

A True Narrative  
*Fanny Talbot*  
A Tale of Circumstantial Evidence

There was a certain heart-sinking look about the stranger as Mr. Talbot told him he was in need of no help in his ware-rooms, which caused that gentleman to look up again from his ledger and eye the young man closely.

With a half audible sigh, and with an air of hopeless utter dependency, the object of his scrutiny had turned to leave the counting-room.

“Stay a moment, young man—what can you do?”

“I have never been accustomed to any kind of business except that of secretary, but I possess an excellent education, and sufficient energy to undertake and persevere in any pursuit that may offer itself.”

There was a certain something in the young man’s manners that interested the good Mr. Talbot. So he told him to take a seat beside him and answer a few questions.

The young man pleased Mr. Talbot. A muted confidence springing up between them, the stranger confided to the good merchant his pressing necessities.

He was a Pole by birth; he had been despoiled of home, fortune and country at one blow. He had served as private secretary for several years to an English nobleman, but a misunderstanding occurring between them, he had come to this country, had been here several months, but not being able to get anything to do, he had spent his last penny, and had not tasted food for two days.

Mr. Talbot did not read him a lecture on the uncertainty of human prospects, but he put his hand into his pocket, and handing a well-filled wallet to the stranger, bid him go and make himself comfortable with good cheer and then to return to the counting-room, that he would take him in his own employ for the present, and that the contents of the wallet were but a part of his salary.

With an expression of gratitude the stranger left Mr. Talbot, wallet in hand. There was something in the lustre of his large, earnest grey eyes that told the worthy merchant that he had not misplaced his confidence.

Ildo Sternberg entered into his new occupation with a zeal and occupation that showed Mr. Talbot had not over estimated either his mental or moral capacity.

Sternberg was employed to write Mr. Talbot’s most confidential letters, and to attend to his most private accounts; for the merchant at that time was deeply involved in several complicated speculations, all of which, if successful, were to benefit the whole system of commerce.

After several months of unremitting labor, the schemes ended in a sudden failure. After honorably satisfying the calls of all creditors who were involved through the unfortunate speculations, Mr. Talbot was enabled to continue his regular business, though on a very much reduced scale.

“A professional friend of mine wishes a secretary; will you accept the situation, Ildo? The salary is good—far better than anything I can offer you, for just now, alas, I can offer you nothing. I mentioned you to my friend, telling him he could not find one more capable and more unexceptionable in every way than yourself.”

“I cannot sufficiently thank you for your good opinion of me, and of your care for me,” replied Sternberg warmly. “I will accept your friend’s offer, whatever it may be, on your recommendation, and I hope the result may prove your good word for me not an unjust one.”

Mr. Redfield, the professional gentleman with whom Sternberg now took up his abode, was a lawyer of much repute, practicing in the city, and dwelling in much style, a short ride in the country.

“Take care of yourself, Ildo, my boy,” said Mr. Talbot, shaking Sternberg’s extended hand, and looking upon him with the fondness of a father.

“I hope you will not forget your old friends for your new ones,” said Miss Talbot with a pretty blush. “Father and I shall expect to see you as often as you can make it convenient to give us a call.”

Fanny Talbot’s bright eyes lingered with him as he entered his new abode. They looked up from the paper on him, day after day as it lay on his desk. They accompanied him in his outgoings and incomings, their light had become the guiding star of his life. But yet in his numerous visits to the merchant’s house, Ildo preserved the same respectful behavior towards the bright Fanny that had marked his conduct from the first.

Mr. Talbot was once more prosperous, and learning wisdom from experience, he pursued the beaten path to wealth, leaving chimeras to the uninitiated.

It had grown to be towards the close of summer when Ildo Sternberg entered the office of Mr. Redfield one morning somewhat later than usual, and told him he could no longer remain in his employ. In vain Mr. Redfield urged him for a reason, he would give none, merely saying he had made up his mind to go to South America.

In about an hour after Ildo left the office, Mr. Redfield was summoned home; his eldest daughter had been found dead in the grove of woods by the seaside; which had ever been her favorite walk. Her sister had seen her start in the direction of the grove, in the early morning, and had also seen young Sternberg take the same path a short time after, seemingly following in her footsteps.

Isabel Redfield was a belle; a dark, willful beauty, full of headstrong passion, and from her wit and the imperious mistress of both father and mother, and in fact the entire household. Some of the field laborers had seen Sternberg closely conversing with the beautiful Miss Redfield in the grove, and as the news of her death reached them (for it spread like wildfire) they came forward to give in their testimony. One of the laborers said that the young man seemed to be expostulating with her, supplicating her to do something that she seemed very resolute in refusing.

The testimony crowded in so closely against poor Sternberg, that a warrant was issued to apprehend him, and so rapid had been all the proceedings that he was taken on board of a South American Packet, within five minutes of the time of sailings.

“Suspected and apprehended for murder,” exclaimed Fanny Talbot. “The murder of my friend Isabel? Oh, papa, how horrible! but he is innocent. He never could commit murder. The court will find the real murderer and will acquit him,” and Fanny Talbot spoke confidently.

“I hope so my child, but appearances are strongly against him.”

“But papa, you do not believe him guilty?”

“My child, I will not say what I believe. I dare not believe anything. My good wishes are for the youth, but I fear it will go ill with him at the trial.”

“Oh, papa,” responded Fanny fervently, “do not say so, even if you think so.”

Meantime, the day of the trial approached. Fanny Talbot had watched the tide of public opinion to discover that the universal voice was against the ungrateful man who could murder his liberal employer’s daughter. Fanny also watched her father’s countenance to gain some consolation from him as to Ildo’s chance of acquittal, but she could glean nothing there.

“Today the trial takes place, dear father.”

“Yes my daughter.”

“You are to sit in the jury box—one of the twelve?”

“It is a terrible thing to decide upon the fate of a human being, and terrible must be the remorse of him who sentences a brother to an ignominious death, and afterwards when it is too late finds the murdered man as innocent as the one he was supposed to have murdered!”

“How strangely you talk!” exclaimed Mr. Talbot, startled by her words and manner.

“Father, Ildo Sternberg is innocent.”

“Very like,” gloomily replied the father.

“And dear father, *you* must not permit his death; if all the other insist, you must refuse to be convinced. They cannot hang him without your sanction.”

“But, my child, my friendship towards him is known—my reputation may suffer, may be ruined in consequence.”

“But then, you will have saved an innocent man from a frightful death. And dear father, no one can suspect you who are so upright, of partiality.”

“Well, dear child, we will see what can be done to save him.”

“Father you must *promise* me,” exclaimed Fanny Talbot with unwonted vehemence; and then she poured into her father’s ears the deep abiding interest she took in the young man, also her deep seated convictions of his truth and innocence, and the grounds of those convictions, saying that if he were hung and could have been saved by her father, she could not live to bear the horror of the thought.

Deeply affected by his daughter’s pleadings Mr. Talbot left her to attend the trial, with a solemn promise to do all in his power to save the prisoner.

The trial proceeded—the evidence was all convincingly against the young Pole. His own words were few and pointed; he declined any explanation of the case, but distinctly and firmly pronounced that he was not guilty of the awful charge proffered against him.

His calm, majestic manner did much toward establishing his innocence in the minds of some. But all the evidence being so strange and decided against him, the presiding judge closed his speech with pronouncing the prisoner “guilty,” and recommending the jury to remember the responsibility resting on them and their duty to society.

The impatient multitude without and within awaited the decision of the panel for twelve long hours. At length they returned and the crowd was hushed into silence.

“We cannot agree!” was the response of the foreman to the usual question.

The bench was perplexed. The president went all over the whole of the evidence, again dilating upon the point which proved so conclusively the prisoner’s guilt.

The jury withdrew, and thirty hours time was passed before they pronounced a second decision, and then the verdict of eleven was guilty, whilst the twelfth juror firmly persisted in the belief of the prisoner’s innocence, and solemnly avowed he would suffer death himself before he would assist in his condemnation.

Finding this man so solemnly impressed with the prisoner’s innocence, and his arguments in his favor still sounding so convincingly in their ears, to the astonishment of all present, the eleven unanimously concurred with the one in a verdict of acquittal.

The prisoner being therefore set at liberty narrowly escaped the lynch law of the infuriated mob without. A strong police guard alone protected him.

Once more Ildo Sternberg stood upon the deck of a vessel bound for South America. A boy whom he recognized as one in the employ of Mr. Talbot, approached him and placed a letter in his hands. The captain's orders meantime had been given, the anchor was drawn up and the brig under way. With a cat-like spring the agile messenger jumped upon the wharf, receiving a lustily cheer from the jolly jack tars who witnessed the feat.

Ildo leaned his head mournfully upon his hands, and gazed abstractedly upon the receding shore.

Suddenly he bethought him of his letter. He opened it, and to his surprise a roll of bank bills fell from it. They were all bills of large amount. The letter merely said:

“You will not refuse the enclosed from one who believed in your innocence. When you make the fortune which I know your energy will achieve in the new country to which you are going, you can repay them, if you like, to your sister. FANNY.”

Three years after the above occurrences a young man lay sick to death upon his bed raving in his delirium to see Mr. Redfield, the father of the murdered Isabel.

“I am sorry to see you so low, my poor Augustus,” said Mr. Redfield kindly.

“Oh, speak not to me! It was I who stabbed Isabel!” exclaimed the young man wildly.

All were horrified at these words. His mother and sister imputed them to the delirium of the disease; but when he grew more calm, and solemnly repeated the asseveration, they were forced to believe him.

Before his death he related the particulars of this unnatural deed.

It seems that the proud Isabel, from the time the handsome Sternberg entered her father's house she had smiled less graciously upon her affianced Augustus Raymond. Stung to madness by jealousy, he had watched them together, had heard Isabel, the evening previous, appoint the grove as a meeting place, that she had something very particular to say to Sternberg.

Augustus repaired himself to the spot before day-break, secreted himself—heard the passionate Isabel avow her love for him, and urge him to make her his wife. Sternberg refused her gently but firmly. At first she was angry but he soothed her into quiet, and left her after confessing to her that he loved another. She acquitted him of attempting in the slightest to gain her love, and as he turned to depart, she smiled sweetly upon him, and said she would try to forget him except with the love of a sister, but that none other could ever supply his place in her affections.

Perfectly infuriated with passion, Augustus Raymond stood before her upon Sternberg's departure, and reproached her more like a demon than a man, with her perfidy.

Her manner was so haughty and indignant that, insane with jealousy and passion, her discarded lover plunged the fatal steel into her fair bosom, and then dashing into the thicket made his escape with the cunning caution that eluded the eyes of all, and locking the fearful secret up in his own breast, he escaped without being suspected even of the foul deed.

The repentant lover died and the father of the murdered girl wished to make reparation to the falsely accused Sternberg.

Finding the turn affairs had taken, Fanny Talbot confessed to her father that she knew the hiding place of the acquitted Ildo. She had corresponded faithfully in his exile.

A few weeks more, and the now happy Ildo return to his friends more highly in favor than he had ever been before.

It was with a proud and reluctant heart that the fond father placed his daughter's hand in that of Ildo Sternberg, who, under an assumed name, had won both fortune and fame during his exile—who had also proved himself in all ways so well worthy of the trust now reposed in him—the sacred trust of the safekeeping of a woman's heart and happiness.

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