

*Experiences Of Mr. Breitenfeld, the Austrian
Detective*

A Nice Young Man—A Letter-Carrier Missing—Horrible Scene In The Apartments Of Mr.
Alfonso Mendoza—A Handkerchief And A Hat—Different Flaws In An Otherwise Well-
Planned And Executed Crime—How The Austrian Detective Makes Use Of The Telegraph—
Twice Misled—A Very Social Dinner Party—A Smoke After Dinner—Mr. Francesconi Under
Arrest—His Repentance And Judgment.

by George McWatters

The “Aziendahof,” one of those enormous buildings of Vienna, Austria, one side of which fronts towards the “Graben,” the other to the “Goldschmiedstrasse,” was, on the 18th of October, 1874, the spectacle of a bloody crime.

This crime is so premeditated in its plan, so horribly exact in its execution, that we, while reading an account of it, imagine ourselves running over those exciting chapters of the “Mysteries of Paris,” or the startling accounts of crimes of other great cities. And indeed, a romantic veil was, for a long time, spread over a crime which alarmed the public of the Austrian capital.

A young man arrives in the city, takes elegant quarters in the most fashionable part of the city, gives himself a foreign name, and soon contrives to gain the confidence of all who know him, by his easy way of spending money, without overdoing it, and his amiability.

At once, he has disappeared, and with him a letter-carrier, who, when looked for, is found lying murdered in the room of the young man.

We will give a minute account of the affair, as found in the Vienna newspapers, and afterwards relate the experiences in this case of the detective of the Vienna police, Mr. Breitenfeld.

Johann Guga, a letter-carrier in Vienna, who had been in office for more than twenty years, was known as a strictly honest man, who did his duty in the most conscientious way, and therefore was entrusted with carrying the letters for that quarter of the city which is apt to have the most valuable letters containing large amounts of money.

According to his custom, he had gone out at eight o'clock in the morning, to carry such letters as had arrived during the night to their address, and to receive a receipt for letters containing valuables or money. He ordinarily carried unregistered letters in a black letter-bag, which he had attached around his waist.

The hour that he should have returned to the post-office with the receipts, had long passed, without Guga, according to his instructions, having handed them to his superior. Soon they inquired into the cause of his delay, but in vain. None of his comrades, who, at other times, often came across him in going over their routes, had seen him that morning.

There could be no doubt but that something had happened with Guga, and everybody who knew him was convinced, at the outstart, that it was absurd to think that he had absconded with the money entrusted to his care. It had oftentimes occurred that he had had letters containing more than a hundred thousand thalers in bank-notes, and they had always been delivered, not only with the greatest accuracy, but it had often been a subject of mirth at the post-office, when they were told how extremely careful Guga was in delivering them into the right hands.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Guga not having returned, the postmaster felt obliged to call in the assistance of the police; he had waited as long as he dared to, thinking that the man had been delayed somewhere, and dreading needless interference of the police with his corps of officials. The captain of police, Effenberger, soon called on the postmaster, who told him the story of the mysterious disappearance of the carrier; he at once reported the affair at the Central station, and the detective Breitenfeld was chosen to trace the carrier.

Mr. Breitenfeld, the detective, now began his work, and in narrating his skillful researches, we will use his own words:

“What was the case I had to pursue? Was it fraud, committed by the carrier Guga? I could scarcely think so, after hearing a description of the man's character, by the postmaster Kammler. Was the man attacked in the street? If this had been done, report certainly would have come in at police headquarters, and I would know about it. At all events, I thought the best plan was to procure the list of letters which he had to carry, and, armed with this, to inquire, at every address, whether he had delivered the letters. The postmaster provided me with the required list, and I proceeded at once, by inquiring, at the first houses of his route, whether the letters had been delivered. At the outstart, everybody declared having received the registered letters, and to have given receipts for them. This gave me, already, certainty that the carrier had not absconded, for if he had done so, he would not have delivered any letters, but simply have appropriated all the valuables entrusted to his care.

At about half past four in the afternoon, I came to No. 31 Graben street, in the ‘Aziendahof.’ Here, according to the list which I had, Guga had to deliver, on the fourth floor, a letter declared to contain one hundred and fifty-eight gulden, which was mailed at ‘Wiener-Neustadt,’ and addressed to a merchant by the name of Alfonzo Mendoza. This house is very much frequented, during daytime, as it has two entrances, one on the ‘Graben,’ and another on the ‘Goldschmiedstrasse,’ and the building is occupied by a great number of merchants of note.

I here inquired whether they had seen a letter-carrier, and I was told that they had seen him at nine o'clock in the morning; and at my question whether they had seen him go out, nobody could tell me, as so many people passed in and out, during the day, that nobody paid any attention to them. I demanded to be led to the apartments of the merchant Mendoza. I was led up stairs, and arriving before the door, I knocked; no answer ensuing, I knocked once more; all was silent; now I tried the lock; the door was closed.

I sent, at once, for a locksmith; the door was opened, and judge of my horror! I was convinced that a murder had been committed.

Guga was lying dead, in the center of the room, covered with blood. Near the body, a great number of letters were scattered, all marked with blood; they had been cut open, and the valuables taken out of them; the black bag, which the carrier always wore around his waist, had been cut open, and a long, new knife, in the form of a dagger, was lying next to the corpse.

With this instrument, the criminal had killed his victim.

It seemed that the knife had been thrust, with great power, into the neck of the carrier.

The coroner was summoned, and an inquest was held; the attending physician declared that the carotid artery had been cut through, and this had caused the death of the unfortunate man.

It was probable that Guga had been attacked at the moment that he handed the registered letter to the pretended merchant.

Undoubtedly, he had fallen to the floor without uttering a single sound, as a servant-girl, who worked in the kitchen next to the room, declared that she had not heard the slightest noise.

Of course, the merchant Alfonso Mendoza was the murderer. I had not the slightest doubt, and summoned, at once, the landlady. The baroness Mayer (such was the name of the lady) had rented the whole fourth floor of the house, and as she had more rooms than she wanted for herself, she underlet a part of them to gentlemen. She declared that, on the 6th of October, a young, well-dressed gentleman, about twenty-six years old, had expressed his desire to see the room, which was vacant. Of course, she had shown it, and as the stranger agreed to pay the monthly price for it, she had handed him the key, and he moved in on the same day.

On the next day, he registered his name as ‘Alfonso Mendoza, merchant, Naples.’

The baroness had had a conversation with him, the same morning, and he had told her that he had come to Vienna, to make considerable purchases of silk, and did not intend to return to Naples before next spring.

She further said that she meant to have observed that he took great pains to give a foreign accent to his pronunciation of the German language, probably with the intention to make himself pass for an Italian.

The eyes of the chambermaid now fell upon an envelope lying on the floor, and, taking it up, she exclaimed: ‘Why, this is the very envelope of the letter, which has been lying here on the table, addressed to the gentleman who lives in this room; I noticed the pretty writing.’

I looked at the address, and saw that it was directed to Mr. Alfonso Mendoza; it was posted at ‘Wiener-Neustadt,’ and was valued at one hundred and sixty-eight *gulden*. This circumstance made me conclude that he had mailed the letter, himself, on the preceding day, in that way being sure that the carrier would call on him the next morning. His plan, of course, had met with success, and when I compared the list with the remaining letters, I soon came to the conclusion that the criminal had appropriated 13,292 florins and 52 kreutzers (about \$7,500) in registered

letters, an amount of 205 florins (about \$100) in cash, and several post-orders—hence, in cash and bank-notes, about \$7,600.

The murderer, in possession of the money, had taken flight, without being noticed by anybody.

It seems that he had cunningly contrived to take his two satchels, his pistol, and his umbrella from the room, which the girl said she had seen there on the preceding day.

I now knew that a murder had been committed, that the murderer was the inhabitant of the room, who called himself Alfonso Mendoza. The next question was to trace his whereabouts. Was Alfonso Mendoza an assumed name? I was led to believe so by the fact that he tried to conceal his nativity by assuming an accent which was probably not his; but this might be imagination of the baroness Mayer, after all.

I have often observed, in my experience, that howsoever cunningly a crime was planned, and boldly and skillfully executed, it often occurs that a small flaw in the plan, a little oversight, leads to the discovery of the whole. I therefore very thoroughly searched the room, and found, in the wardrobe, a handkerchief and a hat.

The handkerchief was marked E. F.; I questioned the landlady, whether she could remember to have ever had an occupant of the room whose initials answered to those of the handkerchief; she answered that, as far as she could remember, no such person had ever occupied the apartment, and that, besides, she was very sure that nothing was left in the wardrobe, as she had looked in it when she showed the room to the gentleman.

The hat indicated that it had been bought at Klagenfurt; hence the man's real name, in all probability, commenced with E. F., and he had been in Klagenfurt.

This was a great oversight in a man who had plotted so cunningly for the execution of his devilish plan, and had so wisely prevented a quick discovery. I resolved, at once, to profit by this fact, and was very materially assisted by the newspapers, which urged the people to zealously support the police in discovering the scoundrel.

I do not know how it is, but we often have a certain instinct which tells us to follow such or such a course, and I always have found that it is well to follow its indication. This time, it told me that the hat was the most important discovery, and, therefore, I made up my mind to start at once for Klagenfurt.

Before I did so, however, I inquired, at the ticket-office of the Southern depot, whether a man had been seen there, answering to the description I gave them, and the ticket-agent told me that such a man had applied for a ticket; he seemed to be in a great hurry, had put his head through the little window, and had said, in a whispering tone: 'a ticket first-class for Udine.' The ticket-agent added that such conduct had seemed very strange to him, but as at that time (about one o'clock), nothing was known yet of the murder, he had not paid any further attention to it.

The baggage-master of the Southern road distinctly remembered to have seen the man in question, as, in the last days, he had repeatedly traveled on the road.

I left Vienna with the next train, and, as I was rather suspicious that Udine, the place for which he had taken his ticket, was not his destination, but merely a means of leading me from the track, I strictly inquired on the road, and had the satisfaction to see that I had not been mistaken. At Marburg, my man had left the cars which went on to Udine, and he took a ticket to Klagenfurt, the roads diverging at Marburg.

Arrived at Klagenfurt, I tried every possible means to come, as soon as possible, in connection with people of that community, and especially with those who attested to have known a man answering my description.

In the evening, I received a dispatch from Vienna, informing me that a physician, whose attention had been attracted by a description given of the murderer, in the 'Wiener Tageblatt,' had declared, at the headquarters, that a man from Klagenfurt had frequently called on him, the man having a wound on his left cheek, a little above the lip; that this man repeatedly had driven from his office to the 'Wiener-Neustadt,' and that he was identical with the description given of him in the newspapers.

Now the question was whether he had a wound on the left cheek. I sent a dispatch back to Vienna, to inquire whether baroness Mayer knew of any such wound of her occupant; and, about an hour afterwards, I received word that she was not quite sure, but had observed that he had covered his left cheek with his handkerchief, while talking with her, and that he had complained of tooth-ache, as she asked him whether something was the matter.

So it was very probable that this was the same man; however, we had no certainty yet.

At last, during my investigations, I came across a waiter of a hotel, who had known the man in Klagenfurt, and knew that he had been a clerk in that city, but had been out of employment for the last four weeks, and he was very sure he had seen him, a few days ago in Vienna, he being there to make some purchases for his employer.

There was now no longer any doubt, in my mind, that Mr. Alfonso Mendoza and Francesconi, (the name which the waiter said he was known by in Klagenfurt,) were one and the same person, and that he had been the murderer of the letter-carrier Guga.

I communicated my suspicion, of course, to all points of the compass. In order to hasten the sending of the dispatches, the original was lithographed, and those copies were sent to the different chiefs of the telegraph offices.* (*The reader will bear in mind that the telegraph, in Austria, is not in the hands of private individuals, but belongs to the State, and the employees are men who have their government certificate, acknowledging their ability and right to act in that profession.)

At the same time, with the dispatches, I sent assistants over the route which he had taken, as he had been unskillful enough not to conceal his moves; here was another flaw in his plan. He had

repeatedly traveled on the Southern road, had sent his luggage on the same road, in his own name, and he, having come from Klagenfurt, made me conclude that he had gone in that direction, and had fled to southern parts. Hence I made this route the principal object of my observation, and especially the town Klagenfurt.

Francesconi was only eight hours ahead of me, and as I often had observed the fact that criminals, having committed the deed, do not enjoy any rest thereafter, and fail to have that calmness which is required for the plotting of a successful flight, I rather relied upon this circumstance this time.

The fact that he had not selected another route, and even was thoughtless enough not to profit by the time which he had gained upon me, was the reason why he fell into my hands sooner than I had expected.

He had left Vienna with the fast train from Treist, at half past one in the afternoon, arrived, in the middle of the night, at Klagenfurt, and here stopped for twelve hours. In this city, he had a mistress and a child living; he went to see them, and made use of his time by shaving off his chin-whiskers, which remarkably changed his appearance, and buying a new hat. I received this intelligence from the baggage-master, Nourrect, of the Southern road, who, at the same time, told me that Francesconi had sent his luggage, on the preceding Friday, from Vienna to Klagenfurt.

With these points of information, I had gained a good foundation for the prosecution, and now I was able to send dispatches to my assistants, containing the real name of the murderer, and the route he had taken. I had given the order to my assistants to especially 'do' the depots where the road diverged, or was crossed by another road, as it might be that he had changed the direction of his journey, so as to put us off the track.

As we had left Vienna on Wednesday evening, at nine o'clock, we did not reach Klagenfurt before Thursday afternoon, and Francesconi had left, at noon, in the direction of Franzensfeste.

After I had gained the above mentioned information, I sent a dispatch to Vienna, and from there, the telegraph was set in operation in all directions:

'Francesconi, murderer of the letter-carrier Guga, arrived, last night, at two o'clock, in Klagenfurt; from there, he has gone, this morning, in the direction of Venice; has shaved his chin-whiskers, and wears a new silk hat.'

I now at once proceeded in the direction of Franzensfeste, and, as the first part of the road goes as far as Marburg, I inquired there, again, as he might have used the same precaution, and taken a ticket there for a different destination.

I was told, there, that at noon, a little after I had arrived from Vienna, and left for Klagenfurt, a train from Klagenfurt had come in, that this train went straightway to Franzensfeste, and that it was due there at midnight. They had not seen him, but I did not doubt but that I and my game had passed each other, and that, if I had had the luck that the train from Klagenfurt had arrived a few minutes before time, my man would probably have been in my hands by this time.

However, I did not despair, and went on in the direction of Franzensfeste; on the road, the conductor told me that I had gained some four hours, anyhow, as the train, arriving in the night at Franzensfeste, does not proceed before thirty-seven minutes past four, in the morning, as it has to take up the passengers from the valley of the Puster, coming with the Tyrol train. Hence Francesconi had to leave the cars, here, at least for about four hours.

When I arrived at Franzensfeste, one of the detectives of the place was standing at the depot; he told me that Francesconi had arrived there during the night, and that, when he heard that he had to wait for about five hours at the depot, he had gone to a hotel, and that he (the detective) had sent word to Vienna, watching the criminal carefully; and he said he was sure that my man was in the hotel yet; he had not arrested him yet, because he knew that he could do so at any time, as soon as indications showed that the criminal intended to pursue his travel.

I at once proceeded to the hotel; it was just the time of the *table d'hôte*, and, as I professed to be hungry, I was led at once into the dining-hall; this hall was provided with small tables, where every guest ate *à la carte*, sitting, either alone, or with two or three at a table. I quickly glanced over the different faces, and soon saw a man sitting alone at a table, taking his dinner, and indulging in a bottle of wine. This man's appearance exactly coincided with the description given to me, only he did not have chin-whiskers, but I knew that these had been shaved off at Klagenfurt.

All the tables were occupied, and I advanced towards my man, saying:

'Will you allow me, sir, to take a seat at your table? I see they are all occupied, and I have just arrived, after a long journey, and feel hungry.'

'Certainly, sir,' he replied; 'you see, I am all alone, and I always like company while taking my dinner. Good conversation is the best sauce at table.'

I bowed in acknowledgment of his politeness, and introduced myself as Mr. Coroni, from Milan,—I speak Italian fluently, and was sure that, if my man was really an Italian, he would converse at once in his own language; however, he did not do so; he seemed to be entirely up to the emergency, for he took a small portfolio from his pocket, and handed his card to me. I glanced at it, and said: 'Very happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Bergmann,' (this was the name on the card,) and, sitting down, I continued: 'have you been for a long time in this city?'

'No,' he replied; 'I arrived last night, and if my business does not call me away, I intend to remain here for some time. Will you allow me to offer you a glass of wine? I can safely recommend it; it is excellent Bordeaux.'

I accepted, and soon we had struck up a lively conversation; at last, I asked him whether he had heard of the murder committed in Vienna. He said he had not heard anything about it, and that he was not very likely to, as he very seldom read the newspapers.

I now told him the particulars of the crime, not going any further than those particulars given by the newspapers; he listened with intense interest, but not a nerve in his face changed, and I confess I was so deceived by this *sang froid*, that I almost thought I had mistaken my man.

After dinner, we went together to the gentleman's parlor, smoked a cigar, and were chatting together, when the detective, whom I had met at the depot, called on me. I excused myself for a few moments, took the detective aside, and requested him to have two policemen at hand as soon as he could.

He went away; I again went into the parlor, took my seat next to the pseudo Mr. Bergmann, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing my detective pass the window, followed by two policemen.

I now stood up, laid my hand on the shoulder of the murderer, and said, very quietly, to him: 'Mr. Francesconi, I arrest you, as being accused of having murdered the letter-carrier Guga.'

He grew deathly pale; his whole frame shook like that of a frightened, runaway horse, stopped in the midst of his course; but he did not resist at all, and silently allowed the policemen to put the handcuffs on.

I now transported him to Vienna, where I delivered him to the court. During his trial, when brought before the corpse of the carrier, he wept, and showed the greatest signs of repentance. However, he was condemned to death, which judgment the emperor changed into life-long imprisonment."

McWatters, George. *Detectives Of Europe And America, Or Life In The Secret Service. A Selection Of Celebrated Cases*. Hartford: Burr, 1877.