

# *The Night Of The French Ball*

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A DETECTIVE is well used to the unusual and to meeting as cold facts what, when told, seems a tissue of the wildest improbabilities. During my experience I had one case which for certain strange features I have never had surpassed. It seemed to make itself into my hand as clear as a first lesson in reading for a child, until almost the end, and then came points which are hard enough to unravel.

It occurred years ago, on the evening of the French Ball. I was free, and attended it. It was the usual thing. The Academy of Music was filled with gay women and young fellows about town. By twelve o'clock the wanton hilarity was beginning to get well under way. The women were leaning heavily on their partners' arms and indulging in loud laughter, while the steps were more vigorous than decorous. The high-kicking had begun. My attention had been particularly drawn to one young woman. She was not very tall, but was beautifully made. She was dressed like a Columbine. Her short, pointed skirt of yellow silk and blue velvet came hardly to her knees, and the waist was quite décolleté. On her blond hair was perched a conical cap with tiny silver bells on it. Around her face was wound a piece of white lace to serve as a mask. I noticed her because she was such an exquisitely graceful dancer. Her small feet, cased in gold shoes with high heels, twinkled as prettily as possible as they lightly touched the waxed floor. The dancing was an intense pleasure to her evidently. She could hardly keep her feet still during any pause in which she had not to move. They would beat impatiently upon the floor, and she would toss one in front of the other and sway her sinuous little figure, impatiently waiting till her turn to dance came again.

As I was standing near the door looking at her a party of several young men came into the Academy. They stood and looked about and passed remarks on the scene as if they had not yet become acquainted with its features. They had been to a theatre, probably, and came to the ball after it. The eyes and cheeks of two or three of them were bright, as if they had been drinking. One young fellow seemed to be the object of much attention from the others. He was a German, of medium height, with blue eyes and exceedingly blond hair, while a rich color mantled in his cheeks. The others would make some remark or comment on the scene to him, and he would laugh or smile with the air of a philosopher who had come to find a cynical enjoyment in the insane folly of his kind. The others addressed him in German or French, and called him "Graf." From his manner and appearance it did not require much astuteness to conclude that he was a young German of rank who was visiting the country.

One of his companions turned to him with a broad smile and made some remark, pointing out one of the dancers. I looked in the direction and saw my pretty blond Columbine pirouetting gracefully around, with her arms stretched out to her partner, a big fellow who was a little fuddled with wine, and who had strayed out of the orbit of the girl in a turn in the dance. She was not going to be balked of her share in the measure, and tripped about by herself quite contentedly till he should come back. It was an amusing touch to see the fairy-like creature smiling good-naturedly, while the lumbering fellow who was dancing with her, or who should have been

dancing with her, was gyrating beyond her reach. I glanced at the group of fellows to see if it was she they were observing.

A change had come over the German. His face was as white as death, and his eyes were dilated and fixed. He had fallen a little back of the others, as if he did not wish to be observed. This was interesting, and I felt my professional instincts aroused. He answered their remarks with a rather hard, forced smile. A moment after he made some proposal or said something that seemed to be a surprise to them, and I saw them shake hands with him. He left the hall in a hurried way. I slipped after him. I wished to see what he did. He stood for a moment in the foyer, and I saw his hands clinch fiercely. Then, in a distraught sort of way, he walked around to one of the other entrances to the dancing-floor and looked about among the dancers. He tried not to get where he could be seen, and there was a fierce scowl on his face. I lounged slowly in the neighborhood, and watched him. The deathly paleness had not left his face.

All at once he walked in upon the dancing-floor, with an attempt at careless ease, and addressed a masker who wore the costume of a Franciscan friar, a roomy brown suit, with a rope knotted at his waist for a cincture, and a large hood to it which he had pulled up over his head. He was standing near the entrance. He was masked, so he was pretty thoroughly disguised. The monk was not dancing.

The young German spoke to him, and then drew him out of the hall. In the corridor he spoke more earnestly to him. The man seemed to be declining some invitation or request. But after a few moments of earnest speech from the German the two walked away, and, keeping them in view, I saw the pair leave the Academy.

I was at first tempted to follow them. But having no more definite purpose than to see what would come of their movements, I concluded to remain and witness the fun at the ball, which always grew fast and furious at the small hours of the morning.

So I resumed my old post and amused myself by watching the reckless extravagance of the mob of revellers. The little Columbine, though she had been taking her share of the champagne, for I had seen her in the wine-room several times, was very firm on her feet. Her eyes twinkled with a lazy sort of brightness. She had a better partner now, a little young fellow dressed in black tights and a short velvet jacket. They were coming down the middle of the room, his right arm around her waist. Every few steps as they advanced, both facing forward, they flung their legs in the air with a wild but graceful vigor. Then they would whirl around to a sort of waltz-step, which the man in tights would wind up by clasping the Columbine firmly around the waist and gyrating so rapidly that her body was thrown out at right angles to his own.

They attracted a great deal of attention, because the grace of their movements was very great, despite the wild abandon of it. I do not know how I came to remark it, but while they were midway on their course I saw the Franciscan monk come in at one of the entrances. He leaned against a pillar, and I saw him watching the pair.

They finished their bacchic course, and the youth in the black tights escorted the panting, smiling girl to a seat, where he made a mock bow of the deepest reverence and went off. I kept my eye

still fixed on the girl, who was smiling and fanning herself. Even then her little feet beat the floor to the sound of the music.

While she was sitting thus the monk came up and seated himself on a chair by her side. He made some remarks to her. She coquettishly answered them. Then to another she shook her head with playful determination. The monk pressed the point, for he bent forward, though I noticed that when she turned towards him he seemed to shrink back.

Finally Columbine sprang to her feet, took his arm, and with a half-regretful glance at the merry dancers left the room with him.

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The next day the evening papers had a startling story. I have kept the newspaper account. It was this:

#### "A SEQUEL TO THE FRENCH BALL.

"Those who were at the French Ball last night in the Academy of Music may have remarked a young woman dressed as Columbine, who excited a good deal of attention by her graceful dancing. The giddy young thing will not dance at the next French Ball. She was lying at the morgue this morning, stone dead, waiting to be identified. It seems a cruel mockery, after her last night's gayety, to behold her now, in her ball dress of black and yellow velvet, lying till someone shall tell who she is. Failing all identification, some doctor's scalpel will dissect the corpse and study the muscles which worked so healthfully in the dance.

"The young girl was strangled to death last night in a carriage. She left the ball with someone dressed like a Franciscan monk, at two o'clock. The monk gave a card to the driver, after printing on it 'No. —120th Street.' He also gave the driver a twenty dollar gold piece. All this without a word. He was closely masked. The driver had only remarked that his hand was very white and large, and that he wore a heavy plain gold ring.

"The two got in and he drove off. While he was driving along the upper part of Madison Avenue he heard a sound which attracted his attention. On looking round he saw that the door of the carriage was open. He stopped, reached back with his whip, and banged it to. He supposed the couple inside were probably the worse for the wine they had taken at the ball, and had either failed to shut the door, which had worked open, or that the handle of the door had been fiddled with till it opened, and they were too far gone to notice it.

"At all events the twenty-dollar gold piece had made the driver disposed to be obliging, and he had pushed it to for them, and driven on. When he reached 120th Street, at the designated number, he got off the box and opened the carriage door.

"A lamp-post in front of the house lit up the carriage. The curtains of the carriage windows had been drawn. They were not drawn when the couple got in. What he saw terrified him. Columbine

was lying, with her white wraps fallen about her, between the seats, and a monk's frock and a girdle of rope, together with a mask, were tossed on a seat. The monk had disappeared!

"The hackman shook the girl and tried to rouse her, but could not. He pulled her forward, and then saw that her face was frightfully red, and that the eyes were puffed out. On the throat were the marks of lingers where a terrible grip had been taken of her neck.

"The story was clear enough. The monk, whoever he was, had strangled the girl in the carriage, and had then thrown off his disguise and let himself out at the door while the carriage was still in motion.

"This savage crime was evidently premeditated. The masker had printed the address, had not spoken a word, and had paid the fare before entering the carriage. So there was not the sound of his voice, or his handwriting, to identify him, and his form and face had been completely hidden.

"The cabman drove at once to the nearest police-station and told his story. The body was taken to the morgue. The detectives are at work on the case, which promises to be a very pretty one. *Known:* a man masked as a monk who was at the French Ball, and who had a large white hand, on which he wears, or wore, a plain gold ring. *Unknown:* the murderer. Who is the detective that will run down the game?"

"Here he is," I said to myself, as I finished reading the account. I had more points than the paper gave. The scenes at the ball came back to me very vividly now. The sudden deathly paleness of the German stranger, and his departure with the Franciscan friar! There was a connection here that was too evident to be passed over.

I determined to find out who had murdered the pretty Columbine, who had won me so by her graceful dancing and smiling good humor. Early the next morning I went to the morgue. There she lay, the dainty figure stretched out so stiff and cold in the big gloomy room. What a contrast to the scene in which I had seen her last! There was a damp cloth over her face. When it was removed I saw a round, full face, the features small and delicate. I gently pushed back the lids from her eyes. They were a dark blue. Her blond hair was her own, and not a wig. I pictured to myself the smoothly-rounded cheeks with the warm color of life in them. I glanced regretfully at her feet, still in their high-heeled golden shoes. They had tripped to their last dance, the dance of Death, and were motionless forever.

I found that a beautiful emerald which I noticed pinned in her corsage on the night of the ball was gone. It had been rudely plucked away, for the lace about the edge of her dress was torn and hanging. But a large ring of rubies and diamonds had been left on her finger, and was kept at the station-house. I had remarked the emerald because it had an old-fashioned setting in gold, and impressed me as a family jewel.

The people who lived at No. — 120th Street were a most respectable family, and a large one. They deprecated the publicity which the number of their house in the story of the murdered girl had thrust upon them. Inquiry into the character of this family satisfied me on one point, that the

monk had given that address simply because it was a distant one, whether he had written it at random or had known the people residing at the number.

I went to all the transatlantic steamers which were in port and got their passenger-lists of the voyage over. In one that had arrived three days before I found a name which I will call in this story Count Hermann Stolzberger of Vienna. He was the only German count who had come over in any of them.

I made a tour of the swell hotels in the city and examined their registers. In one on Fifth Avenue I found the entry, "Hermann Stolzberger and servant." He had arrived three days before.

I engaged a room at the hotel. I wished to be in the neighborhood. I had first inquired if Count Stolzberger had left town, and the clerk had told me no. Where was he to go? The clerk had heard him say to a friend that he expected to be in New York ten days or so. Was he in now? No. He had gone out with friends and would not be back for dinner.

That evening I lounged around the office, sitting in the long corridor into which the door from the street opened. I waited until twelve. No Count! I prolonged my guard for an hour more, and he had not appeared. I wished above all to get a look at Count Hermann Stolzberger. He might, it was true, have gone in at the ladies' entrance, or he might remain out all night. On the other hand, he possibly had delayed with friends and would yet return. I waited.

My patience was rewarded. At half-past one a cab rolled up to the door, and a young man in a large overcoat, somewhat foreign in its mode, sprang out and walked with a quick, nervous tread into the corridor. He walked rapidly by, but my eye had taken him in from the moment he opened the door. My memory of faces is excellent. I recognized the blond fairness of the Count at once, though there was not much color in his cheeks, and his face looked worn and thin. Count Hermann Stolzberger was the young German who had entered the French Ball and turned pale at the sight of the Columbine!

I have said that this case almost seemed to unroll itself for me; but there were two or three connections to be made to constitute proof, and not leave me with a distinct suspicion only.

I visited the morgue daily in hope of some clue, but none came. No one identified the body, and after the allotted length of time it went to the dissecting-table. There were hundreds of visitors to see it, and a great deal of sympathy was expressed; but that was all. Nobody claimed it or seemed to have known the poor girl.

A costumer had claimed the Franciscan's robe. I fancy he did this more through curiosity to find if it were the one he had let than on account of the value of it, for it must have been very cheap. I got the address of this man and called on him. I asked him if he remembered the man who had hired it. He said he did. It was a smooth-faced, dark-complexioned man of about forty. He remembered, because he had made some joke with him about his being clean shaven enough for a monk.

The man had given no address, and he did not know who he was. This was a slight hitch in the proceedings. I was convinced that the murderer in the garb of the Franciscan friar was not the man who had engaged it of the costumer, but the German. He was of much the same size and build as the original monk, and so he had assumed the loose brown habit without exciting my attention. But the fact of the German's turning so pale and calling the monk out from the dance had made me feel that he was the one who had strangled the gay Columbine in the carriage that night.

The Count seemed to grow visibly thinner. There was a drawn look to his face, and during the time that the dead girl lay at the morgue he seemed to be held by some terrible thought. I had shadowed him closely to see if he ever went to see the remains, but he did not go near them. His terrible secret was telling on him fearfully, however. The color had become faint in his cheeks, and his eyes had a haggard look. When he was with others he would affect a gayety that drove much of this distressing expression from his face; but when he came home alone it was very marked.

Something had to be done if I was to secure the proof that would convict the Count. It was the third day since I had come to the hotel and busied myself in studying him. He had gone to the reading-room, contrary to his usual habit, after finishing his breakfast. While he was there two of his friends came in, and they began conversing together. I slipped across the way and hastily wrote a message, sealed it, and charged a messenger-boy to deliver it, saying that he was to wait and see if any answer would be given.

I hurried back to the reading-room of the hotel again. The Count and his friends were still there. If they only remained till the messenger arrived! I had seated myself in a corner behind some one, but with my eyes commanding a full view of the three. The message did come before they left. One of the hotel clerks brought it in. The Count tore open the envelope and read the note. I could not but admire his self-control. The nostrils expanded and hardened, and a stolid look crept into his eyes for a moment; but that was all. What he read was this: "You know and I know whose hands left those marks on the throat. Why do you not wear your gold ring?"

He remained in thought for a moment. Then he lightly excused himself to his friends and went out, having asked something of the servant. He had gone to see the messenger-boy. I did not fear the description he would get being of much help to him. He was not gone very long. When he returned he talked easily to his two friends, and after a little while they went out together.

When he came in that night a letter was waiting for him which had come through the mail. "What good did it do to kill Columbine?" was all there was in it.

The next morning when he awoke he found a note under his door. Its contents were these words: "Is it harder to be choked to death by ten fingers or by a rope?"

There was a far more guarded expression about his face after these notes than before. He always wore a fixed, stolid calm now. He evidently felt that some eye was on him, and he could not tell when or where.

The evening of the following day he received another message. It ran: "Leave New York at once if you would save your neck."

The Count was too sharp for me. He did not go. But he did not go out so much in the daytime. He could not altogether cloak his feelings. There was a disposition on his part to take quick, searching glances about him.

But the strain on him was telling. It cost him more effort to keep from looking troubled. His face got thinner and paler. I was "shadowing" him closely; but I had to be very careful, for he was trying to discover who it was that was on his tracks.

One morning he went out about the hour he generally left the hotel. It was the fourth day after the note which advised him to leave New York. He went directly to a railroad station and took the train for Chicago. I was prepared for this emergency, and went on the same train.

When it arrived in Chicago, he went to the Palmer House and registered as Karl Schlecter. He had not been in his room half an hour when a note was given him. It had been sent by a messenger-boy. "Karl Schlecter is Count Herman Stoltzberger, and the halter is as near him in Chicago as in New York," ran the note.

It seemed almost cruel to pursue him like a Nemesis; but I thought of the gay Columbine whose young life had been mercilessly choked out of her by his smooth white hands, and did not desist.

He left Chicago that night after sending a telegram. Probably it was to his man in New York. He went west as far as Kansas City. A note was handed him in the same way as soon as he had got well settled at his hotel: "The ghost of the strangled girl does not care for place."

He remained here only a day, sending another telegram. When the train had started which carried him away, he walked through the cars deliberately looking at the passengers.

At Denver the old story was repeated: "Eyes sharper than your own are still on you. You cannot escape the hold of your murdered victim."

The next step was to Salt Lake City. He went through the same tactics on the cars, and his sharp eyes took me in.

A new note reached him at the Walker House. "It may not be long before we meet again, and then my fingers will be at your throat."

In the evening after dinner he was in the billiard-room of the hotel. He saw me there and finally came and seated himself by my side. He engaged me in conversation. He spoke English in a broken way which there is no need to reproduce.

"Was I from New York?" he began.

"Yes."

"Are you traveling for pleasure or business?" he asked next.

"For pleasure," I answered.

"A foreigner is a little surprised when he sees an American traveling in his own country. It seems as if he must be familiar with it. Where are you going from here?"

"Oh, I am not settled. I drift where the humor takes me."

I saw I had become the subject of his suspicions. But he did not yet know me as the author of the notes.

He did not remain long in Salt Lake City. I went from the place when he did. He had noticed me once or twice and felt certain I was following him. He went to San Francisco direct. When we arrived there, he gave some order to a hackman, before stepping into the carriage. I engaged another hackman.

"Follow that carriage until the man gets out, but only keep close enough to know where it goes."

The hack in which the Count had got travelled around without any definite termination apparently. He wished to know if anyone was following him, and had told the hackman to see if another carriage was after him. He soon found there was, and then he drove at once to the hotel, and hurried into the office.

I got there a few moments later. I went to the register. His name was not there at all. I looked around the place and found him sitting not far off. He had begun to watch me. I went down stairs and gave a note to one of the boys to take out to the message office, and have it sent to Count Stolzberger. I had prepared it beforehand, so I was only gone a moment. He kept me well in view all he could. When he finally went to register, he signed his right name, Count Stolzberger, and the clerk gave him the message which had been brought in.

He seemed puzzled. He had kept me in view ever since I arrived, and I had had no time to write a note. So for a moment he did not know what to think. The note had said: "The man who lent you the costume of the friar has been found. There are not many more turns for you now. This man will recognize you when he sees you. Other witnesses will prove that you spoke to Columbine, drove off with her in the hack, and that the poor girl was found dead after your disappearance. What lacks to fit the rope to your neck?"

He engaged his room, and soon after he had gone to it a boy came to me and asked me to go to the Count's room for a few moments.

Count Stolzberger was sitting in an easy-chair near a table, on which there was writing-material. He rose, greeted me with dignity, and motioned me to a chair, asking me to sit down.

"You remember that we both came from Kansas City together, and that part of the journey was made in a sleeping-car," he said, with slow deliberation.



"We may have done so," I answered.

"In the night I went through the pockets of your coat and vest. The result of that investigation, and especially as regards certain notes made by you on a sheet of paper, has shown me that you are a detective, and that you are engaged in working up the case of the girl who was—who died after the French Ball in New York. I am right, am I not?" he inquired, all in the same calm, measured way.

"Yes," I replied. "I have been keeping you in sight, Count, until the necessary proofs were obtained that would convict the murderer."

"You fancy that I am the one who did the deed?" he asked, in the same measured tones.

"I know it," I answered quietly, but with an air of conviction.

"Granting, for the moment, that you are right, what interest have you in bringing home the crime to me? Who has engaged you to do this?"

"The pretty girl who was strangled, and a professional desire to work up the case."

"The several notes I have received were from you, I suppose," he continued, in his easy, careless tones.

"Yes."

"And you have the proof that I am the murderer?" he inquired, turning his eyes unflinchingly on me.

I smiled. "Count, I fear that everything is against you."

"You would be sadly mortified to find that you were mistaken, I presume."

"I should be sadly surprised," I returned, again with a quiet smile.

"What time did the hackman drive off with the monk and the girl?" he asked me.

"At ten minutes past two. The hackman noted the time to see what hour he could hope to get back for another fare."

"Well, let me tell you something that may modify your search in this business. I had made arrangements to go with the girl. I did not wish in any way to be connected with her departure. So just when we were ready to go down to the carriage, I told her to wait for me at the entrance for five minutes. She said she would, and went down.

"I had put on the monk's garb over my evening dress. I threw it off and left it in one of the dressing-rooms. I hurried back to the floor and made it a point to show myself to several persons

who knew me. I feared that possibly some one had seen me talk to the monk, and would connect the disappearance of Columbine afterward with a monk with this. This was my reason for conspicuously showing myself after she had gone out with me in the monk's dress.

"I was not away more than six or seven minutes, when I went back to the dressing-room to put on the habit again. It was gone! I searched in the neighboring rooms, thinking some one might have moved it to some other place. I could not find it. I then hastened down to the entrance to go with the Columbine in my dress-suit, with a mask on, for I had slipped that in my breast.

"The girl was not there! I inquired of some of the bystanders, and they told me that a monk had got into a carriage with her not five minutes before. Who that monk was I am as ignorant as yourself. You have followed a false trail. I did *not* go with the girl, and can prove an alibi for the next two hours after she drove off. Several of my friends were with me from then till I went to my hotel, and my man knows the hour when I came home with them. I was terribly shocked the next day when I heard of her mur—her death."

I felt considerably taken back and very foolish. The Count's accents were those of truth, and afterwards his assertions were fully borne out by witnesses. Who it was that murdered the unfortunate girl has remained the closest mystery ever since.

"Will you tell me your relation to the girl? Why did you turn pale when you saw her? And why did you wish to go with her, as you admit having wished to do?"

"That," said the Count, with intense decision, "you will never know from me."

And I never did. There was a twofold mystery about what had seemed to me as clear as the alphabet. Never could I learn what were Count Stolzberger's relations with the girl, nor who had murdered her in the carriage after the ball.

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