the night.

The following day Paxton's agent, who had resumed his task of shadowing Levi Kredge, reported to his principal that the janitor had obtained leave for a day's absence and that he had purchased a ticket for Newburg, N. Y.

"He will leave by the first train in the morning," said the detective agent.

"And so will I," said Paxton. "I'll take the little trip with Levi. The journey may have no meaning for us, and it may, on the other hand, be of great importance."

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